Advent of the Savior
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Advent is the season in which we reread and relive the experience of ancient Israel as it longed for the Messiah and the dawn of salvation. By attuning our lives to the Scriptures that anticipate and describe the first coming of the Savior, we personally enter into the expectancy of our ancestors in faith and deepen our longing for his coming again.

These infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke are an Advent preparation for the coming of Christ, the One “who was, and who is, and who is to come” (Rev 4:8). He who was born into our world through the maternity of Mary, also comes to us in countless ways, and will come to us again in the fullness of his glory.

Perhaps the best analogy for the Advent season is the feminine experience of pregnancy in preparation for birth. Advent is a time of expectant longing and joyful anticipation. We wait for movements and the stirrings of new life. In the midst of gloom and pain, we wait and hope.

Advent is also an opportunity to explore the darkness and gloominess of our world and our lives. The significance of Christ’s coming to us depends on our understanding of the darkness that he dispels. By reflecting on the shadows and pains within our experience and that of others, we open our lives to watch and stand ready for the working of God. By struggling with these realities, we open them to the possibility of redemption celebrated in the coming of the Savior.

The gradually increasing light of the season, represented by the Advent candles and the seasonal lights on our streets and in our homes, represents the emerging light of Christ. He is the One who will shine on those in darkness, the light for the nations, the bright star that shines in the night, the dawning light of salvation that guides our feet on the path of peace.

In this season of watchful longing, we must ask ourselves, “What are our deepest yearnings?” Advent is the time to explore this question.
It is the time to move gradually from longing to hope. By coming to understand more deeply what God has already done for us in sending us our Savior, we are able to deepen our hope for the certain coming of Christ to us. The Advent prayer of the early church, “Come, Lord Jesus!” is still answered in new and surprising ways.

This commentary on the infancy narratives is intended especially for adult education and Bible study groups and for personal study and reflection on the Advent and Christmas texts. Like all who study the infancy narratives, I am indebted to the work of many others, especially for the monumental work of Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*. In addition, I am grateful for and commend to you the works of Matthean commentators, Fred B. Craddock, Daniel J. Harrington, John P. Meiers, and Benedict T. Viviano, as well as the works of Lukan commentators, Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, Eugene LaVerdiere, Jerome Kodell, Luke Timothy Johnson, and R.J. Karriss.

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Stephen J. Binz
Introduction to the Infancy Narratives

In their infancy narratives, Matthew and Luke have given us two magnificent overtures to their accounts of the saving ministry of Jesus Christ. These simple yet profound narratives express the basic truths about the divine and human mystery of Jesus Christ. A faith-filled study of these two birth accounts strives for a deeper understanding of the stories in all their details, while at the same time deepening a sense of awe and wonder at the marvelous miracle of the advent of the Savior.

These four chapters have an importance for Christians far greater than their length may indicate. The art, poetry, prayer, hymnody, and doctrine arising from these infancy narratives have enriched the lives of believers through the centuries. A reflective study of each account will lead to a richer appreciation of the Christian faith and practice that have radiated from these writings of Matthew and Luke.

It is not the objective of this commentary to speculate about the process whereby these narratives were handed down and developed within the early church. Though we should assume that these accounts are rooted in history, their development into the gospel narratives is a subject far beyond the scope of this commentary. The principal objective of this commentary is to interpret the gospel texts as they have been given to us by the inspired authors. The commentary will attempt to illuminate what the evangelists teach us about the identity of Jesus and about the meaning of his coming.

The infancy narratives point backward to the whole history of Israel, and they point forward to the entire Gospel of Jesus Christ, culminating in his death and resurrection and the apostolic mission of the
church. By directing us back to the people and events of the old covenant and by leading us forward to the main body of the Gospel, these narratives are truly a proclamation of the good news of salvation for all of humanity.

These opening chapters from Matthew and Luke form a bridge linking the Old and New Testaments. Through recounting the real people and actual places associated with the advent of Jesus, the evangelists situate his coming within the long history of salvation through which God had already been at work. Yet, the evangelists also demonstrate that Jesus embodied the whole history of Israel and brought that saving history to its climactic conclusion.

By showing echoes of Israel’s history throughout their accounts, the evangelists demonstrate that the Old Testament finds its fulfillment in the person and the work of Jesus. Through offering insights into the Old Testament in light of the New, Matthew and Luke demonstrate that Jesus is the heir of all God’s revelation given in the Hebrew Torah, prophets, and writings.

These infancy narratives also form prologues for each of the gospels. They anticipate the proclamation of the saving Gospel in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Indeed, they contain the Gospel message—proclaiming the identity of Jesus as the Christ and Son of God and inviting all to come to salvation in him.

The earliest preaching of the disciples centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In his glorification the church came to realize most fully his identity and the meaning of his life in God’s saving plan. Because of God’s revelation made known through the Holy Spirit, Paul was able to proclaim “the gospel about his Son, descended from David according to the flesh, but established as Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 1:3-4).

Yet, Jesus did not become the Christ and Son of God at his resurrection. The gospels demonstrate that the resurrection unveiled an identity that was already there. The Gospel of Mark proclaims the revelation of Jesus’ identity through the Holy Spirit at his baptism. Matthew and Luke, however, declare that Jesus was Christ, Lord, and Son of God from the very beginning of his earthly life, from his conception by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

Through the newborn Christ in the crib and the crucified Christ on the cross, the good news of salvation is proclaimed. This “infancy gospel” produces the same responses as the good news of Christ’s death.
Introduction to the Infancy Narratives

and resurrection. Some believed it and came to worship—the magi and the shepherds; others rejected it. Herod, the chief priests, and the scribes, who seek the death of the newborn, anticipate the passion of Christ and the persecution of his disciples. Indeed this child will be, as Simeon says, “a sign that will be contradicted.”

It is best to study the infancy accounts of Matthew and Luke separately, not seeking to harmonize their different details. Each evangelist gives us a different portrait of Jesus, selecting and adapting details from the apostolic tradition in his own way. Each directs us back to the Old Testament and forward into his gospel in a way that makes each gospel a unique contribution to our fuller understanding of Jesus Christ.

Only Matthew records the dreams of Joseph, the coming of the magi, the star, the murder of the children by Herod, and the flight into Egypt. Only Luke gives us the annunciation to Mary, the visit to Elizabeth, the journey to Bethlehem for the census, the search for shelter and birth in the manger, the visit of the shepherds, and the presentation in the Temple.

Yet, while the details differ, both give a remarkably similar message about who Jesus is and the meaning of his coming. Both declare that Joseph is of the line of David and that Mary and Joseph are legally engaged but have not yet come to live together. In both, an angelic announcement reveals that the conception of the child is not through human intercourse, but through the Holy Spirit; that he is to be named Jesus; and that he is to be the Savior. In both accounts the birth of Jesus was in Bethlehem, during the days of Herod, and his early life was spent in Nazareth. It is generally agreed that Matthew and Luke wrote their accounts independently of each other, but drew from a common tradition remembered within the community of faith.

By knowing the Scriptures, we know Christ. Like all the inspired literature of the Bible, the infancy narratives are a call to deeper faith. Though these narratives may be legitimately excerpted from the Bible and studied individually, they call us to further reading and study. These prologues urge us to continue to study the gospels that they introduce as well as the other Christian writings that expand their message. Yet these narratives also convince us of the necessity to study the Old Testament. It is only in studying the writings of our ancestors in Israel that the richness of God’s plan of salvation can be understood.
The Infancy Narrative according to Matthew

The infancy account of Matthew is the ideal beginning of the New Testament. It demonstrates, on the one hand, that the coming of Jesus is in continuity with the whole of the Old Testament, and on the other hand, that the coming of Jesus Christ is a strikingly new event, remarkably unlike anything that God has done before.

The evangelist was a Jewish Christian, writing to give instruction and encouragement for both Jews and Gentiles. The whole gospel stresses the connections between the story of Israel and the life of Jesus and the fulfillment of the Old Testament in Christ. Besides numerous citations from the Old Testament, the gospel depicts Jesus as the great Teacher, who like Moses, is tested in the desert and delivers his teaching on the mountain. In fact, after the infancy narrative that serves as a prologue, the gospel consists of five sections or “books” paralleling the five books of the Torah.

Matthew’s infancy narrative begins with a genealogy followed by five episodes, each centered around a citation from the Old Testament. The narrative is told in a way that shows the fulfillment of saving history and of God’s Word in the coming of Jesus. The Old Testament citations reinforce the understanding that the whole life of Jesus completed God’s plan.

The coming of Christ occurs against the background of Israel’s epic history. Each of the principal periods of salvation history is echoed in the infancy narrative. The period of the patriarchs is recalled as Jesus is described as son of Abraham and as Joseph is portrayed against the background of Joseph the dreamer in the book of Genesis. The period of the exodus is evoked in the parallels between the birth of Jesus and the birth of Moses, in the departure from Egypt by the family of Jesus,
and in the magi and star account that is shaped on the story of Balaam in the book of Numbers. The era of the monarchy is remembered as the promises given to David and his descendants are shown to be fulfilled in Jesus, the Messiah. Finally, the age of the exile is evoked as the weeping of Rachel recalls the banishment of God’s people from the land.

The titles of Jesus given in Matthew’s infancy account—Messiah, Son of God, Savior, and Emmanuel—anticipate the understanding of Jesus developed throughout the gospel. The infant, born of the line of David and conceived by the Holy Spirit, will be acclaimed as Messiah and Son of God. The newborn Savior will save his people from their sins. The child called Emmanuel, “God is with us,” will indeed be with his people always.

Matthew’s infancy account presents Jesus as the true king. He is the messianic king, the king of the line of David, a humble shepherd king, and the royal Son of God. Through the kingship of Jesus, God’s reign is established among the people. The presentation of Jesus as king in the infancy narrative develops most fully in Matthew’s account of the passion and resurrection. From the manger to the cross Matthew develops the identity of Jesus as the royal Son of God.

The kingly rule of Jesus is strongly contrasted with the reign of King Herod. The kingship of Jesus is righteous, humble, committed to the salvation of God’s people, even to the point of his own sacrificial death. Herod’s kingship is egotistical, deceptive, committed to maintaining his own power, even to the point of destroying others.

Matthew’s narrative demonstrates two responses to the kingship of Jesus that will be developed throughout the gospel: the choice to obey the divine will and to worship Jesus (Joseph and the magi) and the choice to oppose God’s will and try to destroy Jesus (Herod and the chief priests and scribes). The response of worship and obedience is developed in the Jewish and Gentile disciples of Jesus; the response of opposition continues in the religious leaders and their cruel persecution of Jesus. Yet, as Herod’s opposition and attempts to kill Jesus ultimately fail to destroy Jesus, so the religious leaders will fail because of God’s sovereign action on behalf of Jesus in the resurrection.

Matthew may well be describing his own role within the Christian community when he describes the role of a scribe: “Every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old” (13:52). Indeed this is what Matthew does in his gospel; he shows the meaning of Jesus for the ancient Jews and for the Gentiles from all the
nations. The “old” is the tradition and Scriptures of ancient Israel; the “new” is the tradition and emerging Scriptures of Christianity.

Through the angels and prophets of his infancy narrative, Matthew shows that the new events have happened according to God’s plan and initiative. Indeed all Christian teachers and writers must understand and express the reality that the new events are all rooted in the old. The advent of the Savior is the fulfillment of God’s plan made known through the history of Israel as well as the beginning of God’s new design for the unity of Jews and Gentiles, for the salvation of all the nations.

The Genealogy of Jesus

Matthew 1:1-17

1The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

2Abraham became the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. 3Judah became the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, 4Ram the father of Amminadab. Amminadab became the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, 5Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. Boaz became the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth. Obed became the father of Jesse, 6Jesse the father of David the king.

David became the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of Uriah. 7Solomon became the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asaph. 8Asaph became the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, Joram the father of Uzziah. 9Uzziah became the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah. 10Hezekiah became the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amos, Amos the father of Josiah. 11Josiah became the father of Jechoniah and his brothers at the time of the Babylonian exile.

12After the Babylonian exile, Jechoniah became the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, 13Zerubbabel the father of Abiud. Abiud became the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, 14Azor the father of Zadok. Zadok became the father of Achim, Achim the father of Eliud, 15Eliud the father of Eleazar. Eleazar became the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, 16Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah.

17Thus the total number of generations from Abraham to David is fourteen generations; from David to the Babylonian exile, fourteen generations; from the Babylonian exile to the Messiah, fourteen generations.
The opening phrases of the New Testament, “The book of the gene-
sis/genealogy” (*biblos geneseos*), evokes associations with the first book
of the Hebrew Scriptures, Genesis. The opening book of the Bible uses
this same phrase in reference to God’s original creation (Gen 2:4 in the
Greek Septuagint). What God is doing in Jesus Christ is a new begin-
nning, a new creative action for the world.

This phrase also introduces the account of the origins or the geneal-
ogy of Jesus that follows. Here the evangelist demonstrates that Jesus is
connected to all of the individual names listed and that in him the high-
est hopes of Israel are achieved. The three titles of Jesus that introduce
the genealogy highlight his identity that will be developed throughout
the gospel.

“Christ” is the Greek word for the Messiah, the anointed king who
was expected to fulfill the hopes of Israel. “Son of David” is a messianic
title proclaiming Jesus’ royal descent in the line of David. As the heir of
David, Jesus completes the promises God made to David that his dy-
nasty and his kingdom would endure forever (2 Sam 7:12, 16). “Son of
Abraham” associates Jesus with the beginnings of God’s covenant with
Israel and to the promise that in his descendants all the nations of the
earth shall find blessing (Gen 22:18).

To understand biblical genealogies the reader must understand their
purpose. They are rarely concerned with mere biological descent. The
purpose of this genealogy is to introduce the gospel by showing how
Jesus fits into and completes the plan of God’s saving history that came
before him. By tracing the lineage of Jesus back through the whole his-
tory of God’s people, Matthew demonstrates that the coming of Jesus
was designed by God and that Jesus was born at the climactic time in
Israel’s history.

For hearers of Matthew’s gospel the genealogy stresses that the be-
inning of the story of Jesus is the Old Testament. For Jewish Christians
the genealogy shows them that the whole history of their people has
been planned by God to move toward the Messiah. For Gentile Chris-
tians it shows that they cannot fully know Jesus Christ unless they
know his ancestors in the Scriptures of Judaism.

Salvation history is here divided into three great epochs. The first
period begins with Abraham and ascends to the high point of Israel’s
history, the kingship of David. Within this period, Jesus is shown to
be related to the great patriarchs of Israel, including not only Judah
but “his brothers.” The twelve sons of Jacob connect Jesus to the whole
of Israel, the twelve tribes who will be called to the kingdom by the
twelve apostles of Jesus. The monarchy of David first joined the tribes together and confirmed their united destiny in the kingdom of Israel.

The second epoch begins with King David and descends to the low point of Israel’s history, the exile in Babylon. Within this period is a list of corrupt Judean kings, described in the Scriptures as murderers, idolaters, and adulterers. Only Hezekiah and Josiah are described as faithful to God’s law. By the time of the exile, the people of Jerusalem have almost given up hope for a king who would realize their dreams.

The third period begins after the Babylonian exile and ascends again to the goal of Israel’s history, the coming of Christ. Except for the first two, Shealtiel and Zerubbabel, and the last two, Joseph and Mary, they are a collection of obscure people whose names never made it into the Jewish Scriptures. Yet through them the hope of God’s people was restored as salvation dawned.

The three-times-fourteen pattern is the evangelist’s demonstration that Jesus came when the time was right in God’s providential plan. There were fourteen days from the new moon, the beginning of the Jewish month, to the full moon, the day of Israel’s greatest feasts, Passover and Tabernacles. Thus David and Jesus are preceded by fourteen waxing generations, beginning with the new moon of Abraham and the darkness of the exile. The moon in its full luminance represents the reign of David and the advent of Christ. It is also significant that the letters for David in Hebrew (d-w-d) have the numerical value of fourteen (4+6+4). Thus the pattern of the generations expresses the fact that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the long-awaited Son of David.

It was even more common for the Jews at the time of Jesus to divide time into periods of sevens. Considering this division of history, Jesus was preceded by six periods of seven generations (three X fourteen). The reign of the Messiah opened the seventh period of seven, the period of fullness and completion. The advent of Christ marked the end of God’s careful plan.

The inclusion of five women is unusual for biblical genealogies. Their mention indicates that each of them played a crucial role in the ongoing history of salvation. Yet, they seem unlikely choices to be included in the messianic lineage.

Tamar, a Canaanite, was left childless after the death of her husbands. She disguised herself as a prostitute and seduced her father-in-law Judah in order to bear a child. Rahab, another Canaanite, was a real prostitute who protected the spies of Israel when they came to Jericho. Ruth, a Moabite, traveled to Judah after the death of her Israelite
husband and married Boaz in Bethlehem. Bathsheba, “the wife of Uriah,” a Hittite, became a wife of King David after he shamefully impregnated her and arranged her husband’s death.

Each of these women was considered an outsider, a foreigner. Their presence in the genealogy of Jesus foreshadowed the messianic mission that invited Gentiles as well as Jews into the kingdom of God. Each also had unusual marital histories that could be looked upon as scandalous and scornful. Their inclusion along with many corrupt and scandalous men in the genealogy prepared for the ministry of Jesus in which sinners and prostitutes entered the kingdom. Indeed, the universal Gospel of Jesus Christ breaks down the barriers between Jew and Gentile, male and female, saint and sinner.

The final woman in the genealogy is Mary. Like the other women, her marital situation is highly unusual and scandalous to outsiders. Despite their situations, all five of these women played an important role in God’s providential plan to continue the lineage of the Messiah. Tamar continued the family line of Judah’s son. Rahab made it possible for Israel to possess the Promised Land. Ruth gave birth to the grandfather of King David. Bathsheba made certain that her son Solomon succeeded David. Mary’s response to God’s unexpected plan enables her to become God’s greatest instrument and to bring the lineage of the Messiah to its fulfillment.

God works in unexpected ways. The genealogy gives us a preview of that peculiar collection of men and women who will follow Jesus and who will become the church in which Matthew ministered. The sinful, scandalous, unknown, and marginalized people who will come into the kingdom and experience salvation in Christ are powerful witnesses that the Holy Spirit is at work.

The final names in the lineage of Jesus break the steady rhythm of the genealogical pattern. The shift that occurs in verse 16 shows that Matthew wanted to indicate that Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus. The virginal conception and birth of Jesus introduces something radically new in human history as the messianic age dawns. Though Jesus was born of the royal line within Israel’s history, as Messiah he concludes the final period of the old Israel and opens up the new era of God’s saving plan.
The Birth of Jesus

Matthew 1:18-25

18Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the holy Spirit. 19Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. 20Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. 21She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” 22All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

23“Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means “God is with us.” 24When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. 25He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus.

Matthew’s account leading to the birth of Jesus continues to tell us who Jesus is. He is Son of David, as the genealogy has shown; and he is, even more significantly, Son of God. Through Joseph’s lineage Jesus is Son of David; through Mary he is begotten as Son of God. Through the legal paternity of Joseph the coming of Jesus is in continuity with Israel’s history; through the virginal maternity of Mary his coming is totally new.

The narrative explains how Jesus is both Son of David and Son of God by describing the relationship of Mary and Joseph. The couple is between the two stages of Jewish marriage. The first stage is the formal exchange of consent, made at the home of the bride’s father. The second stage, made some months or years later, is the solemn transfer of the bride to the house of the groom. The betrothal of Mary and Joseph is a legally contracted marriage, completed before they came to live together.

The miraculous conception of the child in the womb of Mary is the work of the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, God’s spirit was described as God’s life-giving, creative power. The spirit of God was associated with the work of creation, with the utterance of the prophets, and with the work of re-creation in the last days. In Mary the Holy Spirit acts in a way that continues yet surpasses the work of God’s spirit throughout salvation history. The conception of Jesus shows the Holy Spirit at work in a new and ultimate way.
The reader knows more than Joseph who became aware of Mary’s pregnancy before he learned its meaning and causes. Joseph knew that Mary was holy and honorable, yet he also knew that pregnancy could only be the result of either willing or forced relations with a man. Joseph had to decide whether or not to take his pregnant bride to his home.

Joseph is described as a “righteous man,” one who lives according to the law of God and seeks to fulfill God’s will in every respect. How could he show faithfulness to God’s law and also devoted concern for Mary? According to the law given in Deuteronomy, he could have exposed her to the humiliation of a public procedure. Yet, he decided to shield her from shame by giving her the prescribed document of divorce privately.

Joseph’s agonizing choice is cut short by God’s revelation in a dream. By calling Joseph “son of David,” the angel calls to mind the messianic prophecy made to Joseph’s ancient ancestor David. Joseph will be the predetermined link that joins Jesus to the family of David. By taking Mary into his home, thus assuming public responsibility for the care of Mary and the child, and by giving the child a name, Joseph becomes the legal father of Jesus. In this way, the account explains how Jesus is able to be of the lineage of David though he was not the physical son of Joseph.

Through Joseph’s compliant response to the divine will, Jesus is able to be called Son of David, and thus Messiah of Israel. Through the working of the Holy Spirit in Mary, Jesus is able to be called the Son of God. The angel says to Joseph: “She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus.” The complementary and obedient responses of Mary and Joseph are necessary for the coming of the Savior.

The name Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name “Yeshua/Joshua,” popularly interpreted to mean “God saves.” Because the name was given to him by God, it connects the name of Jesus with God’s saving plan made known in the Scriptures. The great deliverer of God’s people from bondage was Moses, yet it was Joshua who led Israel into the promised land. Joshua saved God’s people from their enemies in the land; Jesus “will save his people from their sins.” “His people” is the church—all those Jews and Gentiles who will experience forgiveness through his life-giving death, a death whose power is continually available through the “blood of the covenant” shed “for the forgiveness of sins” (26:28).

The prophecy in verse 23, cited from Isaiah 7:14, was an oracle of hope given originally to the house of David in the eighth century before Christ. It referred to the coming birth of a king, one who would restore the glorious line of David and be a sign that God was with Israel. Since the kings of Judah never fulfilled the high ideals of these
Emmanuel prophecies (especially Isaiah 7, 9, and 11) the expectation of a future, ideal messianic king grew stronger.

The Hebrew text calls the woman of the prophecy “a young woman.” It may be assumed that the young woman was a virgin, though the Hebrew word does not specify virginity. However the Greek text of the Septuagint, the Old Testament text more familiar to the early Christians, call the woman “the virgin.” Her virginity makes it clear that her child would be a firstborn.

Each of the five fulfillment citations of Matthew’s infancy account indicate that the advent of Jesus was foreordained by God and that his coming completed the expectations in the Old Testament. Though the ancient prophets could not have known the full meaning of their words in the divine plan, the early Christians and the inspired evangelist were able to recognize the texts as expressing God’s plan for the coming of Jesus.

This text from Isaiah 7:14 expressed and fortified the early community’s faith in the messianic identity of Jesus and his virginal conception. Through this text the gospel proclaims that Jesus is the long-awaited Savior, that he was born of the Virgin Mary, and that in him God is with his people in a completely new way.

The name Emmanuel, “God is with us,” completes the divine promise made to the patriarchs and prophets, “I will be with you.” The great divide that separates God and his people is sin. Because Jesus saves his people from their sins, God’s people are able to recognize the divine presence. The Emmanuel of the infancy narrative anticipates the end of the gospel when Jesus proclaims “I am with you always” (28:20).

God’s angel and God’s Word explain to both Joseph and the reader the origin and the destiny of the Son of Mary. By obediently responding to all that God asked of him, Joseph became like a father to Jesus—accepting as his own the child who would have been regarded as illegitimate, and naming the child Jesus.

Joseph took Mary into his home, though he did not have intercourse with her “until she bore a son.” The Greek text emphasizes that Mary conceived and gave birth to her son as a virgin, but it does not affirm or deny marital relations after Jesus’ birth.

**The Visit of the Magi**

*Matthew 2:1-12*

1When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising
and have come to do him homage."

3 When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, 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.’”

7 Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star’s appearance. 8 He 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.” 9 After 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. 10 They were overjoyed at seeing the star, 11 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. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

The events in chapter two point backward to ancient Israel and forward to the public life of Jesus. Each of the four episodes is related to a place associated with a key feature of salvation history. Bethlehem harkens back to God’s choice of David; Egypt recalls God’s decision to free Israel from bondage; Ramah is a reminder of the captivity in exile; Nazareth anticipates the life of Jesus. Each episode also contains an Old Testament citation that contains the name of the place.

A strong contrast is established between the “newborn king of the Jews” and Herod, the wicked king of the Jews. Likewise a contrast is established between the Gentile strangers from the East who accept the newborn king and do him homage and the Jewish ruler who rejects him and seeks his death.

The reign of Herod the Great was noted for its murderous cruelty. He killed several of his own wives and many of his children. He was insanely distrustful and saw threats to his power everywhere. He had been appointed king of the Jews by the Romans, and he had taken upon himself the prerogative of the son of David by rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem.

Herod felt threatened by the widespread expectation among the Jews of the coming messianic king, a new and greater David. So when
news reached him that a child was born who was destined to be king, conflict was inevitable. That conflict with the rulers of Israel will continue until Jesus is mocked as king and crucified with the title attached to his cross—“King of the Jews.”

Herod assembled the “chief priests and the scribes of the people.” This council, the Sanhedrin of Jerusalem, appears positively here in that they know the prophecies of Scripture and thus they are able to tell Herod where the Messiah is to be born. Yet they are also “troubled” by the announcement along with “all Jerusalem.” It is this group that will be the enemies of Jesus throughout his public life and will conspire to have him put to death. The leaders of the people know the prophecy, yet they refuse to recognize or accept his coming.

The Old Testament citation in verse 6 confirms that Bethlehem, the birthplace of David, was the expected birthplace of the Messiah. The passage consists primarily of an adapted use of Micah 5:1. Yet Matthew adds “by no means,” emphasizing that though Bethlehem is small, her stature is great because Jesus has been born there. 2 Samuel 5:2 is the source for the last line: “You shall shepherd my people Israel.” Like David, the messianic king will also be a good shepherd of God’s people.

The magi, prompted by their observation of the star, arrive from an unknown land in the East. The word “magi” originally referred to a Persian priestly caste noted for the interpretation of dreams. Later it came to refer to any possessors of supernatural knowledge and power. Here they are probably astrologers who look to the movement of stars as a guide to human events and destiny.

Their origins, occupation, and questions suggest that they are Gentiles entering this thoroughly Jewish setting. Their astrological observations indicate that the Gentiles are able to see signs of the divine in creation. It was a common motif in antiquity that a new star marked the birth of a new ruler. These foreigners may have even been aware of the expectation that a worldwide ruler would come from Judah. Yet they had to consult the Jews about the messianic prophecies in order to unlock the more hidden mysteries of God.

Speculation about the astronomical identification of the star is endless. Theorists suggest that it may have been a supernova, a comet, or a conjunction of the planets. Yet it is the significance of the star at the Savior’s birth that is most important. It is a sign rooted in the tradition of Israel, a heavenly sign that leads Gentiles on a search for a king who will rule the world.
The Old Testament tradition told of a star that would mark the coming of a messianic king. As Moses was leading the people to the promised land, he encountered a wicked king who, like the Pharaoh in Egypt, tried to destroy him. Balak, king of Moab, summoned from the East a famous seer named Balaam, in order to use his powerful knowledge against Moses and Israel. Balaam came with his two servants, but instead of cursing Israel, he gave a blessing on Israel’s future. The oracle of Balaam refers to the emergence of the monarchy in Israel and states:

“I see him, though not now;
   I observe him, though not near:
A star shall advance from Jacob,
   and a scepter shall rise from Israel” (Num 24:17).

The eastern seer frustrated the plans of the wicked king and proclaimed the coming of the messianic king, a king who would be announced by a star. Thus, the star was understood in the New Testament community to proclaim the birth of the long-awaited messianic king.

The rising star and the eastern visitors presenting gifts fit for a king suggest other passages from the Old Testament. Having proclaimed a redeemer for Jerusalem (Isa 59:20) Isaiah says:

“Arise! Shine, for your light has come,
   the glory of the LORD has dawned upon you . . .
Nations shall walk by your light,
   kings by the radiance of your dawning . . .
the wealth of nations shall come to you . . .
All from Sheba shall come
   bearing gold and frankincense,
   and heralding the praises of the LORD” (Isa 60:1, 3, 5-6).

The Isaian passage underlines the fact that the magi represent the Gentile nations who will experience the light of salvation in the Jewish Messiah.

The visit of the Queen of Sheba to the son of David, King Solomon, also prefigures the visit of the magi. She came from a distant land to visit the king in Israel, presenting him with gifts of gold, spices, and precious stones (1 Kgs 10:2). There she witnessed the renowned wisdom of Solomon and marveled at the temple of God. Her visit prepared for all those who will experience the true wisdom and eternal temple in Jesus Christ. After her visit in which she received everything she desired, like the magi, she returned to her own country (1 Kgs 10:13).
Likewise Psalm 72 proclaims a son of David who will be honored by all the nations: “The kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts” (Ps 72:10). The adoration offered to Christ by the magi represents the homage of all the nations to be offered the Messiah: “May all kings bow before him, all nations serve him” (Ps 72:11). This association of the Son of David and the bright star in the New Testament tradition is further reflected at the end of the book of Revelation in which the risen Christ declares: “I am the root and offspring of David, the bright morning star: (Rev 22:16).

The contrast between Herod and the magi revolves around the threefold use of the Greek word for “do homage” (2:2, 8, 11). The term indicates a solemn bow or prostration rendered to a person of great dignity or authority. Herod feigns worship while the magi “prostrated themselves and did him homage.” The action is shown to be the proper response to Jesus throughout the gospel, and it will be the last act of the disciples at the end of the gospel (28:17). The Gentile magi who gather at Christ’s birth anticipate all the believers from all the nations who will be called to salvation through this Davidic king. Indeed this Son of David is also Son of Abraham in whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

The origins of Jesus point toward his destiny. During his public ministry some accepted him and did him homage; others rejected him and sought to put him to death. The disciples of Jesus met a similar response when they proclaimed the Gospel after the resurrection: Some accepted the saving good news, others opposed it and violently persecuted the community of faith. From his birth Jesus was destined to be the suffering Messiah, the Savior whose world-wide dominion brings salvation to all the nations.

The Flight to Egypt

Matthew 2:13-15

13When 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.”

Three times in Matthew’s narrative Joseph is instructed by an angel in a dream; three times he responds in obedience for the sake of the
child and his mother. An angel appeared at decisive moments throughout the Old Testament to communicate the will of God; an angel will announce the resurrection of Christ at the end of Matthew’s gospel.

This account of Joseph resembles the great epic of Joseph the patriarch in the book of Genesis (Gen 37–50). Joseph, the son of Jacob (also called Israel), was known as a dreamer and an interpreter of dreams. He saved his family from destruction by bringing Jacob-Israel from Canaan into Egypt. The New Testament Joseph relives the life of his Jewish ancestor through responding to God’s revelation in his dreams. He too travels to Egypt to seek refuge for his family and he saved them from destruction.

Just as the advent of Jesus is a new genesis, so also it is a new exodus. The great epic of ancient Israel is continued with the story of Moses. The infancy narrative of Moses in the book of Exodus foreshadows the infancy narrative of Jesus. The rescue of the infant Moses from the wicked Pharaoh prepares for the rescue of God’s people through the later ministry of Moses. Likewise, the rescue of Jesus from the sinister king prepares for his later ministry of redeeming his people.

The Old Testament citation at the end of verse 15 is taken from Hosea 11:1, “When Israel was a child I loved him, out of Egypt I called my son.” The prophet was speaking about the original exodus from Egypt. He spoke of Israel collectively as God’s adopted son. This filial relationship with God is experienced in its fullness by Jesus, the Son of God. The exodus of Israel achieves its completion in Jesus as he relives and fulfills in his own life the history of his people.

The gospel will go on to describe how the life of Jesus imitates and completes the formative experiences of Israel’s life. Jesus will leave Egypt, pass through the water of the Jordan River in baptism, undergo trials and temptations in the desert, teach from the mountain, and establish the new covenant. His life is in continuity with Israel’s history, yet he brings Israel to its climactic fullness. He is the new Moses, the renewed Israel, the eternal covenant, the Savior of his people.

The going down to Egypt and the call to come out of Egypt points back to Israel’s past and forward to the end of Jesus’ saving work. The exodus from Egypt, the passage from slavery to freedom, is a foreshadowing of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The rulers of God’s people in the infancy account were unable to destroy Jesus; so the rulers in the passion account are unable to destroy him. In both accounts Jesus is taken away, and he is brought back again. In the infancy narrative he is taken to Egypt and then brought back to the land where God’s saving
The Infancy Narrative according to Matthew

plan can be fulfilled. In the passion narrative his life is taken from him, and then he is brought back to life forever.

The Massacre of the Infants

Matthew 2:16-18

16When Herod realized that he had been deceived by the magi, he became furious. He ordered 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. 17Then 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 narrative turns away from the Holy Family to report the rage of King Herod. His massacre of the innocent children of Bethlehem was a result both of his fear of a rival king and his rage at being deceived.

The word “deceived” carries the idea of being made to look foolish or mocked. The word appears again in the passion account when Jesus is “mocked” as king (27:29, 31, 41). When Herod, the fraudulent king of the Jews, is mocked, he responds by killing the innocent children of Israel. When Jesus the true king is mocked, he responds by accepting death, though he was innocent.

The massacre is entirely in keeping with Herod’s ruthless character. He is the first of many who will try to prevent the advent of salvation by trying to kill its bearers. The death of the Holy Innocents prefigures not only the innocent death of Jesus but also the persecution of the disciples in the early church and the long and glorious line of Christian martyrs.

Herod ordered the massacre of all the boys in the vicinity of Bethlehem, up to two years of age, so that there would be no escape. At the birth of Moses, the Pharaoh had commanded his subjects to kill “every boy that is born” (Exod 1:22). The advent of salvation, for Israel and for the whole world, is accompanied by guiltless suffering and death.

The quotation is from the prophet Jeremiah 31:15. Rachel, the wife of Jacob-Israel, is imagined to be weeping for her children centuries after her death. In Genesis it is said that this matriarch of Israel died and was buried on the road to Ephrath, which is identified as Bethlehem (Gen 35:19). Tradition places her tomb there to this day.
The passage in Jeremiah refers to the deportation and captivity of the people of Israel. Ramah, a small town north of Jerusalem, was the place where the captives of Judah and Jerusalem were taken to begin their march into the Babylonian exile (Jer 40:1). Rachel wept for the children of Israel, those who had been slaughtered by the enemy and those being taken into exile. As Jesus, the new Israel, goes into exile, Rachel is again imagined to be lamenting from her tomb for her slaughtered children.

Though the quotation in Matthew seems to indicate unrelieved suffering, in its context Jeremiah’s prophecy expresses great joy and hope. Rachel is told to stop weeping because her children are returning from exile. This woeful lament is set in the chapter proclaiming a great future for Israel, including the promise of the new covenant (Jer 31:31-34).

The infant Jesus thus embodies the exodus and the exile, the two greatest periods of both suffering and vindication for the people of Israel. The exodus from Egypt and the restoration after the exile in Babylon are events that, as the prophets proclaim, can be completed only in the coming of the Messiah. The future proclaimed by the prophets will be realized with the exodus of Christ’s saving death and resurrection and the establishment of the new and everlasting covenant.

**The Return from Egypt**

*Matthew 2:19-23*

19When Herod had died, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt 20and 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.” 21He rose, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 22But 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. 23He 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.”

Though the principal actor in the Matthean infancy account is Joseph, the center of attention is the child Jesus and his mother Mary. The phrase “the child and his mother” is used repeatedly in all the events after the nativity (2:11, 13, 14, 20, 21). This focus on the messianic child along with his mother reflects the central role of the king’s mother in the birth, enthronement, and reign of the Davidic kings of Judah.

The importance of the queen-mother is demonstrated throughout the Old Testament. The book of Kings always mentions the name of the
king’s mother in the introduction to each reign in Judah. She had an official position in the kingdom and often kept her position even after her son’s death. The queen-mother was enthroned with the king and enjoyed a position of great honor and dignity during his reign (Jer 13:18; 1 Kgs 2:19). Thus it is fitting that the mother of the Messiah should have a central role in the kingdom inaugurated by the coming of Christ.

The birth of Christ from Mary his mother, the attempt by Herod to destroy the child, and the intervention of God to save the child from death are also reflected in the images of Revelation 12. Here the woman who gives birth to the Messiah represents both the people of God in the Old Testament and the Christian church. The birth of the Messiah is both his historical coming and his resurrection into glory. The dragon who waits to devour the child when he is born is all the powers that seek to destroy the Messiah and his reign.

Like Revelation 12, the Matthean account of Christ’s birth looks backward to the history of struggle between the ruling powers of the world and the saving plan of God. It is a battle envisioned in the garden between the offspring of the dragon and the offspring of the woman (Gen 3:15) and continued in Israel’s history with the struggle between the murderous Pharaoh and God’s desire to liberate Israel. Like Revelation 12, the infancy narrative also looks forward to the ongoing conflict between the ruling powers and the messianic reign—a struggle that began with Herod’s slaughter of the children, culminated in the crucifixion of Christ, and continued with the persecution of the church.

The exile of Jesus and his family ends with the death of Herod. Like his ancestors exiled in Egypt and in Babylon and then freed to return to Israel, Jesus now returns with his family “to the land of Israel.” The angel said, “those who sought the child’s life are dead.” This parallels God’s word to Moses when God announced the death of Pharaoh and told Moses to return because all who sought his life were dead (Exod 4:19). That announcement freed Moses to begin his mission of freeing God’s people and bringing them into the land of Israel. Likewise, the announcement of the angel freed the family of Jesus to go to the land of Israel, the place where Jesus would begin his saving work.

Yet those who sought his life only anticipate other ruling powers who will seek to frustrate the designs of God and put the Savior to death. Already the cruel Archelaus, the son of Herod the Great, ruled over Judea. So the family of Jesus settled in Galilee, the northern region of ancient Israel, where the reign of Herod Antipas, another son of Herod, enabled them to be slightly more secure.
Nazareth was a small village in Galilee, a place so obscure that it was never mentioned in the Old Testament. John’s gospel underlines its insignificance in the question of Nathanael, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” (John 1:46). Yet, the evangelist demonstrates that the same prophetic Scriptures that spoke about the Davidic Messiah from Bethlehem also spoke about a Nazorean.

There is no single text in the Old Testament that contains the words quoted by the evangelist, “He shall be called a Nazorean.” Thus establishing its biblical source has been a challenge through the ages. Since the phrase is not found in any single prophet, the evangelist uses the plural “prophets” instead of the usual singular. St. Jerome points out that the phrase is a summary of the prophets’ teachings.

There are several different reasons why Jesus was called a Nazorean by the early Christians and why his followers were called Nazoreans (Acts 24:5). The most obvious reason is that he came from Nazareth. Yet, there are two other messianic associations of the term in the literature of Israel, both of which have implications for Jesus’ identity.

Jesus is called a Nazorean also because he completes a line of Nazarites, those who were consecrated to God’s service from the womb. The biblical figures described in this way in their birth narratives are Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist. In addition, Jesus is called a Nazorean because he is the netzer (branch or shoot) prophesied in Isaiah 11:1. It was expected that the Messiah would be the budding shoot sprouting from the root of Jesse, the father of David.

Matthew shows us that clearly God is directing the history of the world’s salvation. He shows how the advent of the Savior is in continuity with all that has come before him, yet also how his coming is a completely new act of God in human history. By looking backward into ancient Israel and looking forward into the ministry of Jesus, Matthew’s infancy narrative shows how he “brings from his storeroom both the new and the old” (13:52). He shows us again how the “new” grows out of the “old,” and the “old” finds a fuller expression in the “new.”

Having completed the narrative of Christ’s infancy, the evangelist invites the reader to continue the gospel, to see how all the claims made for Jesus at his birth will be realized throughout his life. His words and deeds, death and resurrection will demonstrate that Jesus the Nazorean is indeed the Messiah and Son of God.