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The Origins of Christmas

Revised Edition

JOSEPH F. KELLY



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To my beloved granddaughters,
Marion Yena Kelly, Hannah Laine Wagoner,
and Jenna Grace Wagoner

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Biblical Abbreviations

Gen	Genesis
Lev	Leviticus
Num	Numbers
Deut	Deuteronomy
Josh	Joshua
1 Sam	1 Samuel
2 Sam	2 Samuel
Ezra	Ezra
Ps	Psalms
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Dan	Daniel
Hos	Hosea
Amos	Amos
Mic	Micah
Mal	Malachi
Matt	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts of the Apostles
Rom	Romans
1 Cor	1 Corinthians
Gal	Galatians
Jude	Jude

Preface

This book began as the opening chapters of a projected larger history of Christmas, but, after reading them over, I thought that they might make a good, concise history of how Christmas began. Mark Twomey and Peter Dwyer of the Liturgical Press agreed with me, and thus this book came into existence. But that was in 2003. More work has been done over the past ten years by scholars in general and by me in particular on the Gospel Infancy Narratives and on the first centuries of Christmas. I thought the book needed updating and was delighted to find that Hans Christoffersen, academic publisher of Liturgical Press, thought so as well and agreed to publishing a revised edition.

I want to thank Mark, Peter, and now Hans for their confidence in my work. This book was written during a sabbatical from the Department of Religious Studies at John Carroll University. My thanks to my chairperson, Dr. Paul Lauritzen, for recommending me for the sabbatical to the University Committee on Research; to Dr. Mary Beadle, dean of the Graduate School, and chairperson of that committee, as well as the other members of the committee, for recommending me for the sabbatical; to Dr. Nick Baumgartner, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, who approved the committee's recommendation; and Dr. David LaGuardia, academic vice president, who granted the sabbatical. My thanks to my

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My sincerest thanks go to my wife Ellen 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 was dedicated to my identical twin granddaughters, Hannah and Jenna Wagoner, on the occasion of their first Christmas in 2003, but now they are happily joined by my newest granddaughter, Marion Yena Kelly, born in 2013. Nothing conveys the wonder and hope of Christmas like a baby or, in the wonderful event of 2003, two babies, and now another baby.

Joseph F. Kelly
Christmas 2003, 2013

Introduction

On a snowy mid-December evening some years ago, I gave a lecture at a branch campus of a public university in Ohio. I took a shortcut home on a well-paved but unlighted rural road. Going along in the darkness, I saw some bright lights off to the side of the road. As I got closer, I could make out a farmhouse with a lighted Christmas tree in the front window and strings of bulbs on door frames and plants. There was nothing special about this display, just everyday lighting. But shining in the complete darkness of that rural road, this was a welcome and warming sight. This farm family had no close neighbors, and so their lights would be seen only by anonymous strangers driving by. What a kind thing that was for them to do, to brighten the evenings of people they did not even know.

To switch locales, many years ago I was working in a run-down area of a large city. Many people in that neighborhood lived in unpleasant, cramped, basement apartments with little natural light. About a week before Christmas, late in the afternoon when it was dark, I was walking by one of those apartments and noticed a small but very colorful artificial wreath in the window. This decoration had certainly come from a bargain store, but, inexpensive as it was, the wreath served to brighten that family's holiday season—and mine. These two examples could be multiplied by all readers, and

they would prove conclusively what we all know, that people really do exhibit what we call the Christmas spirit.

Christmas is unique. It impacts us in ways that other seasons and holidays do not. Many people have grown up with Christmas, mostly with happy memories, occasionally with sad ones, but they all wish to make it a joyous occasion for themselves, their families, and their friends. Along with Easter, Christmas is one of the two most important feasts in Christianity, but it is actually the more widely celebrated because even in many countries that are officially nonreligious, like the United States, Christmas has achieved the status of a national holiday. Many people who do not celebrate it religiously still observe it as a secular holiday.

Christmas has become such a part of our lives that we cannot imagine a period when no one knew on what day to observe it or when no three kings existed or, even more amazing, when Christmas itself was not even a feast. But this was the situation from the time of Jesus till the sixth century, the era when Christians lived in the Roman Empire, partly in times of persecution, partly when the emperors themselves had become Christian. It was in this period that Christmas originated, took shape, and developed into the feast we know so well.

This book will tell that story, and when it is done, we will have seen how the gospel Infancy Narratives arose and what role they played in early Christianity. We will have encountered a whole variety of things *not* in the gospels, such as the date of December 25, the three kings, the ox and the donkey at the manger, the accounts of the parents of Mary as well as of Joseph's children by his first marriage (!), and the earliest Christmas art and music.

But before we get to the story of Christmas in early Christianity, we must make an important distinction. The birth of Christ as recounted in the gospels is the *Nativity*, and Christmas is the *feast* of the Nativity. People often speak of the birth

of Christ as the first Christmas, but really it was not. No one celebrated a feast in honor of his birth until at least the third century and most likely not until the fourth. So in this book, when we speak of Christmas, we are speaking of the feast, although, since the feast depends on the event, we will begin with the gospel accounts of the Nativity, which can be found in the appendix after the Epilogue.

The story of the origins of Christmas is not well known, but it is fascinating and, in a way, remarkable. It starts when Christmas did not exist, and it finishes when Christmas had become an integral part of Christian life and Western culture.

CHAPTER ONE

The Birth of Jesus

Although Christmas has made the Nativity the best known of all Bible stories, only two of the twenty-seven New Testament books tell of Jesus' birth, and those are the gospels of Matthew and Luke. The other New Testament books do not even mention the Nativity. The unavoidable fact is that the earliest Christians were not particularly interested in Jesus' birth. Why not?

No one knows the exact date of Jesus' death (nor, as we shall see, of his birth), but it was most likely around AD 33. Jesus himself wrote nothing. The earliest Christian writer was the apostle Paul, an educated Jew from Asia Minor (modern Turkey) who converted to Christianity about the year 35. He never knew the earthly Jesus. Paul wrote his first epistle or letter around AD 50 to a Christian community in a Greek city called Thessalonica. In this letter, titled 1 Thessalonians, Paul warned his readers to be prepared for the imminent end of the world, an idea he repeated in some of his other epistles and that appears in other New Testament books as well.

The notion of an imminent end explains a lot about the early Christians, including their lack of interest in Jesus' birth. They saw little need to produce accounts of him or to write books of almost any kind because the End was near. Even Paul's letters are not formal theological treatises, so

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familiar from later writers, but letters written in response to immediate needs or to crises in various communities. The basic Christian message dealt not with Jesus' birth but with his public ministry, death, and resurrection, which the Christians believed had redeemed the world from the sin of Adam and Eve. There were accounts of Jesus' words and deeds circulating orally among the first Christians, and while Paul's letters prove that he knew something of Jesus' life, they make no mention of his birth.

As our existence proves, the world did not end, and so the earliest Christians slowly but surely began to accept a continued existence on earth. The church was growing numerically and spreading geographically, but by the year AD 64 the three main leaders of the first Church were dead, James of Jerusalem having been killed by his Jewish enemies, Peter dying in Nero's persecution, and Paul dying in Rome either by persecution or by having lost his appeal in a capital case (Acts 27–28). Other Christians who would have known Jesus personally would likewise have been dying. It had become necessary to preserve some account(s) of Jesus' earthly life.

The apostle Paul occasionally mentioned events from Jesus' life, such as the institution of the eucharist, along with his betrayal and crucifixion, but as he was writing letters to churches on pressing issues, Paul never provided any comprehensive narrative of Jesus' life and ministry. If the Church were to continue indefinitely in the world, Christians needed some biographical information about their Lord. Around AD 68, a man known as Mark provided the missing narrative in a document called a "gospel," literally the "good news" of Jesus. Other Christian writers would follow his lead.

That Mark wrote the earliest gospel may surprise people, because many believers think that the gospels are biographies of Jesus. Two of them, those of Matthew and John, have especial value because tradition holds that members of the twelve apostles wrote them. But modern biblical scholarship, which

focuses on the historical background and literary styles used by biblical writers, called that tradition into question and produced some surprising results—ones now widely accepted by scholars and church leaders alike. This is not the place to discuss modern exegesis in detail, but let us consider how it impacts our understanding of the gospel Infancy Narratives.

Mark's gospel came first, followed by the gospels known as Matthew and Luke. Matthew and Luke (whom we will discuss in detail) used Mark's gospel and expanded on it to produce two more. At the turn of the first century, a fourth writer, now known as John, produced the last gospel accepted by Christians as Scripture.

Scholars believe that all four evangelists lived outside the Holy Land, either in Gentile territory or in the Jewish Diaspora—the residence of Jews who lived in non-Jewish areas such as Syria (especially Antioch), Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Greece, Italy, and Egypt (mostly in Alexandria). Because of the conquests of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC), Greek language and culture had spread throughout the Eastern Mediterranean world, including the Diaspora. Thus, all the books of the New Testament, from Paul's epistles to the book of Revelation, were written in Greek.

This leads us to the first major realization about our understanding of Jesus: we do not have his words in the original. Jesus, like all ancient Jews, spoke a Semitic dialect called Aramaic, but his words were preserved for us in Greek, except for the occasional phrase such as *talithá cūmi* ("Little girl, stand up") and *ēphphatá* ("Be opened"), both from Mark's gospel (5:41; 7:34). So we must trust the accuracy of those early Christians who translated his words.

But there is another element to consider. Jesus probably died around AD 33; definitely no later than AD 36 when the governor Pontius Pilate was recalled to Rome for incompetency. But Mark wrote his gospel more than thirty years later. How did he get his information? By oral tradition.

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This makes us moderns uncomfortable. We have so many ways to preserve exact information, starting with writing something down to preserving it in the cloud. We naturally wonder what might have gotten lost in the oral traditions about Jesus' words and deeds.

But moderns cannot change how ancient people did things; we must work with what they left us and try to understand it. Most puzzling to us is that ancients liked oral tradition precisely because it could be changed to fit a particular situation. Amazingly, we have an example in the New Testament.

Mark tells us of the story (2:1-12) of four men who carried a paralytic to Jesus for a cure. Jesus was inside a crowded house, and the men could not get inside, so they went up on the roof and ripped it open because ancient Palestinian houses were built of daub and wattle. The men lowered the paralytic down, and Jesus, seeing "their" faith, that is, the porters, cured the man.

Matthew retold the story (9:2-8), leaving out the roof. But when Luke retold it (5:17-26), he said that when the men went up on the roof, they "removed the tiles," that is, he changed Mark's account. Why? Because Luke was writing for a Gentile audience outside of Palestine, and those Christians would not have understood how people in Palestine could rip open a roof. Since Luke wanted people to focus on the essential meaning of the account, he simply changed what would have been a confusing detail.

Basically, when we read the gospels, we read how Christians of the late first century understood Jesus, and so these writers included material that they wanted their readers to know. But there is more. Sometimes they disagreed on some points. For example, John says that Jesus cleansed the Temple at the start of his public career (2:13-22) while the other three recounted that he did so at the end of his career (Matt 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-46). Occasionally even words differed; Matthew (5:3-12) and Luke (6:20-26) have different versions

of the Beatitudes and even different locations, Matthew having Jesus give them on a mount and Luke on a plain.

All of this can be disturbing since so many Christians consider the gospels to be biographies of Jesus. But in fact, scholars consider the biographical information we have about Jesus to be very reliable, more than for many other ancient figures. We must accept that we cannot say things like “Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan on March 11 in the year 31”—the kind of detailed information so common for modern figures. But we can still say a great deal about his life.

Here is an outline of his life:

- He was born in Bethlehem during the reign of Herod, the Roman-appointed king of Judea, and the reign of the Roman emperor Augustus.
- His parents were named Miriam (Mary) and Joseph, both pious Jews.
- He grew up in Nazareth.
- Joseph was a carpenter, and Jesus took up that trade, a standard practice for boys in the ancient world.
- His parents brought him up to be a pious and learned Jew, as he demonstrated when he dialogued with scholars in the Jerusalem Temple.
- Joseph apparently died before Jesus’ public career since there is no mention of him in the gospels when Jesus is an adult.
- He could read (Luke 4:14) and write (John 8:6).
- His career began shortly after that of the charismatic prophet John the Baptist.
- Jesus gathered disciples to himself—both men and women—in Galilee.
- He chose twelve of the male disciples for a special role with him.
- He preached among the people and won great success.

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- He cited the Old Testament and frequently used parables to teach.
- He was revered as a miracle worker and one who could perform exorcisms.
- He was a charitable person, often helping those on the bottom of society.
- He showed particular kindness toward women, giving them the respect ancient society routinely denied them.
- He spoke the truth to all people, regardless of the consequences.
- He respected the Jewish Law and always followed it.
- Members of the Pharisees, a pious lay brotherhood, challenged his teachings.
- Jesus decided to make a journey to Jerusalem, where he received a tumultuous welcome.
- Some of the Jerusalem authorities—but *not* the Jewish people—feared his influence and plotted his death.
- Stirring up mob action, they intimidated Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, to consent to have Jesus crucified.
- He rose from the dead and appeared to some of his disciples.

Confident that the gospels do provide biographical information on Jesus, we can now turn to what the gospels tell us about his birth.

Since Mark was the earliest evangelist, we can start with him, but we will not get very far since Mark does not mention Jesus' birth. Mark focuses completely on Jesus' public career. This may sound odd, but Mark is actually in very good company in this regard, as neither John nor Paul even mentioned it. In addition, the birth of Jesus is not mentioned in any of the non-Pauline epistles (James; 1–2 Peter; 1–3 John; Jude), the Acts of the Apostles, or the book of Revelation. Only Matthew and Luke wrote about the Nativity, and they did so at the be-

ginning of their gospels. We have to ask why they had such an interest in the Nativity. What had happened in the life of the early Church to make the Infancy Narratives relevant?

Mark's gospel opens with an account of Jesus' baptism by the charismatic prophet John the Baptist. When Jesus has been baptized by immersion in the River Jordan and is emerging from the water, "he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Beloved Son; with you I am well pleased'" (Mark 1:10-11).

Matthew and Luke do not explain their interest in the Infancy Narratives and why they added them to their gospels, but modern biblical scholars have deciphered the answer. It may seem natural to think that people simply wanted to know more about Jesus. He had then been dead for a half-century, and disciples who had never met the earthly Jesus personally were growing in number. The problem with this is that Matthew and Luke tell us nothing about Jesus between his birth and public career thirty years later, except for a brief story Luke tells of the twelve-year-old Jesus. If they had wanted to give biographical information about him before his public career, why leave out so much, yet include accounts of his birth? The answer is that their concern was more *theological* than biographical and that the baptism of Jesus in Mark's gospel (the first gospel) presented them with a genuine theological problem.

Christians believed that Jesus was the Son of God, not in the way that the Jews believed all women and men to be God's daughters and sons, but in a special, unique way. Yet Mark's gospel portrayed this truth in a way that was potentially problematic. He says that immediately *after Jesus had been baptized by John the Baptist*, the voice from heaven acknowledged him as the unique Son of God.

Matthew and Luke, like all Christians, believed that Jesus had been God's Son for his whole life, and it disturbed them that Mark's gospel implied, even if unwittingly, that Jesus

had been recognized as God's Son only as an adult and only after his baptism by John. Indeed, they may have feared some people would see a causal relationship between the baptism and the recognition, that is, a divine sonship occurring as a result of the baptism by John.

But why were they concerned about the Baptist? After all, John had acknowledged Jesus' superiority to himself (John 1:29-30; 3:30), some of his disciples left him and followed Jesus, and his movement ended with his death.

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. 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 this occurred more than twenty-five years after John's death and hundreds of miles from Palestine. Indeed, John's and Jesus' disciples may have considered themselves rivals on occasion.

A nonbiblical support for a possible rivalry can be found in a third-century work titled *The Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions*, written in Greek, definitely from the Eastern Mediterranean region, and possibly containing material that dates to the first century. The book claims to have been written by Clement of Rome, a Christian writer at the end of the first century and, in Roman Catholic tradition, the bishop of Rome. Several *pseudepigraphia* (falsely named works) were attributed to him. In the *Recognitions*, one of John the Baptist's disciples tells Jesus' disciples that "[John] is the Christ and not Jesus." A tradition of John's superiority to Jesus, although

not widespread, survived in the Eastern Mediterranean for at least two centuries after the deaths of both.

Now we can understand what concerned Matthew and Luke about Mark's account of Jesus' baptism and the recognition of him as Son of God after that baptism and why they wrote accounts of his birth. The two evangelists, as gospel writers are called, set out to put the record straight and to make it clear that Jesus had been recognized as the Son of God right from his birth and, for Luke, actually even before his birth. They wrote gospels that focused on Jesus' public career, death, and resurrection, but they added to the basic narrative accounts of his birth. This is an example of Christology, that is, the theology of Christ. The two evangelists wanted to leave no doubt that Jesus had always been the Son of God, and these accounts, which recorded fulfillment of prophecies, signs in the sky, and angelic annunciations, would make that clear. Had the two evangelists not done such Christology, we would never have had Christmas.

But they were writing more than eight decades after the event. How did they know anything about Jesus' birth? As just mentioned, many traditions about Jesus were passed along orally, a common practice of ancient cultures in which very few people could read. It is likely that Jesus' disciples asked him about his early life, and these traditions were passed on in the community. Some common core of traditions survived, because Matthew and Luke agree on several basic facts that do not appear in Mark's gospel or any other earlier texts. These include the virginal conception, Jesus' being born in Bethlehem, his father's name being Joseph, and a sign in the sky at the time of his birth. (Mark had already mentioned that his mother's name was Mary and that he grew up in Nazareth.) But the two also disagree on several points, the most important being that in Matthew's gospel, Jesus' parents lived in Bethlehem and later moved to Nazareth for the child's safety, while Luke says that they lived in Nazareth and

that Jesus was born in Bethlehem because his parents had to go there to register for a Roman census. So while we can say that both evangelists knew some common material, they were also uncertain about several specific traditions.

This may be a bit surprising because the majority of crèches, cards, and books about “the first Christmas” give the impression of a continuous, settled narrative. But such a narrative does not exist in the New Testament. Matthew speaks of the coming of the Magi, Herod’s massacre of the Holy Innocents (the innocent infant boys of Bethlehem), and the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt, while Luke tells of the announcement of Jesus’ birth to Mary by the angel Gabriel, of her visit to Elizabeth, of the shepherds visiting the newborn baby, and of the presentation of the child Jesus by his parents in the Temple at Jerusalem. Since the evangelists were not writing their Infancy Narratives for an as yet nonexistent feast, they wrote the accounts as introductions to their gospels, which in turn were written for specific early Christian groups. We will understand the Infancy Narratives best when we realize that the dominant themes of the individual gospels themselves strongly impacted the two accounts of Jesus’ birth.

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

For generations Christians believed that “Matthew,” the author of the first gospel in the New Testament, was one of Jesus’ twelve closest disciples, known as the twelve apostles. If that were the case, his eyewitness account would be of immeasurable value. But once biblical scholars realized that Matthew had taken large sections of his gospel from Mark, who did not even know Jesus personally, they realized that the author of the gospel could not have been one of the Twelve. After all, why would an eyewitness borrow information from someone who did not know Jesus? In that case, who was Matthew?

Possibly from outside the Holy Land, Matthew was a Jewish-Christian, that is, someone who was ethnically Jewish

and religiously a Jew but who converted to Christianity, in his case at a time when the new religion was starting to break off from the old one. In the eighties, Matthew wrote for a community that was heavily Jewish but was becoming increasingly Gentile. Most likely this community was in the city of Antioch in the Roman province of Syria.

The nature of Matthew's community determined the nature of his gospel. Matthew wanted to explain to his readers who Jesus was and what the Church should be, but he also had to deal with Jewish-Gentile tensions. As a Jew, he believed that God's Law as revealed throughout history to his chosen people was still valid. In his gospel (and only in his gospel), Jesus says, "I have come not to destroy the Law but to fulfill it" (5:17). But Matthew also believed that the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day had rejected the true Messiah, a mistake which the Jewish leaders of his own day—a half-century after Jesus' death—were continuing, and so the Christian message went increasingly to Gentiles. Matthew's gospel shows the frustration of a sincere Jew who believed his people, under poor leadership, were going the wrong way. He presciently accepted that the Gentiles represented the future of Christianity, but he did not want the Jewish element of the new faith to fade. Christianity emerged from Judaism; the life of Jesus was a recent manifestation of the divine activity so evident in the history of Israel. Matthew's concern for easing tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians will be shown in his constant citing of the Old Testament, especially the prophets, to assure Jewish converts and to demonstrate to Gentile converts the deep and abiding link between Christianity and the Jewish Scriptures. This Jewish-Gentile tension will appear in Matthew's Infancy Narrative.

Chapter 1

Matthew's Infancy Narrative appears in chapters 1 and 2 of the gospel. When we turn to his account of Jesus' birth,

we find, to our disappointment, that it begins with a boring genealogy of “so-and-so begat so-and-so” from Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, down to Jesus, the Messiah. Yet the problem lies not with Matthew but with us. In the ancient Semitic world, you could not really know who people were unless you knew who their ancestors were. To us, this seems unfair. We judge people by who they are, not by who their great-great-grandparents were. But modern attitudes cannot change history. Genealogies make up much of the Old Testament. We do not know about these Old Testament genealogies because almost no one reads them, either on one’s own or from a pulpit; it is so much better to read about the Exodus or about David and Goliath. But genealogies were so important to the Jews that the first book of Chronicles devotes its first nine chapters—about a dozen pages in the average modern Bible—to listing how “so-and-so begat so-and-so” and cites more than one thousand names! As a good Jew, Matthew had to provide a list of Jesus’ ancestors. His readers would have found the genealogy important, not boring.

A good example of a biblical genealogy is that of the Jewish hero Ezra. The book named after him lists his ancestry back sixteen generations (Ezra 7:1-5), and the modern reader immediately notes that *all the names are of men*. There is nothing unusual about this. Ancient patriarchal societies considered the man the head of the household and the one who passed on the family name; they thought that women played a secondary role in the generative process and so it was not important to include the names of the mothers. Matthew generally follows that path; he is especially concerned to show that Jesus took his descent from David, the greatest of the Jewish kings, and ultimately back to Abraham, father of the Jewish people. But Matthew also provides the names of five women (including Jesus’ mother Mary), something shocking for the ancient world. Why did he do so?

The answer lies in his belief in the virginal conception of Jesus by Mary before she had come to live with Joseph. Christians accepted that account, but it could be misinterpreted or even manipulated to make Mary look like a sinful woman. Matthew accuses some contemporary Jews of spreading false rumors about Jesus' resurrection (28:11-15), and he worries about possible similar rumors about Mary. This explains the other four women he includes in the genealogy.

The first is Tamar, a Canaanite daughter-in-law of the Hebrew patriarch Judah, who had lost three husbands, all sons of Judah, who would not then let her marry his fourth son as tradition demanded. This meant that she would be childless, a disgrace in those days. To avoid this, Tamar posed as a harlot to trick Judah into having relations with her, which he did, and she bore him two sons, one of whom was an ancestor of the great Israelite king David. Judah acknowledged that his devious daughter-in-law had acted more righteously than he did by guaranteeing herself a son (Gen 38). Next Matthew includes Rahab, another Canaanite and a harlot who helped Joshua's spies plot the conquest of the city of Jericho (Josh 2). The third woman was Ruth, a Gentile who married a man named Boaz and who became a grandmother of David.

The fourth woman is the only Jew—Bathsheba, the woman with whom David committed adultery and whose husband, Uriah, he had killed (2 Sam 11–12). Matthew finds her so distasteful that he does not even mention her name, identifying her as “the wife of Uriah,” but in spite of her adulterous behavior, she became the mother of the great King Solomon.

By mentioning Mary at the end of the genealogy, Matthew puts her in the company of these women, Gentiles who were by definition outsiders and women who had questionable reputations, deserved or undeserved, but, most important, women through whom God worked in the history of Israel. Mary may also have been the victim of question and doubt, but

Matthew has no question or doubt of Mary's integrity or that God worked through her, not only for the good of his chosen people but also for the redemption of the entire human race.

The genealogy also contains some subtle points. Abraham is preeminently the father of the Jewish people, but God had also promised him that he would be "the ancestor of a multitude of nations" (Gen 17:4), so this fit Matthew's belief that a movement that originated among the Jews could spread to other peoples, just as Abraham's spiritual fatherhood had. Matthew identifies Joseph as the parent who carries Jesus' descent from the great king David, even though Matthew is about to introduce the virginal conception.

But how can Joseph carry the Davidic descent if he were not the physical father? Matthew answers the question in 1:21, where the angel tells Joseph what to name the baby. According to the Jewish Law, as the biblical scholar Raymond Brown explained, "Joseph can acknowledge Jesus by naming him, and that makes him 'son of David,'" something that Jewish-Christian readers would accept as legal fatherhood. (In Luke's gospel, Mary names her son.) Since most Jews believed that the Messiah, the deliverer of Israel, would come from the House of David, Matthew makes it clear that Jesus stands in the Davidic line.

The genealogy has established not only Jesus' ancestral line but also placed him within the history of Israel and, via Abraham, that of other nations as well. It also sets up another Matthean theme, the fulfillment of prophecy which will demonstrate a further link between Jesus and God's chosen people.

After the genealogy, Matthew tells us that Mary became pregnant by the Holy Spirit after she was engaged to Joseph but before they had lived together. In ancient Jewish law, such a couple was considered married, even before the consummation of the marriage. She could not keep her pregnancy secret, however, and Joseph, "a righteous man" (1:19) in the sense of

following the Law, was also a kindly man. Although naturally dismayed at his wife's pregnancy, he wanted to dismiss her quietly, sparing her both embarrassment as well as the real chance of her being stoned to death as an adulteress, as in the account of the woman taken in adultery in chapter 8 of John's gospel.

The gospels say very little about Joseph, but this one episode shows him not only to be someone who is righteous but also someone who can rise above an apparent betrayal and protect his wife. But then an unnamed angel appeared to Joseph in a dream to comfort him by telling him that Mary conceived miraculously by the Holy Spirit, in fulfillment of a prophecy by the great Jewish prophet Isaiah (7:14) that a virgin would conceive. The angel also told him the child's name, Jesus, while the prophecy adds the symbolic name Emmanuel or "God with us." As it happens, the child is never called "Emmanuel" in this gospel (or in any place else in the New Testament), but at the end of the gospel (28:20) Jesus says, "Behold, *I am always with you*, even to the end of the age."

In Matthew's Infancy Narrative, God communicates with humans via dreams five times—once to the Magi but four times to Joseph. This recalls for the evangelist's Jewish-Christian readers the Hebrew patriarch Joseph, famous for his interpretation of the dreams of Pharaoh of Egypt. It would also make sense to his Gentile readers since ancient pagans believed that deities contacted people in dreams. Additionally, events around the birth of Jesus would fulfill five prophecies from the Old Testament, a phenomenon that would carry great weight with Jewish-Christian readers. Indeed, beginning with the Infancy Narrative, Old Testament prophecies are declared fulfilled throughout Matthew's gospel. Matthew cites the fulfillment of prophecies all throughout Jesus' public ministry, right down to his Passion.

We see yet another Jewish element in chapter 1. The announcement goes to Joseph because according to the Law, he

was Jesus' legal father and thus the appropriate recipient of this news. Continuing the theme of the virginal conception, Matthew finishes chapter 1 by saying that Joseph did not have relations with his wife before Jesus was born.

But there is a puzzling omission to this account: Matthew never tells his readers how Mary came to know that she had conceived via the Holy Spirit. Luke says she learned it from an angel named Gabriel, but Matthew's readers would not have known that.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 changes directions as the attention shifts from the Holy Family to the mysterious Magi who suddenly appear, following a star. Contrary to later tradition, Matthew does not say how many Magi there were, nor does he give them names or ethnic backgrounds or royal status or even camels to ride on. They are simply *magi*, the plural of the Greek word *magos*, a term widely used of the priests of ancient Babylon and Persia, which is apparently what Matthew means since the Magi came "from the East," and both those kingdoms were east of the Holy Land. The Magi were also astrologers, which is why they left their country to follow a star. Not all biblical references to magi are positive; in the biblical book of Numbers (22–24) Balaam, a *magos* in Jewish tradition, intends to curse the people Israel. The word "magic" has the same root as *magos*, a serious concern for Matthew's readers since Jewish law forbade magic. In the Acts of the Apostles (8:9-24) Peter has a run-in with a *magos* named Simon who offers him money to find out how to do his "tricks," that is, miracles. The word *magos* could have very negative overtones.

But these visitors are virtuous magi, and in good faith they arrive at the court of Herod the Great, king of Judea. Ethnically he was just half-Jewish, and he never took Judaism seriously, practicing it only in public. Politically he was a Roman puppet, and Roman authority guaranteed his long reign (37–4 BC). He

was a violent, bloodthirsty man, suspicious of all around him. He murdered his wife and three of his sons as well as numerous other innocent people. His Jewish subjects hated him—which guaranteed his loyalty to Rome—and Herod returned the hatred. When he knew he was dying, he ordered his surviving son to murder six thousand prominent Jews so that the people would be sorry he had died. Fortunately for the Jews, his son did not follow his father's wishes. (Some readers may have noticed that Herod died in 4 BC, that is, before the birth of Jesus Christ, which is impossible if Jesus was born during Herod's reign—how can Christ be born before Christ? We will solve that minor mystery in chapter 3.)

The Magi seek the newborn "king of the Jews," an important reference by Matthew. They could have called Jesus the Messiah, but Herod's official, Roman-given title was "king of the Jews." By calling Jesus by that name, the Magi have unwittingly alerted Herod to a challenge to his power. The devious king calls his scholars together. They search the holy books and conclude the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, thus fulfilling a second prophecy (Mic 5:2). Herod learns from the Magi when they first saw the star; then he sends them on their way, after first getting them to agree to come back and tell him where the child is so that Herod, too, might go and pay him homage.

The Magi continue their journey, and the star leads them to the house (Matt 2:11) where Jesus is. They go in and give him their now famous gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, all gifts befitting a king. Gold has obvious value; frankincense was used in royal ceremonies; myrrh interestingly enough was used for embalming and has a symbolic importance for Matthew. Next the Magi are warned in a dream, Matthew's second one, not to return to Herod but to go home a different way. Realizing the Magi tricked him, the enraged Herod has his troops kill all the boys in Bethlehem under age two, but, warned by an angel in a dream (the third dream presented

in Matthew), Joseph takes his wife and son and escapes into Egypt. The flight into Egypt and the massacre of the Holy Innocents fulfill two more prophecies (Hos 11:1 for the warning and Jer 3:15 for the slaughter of the innocents), the third and fourth in Matthew.

Although it may have some historical base, this famous story has problems if taken completely literally. Most obvious, why did the crafty Herod not send some spies to follow the Magi to see where the child was instead of risking his throne by relying on strangers? Matthew presents this event in a straightforward way, but he is obviously working some significant theological themes. As we said earlier, the evangelist was Jewish and lived in a heavily Jewish but increasingly Gentile Christian community. The fulfillment of three more prophecies would appeal to Jewish-Christians, but the real importance lies in the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leadership in contrast to the faith in Jesus of the Gentile Magi. This foreshadows what would happen at Jesus' death when the leaders of the people turn against Jesus, while the pagan centurion in charge of the crucifixion and some of his soldiers publicly acknowledge, "Truly this man was the Son of God" (Matt 27:54).

Since the account of the centurion also appears in Mark's gospel, Matthew strengthens his account by adding recognition of Jesus' goodness by another Gentile pagan, an account unique to his gospel. The wife of Pontius Pilate is warned *in a dream* that Jesus is an innocent man whom her husband should not harm, but when she tells him so, it is to no avail (27:19). Thus Matthew draws a parallel between the beginning and end of Jesus' life. This foreshadowing of Jesus' death would also explain the rather strange gift of myrrh to a baby. Matthew wants to remind his readers how this baby would eventually die to redeem the world. (John's gospel [19:39] mentions that Jesus' body was wrapped in linen anointed with aloes and myrrh.)

The star makes a second parallel between Jesus' birth and death because at his death other remarkable natural phenomena occurred, such as darkness over all the land and even an earthquake (27:45, 51). Only Matthew among the evangelists mentions the earthquake. He may be writing about a baby, but his Infancy Narrative definitely points toward the Passion.

Matthew also subtly inserts another theme. The apostle Paul, who lived and wrote well before Matthew, had said that pagans could recognize the existence of God by looking at the wonders of creation (Rom 1:19-20). Matthew shows the believing Magi moved to adore Jesus by following a natural object, the star, while Herod and his court have God's revealed truth in the form of the Bible, but they are so committed to maintaining their power that they cannot see this truth. And the star plays still another role. In the biblical book of Numbers, the pagan *magos* Balaam prophesies that "a star shall rise out of Jacob" (24:17). Since the patriarch Jacob's other name was Israel, a star rising out of Jacob symbolizes Jesus emerging from the history of Israel, thus reinforcing the genealogy theme. By thus linking the star and the Magi with an ancient Jewish tradition, Matthew has brilliantly joined both Jew and Gentile in this story.

The evangelist's concern about his own people causes him to emphasize the purely Jewish element in Jesus' birth narrative. He not only specifies that Jesus has indeed fulfilled prophecies and sums up the revelation God had given to his people Israel but also casts Jesus in the mold of Moses. Consider the parallel to the infant Moses in the book of Exodus, chapters 1-2. A child is born who can threaten the ruler (Pharaoh=Herod). The ruler attempts to meet the threat by murdering all the boys in the child's community, but the child manages to escape this fate. As an adult Moses had to flee from Egypt; the infant Jesus fled to Egypt. In Exodus 4:19 "the LORD said to Moses, 'Go back to Egypt for all those who were seeking your life are dead'"; in Matthew 2:20, an angel tells

Joseph in Egypt, "go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." The evangelist adds a second verbal parallel: "Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to land of Israel" (2:21). Exodus 4:20 reads: "So Moses took his wife and his sons, put them on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt."

The Jesus-Moses parallel reappears in the most famous part of Matthew's gospel, the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5–7), which contains the eight beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer among many other sayings, including the one about Jesus' fulfilling the Law. Just as Moses received the Law on Mount Sinai, so Matthew shows Jesus giving the people the new law on another mountain. In addition to the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew's gospel contains four other sizeable discourses by Jesus. Matthew may have intended them to parallel the five books of the Torah, which Jewish tradition attributed to Moses.

This analysis does not mean that there is no history here; certainly the massacre of the Holy Innocents fits into Herod's character as ancient historians have recorded it. But clearly Matthew's main concern was not history but theology, focusing on themes for both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

Now we return to the Holy Family in Egypt. Matthew gives no indication how long they were there, nor does he say where they stayed. Since there was a large Jewish community in the city of Alexandria, the Holy Family would have fit in there, although the Alexandrian Jews normally used Greek as their daily language. After Herod's death, Joseph has a dream (Matthew's fourth dream narrative) in which an angel tells him it is safe to go home, that is, back to Bethlehem, which was in Judea. But when Joseph learns that Herod's son Archelaus now rules Judea for the Romans, he is afraid to go there. Joseph now has Matthew's dream number five in which an angel tells him to go instead to Galilee, a more rural area north of Judea. This is how the evangelist explains why Jesus was born in Bethlehem but grew up in Nazareth, a town of

Galilee. Matthew closes his Infancy Narrative by showing that Jesus' residence in Nazareth fulfills a fifth prophecy.

Biblical scholars will dispute the historical accuracy of several aspects of Matthew's Infancy Narrative, but there can be no dispute about Matthew's literary or theological abilities. He wrote an appealing and sometimes vivid account that brings to life the events surrounding Jesus' birth as a historical event, an act of God, and a continuation of the story of God's chosen people. This is justly one of the best known stories in the world. Matthew has also demonstrated that for Christians, Jesus had always been recognized as the Son of God, his virginal conception accomplished through the Spirit and foretold by an angel in a divinely sent dream. He further demonstrated that, as during Jesus' public career, the message of Jesus went first to the Jews, whose leaders opposed him, and then went increasingly to the believing Gentiles, although its Jewish roots will never be abandoned. The evangelist produced a superb introduction to his gospel and unknowingly provided half of the base for the one of the greatest feast days his faith would create. The other half would be provided by his contemporary and fellow evangelist, Luke.

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

With the Gospel of Luke, we enter a different world. Although he was a contemporary of Matthew, the two evangelists show no awareness of one another's work. Luke was most probably a Gentile. He shows little knowledge of Jewish customs but a considerable knowledge of the Eastern Mediterranean Gentile world, that is, the part of the Roman Empire where Christianity first emerged (equivalent to modern Turkey, Greece, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Israel), although we cannot say exactly where he lived and wrote. He places emphasis on Christianity's message going to the Gentiles.

Luke is the New Testament's great stylist. A conscious literary artist, he raises all his characters to his level. In his

writings, everyone from illiterate peasants to Roman governors speak the same good quality Greek. Like all the writers of the New Testament, he wrote for a Christian audience, but he also remained conscious of a larger, educated world. His Infancy Narrative employs several effective literary devices. All this implies a considerable education, which matches the tradition that he was a physician, a title given to him in the Epistle to the Colossians (4:14), although the title might have been symbolic, that is, a physician of souls.

Luke had a great insight that changed Christianity. He recognized that the world would not end immediately. Jesus had died a half century before Luke wrote, and he believed that by constantly delaying the Second Coming, God had revealed his true plan, that is, to create the Church. Previously, the Church had functioned as a lightly structured organization to keep the Christians together until the imminent End, but Luke believed that the Church had been established by the Holy Spirit to continue the work of Christ in the world. The Church was a good *in itself*, irrespective of the Second Coming, and so Luke did something no other evangelist did. He wrote a second volume, called the Acts of the Apostles, to recount the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church, especially through the work of Luke's hero, the apostle Paul.

This second book helps us to understand Luke's gospel and thus his Infancy Narrative. Luke recognized the overall failure of the Christian mission to the Jews and the growing movement of the Church into the Gentile world of the Roman Empire. He ended the Acts of the Apostles in Rome, the center of this world, when Paul, a prisoner, arrives there for trial. Luke realized that the delayed Second Coming meant that the Christians would have to learn to live with the Romans, and he clearly did not think this was a bad thing. Like almost all Christians, he considered himself a loyal citizen of the empire and did not see Rome and the Church as inevitable enemies.

For example, in the Acts of the Apostles, Roman officials intervene to save Paul's life when Jewish or pagan mobs

threaten it. When Paul is put on trial in Judea, he appeals to Rome, to the court of the emperor (at the time Nero), showing Paul's faith in Roman justice. In his gospel (Luke 23) Luke worked overtime to prove that Pontius Pilate, the Roman official who put Jesus to death, was incompetent and cowardly, a man unworthy to be a governor, and so Pilate's judgment against Jesus did not mean that the empire and the faith could not get along. These themes will be strong in the Infancy Narrative.

Many early Christians believed that the Jesus movement should remain part of Judaism or should at least retain many aspects of Jewish law and practice. But Luke, like Paul, belonged to the universalist strain. He believed Christianity to be a faith for all people. Unlike Matthew, Luke did not believe this happened because the Jews did not accept Jesus' message. On the contrary, the message was *always* intended for people of all ethnic groups, including the Jews whose traditions Luke respected. In his gospel, Luke emphasized how Jesus' message goes to people of all ethnic groups by including the parable of the Good Samaritan (10:29-37). In the Acts of the Apostles, many Gentiles welcome Paul's preaching while most Jews challenge it.

But, significantly for his Infancy Narrative, Luke's universalism went beyond ethnic groupings. It also extended to those on the margins of society, such as the poor and the outcast. In the gospel, Jesus stays at the house of a notorious tax collector who admits to Jesus that he had cheated people; in response, Jesus says that he came "to seek out and save the lost" (19:1-10). Only Luke tells us that the crucified Lord promised Paradise to one of the thieves who were executed with him (23:39-43). Luke's fondness for the common people appears also in the parable in which the sinful publican is more just than the self-righteous Pharisee (18:9-14). In the parable of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus (16:19-31), the rich man goes to hell while the poor man rests in the heavenly bosom of father Abraham.

Yet no marginalized group plays such a prominent role in the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles as do women. Only Luke tells us how Jesus cured the crippled woman (13:10-17), how he raised the widow's son from the dead (7:11-17), and how he enjoyed the company of Martha and Mary (10:38-42), while the Acts of the Apostles speaks of important women converts, such as the businesswoman Lydia (16:11-15), and four early Christian women prophets (21:9). In keeping with Luke's general approach, women, especially Mary, play a major role in the Infancy Narratives, one even more important than that of the men.

Apparently Luke was also a kind man because in addition to extending the message to the marginalized and outcasts, whether ethnic or social, he stresses mercy and forgiveness. The publican wins forgiveness for his sins from God while, on the cross, Jesus forgives those who engineered his death (23:34). This theme too will appear in the Infancy Narrative.

Chapter 1

When we turn to the very first chapter of Luke's gospel, we encounter the same problem that we did with the beginning of Matthew's—where is the Infancy Narrative? In the ancient world, literary figures usually had wealthy patrons who subsidized their work. In an era when books had to be copied by hand, mass marketing was not feasible. And, of course, there were no television or movie deals to be made. Authors needed wealthy patrons to finance their work. Luke starts off by thanking someone named Theophilus, clearly his patron since this man reappears at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles (1:1). Since the name Theophilus means "one loved by God" in Greek, it may not be a proper name but an honorific one. Luke addresses him as "your excellency" which indicates Theophilus was an aristocrat, which is what we would expect. Having completed the obligatory dedication, Luke turns to the story.

He starts with an annunciation—not one about Jesus, but about John the Baptist. Recall that Matthew and Luke wanted to establish that Jesus did not become God’s Son after being baptized by John, and Luke will here make the point forcefully. While serving in the Temple in Jerusalem, a Jewish priest named Zechariah sees an apparition of the angel Gabriel. Gabriel was a prominent figure in Jewish literature who had appeared to the prophet Daniel. The apparition frightens Zechariah, and for good reason, since some Jews believed Gabriel to be God’s agent in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. But the angel tells Zechariah not to fear and then goes on to foretell that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son whom they should call John and who would “bring back many of the Israelites to the Lord their God” (1:16). The angel also tells Zechariah that his son “even before his birth would be filled with the Holy Spirit,” that is, he would prophesy and prepare the people for the Lord’s coming. Zechariah has doubts because his wife and he are too old to have a child, so Gabriel gives him a sign of the truthfulness of the message by striking him dumb. When Zechariah returns home from Jerusalem, he has relations with his wife, who conceives.

As the parents of John the Baptist, the last great predecessor of Jesus, Elizabeth and Zechariah will typify the Old Testament for Luke’s readers—good people but passing into history as a new age begins. They also fit into a distinct pattern in the Old Testament. God overcame the barrier of advanced age to give a son, Isaac, to Sarah and Abraham, and he also overcame the barrenness of Rebecca, the wife of Isaac, as well as the barrenness of the mother of Samson, and of Hannah, the mother of the Israelite judge Samuel. Thus the universalist Luke is setting his story in the framework of Jewish tradition. God had to overcome the barrenness of women because in the ancient patriarchal world, if a couple did not produce children, it was assumed that the problem was the woman’s,

never the man's. Elizabeth thanks God for taking away *her* disgrace (1:25), not that of her husband or of both of them.

We might expect Luke to continue this story, but instead he switches to a second annunciation story, as the angel Gabriel next visits a virgin named Mary who was betrothed to a man named Joseph to tell her that she would become the mother of Jesus. Before going on with the Annunciation, we should note that Mary lives in Nazareth of Galilee, so here Luke disagrees with Matthew who said that Jesus' parents settled in Nazareth because it was not safe for them to return from Egypt to Judea. Obviously both evangelists knew that Jesus came from Nazareth but were unsure as to how he got there. This is also proof that Matthew and Luke did not know one another's work because they could have reconciled such an obvious discrepancy.

Gabriel appears to Mary, who is engaged to Joseph, and greets her with "The Lord is with you." This perplexes Mary, but Gabriel assures her she has divine favor and will bear a son whom *she* will name Jesus, in contrast to Matthew's gospel which says Joseph will name the child (1:21). Gabriel makes glorious predictions about her son's future, but Mary cannot understand how she, a virgin, will conceive. Luke agrees with Matthew that the Holy Spirit will overshadow her and a pregnancy will result; both evangelists witness to the tradition of a virginal conception. Just as he gave a sign to Zechariah, Gabriel gives Mary a sign, but a positive one, that is, her relative Elizabeth has conceived a son "for nothing will be impossible with God" (1:37).

Luke is a superb stylist, and in his annunciation narrative, we notice a literary device. Luke has paralleled the two annunciations, although with some differences. That is because Luke used a literary device called a step parallel, that is, he paralleled two accounts but one is usually a step higher than the other. A comparison will illustrate this device:

	<i>John the Baptist</i>	<i>Jesus</i>
<i>Angel</i>	Gabriel	Gabriel
<i>Human</i>	Zechariah	Mary
<i>Son's Name</i>	John	Jesus
<i>Son's Deeds</i>	Bring the Israelites to God	Son of the Most High
	Spirit of Elijah upon him	Have the throne of David
	Many rejoice at his birth	Will have eternal reign
<i>Obstacle</i>	Age of parents	Virginity
<i>Sign</i>	Zechariah struck dumb	Cousin Elizabeth is pregnant

John will be a great man, but Jesus is the Son of the Most High and his reign will have no end. Elizabeth's pregnancy overcame the obstacle of age, a not impossible task (although here accomplished with divine aid), but Mary's pregnancy overcame the obstacle of virginity, a genuinely miraculous occurrence to which the Old Testament offered no parallel. Luke implies that Mary's question to the angel, "How can this come about, since I have no knowledge of man?" was given in a better spirit than Zechariah's because Gabriel punished him for his doubt with the sign of dumbness, while Mary received the good news that her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant with a son and had thus shaken off the disgrace of not having given her husband a male heir. Luke has here advanced a central early Christian theme, the superiority of the mission of Jesus to that of John the Baptist. He has also advanced another of his favorite themes—in his gospel, the angel announces Jesus' birth to the woman, not to the man, as happens in Matthew's gospel.

The evangelist does not tell us much about Mary, but we can deduce some things about her by looking at the historical

circumstances. For example, it was common in the ancient world for people to marry as teenagers because life expectancy was so much shorter than today, and the chief cause of death for women was childbirth. It was best that a woman become pregnant while healthy and young. Mary was likely fourteen or fifteen years old. It is also likely that she could not read. Few people in the ancient world would “waste” an education on a girl. But society was structured to accommodate the vast majority who could not read, so illiteracy was not the negative it is today. Since parents traditionally chose their children’s spouses, we can assume that the marriage of Mary and Joseph was an arranged one, a practice still common in much of the world. Joseph was a carpenter, a craftsman, the kind of husband a small-town girl would have expected. Naturally both husband and wife would have to be Jewish. According to John’s gospel, Mary had a sister (19:25), although the other gospels do not mention her.

Mary fit Luke’s notion of the ideal Christian—pious, humble, and responding to God’s message. He also quotes her response to Gabriel as “I am the handmaiden of the Lord” (1:38). But in the ancient world a “handmaiden” would be a slave woman, a person on the lowest rung of society, literally a piece of property, routinely overworked and just as routinely abused, so Mary has self-identified with those at the very base of ancient society.

In an act of kindness, Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth. When Elizabeth greeted her, the unborn John jumped in his mother’s womb, a sign that he recognized a greater person was there and fulfilling the angel’s words to Zechariah that his son would be filled with the Holy Spirit before his birth (1:15). His mother Elizabeth also “was filled with the Holy Spirit,” so her words to Mary, “Of all women you are the most blessed,” have the status of revelation. Luke stresses his point: John and his mother acknowledge the superiority of Jesus and his mother.

Mary then recited a poem, usually called the *Magnificat* from the first word of the Latin translation of the poem, widely used in the Middle Ages when educated people read and spoke Latin. It is a beautiful piece. The nature of the verse proves it was originally created in Greek, and a teenage girl who spoke only the Semitic dialect of Aramaic could not have composed it. Like most ancient authors, Jewish, Greek, and Roman, Luke felt free to put words in the mouths of historical figures, and so the *Magnificat* resounds with Lukan themes.

This literary approach does not resonate with modern people who expect authors *not* to put words in people's mouths. But it has good biblical precedents. To give just the most famous example, biblical scholars have shown that the book of Isaiah records not only the prophecies of the great prophet but also of disciples of his who lived hundreds of years later and whose prophecies survive under the prophet's name. These later prophets are known as "Second Isaiah" (chaps. 40–55) and "Third Isaiah" (chaps. 56–66). Although David did not write all the psalms, in Jewish tradition all the psalms went under his name. The ancient Jews also attributed several wisdom writings to the famous king Solomon, even ones like the book of Wisdom, which was written in Greek!

In the *Magnificat*, Mary acknowledges that the Lord has "looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant" but "all generations will call me blessed" (1:48), that is, God chose to work with a humble woman, but he will exalt her through the ages. By working with the lowly, God "has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (1:52-53). Luke does not say that Mary possessed the Holy Spirit when she said these things, but he did not have to. In the ancient world people believed poets to be inspired.

And this inspired poet showed God providentially favoring the commoners over the noble, the poor over the rich. Furthermore, Luke's readers who knew the Old Testament would have recognized themes from the great Jewish prophets who also excoriated the aristocracy for their treatment of the lowly, such as Amos who denounced those who "trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land" (8:4).

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months but left before John was born. When the baby arrived, Zechariah had to write the boy's name on a writing tablet, and when he did, his power of speech returned. He used this newly regained ability to utter a poem of his own, called the *Benedictus*, again because of its first word in the Latin translation. Like a pious Jew as well as a priest, he praised God for all he had done for his people and then predicted what kind of man John would be. Specifically John "will go before the Lord to prepare a way for him" (1:76). For a pious Jew the Lord was God, but Jesus is frequently called "Lord" in Luke's gospel, and the evangelist's readers would not have missed the point. (A small note here: in verse 1:62 "they began motioning to his father [Zechariah] to find out what name he wanted to give him [the baby]." Why were they motioning rather than speaking? This implies he had been struck deaf as well as mute, although that was not what Luke said the angel had done [1:20]. An otherwise careful writer has made a small slip here.)

Luke finishes chapter 1 by telling us that John grew up to be strong and went off to live in the desert until his public career. Saying goodbye to Galilee, Luke turns to a much wider world.

Chapter 2

"In those days a decree went forth from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled" (2:1). The geographical change is abrupt, but Luke wants to establish that the birth of Jesus would impact the whole world. When we remember that Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles, which

ends with the apostle Paul in Rome, we can see that this Roman setting has great significance for Luke who places the imperial city at the beginning of the gospel and at the conclusion of Acts. Yet the issue is not just Rome but Augustus himself. He was a prince of peace because he put an end to the Roman civil wars and brought order to the Roman world, an achievement with beneficial effects for Christianity (the history of the Church would have been very different if Paul had been murdered by bandits or kidnapped by pirates). Augustus brought peace by successful warfare and by shrewd political manipulation of his opponents; Jesus would bring peace by redeeming humans from sin and reconciling them to God. And the comparison is not just spiritual. Luke loves the idea of comparing the Roman emperor on his throne to a poor baby born in a stable in a frontier province.

As we saw, Luke believed that Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth, and he knew that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, so he has to explain why the Holy Family was there. He does so via the census. He agrees with Matthew that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod (Luke 1:5), but there is no trace of a Roman census in Judea at that time, although there was one about ten years later. Writing eighty years after the events, Luke clearly was uncertain on this issue, but the census allows him to make an important point at a time when the Christians had to learn to live with Rome: the parents of Jesus were good citizens of the empire, obeying the law to register for the census.

To Bethlehem the Holy Family went, only to find no room in an inn so that they had to take shelter in a stable where Jesus was born. (It is only fair to note that Luke says simply that the inn was full and makes no reference to the rude, unkind innkeeper of later folk and literary tradition.) But without a place to stay in Bethlehem, the Holy Family was symbolically homeless, precursors of the outcast and marginalized that Jesus would preach to in Luke's gospel. The

Holy Family takes refuge in the stable, and the newborn infant is laid in a manger, that is, a feeding trough for animals, wretched symbols of his humble status as well as a major Lukan theme: like his mother the handmaiden, the savior of the world self-identifies with the lowest of the low. We must also note that this birth in a stable differs from Matthew's account, since the visiting magi "enter the *house*" (2:11).

Who were the first ones to recognize the newborn savior? Not educated, important Magi, but humble Jewish shepherds: poor, ignorant, odiferous people with whom "proper" people would not want to associate. Yet all was not humble; there was glory there as well. Matthew had a sign in the sky, the star that led the Magi; Luke's sign in the sky is a chorus of angels, letting the shepherds know that Jesus has been born, and then uttering the famous but unfamiliar words: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." What happened to the famous, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will"? This comes from a Latin translation, *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, and it often appears in liturgical music as the *Gloria*.

The presence of angels not only signifies divine recognition of the newborn child but also reminds us of the angelic apparitions to Zechariah and Mary. Lest we miss the point, Luke uses the same annunciation formula: the angels appear; the shepherds are frightened; an unnamed angel tells them not to fear; a child has been (rather than will be) born; his name is Christ, the Lord; and the sign is that he is lying in the manger.

The shepherds arrive at the stable and venerate the child, telling his parents of the angelic apparition, yet Luke mentions that only Mary kept these things in her heart. Presumably Joseph was moved as well, but Luke again focuses on the woman.

Obedient to Jewish as well as Roman law, the child's parents have him circumcised on the eighth day and they give him

the name Jesus. Luke describes this event very briefly. He next speaks of the purification of Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple, once again showing Mary and Joseph acting “according to the law of Moses” (2:22). This sounds correct, but, in fact, this Gentile evangelist got it wrong, saying “they” had to be purified after the birth, when Jewish law required only that women had to be (Lev 12:2-8). But Luke’s real concern is prophetic recognition of Jesus. Simeon, an “upright and devout man,” was also in the Temple, and “the Holy Spirit rested upon him,” that is, he was a prophet. “Prompted by the Spirit . . . he took him [Jesus] into his arms and blessed God and uttered another Greek poem, again known by the first words of its Latin translation, the *Nunc Dimittis*. Simeon says that this boy will be “a light of revelation for the Gentiles and glory for [his] people Israel,” a perfect example of Luke’s theology. This boy would glorify his own people, but his message was for all.

Simeon adds another prophecy, but this one is for Mary. He warns her that her son is “destined to be a sign that will be opposed” and that “a sword will pierce your soul, too” (2:35). For generations, Christians believed that this meant Mary’s agony at seeing her son on the cross, but this interpretation is not feasible because in Luke’s gospel, Mary is not under the cross. Only John’s gospel places her there (19:25), and that gospel had not yet been written (it was produced around the year 100). Most likely the sword symbolized Mary’s pain at having to let Jesus go to do God’s work, even at the cost of his life. Working from this appearance of Jesus in the Temple, Luke uses the theme of Mary’s pain in his account of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple. But first Luke had more to say about the purification.

In addition to Simeon, the prophet Anna also resides in the Temple. She likewise prophesies that Jesus would deliver his people. Women prophets were few but not unknown in ancient Judaism, for example, the biblical book 2 Kings

mentions an important woman prophet named Huldah (22:14). In highlighting Anna, Luke again emphasizes the role of women in the early life of Jesus and thus symbolically in the life of the Church. He reemphasizes this point in the Acts of the Apostles, where he records the presence of women prophets in the early Church, specifically the four daughters of a deacon named Philip (Acts 21:8-9). Luke does not quote any words of Anna, but says only that "she spoke of the child to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem" (2:38).

Emphasizing again that Jesus' parents did "everything that the Law of the Lord required," Luke tells us they returned to Nazareth. When Jesus was twelve, his parents took him to Jerusalem for Passover. When the feast was over and they joined the other pilgrims on the road home, Mary and Joseph realized that Jesus was not with them. They checked with relatives and friends but could find him nowhere.

This passage makes Mary and Joseph look rather irresponsible. Why had they not kept their son with them on a long journey amid crowds of people? But we should not take this too literally, because Luke did not intend to paint a negative picture of the parents. Here is the key: Jesus is withdrawn from his parents, and they are wretched without him. But they encounter him again *after three days*, and, as with the resurrection, he is a different person, there the Savior risen from the dead, here not just a bright, small town Galilean boy who can impress the Temple scholars with his learning, but one with a sense of a future calling: "Do you not know I must be in my Father's house?" (2:49). Christian readers would have recognized this because they knew that Jesus would make a second trip to Jerusalem and again encounter Temple authorities who, instead of praising him, would revile him and seek his destruction.

Three other points in this account deserve consideration. First, it was the father's responsibility to see that his son

learned the basics of Judaism, and clearly Joseph—so little recognized in the Bible—had done a superb job in seeing to Jesus' education. Second, for the first time, but not the last, Mary's soul is pierced with agony as she recognizes the demands of her son's mission. Third, Luke makes it clear what the Infancy Narratives were leading up to, as Jesus recognizes his special calling.

Luke closes his account by telling us that Jesus lived with his parents and continually "increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favor with God and with people" (2:52). Luke mentions nothing else about Jesus' life before his public ministry, although we may conclude that Joseph died during this time, since no mention is made of him during the public ministry.

THE GOSPEL ACCOUNTS AND HISTORY

Like Matthew, Luke has given us a fine account, replete with tenderness (the elderly Elizabeth and Zechariah finally able to have a son), superb poetry, effective literary devices, and an important Christology. But how historical can both (or either) gospel accounts be?

First, there definitely is historical material here, because it is simply inconceivable that none of Jesus' disciples, women or men, ever asked him about his life before his public mission. Additionally, Jesus' mother Mary, who was with the disciples after the resurrection (Acts 1:14), could have provided some information about his childhood. Thus, some general facts about his birth would have been available, although Matthew and Luke wrote a half century after Jesus' death and did so outside the Holy Land—that is, they would not have been direct recipients of this earliest information.

Second, in fairness, we must always remember that both evangelists depended on oral traditions passed along for decades, and even then only on the oral traditions known to their own local communities. We should not be surprised that they disagree on some points, although they also agree on

several important points. The one unambiguous fact on which both agree is that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great. Luke adds the reign of Caesar Augustus (31 BC to AD 14), which is historically accurate since Herod and Augustus were contemporaries.

There is no doubt that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and that his father was Joseph, details not found in Mark or other writings earlier than these two gospels; furthermore, these two gospels agree with Mark that he grew up in Nazareth. But many geographical problems still abound. It seems plausible that his parents lived in Nazareth before his birth because Luke presumes it, while Matthew's explanation for their residence there depends on Herod's massacre of the innocent children and the Holy Family's flight to Egypt. Since that fits the evangelist's comparison of Jesus to Moses, it is less historically probable than Luke's account. On the other hand, if they lived in Nazareth, how did Jesus come to be born in Bethlehem? Matthew presumes the family lived there, while Luke's explanation of the birth in Bethlehem because of a census falters for a lack of evidence of such a census at that time and coincides, perhaps too well, with his obvious desire to place Jesus' birth in a Roman setting. Geographically, the two accounts just cannot be reconciled completely.

Matthew says nothing about John the Baptist. Luke's assertion that he was Jesus' cousin does not reappear in his gospel's account of the two as adults, a puzzling omission if his Infancy Narrative is historically accurate on this point. Luke is the only source for the names of John's parents.

Since both evangelists wrote about the virginal conception, the tradition clearly antedated both of them and was authoritative among the first Christians, yet it has always been the topic of some questioning because the Hebrew version of Isaiah 7:14 does not read "virgin" but rather "young woman." Over the centuries, this has led to suspicion and sometimes to actual accusations that Matthew, who cited

Isaiah, changed the text to accommodate Christian teaching. But that is simply untrue. In the centuries before Jesus was born, many Jews migrated to the city of Alexandria in Egypt, a Greek-speaking locale. These immigrants soon began to speak Greek and wanted a translation of the Bible in that language. Alexandrian Jewish scholars produced a Greek Old Testament translation known as the Septuagint. When the translators got to Isaiah 7:14, they equated the Hebrew “young woman” with the Greek word for “virgin.” As a Diaspora Jew writing in Greek, Matthew cited the Septuagint, that is, he cited a *Jewish* edition of Isaiah for the word “virgin;” he did not change the text to fit Christian belief.

Clearly Luke did not get everything right, but his portrayal of Jesus’ parents as faithful, practicing Jews is accurate because the adult Jesus is at home in synagogues and can debate the Law with learned Jews, as he does while a boy in Luke’s gospel. Jesus clearly grew up in a pious household. Matthew supports the notion of the boy’s piety by telling us that Joseph was a righteous man, that is, one who followed the Law, and so we can expect him to have brought up his son to know and follow the Law.

Both writers include a sign in the sky, and both intend it to be miraculous. Luke speaks unequivocally about angels, while Matthew speaks of a star that moves and which leads the Magi to Jesus. This is clearly not just a normal star. But it is significant that both evangelists mention a heavenly sign; clearly an established tradition by the time they wrote. Furthermore, as we shall see next, some modern astronomers believe there was a stellar phenomenon that could explain this tradition.

An agreement on the names of Jesus’ parents, the places of his birth and childhood, the ruling monarchs, and miraculous elements such as the virginal conception and the sign in the sky may not seem like much to a modern historian, but they represent far more than we know about the births of many other great figures of Antiquity, Greek, Jewish, Egyptian, or Roman. More important, we must recall that the historical

setting is just that—a setting in which Matthew and Luke recounted how they, as believing Christians, understood Jesus' birth, that is, how they incorporated the Infancy Narratives into their Christologies.

THE STAR

For generations astronomers have tried to identify the Star of Bethlehem, but with the rise of modern biblical study in the nineteenth century, religion scholars have downplayed the physicality of the star in favor of a symbolic or theological explanation, such as the star rising out of Jacob or the parallel to the sign in the sky (the darkening) at Jesus' death. For such scholars, Matthew clearly did not intend his star to be understood as a physical reality.

But if that is the case and if Matthew simply fabricated the story of the star and the Magi to show Gentiles accepting Jesus while the Jewish leadership tries to harm him, then we have to ask, why did Matthew choose this particular story? He could have made up anything to show Gentile acceptance. And why not use Romans or Greeks to represent the Gentiles? They would have been much more familiar to his congregation than the anonymous magi vaguely "from the East." And why use a star? Plenty of other natural phenomena could come to mind, especially when we recall that when Matthew was writing in the 80s, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and the destruction of Pompeii in 79 were fresh in people's minds. For that matter, why does he need natural phenomena at all to show the Gentiles' acceptance of Christ? Unanswered questions like these convinced some modern astronomers that there was likely a good historical reason why Matthew chose an astral phenomenon.

The astronomers "walked down the hall," so to speak, and talked with their colleagues in the religion department. They understand that Matthew had a theological rather than an historical theme in mind, but they still believe that some

astral event occurred about the time Jesus was born that convinced Matthew to use a star for his symbolism. If the astronomers are correct, then it is possible that Matthew not only made a theological point but also passed along an historical tradition.

This writer is not an astronomer and cannot evaluate the scientific questions involved, but readers who want to know more about this topic should consult two books written for a general audience, *The Star of Bethlehem: An Astronomer's View* by Mark Kidger and *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* by Michael Molnar (listed in the bibliography). Both writers did their historical homework, and they pay great attention to how the ancient Magi understood the stars because it is not enough to prove that some astral phenomenon existed—that goes on all the time—but rather that some phenomenon occurred that was so grand or so unique that it moved people to believe that some great event had occurred on earth.

They argue that ancient astrologers would look not just to one event in the sky but to several, because multiple events made interpretation more reliable, and the astrologers did not have to bet everything on interpreting one event correctly. The modern astronomers believe that several events did occur in the period 6 to 4 BC, such as a conjunction of planets in the constellation Pisces (Kidger) or Aries (Molnar), a further massing of planets in Pisces, followed by two pairings in the same constellation, and finally a supernova observed by Chinese astronomers in 5 BC and by Korean astronomers in 4 BC. Kidger believes that the Star of Bethlehem might be a star called DO Aquilae, but concedes that “it would be quite astonishing if this turns out to be correct. Most likely it is some other, now anonymous star.”

The physical star may not have been the evangelist Matthew's central concern, but modern astronomers make a good case for some unique astral phenomenon or phenomena at the time of Jesus' birth.