

## Introduction

### Scholarship and the Infancy Narrative

- A. The Infancy Narratives and the Rest of the Gospels
  - 1. The Formation of the Gospels
  - 2. The Development of Christology
- B. The Infancy Narratives as History
  - 1. The Problem of Corroborating Witnesses
  - 2. The Problem of Conflicting Details
- C. The Infancy Narratives as Vehicles of the Evangelist's Theology

### Book One: The Matthean Infancy Narrative

- I. General Observations on the Matthean Gospel and Infancy Narrative
  - A. The Matthean Gospel
  - B. The Matthean Infancy Narrative
    - 1. The Relation of Chs. 1-2 to the Rest of the Gospel
    - 2. The Internal Organization of Chs. 1-2
- II. The Genealogy of Jesus
  - A. Matthew's Purpose in the Genealogy
    - 1. General Observations
    - 2. How Matthew Composed the Genealogy
    - 3. Why Bring on the Ladies?
    - 4. Fourteen - the Magic Number
    - 5. Could Matthew Count?
  - B. Matthew's Genealogy Compared to Luke's
    - 1. Who Was Jesus' Grandfather?
    - 2. The Family Tree of the Son of God
- III. The Composition of the Basis Matthean Narrative in 1:18-2:33
  - A. Matthew's Formula Citation of Scripture
    - 1. Purpose of the Citations
    - 2. Relation of the Citations to Their Context
    - 3. Origin of the Formula Citation
  - B. The Detection of Pre-Matthean Material
    - 1. The Method Employed in the Detection
    - 2. Summary of the Results
- IV. The Conception of Jesus
  - A. Matthew's Message: the Who and the How - a Christological Revelation
    - 1. The *Quis*: Who Jesus Is
    - 2. The *Quomodo* or the "How" of Jesus' Identity
  - B. The Formula Citation of Isaiah 7:14
    - 1. The Placing of the Citation
    - 2. Isaiah 7:14 in the Hebrew and Greek Bibles
    - 3. The Matthean Use of Isaiah 7:14
  - C. Matthew's Use of Pre-Matthean Material
    - 1. The Annunciation of Birth
    - 2. Begotten of a Virgin through the Holy Spirit
    - 3. Summary
- V. The Magi Come to Pay Homage to the King of the Jew
  - A. Matthew's Message: the Where and the Whence - Reactions to a Christological Revelation
    - 1. The Place of 2:1-12 in the Plan of Chapter Two
    - 2. The Relation of the Plan to Matthew's Message
  - B. Matthew's Use of Scripture in the Service of His Message
    - 1. The Formula Citation of Micah 5:1 and II Sam 5:2 in Scene 1
    - 2. The Implicit Citation of Isa 60:6 and Ps 72:10-11 in Scene 2
  - C. The Pre-Matthean Background of the Magi Story
    - 1. History and Verisimilitude
    - 2. The Balaam Narrative
  - D. The Magi in Subsequent Christian Piety
- VI. Herod Unsuccessfully Seeks to Destroy the King of the Jews
  - A. Matthew's Message as Enhanced by His Use of Scripture
    - 1. Chap. Two, Scene 3 (v. 13-15)
    - 2. Chap. Two, Scene 4 (v. 16-18)
    - 3. Chap. Two, Scene 5 (v. 19-23)
  - B. The Three Formula Citations
    - 1. The Citation of Hosea 11:1 in Matt 2:15b
    - 2. The Citation of Jer 31:15 in Matt 2:18
    - 3. The Citation of Isa 4:3 and Judg 16:17 in Matt 2:23?
  - C. The Pre-Matthean Background of the Herod Story
    - 1. History and Verisimilitude

- VII. Epilogue
2. The Joseph/Moses Narrative
- Book Two: The Lucan Infancy Narrative
- I. General Observations on the Lucan Gospel and Infancy Narrative
- A. The Lucan Gospel
- B. The Lucan Infancy Narrative
1. The Relation of Chs. 1-2 to the Rest of Luke/Acts
2. The Internal Organization of Chs. 1-2
- II. The Annunciation of the Birth of John the Baptist
- A. The Introduction (1:5-7)
- B. The Annunciation (1:8-23)
1. Echoes of Daniel in the Appearance of Gabriel
2. The Message(13-17)
3. Zechariah's Response (18-20) and the Conclusion (21-23)
- C. The Epilogue (1:24-25)
- D. The Relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus
- III. The Annunciation of the Birth of Jesus
- A. The Structure and the Annunciation Pattern
- B. The Virginal Conception (1:34)
1. Does the Present Account Contain a Virginal Conception?
2. Did the Original Account Contain a Virginal Conception?
3. The Logic of Mary's Question in 1:34
- C. The Future Accomplishments of the Child (1:32.33.35)
1. The Davidic Messiah (32-33)
2. The Son of God through the Power of the Holy Spirit (35)
- D. The Portrait of Mary as Handmaid (1:38)
- E. Mary and Old Testament Symbolism
1. Daughter of Zion in the Old Testament
2. The Salutation in 1:28
3. The Ark of the Covenant in 1:35?
- IV. The Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth
- A. The Structure and Composition of the Scene
- B. The Visitation (1:39-45.56)
- C. The Lucan Canticles in General
1. The Composition of the Canticles
2. The Canticles and the Jewish Christian Anawim
- D. The Magnificat (1:46-55)
1. The structure
2. The Contents
- V. The Birth and Naming of John the Baptist; Zechariah's Prophecy
- A. The Birth and Naming (1:57-66.80)
- B. The Benedictus (1:67-79)
1. The Setting and the Structure
2. The Contents
- VI. The Birth and Naming of Jesus
- A. The Structure of the Story in 2:1-40
- B. The Setting at Bethlehem (2:1-7)
1. The Census of the Whole World (1-5)
2. The Birth, the Swaddling, and the Manger (6-7)
- C. The Annunciation to the Shepherds (2:8-14)
1. The Symbolism of the Shepherds (8)
2. The Annunciation by the Angel of the Lord (9-12)
3. The Canticle of the Heavenly Host (13-14)
- D. The Reaction as the Shepherds Go to Bethlehem (2:15-20)
- E. The Circumcision and the Naming (2:21)
- VII. The Presentation; Simeon and Anna Prophecy about Jesus
- A. The Sequence and Internal Structure
- B. The Setting Supplied by the Law (2:22-24)
- C. Simeon Greets the Child and Prophecies (2:25-35)
1. The Characterization and Symbolism of Simeon
2. The Problem of the Two Oracles
3. Simeon's Nunc Dimittis (29-32)
4. Simeon's Second Oracle (34c-35)
- D. Anna Greets the Child (2:36-38)
- E. The Conclusion (2:39-40)
- VIII. The Boy Jesus in the Temple Speaks
- A. Structure, Christology, and Outline

- B. [The Introduction and the Setting \(2:41-45\)](#)
  - C. [The Core of the Story \(2:46-50\)](#)
    - 1. [Jesus Is Found in the Midst of the Teachers \(46-48a\)](#)
    - 2. [The Mother's Question Leads Jesus to Speak about His Father \(48b-50\)](#)
  - D. [The Conclusion \(2:51-52\)](#)
- IX. [Epilogue](#)

## [Appendixes](#)

- I. [Levirate Marriage](#)
- II. [Davidic Descent](#)
- III. [Birth at Bethlehem](#)
- IV. [Virginal Conception](#)
- V. [The Charge of Illegitimacy](#)
- VI. [Other Jewish Background for Matthew's Narrative](#)
- VII. [The Census under Quirinius](#)
- VIII. [Midrash as a Literary Genre](#)
- IX. [The Fourth Eclogue of Virgil](#)

## Introduction

### Scholarship and the Infancy Narrative

Two of the four gospels, Matthew and Luke, begin with a narrative about the conception, birth and infancy of Jesus. Each devotes two chapters of unequal length to this, with Luke's chapters being much more extensive. Although they total only four of the 89 chapters in the gospels, their importance is greater than their length.

For Orthodox Christians, the infancy narratives helped shape their doctrine about Jesus as the son of God from his conception, while allowing them to visualize his humanity in his humble birth. Artists, storytellers, and poets have drawn heavily on the m. On the other hand, stories such as the frequent appearance of angels, the virginal conception, the wonder star that leads the magi and the prodigious wisdom of the child Jesus have been the object of rationalist mockery. While the latter may reflect disbelief in the supernatural, it does reflect observations from critical scholarship on the problem of the historicity of infancy narratives.

It is therefore appropriate to begin this commentary with a simplified presentation of the development of scholarly understanding of infancy narratives. This journey through the past history of scholarship will force the reader to live the same experience in himself. Three stages can be distinguished: A) The realization that the infancy narratives diverge significantly from the rest of the gospels; B) The fact that the Luke and Matthew narratives diverge from each other creates a serious problem about their historical value; C) The perception that these narratives are primarily a vehicle for the theology and Christology of the evangelists relativizes the question of their historical value.

#### A. The Infancy Narratives and the Rest of the Gospels

To understand why the infancy narratives took so long to become part of the gospels, we must first answer the question: how did the gospels come about?

##### 1. The Formation of the Gospels

The gospels were written beginning with the end, i.e., the death and resurrection of Jesus was preached first, for this was the most striking salvific action of God in Jesus (see, for example, Acts 2:23.32; 3:14-15; 4:10; 10:39-40; and 1 Cor 15:3-4). It was around this preaching that an account of Jesus' passion began to take shape. To support the faith of those who embraced the Christian faith, Christian preachers turned their attention to the actions and words of Jesus from the tradition about his ministry. This resulted in collections of sayings, parables and miracles that were later grouped together to form an account of Jesus' ministry. This grouping did not follow a chronological order, but a logical one, because none of the evangelists was an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry. The earliest example is the gospel according to Mark composed in the late 60s, say around 67, shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, a gospel that begins with the baptism and the beginning of his preaching and ends with the announcement of his resurrection after his death. Mark tells us nothing about the birth and youth of Jesus, and does not even name his father (Joseph). The same pattern is found in the fourth gospel which, after an introductory hymn, begins with John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus and ends with the appearances of the resurrected Jesus; John tells us nothing about the birth of Jesus and does not even give us the name of his mother (Mary).

What guided the choice of narrative elements in the formation of the gospels? It was the need to make known the core message of salvation; biographical interest was far from being primary. It is therefore wrong to consider the gospels as "lives of Jesus" in the biographical sense.

But then why were infancy narratives composed and why were they incorporated into the gospels? First, the reason for their composition.

- i. Curiosity certainly played a role in the composition of both canonical and apocryphal stories: people wanted to know the family, the ancestors and the birthplace of the master.
- ii. There are also apologetic reasons that explain certain aspects of the stories. For example, it was necessary to respond to the Jewish argument that Jesus could not be the messiah because he was from Nazareth, or that he was an illegitimate child (hence the virginal conception).
- iii. there are theological reasons why, for example in Matthew, the infancy narrative was modeled on the story of the patriarch Joseph with his dreams who goes to Egypt, as well as the story of the birth of Moses who is saved from the wicked Pharaoh. All of this helped to develop a Christian understanding of Jesus as the messiah who relives the story of his people.

Second, why were these stories incorporated into the gospels of Matthew and Luke? It is likely that Matthew and Luke saw the Christological implications of these stories about the birth of Jesus that were already circulating, as well as the possibility of incorporating them into a composition of their own to convey a message about Jesus the son of God acting for the salvation of humanity. Therefore, it was only natural that these compositions should constitute an introduction to their gospel.

## 2. The Development of Christology

In the period before the composition of the gospels, the resurrection was the main moment of revelation and proclamation of Jesus' identity. It was at this moment that God made him Lord, messiah, and son of God (Acts 2:32,36; 5:31; 13:32-33; Rom 1:3-4; Phil 2:8-9). This resurrection was in contrast to the obscurity and limited nature of his ministry. Before his resurrection, even his disciples had no clear vision of his identity. But with time and the development of Christian thinking, it was deduced that this messiah and son of God discovered at the resurrection was already son of God during his ministry. It was at this time that a gospel like Mark's began to be written, around the year 67. Thus Mark shows his readers that Jesus was already the son of God at his baptism, but that his disciples never perceived this identity throughout his life, and that Jesus himself never clearly revealed it to his disciples; only after his death does a human witness reveal the mystery: "Truly this was the son of God" (Mk 15:39).

The evolution of theological reflection will continue over time, so that, for example, for Matthew (around the year 80) it is during his ministry that the disciples will recognize the identity of Jesus (see Mt 14:33 on the confession of the disciples at the end of the account of the walk on the water). Then Matthew and Luke (around the same time) will push this recognition of Jesus' identity even further until the conception in Mary's womb: the same vocabulary is used as at the resurrection: the divine proclamation, the begetting as son of God, the role of the Holy Spirit. Later, with the fourth gospel (around the year 90), the recognition of his identity goes beyond his conception to a pre-existing life.

In this context, we understand that the infancy narratives are part of a long Christological process, and that it is normal that they appeared so late. Once inserted into the gospels, they give them a biographical flavor: they begin with the conception and birth of Jesus, continue with his ministry, and end with his death and resurrection. However, their insertion poses a problem: if, according to the infancy narratives, Herod and all Jerusalem knew about the birth of the Messiah-king, why is no one thereafter aware of his marvelous origin and why are they surprised by his behavior (Mt 13:54-55), and why does Herod's son ignore everything about him (Mt 14:1-2)? If Jesus' identity was clearly revealed to his parents, why do the disciples not perceive it with the same clarity during his ministry, while his parents are still alive? Mary herself seems to be left out of Jesus' true family (Mt 12:46-50). If, according to Luke, John the Baptist was his cousin who recognized his identity even before he was born (Lk 1:41,44), why does he give no indication during his ministry of prior knowledge, and is even confused by his action (Lk 7:19)? In fact, all this shows that the narratives of Jesus' ministry were formed before the creation of the infancy narratives, and when the latter were inserted, little effort was made to harmonize everything and to streamline the gospel's narrative.

## B. The Infancy Narratives as History

### 1. The Problem of Corroborating Witnesses

The main content of the gospel material comes from the memory of those who accompanied him since his baptism and which has been transmitted in the form of a tradition. But how do we know what happened at Jesus' birth? The gospels as a whole show us that the people among whom Jesus was raised knew nothing about an extraordinary childhood. Some imagine that the tradition about the childhood comes from Jesus' parents. But Joseph never appears during Jesus' ministry and we can say with some certainty that he was already dead. As for Mary, she never appears near the disciples during Jesus' ministry. While it is not impossible that Mary is the source of the Lucan material of the infancy narrative, it is unlikely that she is the source of the Matthean material where she plays a secondary role to Joseph. In the second century it was believed that James, the brother of Jesus, could be a plausible source on the childhood of Jesus, but the work attributed to him, the Protevangelium of James,

is highly legendary with inaccuracies, and is more folklore. In short, nothing is known about a tradition of infancy narratives that could be corroborated by witnesses.

## 2. The Problem of Conflicting Details

Thus, we are faced with three options when confronted with the infancy narratives of Luke and Matthew: either their two narratives would be historical; or one would be historical and the other a freer composition; or both represent a non-historical dramatization. To make a decision, one must compare the two accounts to see if they confirm each other or contradict each other. For an agreement between the two narratives would confirm the existence of a common tradition that precedes the infancy narratives. The following is a list of eleven points shared by the two narratives.

- a. The parents of Jesus are Joseph and Mary who are legally engaged or married, without yet living together or having sexual relations (Mt 1: 18; Lk 1: 27.34)
- b. Joseph is of Davidic descent (Mt 1: 16.20; Lk 1: 27.32; 2: 4)
- c. An angel announces the upcoming birth of the child (Mt 1:20-23; Lk 1:30-35)
- d. Mary did not conceive the child through sexual intercourse with a husband (Mt 1:20,23,25; Lk 1:34)
- e. The conception is done by the Holy Spirit (Mt 1: 18.20; Lk 1: 35)
- f. The name of the child (Jesus) comes from a directive of the angel (Mt 1: 21; Lk 1: 31)
- g. The angel affirms that Jesus will be Savior (Mt 1:21; Lk 2:11)
- h. The birth of the child occurs after the parents have lived together (Mt 1:24-25; Lk 2:5-6)
- i. The birth takes place in Bethlehem (Mt 2:1; Lk 2:4-6)
- j. The birth is chronologically linked to the reign of Herod the Great (Mt 2:1; Lk 1:5)
- k. The child is raised in Nazareth (Mt 2:23; Lk 2:39)

It is remarkable that the common points in Matthew are concentrated in one section (Mt 1:18 - 2:1). As for the rest, everything is different: his genealogy bears no resemblance to Luke's, his section Mt 2:2-22 has no parallel in Luke just as Luke's ch. 2 has no parallel in Matthew. Matthew focuses on events not mentioned in Luke, such as the star, the magi, Herod's plot against Jesus, the massacre of the children of Bethlehem and the flight into Egypt. If there was originally only one tradition, how could it be fragmented into two such different accounts? And if Matthew had Joseph as his source, why doesn't he mention the annunciation? And if Luke had Mary as his source, why doesn't he mention the arrival of the magi and the flight into Egypt?

We must therefore recognize that we are faced with two accounts, not only different, but contrary to each other on many points of detail:

- According to Lk 1:26; 2:39: Mary lives in Nazareth and it is the census of Augustus that explains a trip to Bethlehem where her child will be born; in Mt 2:11 there is no indication of a trip to Bethlehem, since Bethlehem seems to be their permanent residence. The only journey Matthew mentions is to Egypt.
- Luke's statement (2:22.39) that the family returned peacefully to Nazareth soon after his birth is irreconcilable with Matthew's statement that the child was about two years old when the family left Bethlehem to go to Egypt and was even older when he returned to Nazareth.

We must conclude, therefore, that of the three options mentioned above, we must eliminate the option that would consider the two narratives to be totally historical.

Moreover, a close analysis of the narratives shows the impossibility that they are totally historical:

- Matthew's account contains public events so extraordinary that they should have left traces in the Jewish annals or elsewhere in the New Testament: King Herod and all of Jerusalem being overwhelmed by the birth of the messiah in Bethlehem; a star moving through Jerusalem and stopping over a house in Bethlehem; the massacre of all the male children of Bethlehem
- Luke's reference to a general census of the Roman Empire under Augustus that would affect all of Palestine before Herod's death is certainly erroneous, as is his understanding of the Jewish customs of presenting the child and purifying the mother (2:22-24).

Today, it is better understood that certain scenes, not historically plausible, are in fact a rewriting of scenes from the Old Testament. Examples:

- The story of the magi who saw the star of David rising in the East is an echo of the story of Balaam, a type of magi from the East who saw a star rising out of Jacob
- Herod's search for the child Jesus and slaughter of the male children of Bethlehem is a reuse of the behavior of Pharaoh who wants to take the life of the child Moses and slaughters the male children of the Israelites
- The account of Joseph, Jesus' father, who has dreams and goes to Egypt is a reuse of the account of the patriarch Joseph who does the same thing

- In Luke, the description of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, is borrowed, sometimes almost word for word, from the Old Testament description of Abraham and Sarah

It was at this point in the history of infancy narrative research that the term "midrash," a Hebrew term that describes a Jewish practice of interpreting the Old Testament by popularizing and expanding the biblical narratives, came into use. However, while the Jewish midrash seeks to make these ancient narratives intelligible, the infancy narratives seek rather to convey how Jesus' origins fulfill what was foretold in the Old Testament. And in both Matthew and Luke, the infancy narratives serve as a transition between the Old Testament and the gospels, and for the Church it allows for Christological preaching using the imagery of Israel.

### C. The Infancy Narratives as Vehicles of the Evangelist's Theology

Biblical scholarship has now come to focus on what the gospel author intended to say and on the theological value of the infancy narratives. In the last twenty years, research has focused on the role of the stories within the final edition of the gospels: what message are the evangelists trying to convey to the church through these stories?

Throughout this commentary, one leitmotif will recur: the infancy narratives make sense in their respective gospels. Regardless of their historical value or whether they are based on an earlier tradition, Matthew and Luke thought they were appropriate to introduce the mission and importance of Jesus. To give them less value than the rest of the gospel would be to betray the intention of the evangelists that the infancy narratives were the appropriate vehicle for conveying their message. But since they refer to material that was less fixed than the rest of the gospel, the evangelists allowed themselves more freedom in their compositional work. We are looking at masterpieces, for one will search in vain elsewhere in the gospels for such a succinct and imaginatively presented theology.

## Book One: The Matthean Infancy Narrative

### I. General Observations on the Matthean Gospel and Infancy Narrative

#### A. The Matthean Gospel

Most biblical scholars maintain that the gospel of Matthew was written in the 80s in Syria by an unknown Greek-speaking Jewish Christian to a community of people of both Jewish and Gentile origin. Matthew's dependence on Mark and Document Q tells us that he was not an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry. Moreover, since he improves on the Greek text of Mark and there is no evidence in his gospel of any translation from a Semitic language, we must conclude that he was a Christian whose native language was Greek. On the other hand, some of his citations from Scripture indicate that he must have known Hebrew. Finally, his deep respect for the details of the Law and the authority of the scribes and Pharisees, while at the same time making the fiercest attacks on them, indicates that he may have been a Pharisee convert himself, and that the following remark may have been autobiographical: "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Mt 13:52).

The determination of a possible date for the gospel is guided by the fact that in the year 70 the temple was destroyed and the Jewish revolt put down, which led to a restructuring of the Jewish community around the Pharisees. And in the year 85, the twelfth of the Eighteen Blessings (*Shemoneh Esreh*: one of the main prayers recited in the synagogue) was modified to include a curse on the *minim* or heretics, which was aimed primarily at those Jews who began to believe in Jesus as the messiah. All this went hand in hand with an exclusion from the synagogues, which cut the umbilical cord of many Jews of Christian origin. All this contributes to the tense and acrimonious relations with the Jewish community, which are reflected in the apologetic atmosphere of the infancy narratives.

Nevertheless, the catechetical intent is much more important than the apologetic intent in the infancy narratives. For Matthew seeks to instruct and exhort the Christians in his community, which was composed of people of both Jewish and Gentile origin. Although he emphasizes that Jesus' mission was only to the Jews (Mt 10:5-6; 15:24), his gospel ends with the sending of the disciples to the whole world (Mt 28:18). This reflects a situation where the community, initially composed of Christians of Jewish origin, has seen Gentiles join it to the point of perhaps being in the majority. In such a context, Matthew wants to show that the gospel has as much meaning for the Gentiles as for the Jews. Thus we are led to locate this community in Syria, where there was a large community of Greek-speaking Jews and Gentiles, not far from Palestine, with a significant synagogue presence, and where it was possible to find a converted scribe who could write in Greek while knowing Hebrew. The most important city in this region was Antioch, where Peter seems to have stayed for some time (Gal 2:11), which would explain the important role he plays in the gospel, as well as the similarities with the Didache, and the fact that Ignatius of Antioch knows this gospel.

One of the features of Matthew's gospel is that it is very well organized and has grouped into thematic units elements that are scattered in the other gospels, making it a suitable tool for catechetical formation. Thus, biblical scholars divide chs. 3 to 25 into five books, based on five major speeches of Jesus which all end with an indication that he has finished speaking (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). These five speeches would constitute a form of Pentateuch, and in particular the Sermon on the Mount with its beatitudes would be the equivalent of the giving of

the Ten Commandments to Moses at Sinai. This structure provides the background for his infancy narrative, which is divided into five episodes.

## B. The Matthean Infancy Narrative

### 1. The Relation of Chs. 1-2 to the Rest of the Gospel

The infancy narrative is so different from the rest of the gospel that the question arises: did Matthew write his gospel beginning with v. 1 of ch. 1, or did he begin as Mark did with the ministry of Jesus, and afterwards add the infancy narrative?

In style and ideas, the infancy narratives and the rest of the gospel are so similar that the same author composed it all. But beyond style and ideas, we are confronted with two worlds: the rest of the gospel completely ignores what was learned in the infancy narratives, so that if chs. 1 and 2 did not exist and the gospel began with 3:1, we would never have the impression that chapters were missing.

That said, it is possible that these two worlds are simply a reflection of the unique origin of the infancy narrative material, rather than that of the gospel composition process. Moreover, chs. 1 and 2 are somehow connected to the next section (3:1-4:16) with a geographically centered plot: Bethlehem (2:1), Nazareth (2:23), Capernaum (4:13) which is the center of Jesus' ministry. In this case, the real beginning of the section on Jesus' ministry would be 4:17 with: "Then Jesus began to preach". And the citation formulas (five in chs. 1 and 2) would continue with two more in 3:3 and 4:14-16, and on the Christological aspect, the statements of Jesus son of David and son of Abraham (chs. 1 and 2) would continue with Jesus son of God (3:17). Finally, the analogy with Moses as a child in chs. 1 and 2 would continue in 3:1-4:6 with Moses as a young man. All these arguments are interesting without being decisive, but they are sufficient to affirm that the composition of the infancy narratives was part of the initial plan in the composition of the gospels.

### 2. The Internal Organization of Chs. 1-2

The discernment of a structure in these two chapters depends on a decision about what constitutes the main emphasis and whether there are various sources which Matthew would have sought to unify. Here are the data to be considered.

- a. The genealogy of 1:1-17 constitutes a unity of its own, where the beginning and the end respond to each other to present Jesus in connection with David and Abraham.
- b. The genealogy is linked to the conception of Jesus that follows (1:18-25), for this new section continues the motives of the genealogy by explaining "how" this genesis or origin of Jesus took place, in particular the Davidic descent of Jesus through his adoption by Joseph
- c. Section 1:18-25 is also related to what follows (ch. 2). For there we find the same approach of quoting Old Testament prophets to show that their prophecies are fulfilled through the Jesus event, just like those angelic apparitions that give instructions that Joseph fulfills to the letter.
- d. Nevertheless, there is a separation between ch. 1 and 2. For 2:1 gives the impression of a new narrative that begins, and this narrative does not presuppose anything of ch. 1. These chapters appear as parallel narratives, one ending with the child who is called "Jesus," the other with the child who is called "Nazarene."
- e. If we consider ch. 2 as a unit, however, we must recognize the existence of two overlapping wefts. The first storyline (vv. 1-2, 9-11) is that of the wise men guided by a star to Bethlehem and the birthplace of Jesus. The second storyline (vv. 3-8) is that of Herod directing the magi to Bethlehem and asking to inquire about him. This storyline will be further developed in vv. 13-23 and will constitute a story in itself.
- f. A geographical motif runs through ch. 2: first Bethlehem, then the flight to Egypt and the return journey to Nazareth. Each place is introduced by a similar grammatical style ("Then, when (or after)..., behold") and becomes the subject of a scriptural citation.

None of the proposed structures is able to fully account for all these data. Here are the two most popular ones.

Introduction:	1: 1-17		The genealogy
Scene 1:	1: 18-25	(Isa 7: 14)	First dream of Joseph
Scene 2:	2: 1-12	(Mic 5: 1)	Herod, magi, Bethlehem
Scene 3:	2: 13-15	(Hos 11: 1)	Second dream of Joseph
Scene 4:	2: 16-18	(Jer 31: 15)	Herod, children, Bethlehem
Scene 5:	2: 19-23	(Isa 4: 3?)	Third dream of Joseph

This structure accounts for (a), (c), and (e), but takes little account of (b), (d) and (f). It revolves around references to Scripture, but it is doubtful that Matthew has built his gospel around Scripture citations that are in fact scattered throughout. But this structure has the advantage of emphasizing the Christological significance of the events narrated.

A second proposed structure is even more popular and presupposes the division into two parts according to the chapters, each with a subdivision.

ch. 1:	1: 1-17:	Genealogy
	1: 18-25:	The conception of Jesus
ch. 2:	2: 1-12:	The coming of the magi to Bethlehem
	2: 13-23:	Flight of the family to Egypt and return to Nazareth

The first chapter would answer the question "who": Jesus is the son of David, the son of Abraham and the savior of his people. The second chapter would answer the question "from where", a chapter focused on places (Bethlehem, Egypt, Ramah) offering a geographical/theological itinerary. This structure accounts for (b), (d), and (f), but less so for (a), (c), and (e).

Each proposed structure has its advantages and disadvantages. The difficulty probably arises from the fact that Matthew has incorporated into his narrative raw material that he found around him: A list of patriarchs and kings, a messianic family tree, a messianic birth announcement built on the model of the OT birth annunciations, a birth narrative involving Jesus and Joseph picking up on the model of the patriarch Joseph and the legends surrounding the birth of Moses, a story of the magi and their star picking up on the story of the magus Balaam coming from the east and seeing Jacob's star rise. To all of this Matthew would have added carefully chosen citations from Scripture. The complexity of chs. 1 and 2 comes from the fact that all this raw material probably had its own structure, which we were able to detect through points (a) to (f) earlier, and which Matthew has only partially succeeded in masking.

This being said, we can propose a structure based on an expansion of the second proposed structure: to the questions "who" and "from where", we add the questions: "how" and "where":

1:1-17: The "who" question of Jesus' identity as son of David and son of Abraham is illustrated by his ancestors, both Jews and Gentiles, reflecting the Matthean community. The presence of the women anticipates the role of Mary and the Holy Spirit.

1:18-25: the "how" question about the identity of Jesus: he is the son of David, not by physical conception, but by Joseph's acceptance, of Davidic lineage, of what was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

2, 1-12: the question "where" about the birth of Jesus: he was born in Bethlehem, underlining his identity as son of David. The event of the Magi, the Gentiles, begins to explain "how" he is the son of Abraham.

2:13-23: the question "whence" of Jesus' destiny: the answer is introduced by the hostile reaction of Herod and the authorities. Jesus is called to providentially relive the experience of Moses in Egypt and of Israel in its exodus. He must leave Bethlehem, the land of the Jews, for Galilee, the land of the Gentiles, and it will be as Jesus the Nazarene that he will undertake his ministry.

## II. The Genealogy of Jesus

### Translation Mt 1, 1-17

\* In italics, the five female characters

- 1 The birth record of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham;
- 2 Abraham was the father of Isaac;  
Isaac was the father of Jacob;  
Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers;
- 3 Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah; by Tamar;  
Perez was the father of Hezron;  
Hezron was the father of Aram;
- 4 Aram was the father of Amminadab;  
Amminadab was the father of Nahshon;  
Nahshon was the father of Salmon;
- 5 Salmon was the father of Boaz, by Rahab;  
Boaz was the father of Obed, by Ruth;  
Obed was the father of Jesse;
- 6 Jesse was the father of David the King.

- David was the father of Solomon by Uriah's wife;
- 7 Solomon was the father of Rehoboam;  
Rehoboam was the father of Abijah;  
Abijah was the father of Asaph;
- 8 Asaph was the father of Jehoshaphat;  
Jehoshaphat was the father of Joram;  
Joram the father of Uzziah;
- 9 Uzziah was the father of Jotham;  
Jotham was the father of Ahaz;  
Ahaz was the father of Hezekiah;
- 10 Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh;  
Manasseh was the father of Amos;  
Amos was the father of Josiah;
- 11 Josiah was the father of Jechoniah and his brothers  
at the time of the Babylonian Exile.
- 12 After the Babylonian Exile,  
Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel;  
Shealtiel was the father of Zerubbabel;
- 13 Zerubbabel was the father of Abiud;  
Abiud was the father of Eliakim;  
Eliakim the father of Azor;
- 14 Azor was the father of Zadok;  
Zadok was the father of Achim;  
Achim was the father of Eliud;
- 15 Eliud was the father of Eleazar;  
Eleazar was the father of Matthan;  
Matthan the father of Jacob;
- 16 Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary;  
of her was begotten Jesus; called the Christ.

17 Thus the total generation from Abraham to David were fourteen generations; and from David to the Babylonian Exile fourteen more generations; and finally from the Babylonian Exile to the Christ fourteen more generations.

#### Notes

v. 1

- "birth record" (*Biblos geneseōs*). Literally: "Book of the genesis". For the word *geneseōs*, we could translate: genealogy, but the same word genesis appears in v. 18 where it is translated: birth, and so to translate v. 1 and 18 differently would destroy the relationship Matthew intended to introduce. For the word *biblos*, usually translated as: book, we have preferred: record. It is quite fanciful to think that we would have here a formula of introduction to the whole gospel seen as "the book of the origins of Jesus Christ". Rather, we have here an introductory formula to a genealogy similar to what we have in Gen 5:1: *sēper tōlēdōt* (LXX: *biblos geneseōs*, act of descent).
- "of Jesus." Some biblical scholars make the mistake of seeing the name Jesus as a subject genitive, i.e., the book of genesis (new creation) brought by Jesus. Jesus is rather the object of the genealogy.
- "Christ". The name "Christ" appears five times in the infancy narrative, but it cannot be translated the same way each time. While it is legitimate to translate *Christos* in 2:4 as "messiah" (from Aramaic *mešīhā*), the anointed one, i.e., the anointed king of the house of David, just as in 1:16-17, on the other hand, here and in 1:18 it must be translated as Christ, for this name has become the proper name of Jesus, as has the compound name: Jesus Christ.
- "son of David, son of Abraham". Why put David before Abraham? It is a logical order, because in v. 1 we have the ascending order in time: Jesus / David / Abraham, and this allows us to follow up with what follows, which begins with Abraham and goes down in time. Moreover, this allows Matthew to have an inclusion with v. 17 which has the descending order: Abraham / David / Jesus.

v. 2

- "was the father of" (*engennēsen*). The Greek verb literally means: to beget. This is the classic expression for genealogies in the OT (see Ruth 4:18-22 and 1 Ch 2:10-15) before the Davidic period, whereas 1 Ch 3:10ff uses the expression "sons of (i.e. descendants of) Solomon: Rehoboam, Abijah his son, Asa his son" after the Davidic period. Matthew keeps the same formula everywhere: "A begot B" or "A was the father of B".

v. 3

- "Perez was the father of Hezron". While the OT contains accounts of the first four names (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah), it offers nothing about the names that follow until Boaz, except for their mention in genealogical lists such as those in Ruth 4:18-22 and 1 Ch 2:5.
- "Aram". While up to now the names of the genealogy have not been translated literally from the Greek text of Matthew, but from the Hebrew text of the Massoret, here, however, rather than the name "Ram" of the Hebrew text, we have opted for the Greek version of Matthew (Aram), the same name which is also in the Septuagint of Ruth 4:19 in the form "Arram". As we shall see, the ancestor of Matthew's list is Greek rather than Hebrew.

Hezron, the father of Aram, is linked to the patriarch Joseph and his stay in Egypt, while Aram's son, Amminadab, is linked to Moses and the stay in the desert after the Exodus. Matthew thus presents us with two characters to cover a period that traditionally would have lasted 400 years. The genealogy that Matthew inherits was probably influenced by a different tradition about the Hebrews' stay in Egypt than the one we have.

v. 4

- "Amminadab was the father of Nahshon". The book of Numbers (2:3 and 7:12) speaks of Nahshon and Ex 6:23 tells us that his sister, Elisheba or Elizabeth married Aaron, the Levitical high priest. In Luke and Matthew we find a mixture of Judah and Levi in the presumed ancestors of Jesus.

v. 5

- "Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rahab". Apart from appearing in the list of Ruth (4:21) and 1 Chronicles (2:11), he does not appear anywhere else. That Boaz is the child of Rahab is nowhere confirmed and is problematic: for the famous Rahab of the OT belongs to the period of the conquest, almost two centuries before the period of Boaz. Yet it is almost certain that this is the famous Rahab that Matthew has in mind. According to rabbinic tradition, she married Joshua.

v. 7

- "Asaph". This is the reading that should be preferred to "Asa". It is the copyists who confused "Asaph" (see the beginning of Psalms 50 and 73-83 and Ch 15:5-27; 2 Chr 29:30) with King Asa of Judah (1 Kgs 15:9) and changed the original text to "Asa", a recension retained by the Byzantine, Latin and Syriac tradition.

v. 8

- "Joram was the father of Uzziah". This note reflects a first omission in the list of Davidic kings, specifically three kings, three generations and 60 years separate the kings Joram and Uzziah. If the list were complete, we would have: Joram, Ahaziah, Jehoash, Amaziah, and Uzziah. This point will be discussed in the commentary. Note that it happens that we know both the birth name and the royal name of the kings of Judah, which is the case for Azariah whose birth name was Azariah but whose royal name was Uzziah.

v. 10

- "Amos". This is the same problem as with Asaph / Asa underlined in verse 7: copyists have observed that Matthew has confused the prophet Amos with king Amon of Judah (2 Kings 21:19), and so have replaced Amos with Amon. Some biblical scholars, in an effort to spare Matthew from making a mistake, have instead blamed the copyists for confusing Amos with Amon. These biblical scholars overestimate Matthew's knowledge of Scripture: yet in 27:9 Matthew attributes a citation from Zechariah to Jeremiah, and in 23:35 he confuses the prophet Zechariah, son of Berechiah, with another Zechariah who was murdered in the temple three centuries earlier (2 Ch 24:20-22).

v. 11

- "Josiah was the father of Jechonias and his brothers". Here Matthew has preferred Jechoniah, the name at birth, to Jehoiachin, the royal name, the opposite of what he does in v. 8. Moreover, this note contains a second omission in the list of Davidic kings: Josiah was the grandfather of Jechoniah, and the latter had only one brother. The correct list is: Josiah was the father of Jehoiachin and his brothers (he had two brothers) at the time of the Babylonian exile. Thus, Matthew has confused Jechoniah (Jechoniah), the grandson of Josiah, with Jehoiakim, his son.

v. 12

- "Shealtiel was the father of Zerubbabel". That Zerubbabel was the son of Shealtiel is confirmed by Ezra 3:2,8; 5:2; Neh 12:1; Hag 1:1,12,14; 2:2,23 and the Septuagint of 1 Ch 3:19). On the other hand, the Hebrew text of 1 Chr 3:19 gives us Zerubbabel son of Pediah, who was the brother of Shealtiel and the third son of king Jechoniah. Zerubbabel, active in the period 520-515 BC in the rebuilding of the temple after the exile, would have been

appointed *pešah* or governor of Judea by the Persian king. This Zerubbabel became the focus of Davidic Messiahship after the exile, hence his presence in Matthew and Luke. He is the last figure about whom we have information in the OT.

v. 13

- "Zerubbabel was the father of Abiud". Abiud is not listed among the eight children of Zerubbabel in 1 Chr 3:19-20.

v. 16

- "Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary; of her was begotten (*egennēthē*) Jesus, called the Christ." The verb *gennan* is ambiguous when applied to a pregnant woman: it can refer to conception (begetting), or birth, both steps in the generative process. In 1:20 the verb refers to conception in the womb, but in 2:1 it refers to the child already born. Here, since it is situated in the middle of a genealogical list where A begat B, the verb can be translated as "was begotten" provided it is not understood as a natural begetting by Joseph; for Matthew does not write "Joseph begat Jesus", the begetting being linked to Mary, which he takes the trouble to clarify in 1:18-25. Thus, Matthew does not affirm that Joseph is the biological father of Jesus.

- a. The reading of v. 16 proposed here, let us call it (a), is supported by the best manuscripts such as the codex Vaticanus and the Sinaiticus. But there are two other readings, let us call them (b) and (c), supported by a minor textual tradition. These other readings would have gone unnoticed had it not been for biblical scholars who saw in them evidence for a natural conception of Jesus with Joseph as his biological father. In addressing these two variants, we must separate these two questions: 1) Is it likely that these variants are preferable to our reading (a)? 2) Do these variants imply that Joseph was the biological father of Jesus?
- b. One of the variants comes from Greek (Koridethi codex and the Ferrar family manuscripts) and Latin (Old Latin) manuscripts and could be translated as follows:

Jacob was the father of Joseph, to whom the betrothed virgin Mary bore [gave birth to] Jesus, called the Christ.

Note that Joseph is not called Mary's "husband" and Mary is explicitly referred to as a virgin. This clue and the fact that the typical formula of genealogy (A begat B) is no longer used offer even less support to the idea of a biological father.

- c. The other variant, supported by even fewer manuscripts (the clearest is the ancient Syriac Sinaiticus), gives us this:

Jacob was the father of Joseph; and Joseph, to whom the virgin Mary was betrothed, was the father of Jesus, called the Christ

Here we find the typical formula (underscore) of the genealogy.

How to explain the existence of three readings of the same text?

- i. A first hypothesis is to imagine that there would have been an original text (which would have been lost) which would have kept the genealogical style: "Jacob was the father of Joseph; and Joseph was the father of Jesus". And our three readings (a), (b), (c) would then be an attempt by scribes to modify the impact of the statement that Joseph would be the father of Jesus, and thus deny the virginal conception. But can we really believe that Matthew would have written that Joseph fathered Jesus when he devotes section 1:18-25 to demonstrating the opposite? Even if he did write it, one could only understand such a statement in a non-biological sense.
- ii. Another more satisfactory hypothesis is to consider one of the three variants as original (Matthew's hand), and the other two as modifications by a copyist to clarify matters. Some biblical scholars consider variant (c) to be original, i.e. Matthew claims that Joseph is the biological father of Jesus, and copyists, scandalized by this claim, would have created variants (a) and (b). But this argument is not very convincing. First of all, if the author of (c) intended to affirm that Joseph is the biological father of Jesus, why does he insist that Mary is a virgin and does not designate Joseph as her husband, and why does he not use the typical formula: Joseph was the father of Jesus by Mary? Second, if, for example, the author of variant (a) intended to correct the statement in (c) to protect the virginal conception, why would he delete the statement that Mary was a virgin, which would have been an argument in his favor?
- iii. A much more satisfactory solution is to assume that the reading (a) is the original text of Matthew and that the variants (b) and (c) are the work of copyists uncomfortable with (a). What could be the source of their discomfort if (a) does affirm the virginal conception? The problem might have been the mention of Joseph as "Mary's husband" which was considered an indelicacy in light of the growing tradition of Mary's

perpetual virginity (i.e., she remained a virgin even after the birth of Jesus) which was the subject of intense theological debate between the second and fourth centuries.

### Comment

The study of OT genealogies has taught us that a genealogical list can serve different functions, and it is normal for an individual to have more than one genealogy depending on the role one wants it to play. It is rare that one is simply faced with a simple list of biological ancestors.

The interest in ancestry in Israel reflects its tribal origins where the identity of a tribal member is his or her passport to survival: a tribe takes care of its members. But in addition to establishing an individual's identity, biblical genealogies are used to validate occupancy of the positions of king and priest where lineage is important (see Ezra 2:62-63; Neh 7:64-65). Finally, another function of genealogy is related to the notion of collective personality where certain traits of the ancestors are reflected in the descendants, so that history becomes an expansion of genealogy (i.e., the past continues into the present).

Given this context, we would be surprised if the NT did not give us a genealogy to reflect the importance of Jesus. Matthew and Luke will do that. But they do it in different places. Matthew places his genealogy at the very beginning of his gospel, while Luke places it after Jesus' baptism, as he begins his ministry. We have similar situations in the OT: in Gen 5-9 the genealogy precedes the story of Noah, and in Gen 11:10-32 the genealogy precedes the story of Abraham; on the other hand, in Ex 6:14-25 the genealogy of the tribes and of Moses is placed after Moses' call, just before he begins his mission to bring his brothers out of Egypt.

#### A. Matthew's Purpose in the Genealogy

##### 1. General Observations

Matthew begins his gospel as follows: "The birth record of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham". One of the best parallels is found in 5:1: "The record of the genesis (Greek: *biblos geneōs*, Heb. *sēper tōlēdōt*) of Adam." This genealogy introduces the story of Noah. The greatest difference between the two genealogies is that Adam's is about the descendants up to Noah, while Jesus' is about the ancestors, since in Jesus the story has reached its end.

"Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham". In one sentence Matthew introduces the major themes of his infancy narrative. The name "Christ" links Jesus to the title "Messiah", and thus prepares us for the genealogy that follows and the Messiahship hope that Jesus will fulfill. This Davidic filiation will be the theme of the first chapter, present in the genealogy and in the account of the angel's message. The theme of Abraham is also present, but in a more subtle way. By being the son of Abraham, Jesus fulfills Yahweh's promise to Abraham: "Through your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed" (Gen 22:18). This is the meaning of chapter 2 with the arrival of the Magi, prototypes of the Gentiles, who have come to pay homage to the king of the Jews. For Matthew, the fact that Jesus is the son of David and the son of Abraham is important, because it allows him to justify the presence in his community of both Jews and Gentiles.

This emphasis on Jesus' relationship to David and Abraham is not a creation of Matthew's, but comes from an ancient tradition, as evidenced by those Pauline epistles (Rom 1:3; Gal 3:16) written in the mid-50s. Matthew's originality lies in weaving these two themes together throughout his infancy narrative. For the evangelist, such a connection to David and Abraham is not a matter of human chance; rather, he sees it as God's plan in salvation history.

This providential plan is expressed in the division of the genealogy into three sections of 14 generations, as each section corresponds to a major portion of salvation history. In the first section, the divine selection appears in the fact that Jesus is the son of Abraham, not through Ishmael, the firstborn son, but through Isaac; he is the son of Isaac not through the firstborn Esau, but through Jacob; he is the son of Jacob through his fourth son, Judah, to whom was promised an eternal scepter (Gen 49:10). At the same time, by mentioning "Judah and his brethren" Matthew intends to include the twelve tribes of Israel, justifying Jesus' choice of his twelve disciples. This section ends triumphantly with the mention of "David the king" who, by God's grace, has supplanted Saul. The second section lists the kings of the Davidic line who ruled in Jerusalem until Jechoniah who, despite the Babylonian exile, managed to give an heir, allowing the Davidic line to survive. The last section links the end of the monarchy and the arrival of Jesus, the final anointed one of David, the messiah. This is how Matthew inserts Jesus into history and into a people.

##### 2. How Matthew Composed the Genealogy

Matthew probably made use of two genealogical lists written in Greek which existed in his time and were partly dependent on the Septuagint. The first covered the pre-monarchic period and was similar to that found in Ruth 4:18-22 and 1 Ch 2:5ff. He added to it the names of women, despite their unconventional history and irregular marital status, seeing in them the hand of God in carrying out his plan. Moreover, he noticed that this list from Abraham to David contained 14 names, thus 14 generations. The other list, covering the monarchical and early post-monarchical period, was a popular list of the royal house of David, containing the names of the kings who ruled in Judea and some descendants of Zerubbabel who were considered descendants of David. This list is

dependent on the OT, but circulated in popular circles and not in official records, as some of its errors and the confusion of some royal names suggest.

Matthew would have noted that in the (accidentally abbreviated) monarchical section of the popular list, there were also 14 generations. Even more, in the alleged list of Zerubbabel's descendants, one could spot a sequence of fourteen generations if one added Joseph and Jesus. In this numerical structure of 3 x 14, formed partly by pure coincidence in the genealogy and partly by additions by Matthew himself, the evangelist would have seen the key to God's plan of salvation. But the final product (1:1-17) is thoroughly Matthean in its theology and emphasis.

### 3. Why Bring on the Ladies?

In addition to Mary, there are four women in the genealogy: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and (Bathsheba) the wife of Uriah. The mention of these women breaks the rhythm of the expression "A was the father of B" in the genealogy, and it is Matthew's way of drawing attention to the divine selection, the work of his providence, as we see when the rhythm is broken by the mention of men ("Judah and his brothers"; "Perez *and Zerah*"; "Jechoniah *and his brothers*"). The question then arises: what do the four women have in common that Matthew chooses them? Is there a connection between these women and Mary who is named at the end of the genealogy? Three answers have been proposed.

- a. St. Jerome (On Matthew 9) had already suggested that these four women were sinners, and their presence anticipated Jesus' role as savior of sinners. But when we look more closely, it is not clear that the Bible makes all these women sinners. For example, it is not clear that Ruth sinned with Boaz. Moreover, in Jewish piety, despite the fact that Tamar was a seductress and so-called prostitute, that Rahab was a prostitute, that the wife of Uriah committed adultery, they were nevertheless esteemed, Tamar as a holy Jewish proselyte (a Canaanite convert) who continued the family line of her deceased husband Judah's son, Rahab as a heroine for having contributed to Israel's victory at Jericho, and even as a model of faith in Christian circles (Heb 11:31; 1 Clement 12:1), and Uriah's wife as the mother of King Solomon. It is unlikely that Matthew's audience perceived these women as sinners.
- b. A second answer has been proposed by Luther: these four women were foreigners and Matthew would have included them to show that Jesus, the Jewish messiah, was related by his ancestry to Gentiles. In fact, Rahab and Tamar were Canaanite women, Ruth was a Moabite, and if Bathsheba was Jewish, she had married Uriah, a Hittite, which would explain why Matthew names her only by her husband's name. But there are two objections to this answer for it to be the only or most important explanation for the presence of these women. The first is that this explanation fails to show the connection with the fifth woman, Mary, who was not a stranger. Second, it is not at all clear that the Jewish milieu of the first century regarded these women as strangers: the emphasis was rather on their status as proselytes or converts to Judaism. It is therefore difficult to understand how the gentiles in the Matthean community could have identified themselves as converts to Judaism, when it was Jesus they welcomed into their lives, not Judaism.
- c. The third answer, widely accepted today, identifies two elements common to the four women that they share with Mary.
  - i. The union with their partner is extraordinary and irregular, a union that, although perceived as scandalous, maintains the blessed lineage of the messiah
  - ii. These women have taken initiatives or played an important role in God's plan, to the point of being considered as instruments of Providence or of the Holy Spirit.

It is this combination of a scandalous and irregular union and divine intervention through these women that explains their choice of Matthew in his genealogy. For these women foreshadowed the role of Mary, Joseph's wife. In the eyes of men, Mary's situation, pregnant before she cohabited with Joseph, was scandalous; yet this child had been begotten of the Holy Spirit, a work of God fulfilling the promise of the Messiahship.

This third response fits best with the overall view of the infancy narrative. But the second answer, which focuses on the foreign status of these women, may be part of a secondary theme in Matthew; it may not anticipate Mary's role, but the arrival of Gentiles in God's plan. In any case, the presence of these women in the genealogy is part of Matthew's theology and can only come from his pen, not from an earlier tradition.

### 4. Fourteen - the Magic Number

Matthew's genealogy is "artificial" rather than strictly "historical" because even God could not arrange things so that exactly 14 generations separate the great moments of salvation history such as the call of Abraham, the accession of David to the royal throne, the Babylonian exile and the arrival of the messiah. Moreover, the period covered by these sections is too large to have only 14 generations per section, since 750 years separate Abraham from David, 400 years separate David from the Babylonian exile, 600 years separate the Babylonian exile from the birth of Jesus. This is why we find many more generations in Luke. Moreover, when we examine the OT genealogies, we notice that Matthew has omitted generations.

How then can we interpret the insistence in Matthew (1:17) on the motif 3 x 14? First of all, it does not seem that Matthew is aware of his omissions, otherwise it would be difficult to understand why he would want to share his

wonder at a motif which he considers providential if it were the result of his own manipulations. Is it not possible that he discovered this pattern in whole or in part in the material he found? This is quite plausible if we consider the lists of 1 Chr 1 - 2 which present exactly 14 names from Abraham to David exclusively. As for the second section, Matthew was able to get his hands on a list of kings which accidentally included omissions and which, if interrupted at the exile and counted the last kings as one ("Jechoniah and his brothers"), gave 14 generations. A catalyst for this approach is gematria (assigning a numerical value to each name based on the order of its consonants) practiced in the Jewish world: thus the name David is written: *dwd*, so  $4 + 6 + 4 = 14$ . Such an approach suited Matthew to show that Jesus is the son of David. So it may be that he decided to apply this pattern to the post-monarchic section as well, adding Joseph and Jesus to a traditional genealogical list of people who claimed to be of the Davidic line from the descendants of Zerubbabel.

That Matthew saw a plan of God in this pattern is consistent with his view in the infancy narrative when he quotes scripture five times and introduces it four times with the formula: it happened in order to fulfill the Scripture. God planned the origins of the messiah from the beginning with precision.

This idea of a list of ancestors of a famous man, beginning with Abraham, which is divided into numerical sequences of equal length, is not foreign to the Jewish spirit. Consider the list of priests from Aaron to the exile (1 Chr 5:27-41), the Midrash Rabbah XV 26 on Ex 12:2 (15 generations from Abraham to Solomon and 15 generations from Solomon to Zedekiah), Enoch 93:1-10 and 91:12-17 where history is divided into ten weeks of years ( $10 \times 7 = 70$  years), the first three being pre-Israelite, and the other seven covering the period from Jacob to the end, to Pirke Aboth 5:2-3 where there are 10 generations from Adam to Noah, another ten from Noah to Abraham, to II Baruch 53-74 where world history from Adam to the Messiah is divided into 12 periods, the Messianic period being the last. All these lists share with Matthew an eschatological perspective, so that the arrival of the Messiah marks the end of a plan meticulously laid out by God.

5. Could Matthew Count?

Although Matthew insists on the pattern of three sections of fourteen generations ( $3 \times 14$ ), a close analysis of this genealogy shows that its arithmetic capabilities leave something to be desired. For example, the first section from Abraham to David includes 14 names, but only 13 generations, unless one implicitly adds that Abraham was the son of a father to constitute the first generation. Only in the second section is it possible to calculate 14 generations (but at the cost of omitting four historical generations and six kings who reigned). In the third section, only 13 generations are counted.

In this analysis, let's start with the omissions from the second list. In v. 8, Matthew writes: "Joram was the father of Uzziah". We have already pointed out that between Joram and Uzziah there were Ahaziah, Jehoash and Amaziah who were omitted. If they were omitted, it was not because they would have been evil kings or murdered or cursed. The simplest solution would be that the copyist confused the Greek form of the names Uzziah (Azariah) and Ahaziah, so that Joram, instead of being the father of Ahaziah, became the father Uzziah (Azariah). This would confirm the fact that the list received by Matthew was already in Greek and already contained the error.

Another error in the second section concerns the following sequence: Josiah was the father of Jehoiakim who was the father of Jechoniah. Matthew's list omits Jehoiakim when it says, "Josiah was the father of Jechoniah and his brothers. This omission probably stems from confusion between Jehoiakim and the Greek version of the name Jechoniah (Jehoiachin), a confusion fostered by the fact that both figures had a brother named Zedekiah and that in Greek their names are sometimes spelled the same way: *lōakim*.

In the third section, from the Babylonian exile to Jesus, there are only thirteen generations. Many more ingenious solutions have been proposed: to create a new generation with the Messiah in addition to that of Jesus, or to consider Mary as a generation on her own, or to move "Jechoniah and his brothers" from the second section to the third section, for it was actually from Jehoiakim that Josiah was the father. But was Matthew aware of this last omission in the first place and could he have had these sophisticated reasonings made? With ingenuity one can rescue Matthew's arithmetic, but it would have been better if the evangelist had been clearer.

B. Matthew's Genealogy Compared to Luke's

Here is the genealogy of Jesus in Luke, which begins with the father of Jesus and goes all the way to God, since just before that there was that voice from heaven which said: "You are my son" (Lk 3:22).

Table 1 (Lk 3: 23-38)

Now, as Jesus began his ministry, he was about thirty years of age.

	<b>Post-Monarchical</b>		<b>Pre-Monarchical</b>
1	the supposed son of Joseph	43	the son of Jesse
2	the son of Eli (Heli)	44	the son of Obed
3	the son of Matthat	45	the son of Boaz
4	the son of Levi	46	the son of Sala (Salmon)
5	the son of Melchi	47	the son of Nahshon

6	the son of Jannai	48	the son of Amminadab (Amminadam)
7	the son of Joseph	49	the son of Admin
8	the son of Mattathias	50	the son of Arni
9	the son of Amos	51	the son of Ezrom
10	the son of Nahum	52	the son of Perez
11	the son of Hesli	53	the son of Judah
12	the son of Naggai	54	the son of Jacob
13	the son of Maath	55	the son of Isaac
14	the son of Mattathias	56	the son of Abraham
15	the son of Semein		
16	the son of Josech		
17	the son of Joda	<b>Pre-Abrahamic</b>	
18	the son of Joanan	57	the son of Terah
19	the son of Rhesa	58	the son of Nahor
20	the son of Zerubbabel	59	the son of Serug
21	the son of Shealtiel	60	the son of Reu
		61	the son of Peleg
		62	the son of Eber
		63	the son of Shelah
	<b>Monarchical</b>		
22	the son of Neri		
23	the son of Melchi	64	the son of Cainan
24	the son of Addi	65	the son of Arphaxad
25	the son of Cosam	66	the son of Shem
26	the son of Elmadam (Elmodam)	67	the son of Noah
27	the son of Er	68	the son of Lamech
28	the son of Jesus (Joshua)	69	the son of Methuselah
		70	the son of Enoch
29	the son of Eliezer		
30	the son of Jorim	71	the son of Jared
31	the son of Maththat (Matthat)	72	the son of Mahalaleel
32	the son of Levi	73	the son of Cainam
33	the son of Simeon	74	the son of Enos
34	the son of Judah	75	the son of Seth
35	the son of Joseph	76	the son of Adam
		77	the son of God.
36	the son of Jonam		
37	the son of Eliakim		
38	the son of Melea		
39	the son of Menna		
40	the son of Mattatha		
41	the son of Nathan		
42	the son of David		

Let us now compare the genealogies of Matthew and Luke with those provided by the OT.

Table 2: The Pre-Monarchical Period

\*The names have been standardized on the Hebrew; in Luke each seventh name is in bold type

	<b>Matthew: Generations from Abraham to David</b>	<b>Genealogy according to 1 Chr 1 28.34; 2, 1-15 Ruth 4: 18-22</b>		<b>The Genealogy in Luke</b>
1	Abraham was the father of Isaac	Abraham; Isaac	<b>56</b>	Abraham
			55	Isaac
2	Isaac " " Jacob	Israel	54	Jacob
3	Jacob " " Judah and his brothers	Juda	53	Juda
4	Juda " " Perez and Zerah by Tamar	Perez	52	Perez
5	Perez " " Hezron	Hezron	51	Hezron
6	Ezrom " " Aram	Ram (Aram, LXX: Arran)	50	Arni
			<b>49</b>	Admin
7	Aram " " d'Amminadab	Amminadab	48	Amminadab
8	Amminadab " " Nahshon	Nahshon	47	Nahshon
9	Nahshon " " Salmon	Salma (LXX: Salmon)	46	Sala
10	Salmon " " Boaz by Rahab	Boaz	45	Boaz
11	Boaz " " Obed by Ruth	Obed	44	Obed
12	Obed " " Jesse	Jesse	43	Jesse

13	Jesse " " David the king	David	42	David
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Table 3: The Monarchical Period

	<b>Matthew: Generations from David to the Exile</b>	<b>Genealogy of the Kings of Judas according to 1 et 2 Kings</b>		<b>Genealogy in Luke</b>
1	David was the father of Solomon by Uriah's wife	Solomon (961-922 BC)	42	(David)
2	Solomon " " Rehoboam	Rehoboam (922-915)	41	Natham
3	Rehoboam " " Abijah	Abijah or Abijam (915-913)	40	Mattatha(n)
4	Abijah " " Asaph	Asa (913-873)	39	Menna
5	Asaph " " Jehoshaphat	Jehoshaphat (873-849)	38	Melea
6	Jehoshaphat " " Joram	Jehoram or Joram (849-842)	37	Eliakim
		Ahaziah (842)	36	Jonam
		Queen Athaliah (842-837)	35	Joseph
		Jehoash or Joash (837-800)	34	Judah
		Amaziah (800-783)	33	Simeon
7	Joram " " Uzziah	Uzziah or Azariah (783-742)	32	Levi
8	Uzziah " " Jotham	Jotham (742-735)	31	Maththat
9	Jotham " " Ahaz	Ahaz or Jehoahaz I (735-715)	30	Jorim
10	Ahaz " " Hezekiah	Hezekiah (715-687)	29	Eliezer
11	Hezekiah " " Manasseh	Manasseh (687-642)	28	Jesus (Joshua)
12	Manasseh " " Amos	Amon (642-640)	27	Er
13	Amos " " Josiah	Josiah (640-609)	26	Elmadam (Elmodam)
14	Josiah " " Jechoniah and his brothers	Jehoahaz II or Shallum (609)	25	Cosam
		Jehoiakim or Eliakim (609-598)	24	Addi
		Jehoiachin or Jechoniah (597)	23	Melchi
		Zedekiah or Mattaniah (587-587)	22	Neri

Table 4: The Post-Monarchical Period

	<b>Matthew: Generations from Exile to the Messiah</b>	<b>Post-Monarchical Davidids (1 Chr 1: 19-24)</b>		<b>Genealogy in Luke</b>
			22	(Neri)
1	Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel	Shenazzar or Sheshbazzar (595)	21	Shealtiel
2	Shealtiel " " Zerubbabel	Zerubbabel (570)	20	Zerubbabel
			19	Rhesa
3	Zerubbabel " " Abiud	Hannaniah (545)	18	Joanan
4	Abiud " " Eliakim	Shecaniah (520)	17	Joda
			16	Josech
			15	Semein
5	Eliakim " " Azor	Hattush (495)	14	Mattathias
6	Azor " " Zadok	Elioenai (470)	13	Maath
			12	Naggai
7	Zadok " " Achim	Anani (445)	11	Hesli
			10	Nahum
8	Achim " " Eliud		9	Amos
9	Eliud " " Eleazar		8	Mattathias
			7	Joseph

10	Eleazar " " Matthan	6	Jannai
		5	Melchi
11	Matthan " " Jacob	4	Levi
		3	Matthat
12	Jacob " " Joseph, the husband of Mary	2	Eli (Heli)
13	of her was born Jesus, called the Christ	1	Joseph of whom Jesus was supposed son

Let's make some preliminary observations.

- Overall: Matthew presents us with a descending list from Abraham to Jesus using the formula: "A was the father of B; B was the father of C", while Luke presents us with a descending list from Jesus to Adam and God, using the formula: "A, (son) of B, (son) of C". Luke's list contains 77 names compared to Matthew's 41.
- The pre-monarchical period: this is the only period in which the Luke-Matthew agreement was fairly extensive, if not total.
- The monarchic period: the two lists diverge completely, and agree only on David. Luke's list contains 27 names compared to Matthew's 15.
- The post-monarchic period: the two lists agree only on the first two and the last two names. And these names are the only ones on which we have biblical information.

In the face of so many differences, we must remember what we said about the biblical genealogies: they have different functions, and so it is normal that they diverge; Matthew intends to show that Jesus is the Davidic Messiah, while Luke intends to show that Jesus is the son of God.

#### 1. Who Was Jesus' Grandfather?

For Matthew, Joseph's father is called Jacob, while for Luke he is called Heli. This brings us first to the third section of Matthew's list, where the nine names between Zerubbabel and Joseph are completely unknown to us. Where did Matthew get these names? Three explanations have been proposed.

##### a. It is a creation of Matthew

This explanation does not hold water, for the first two sections of his genealogy refer to existing lists in the OT, and it would be surprising if he did otherwise for his third section. Moreover, in v. 17 he seems to marvel at his discovery of the 3 x 14 pattern in his three lists, which would be incomprehensible if he had created this last list from scratch. Finally, since the return of the Jews from exile many genealogical lists were circulating in Judea in order to establish their rights and privileges.

##### b. Matthew copied an existing genealogy from the Davidic lineage

Let us distinguish between individuals who claim descent from King David, and the existence of a royal lineage that would have survived. As far as individuals are concerned, there are a few examples such as Rabbi Hillel who claimed to be of Davidic descent through his mother, or, in the first Christian millennium, the head of the Jewish community in Babylon; Roman emperors (Vespasian, Domitian, Trajan) are said to have persecuted a certain number of these claimants. The existence of these claims suggests that lists may have existed.

As for the existence of a House of David which would have continued after the exile, at least until the period of the Maccabees, the fact can be confirmed by the existence of discussions at the time of Jesus about the Davidic origin of the Messiah. Does this imply that official lists existed about a royal lineage? It is possible if we believe Julius Africanus, who informs us that Herod the Great had family records burned for fear of having his power challenged. The OT itself gives us a list of five descendants of Zerubbabel. But it is doubtful that this list was continued and nothing is known for the period from 400 to 200 BC.

Matthew's genealogical list is too short to cover the period from Zerubbabel to Jesus, and neither his nor Luke's list coincides with that found in the OT. Thus, even if such an official list existed, we have no indication that Matthew would have referred to it. Instead, he seems to have used a popular list from Greek-speaking circles, probably derived from speculation about the coming of the Messiah. And it is to this list that he would have added the names of Joseph and Jesus. Finally, if Jesus was ever of Davidic descent, it can only be through a side branch of the family, not a direct royal line: there is no indication in the account of Jesus' ministry that

his ancestors were of nobility or royalty; on the contrary, he seems to have come from an uninteresting background and an unimportant village.

c. Matthew had access to Joseph's family records

Before examining this explanation, it is necessary first to settle the question of the differences (with the possible exception of Joseph's grandfather called Mathan in Matthew, Matthat in Luke) between Matthew's list and that of Luke. A first proposed solution was to consider Matthew's list as coming from the archives of Joseph, and Luke's from the archives of Mary. Unfortunately, this solution cannot be taken seriously: first, a genealogy from the mother would not be normal among the Jews, and second, Luke clearly tells us that he traces Jesus' descent from Joseph. One might add that we have no indication that Mary would belong to the Davidic line.

The other proposed solution appeals to the custom of the levirate (Deut 25:5-10) where a relative of a deceased husband without children must marry his widow to give her offspring: thus, one of the genealogical lists would give us the family records from Joseph's natural father, the other from the legal father, the one who had died. This solution encounters major difficulties which will be discussed in Appendix I.

In view of all these difficulties, most biblical scholars today reject the idea that either Matthew's or Luke's genealogical list comes from the family records. While maintaining that Matthew may have drawn on a popular list from a Davidic genealogy, let us examine Luke's list more closely.

2. The Family Tree of the Son of God

Like Matthew's, Luke's genealogy has a theological purpose. Why does it go back to God? A voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism just said, "This is my beloved son". Why does this genealogy go through Adam? Luke is writing for the Gentiles of the Pauline communities for whom Paul drew a parallel between Jesus and Adam (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:22,45). This has the advantage of accentuating the paradox of Jesus as truly God, and truly man.

In Luke's list, we can detect a pattern around the number 7.

- The genealogical list includes  $11 \times 7 = 77$  names
- There are 7 patriarchs from Adam to Enoch, and then 70 names between Enoch and Jesus, perhaps an echo of the tradition of 70 generations between the sin of the angels and the day of judgment (see [Enoch 10, 12](#))
- There are  $3 \times 7 = 21$  names for the postexilic period as well as for the monarchic period
- For the pre-monarchic period there are  $2 \times 7 = 14$  names before David
- The names of David (#42) and Abraham (#56) appear as multiples of seven.

Thus, the set of names in Luke's list (see table 1) has the following pattern: 21 (post-monarchic) + 21 (monarchic) + 14 (pre-monarchic) + 21 (pre-Abrahamic) = 77.

Some biblical scholars have questioned this reasoning, considering that Jesus and God could not be assigned a number. Moreover, different manuscripts offer different numbers. Even allowing for all this, the fact remains that the motif around the number seven is present at least in part in Luke's list, and this allows us to question whether it is more historical (in the biological sense) than Matthew's.

When we examine Luke's list, we note this:

- The Davidic line goes back to David through Nathan in Luke, a more humble figure than Solomon in Matthew; but this is not a guarantee of authenticity. Some names from the pre-exilic period (Levi, Simeon, Joseph, Judah) are anachronisms, since the custom of naming children after the patriarchs developed only after the exile.
- Several names in the list (sequence 28-32: Levi, Matthat, Jorim, Eliezer, Jesus) seem to be a repeat of the names at the beginning of the list (sequence 1-4): Jesus, Joseph, Heli and Levi
- The name Joseph appears three times, and six names are very similar: Matthat (twice), Mattathias (twice), Maath, Mattatha(n), names associated with the Maccabean or Hasmonean family of the House of Levi in the 2nd century BC.
- Rather than making Shealtiel (#21) the son of Jechoniah, the last king, as in Matthew, Luke makes him the son of Neri, who is otherwise totally unknown to us; Luke's motivation may be theological, for according to Jeremiah 22:30: "Thus says the Lord: 'Write about this man (Jechoniah), 'A failure, a boy who has not succeeded in his life! Not one of his children will succeed in taking the throne of David, in keeping the power in Judah'".
- In the list from Zerubbabel to Jesus, there are duplicates and Levitical names, and signs of confusion such as the one around the name Rhesa, which seems a misunderstanding of the Greek transcription of the Aramaic *rēšā'* (prince), opening the possibility that the pre-Lukan text may be referring here to Prince Joanan, the son of Zerubbabel

In short, although Luke's list may seem more plausible than Matthew's, it is not the exact record of Jesus' biological genealogy. What is certain is that the list has been artificially organized by numerical pattern, and this list contains inaccuracies and signs of confusion, suggesting a popular provenance in Greek-speaking Jewish circles. Luke would have taken this list and inserted it between the baptism of Jesus and the temptation scene. The message about Jesus is not that he is in fact the grandson of Jacob (according to Matthew) or of Heli (according to Luke), but that he is theologically the son of David, the son of Abraham (according to Matthew), and the son of God (according to Luke).

### III. The Composition of the Basis Matthean Narrative in 1:18-2:33

When we looked earlier at possible structures of Matthew's infancy narrative, one thread could be the four or five citations from Scripture. It is therefore worth studying the technique of formula citations throughout Matthew's gospel to determine whether the citations in the infancy narrative are from the evangelist or from a pre-existing source. This will later allow us to study the relationship of the citation to the immediate context, and thus determine whether the rest of the narrative has the same origin as the citation.

#### A. Matthew's Formula Citation of Scripture

Here is a table of formula citations in the Synoptics.

Evangelist	Text of the citation	Author cited
Matthew	1: 22-23: All this happened to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which is translated, "God with us".	Isaiah 7: 14
	2: 5b-6: For this is what is written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are not the least of the chief towns of Judah: for out of you shall come the ruler who shall feed my people Israel.	Micah 5: 1 et 2 Samuel 5: 2
	2: 15b: This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."	Hosea 11: 1
	2: 17-18: Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."	Jeremiah 31: 15 (LXX 38: 15)
	2: 23b: so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."	Isaiah 4: 3 et Judges 16: 17
	3: 3: This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"	Isaiah 40: 3
	4: 14-16: so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles - the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned."	Isaiah 8: 23 - 9: 1
	8: 17: This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases."	Isaiah 53: 4
	12: 17-21: This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory. And in his name the Gentiles will hope	Isaiah 42: 1-4
	13: 14-15: With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: 'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn - and I would heal them.'	Isaiah 6: 9-10
	13: 35: This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world."	Ps 78 (77): 2

	21: 4-5: This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."	Isaiah 62: 11 et Zechariah 9: 9
	26: 56: But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled." Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.	Nil
	27: 9-10: Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me."	Zechariah 11: 12-13 (perhaps combined with echoes of Jeremiah 32: 6-15; 18: 2-3)
Mark	15: 28: And the scripture was fulfilled which says: and he was numbered with the evildoers (verse present only in some minor manuscripts)	Isaiah 53: 12
Luke	18: 31: Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished.	Nil
	22: 37: For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, 'And he was counted among the lawless'; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled."	Isaiah 53: 12
	24: 44: Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you - that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."	Nil

Note: were discarded Mk 1: 2-3; 14: 59; Lk 3, 4-6 which are not really formula citations and reference to an accomplishment of the Scripture.

As can be seen, these formula citations are a particularity of Matthew's in the synoptic narratives that has standardized the way of linking Jesus to the fulfillment of Scripture. And the link he makes does not refer to the full meaning of the text or its context, but rather to an aspect of the text that has some similarity to Jesus or an event. And the way he quotes a prophet directly rather than incorporating him by allusion into the wording of the story is indicative of a Christian effort to provide the story about Jesus with a scriptural background.

#### 1. Purpose of the Citations

For many biblical scholars, the purpose of these citations is primarily apologetic, allowing Christian Jews to prove to their Jewish brethren in the synagogue that Jesus' career was foretold in the OT. But if this was the main purpose of these citations, it is difficult to explain why there are so few of them in the account of the passion and crucifixion which was really the stumbling block for the Jews. A more satisfactory explanation is to see a didactic objective: a catechesis to support the faith of the Christians in the community.

The distribution of these formula citations throughout Matthew's gospel is remarkable. For in his infancy narrative, we find five citations out of a total of fourteen. It is as if the infancy narrative was still unexplored in reference to the OT, in contrast to the passion narrative which had been analyzed from the beginning of Christian preaching in relation to the scriptural background. We can then think that the infancy narrative belongs to a time when preaching became less missionary and more didactic, addressed to well established Christian communities.

#### 2. Relation of the Citations to Their Context

There are two competing theories about the relationship of the citations to the story they illustrate. The first is that the citations gave rise to the stories: the evangelist would have thought imaginatively and creatively about the citations, or at most, he would have gathered some fragments of tradition around a passage of the OT. The second theory is that the citations were added to an existing narrative: a fairly well-developed and important set of traditions already existed, which Matthew patched together into a continuous narrative, and the scriptural citations were added as a finishing touch. Which theory is more plausible? Several factors support the second theory.

- i. Take for example section 2:13-23. It is very difficult to imagine that the three scriptural citations ("from Egypt I called my son," "Rachel weeps for her children," "he will be called a Nazarene"), which have a fairly marginal connection to the story, could have given rise to the story itself: Joseph and family flee to Egypt, Herod feels cheated and slaughters children, Joseph and family return to the land to settle in Nazareth. Similarly, in 2b-6, it is very difficult to imagine that the scriptural citation ("Bethlehem, land of Judah, you are not the least...") could have given rise to the story of the magi. Finally, in 1:22-33, it is very difficult to imagine that the scriptural citation ("the virgin will conceive...") could have given rise to a narrative around the figure of Joseph.
- ii. The five citation formulas appear to have been added. They could be removed, and the narrative would be even more harmonious. Except for the citation about Bethlehem (2:5b-6), the citations have a marginal relationship to the narrative.

- iii. we have several examples where it is clear that Matthew has added a citation to his narrative after the fact. Consider the following example where Luke and Matthew copy a scene from Mark.

<b>Mk 1: 14</b>	<b>Lk 4: 14</b>	<b>Mt 4: 12-16</b>
And after John was given over, Jesus came to Galilee	And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit	Now when Jesus heard that John had been given over, he withdrew to Galilee. <u>He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles - the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned."</u>

What does Matthew do here? After copying Mark's text, he adds a citation from Isaiah 8:23-9:1 (in italics). But he has to introduce this citation, so he mentions the fact that Jesus leaves Nazareth to go to Capernaum, by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali (underlined). It is unthinkable that Matthew could have created a scene of Jesus going to Galilee from this citation from Isaiah.

### 3. Origin of the Formula Citation

Once we have opted for the theory that the citations were added after the fact to the infancy narratives, we must answer the question: how did he choose the citations he inserted in his narratives? Are they the product of his personal reflection, or were they known in the Christian tradition? Three paths have been explored by biblical scholars to answer this question.

#### i. The possibility of a broader use of the citations

The study of the gospels shows that before the publication of the gospel according to Matthew, there was a tradition of using prophetic texts that Matthew only made more explicit. For example, in the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem reported by the synoptics, only Matthew explicitly quotes Zechariah 9:9, a scriptural association also found in the independent evangelist John (12:15-16). If, therefore, an association of OT texts with certain events in the life of Jesus existed in the pre-evangelical tradition, on the other hand, it would be difficult to understand how a pool of all-purpose citations could have existed and from which it was sufficient to draw, like those good fortune texts in fortune cookies: how could the reference to Hosea 11:1 ("from Egypt I called my son") or Jeremiah 31:15 (Rachel weeping for her children) have existed independently of their present context?

#### ii. The wording of the citation in relation to the Hebrew and Greek OT

The wording of the citation text varies in Matthew. When he copies a citation that is at least implicitly found in Mark, Matthew adheres closely to the wording of the Septuagint text. In other cases, Matthew is much freer from the Septuagint. In fact, in the first century CE there were several textual traditions both of the Hebrew of the Masoretic text and of the Aramaic Targums and Greek translations. In the face of all this, it is difficult to determine whether a citation is from the pen of Matthew or from a pre-Matthean tradition. On the one hand, it is possible to think that when Matthew introduces a citation that is well known in Christian circles, he must have used the wording that was familiar to everyone. On the other hand, when a citation was the result of his personal reflection, we can presume that he chose the formulation that best suited his purposes.

#### iii. The relation of the citation to the Matthean theology

The idea is this: if a formula citation fits Matthew's overall theological interest, Matthew himself would have found it in the OT; on the other hand, if the citation does not fit his theology very well, Matthew would have simply taken it from common Christian usage. But how do we determine theological relevance and how a scriptural citation fits? There is a danger here of a circular argument. For, as we shall see, all the citations from the infancy narrative can be interpreted as linking Jesus to different moments in Israel's history: the Davidic Messiah, the exodus, the Babylonian exile, etc.

In short, it is likely that it was Matthew himself who added the citation formulas to the gospel traditions. In many cases, he would have been the one who first spotted the applicability of an OT passage to an event in Jesus' life. He

would then have chosen the Old Testament tradition that best illustrated this applicability, or he would have proposed his own translation into Greek. In rarer cases, this applicability would have been detected in a pre-Matthean stage of the tradition, and Matthew would have been content to reproduce it as is. It should be noted that these citations do more than highlight the accidental agreement between the OT and the life of Jesus, for they correspond to his theological view of the uniqueness of God's plan and his pastoral interest in dealing with a Christian community composed of Jews and Gentiles.

B. The Detection of Pre-Matthean Material

Having recognized that it was Matthew who chose and added the five formula citations to the infancy narrative, we must ask the question: what about the content of the different stories that make up the narrative? From the outset, we must exclude the hypothesis that Matthew had before him a well-formed narrative to which he simply added the formula citations. For there is too much of Matthew's style, starting with the vocabulary. Then there is the insistence on the genealogy afterwards, even though we have seen that he is the author of this genealogy. We can also add the presence of the motif of the five alternating episodes, a motif found elsewhere in his gospel. To say the least, Matthew played an important role in shaping the story as it appears to us today.

1. The Method Employed in the Detection

Biblical scholars have used three criteria to detect pre-Matthean material.

- i. The first refers to the amount of Matthean elements regarding vocabulary, style and motifs in a verse or section of the infancy narrative
- ii. Then there are sometimes tensions and conflicts within a passage itself, indicating that two different pieces of the tradition have been merged
- iii. Finally, there is the presence of parallels that can be found elsewhere in the gospels, such as the elements common to Matthew and Luke in their infancy narratives, a sign of the existence of a prior tradition from which the two evangelists have drawn.

To illustrate, let us apply these three criteria to section 2, 19-23.

19 Now, when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, 20 saying, "Get up; take the child and his mother and go back to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." 21 So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went back to Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was king over Judea in place of his father Herod, Joseph was afraid to return there. And being warned in a dream, he went off to the district of Galilee. 23 There he went to dwell in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: "He will be called a Nazorean."

Let us first apply the second criterion: the internal tensions in the section. A line of tension appears in the geographical locations: Joseph is asked to take the child and his mother and go "to the land of Israel", i.e. Judea, and then to go "to the region of Galilee". Both geographical targets are ordered in a divine dream. If the story was originally a unit, why the need for two different dreams, and why did the angel not tell Joseph in the first dream to go to Galilee, rather than this unnecessary detour to Judea?

But we must be careful, for what is illogical for us may have been logical for the ancient authors. So let us apply the other criteria, specifically our first criterion on Matthean style. The mention of "the region of Galilee" and "a city called Nazareth" is in harmony with the formula citation of 23b. One suspects that Matthew added the specification of Galilee and Nazareth to a tradition that presents Joseph returning to the land of Israel in order to prepare the formula citation on the Nazarene. This suspicion is confirmed by comparing 2:22-23 with that other passage in Matthew (4:12-16) we saw earlier.

**Mt 2: 22-23**

But when he heard that Archelaus was king over Judea...

He went off to the district of Galilee. There he went to dwell in a city called Nazareth

So that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled [formula citation].

**Mt 4: 12-16**

But when he heard that John had been arrested...

He went off to Galilee. There, leaving Nazareth, he went to dwell in Capernaum

In order that what was spoken by Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled [formula citation].

It can be seen that the structure, grammar and vocabulary of these two passages are clearly the same and reflect Matthew's style. On the other hand, the preceding passage, i.e. 2:19-21, which brings Joseph back to Judea, is in tension with 2:22-23, which suggests to us that 2:19-21 belongs to pre-Matthew material.

The conclusion that emerges is reinforced when we apply the third criterion, that of parallels. Matthew did not invent the fact that Jesus grew up in Nazareth; there is a consensus on this in the gospel tradition. Rather, his challenge was to explain how Jesus could have grown up in Nazareth in the face of a tradition that he was born in Bethlehem. There is no common pre-gospel tradition that provides such an explanation, since Luke offers a different version. Using the third criterion again, we find a parallel with the account of Moses in Midian when Pharaoh has just died: "The Lord said to Moses in Midian: 'Go, return to Egypt, for all those who sought your life are dead'" (Ex 4:19). The theme of Moses' infancy runs through the whole of Matthew's narrative in 1:18 - 2:23. Finally, a parallel can be drawn between the structure of 2:19-21 and the rest of the infancy narrative, more precisely the one in which an angel appears in a dream, makes a request, gives the reason for the request, and Joseph follows up on the request. If 2:19-21 is pre-Matthean, we can assume that the other passages in which this stereotypical motif appears are as well. Here is a chart of the angelic appearance motif in a dream:

#### **The Pattern of Angelic Dream Appearances**

An introductory resumptive clause connecting the appearance with what precedes:

- |    |       |                                       |
|----|-------|---------------------------------------|
| A) | 1: 20 | As he was considering this, behold... |
| B) | 2: 13 | When they had gone away, behold...    |
| C) | 2: 19 | When Herod died, behold...            |

1) An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream (1: 20; 2: 13; 2: 19)

2) The angel gave a command, saying:

- |    |       |   |
|----|-------|---|
| A) | 1: 20 | Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home...           |
|    | 1: 21 | She will give birth to a son; and you will call his name Jesus...                         |
| B) | 2: 13 | Get up; take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you... |
| C) | 2: 20 | Get up; take the child and his mother and go back to the land of Israel...                |

3) The angel offered a reason for the command:

- |    |       |  |
|----|-------|--|
| A) | 1: 20 | for the child begotten in her is through the Holy Spirit.  |
|    | 1: 21 | for he will save his people from their sins.               |
| B) | 2: 13 | for Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him. |
| C) | 2: 20 | for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.      |

4) Joseph got up and fulfilled the command:

- |    |           |  |
|----|-----------|--|
| A) | 1: 24-25  | So Joseph got up from sleep and did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him. He took his wife home, but he had no sexual relations with her before she gave birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. |
| B) | 2: 14-15a | So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went away to Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod.  |
| C) | 2: 21     | So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went back to the land of Israel.  |

## 2. Summary of the Results

### a. The Pre-Matthean Material

When we speak of pre-Matthean material we are speaking only of traditions that existed before Matthew produced his gospel. It is possible that the gospel went through several editions, i.e., that a basic gospel appeared before the final edition, but we have no way of knowing. We present first what was the main pre-Matthean narrative, and then other pre-Matthean episodes, without eliminating the possibility that the two sets were merged by the time Matthew wrote his gospel.

#### i. The Main Pre-Matthean Narrative

##### **A Reconstruction of the Main Pre-Matthean Narrative**

- A) Now, when Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, behold an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Take Mary your wife into your home, for she will give birth to a son who will save his people from their sins." So Joseph got up from sleep and took his wife home, and she gave birth to a son.
- Now Jesus was born in the days of Herod the king. When Herod the king heard this [in a dream], he was startled, and so was all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem of Judea," they told him. Then he sent (secretly) to Bethlehem with the instruction: "Go and search diligently for the child."

- B) Now, when [Herod had done this], behold an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream saying, "Get up; take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him." So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went away to Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. Then Herod [when the search for the child was unsuccessful] fell into a furious rage. He sent into Bethlehem and the regions all around it and massacred all the boys of two years of age and under [according to the time he had ascertained from the dream].
- C) Now, when Herod died, behold an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Get up; take the child and his mother and go back to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went back to the land of Israel...

The first caveat is that any pre-Matthew material may have been so extensively altered that it is often almost impossible to find the original text. All that can be said is that the proposed reconstruction presents in a partial and approximate way the content of the narrative that Matthew used.

A second caveat is that the reconstruction is based on the angelic apparitions, which offer only the skeleton of the story, and therefore do not allow us to establish all its details, such as Mary's pregnancy, the messianic child, the coming of the magi or Herod's attempt to take the child's life. To determine what comes from the same source or tradition as the angelic apparitions, we need to apply the second and third criteria we identified earlier, specifically the internal tensions that indicate that two pieces of material have been merged, and the parallels of the Jewish traditions.

Let us begin with the Jewish traditions that probably served to flesh out the skeleton of angelic apparitions. Jesus was "son of Joseph" according to the tradition common to all the gospels. Nothing is known about this Joseph and he does not appear anywhere in the accounts of Jesus' ministry. But a description of this figure could very well come from the patriarch Joseph in the book of Genesis. Two memorable elements in the saga of this patriarch are his ability to interpret dreams (Gen 37:19: "a man or expert in dreams") and his sojourn in Egypt where he had to interact with the Pharaoh. These two elements are also found in Jesus' father. And if the first Pharaoh with whom the patriarch Joseph interacted was benevolent, the second was wicked, had the male Israelite children killed, and also sought to kill the child Moses, so that the latter could not return from exile until he was dead. So we can see the parallel: on the one hand, we have the patriarch Joseph/the wicked Pharaoh/Moses as a child, and on the other hand we have Joseph/the wicked king Herod/Jesus as a child. Thus, in the absence of information on the father of Jesus, we used what the Bible said about the patriarch Joseph.

Let us now turn to the parallel between Moses and Jesus, a parallel deeply rooted in Christian thought, and particularly important to the Jew Matthew to the point of marking his writing of the ministry of Jesus. Thus, finding a tradition in which the young Moses appears as a filigrama allowed him to complete this Jesus-Moses parallel more perfectly. And just as the book of Exodus already shows God's hand on young Moses before he even begins his ministry of liberating the Israelites from Egypt and mediating the covenant between God and his people, so Matthew does the same with his infancy narrative before Jesus even begins his ministry of salvation and the new covenant. Let us look in more detail at both the biblical and non-biblical tradition about the young Moses.

#### 1. The Biblical Account

Let us recall the main features of this story told in the book of Exodus. Faced with the explosion of the Hebrew population despite their state of poverty and forced labor, Pharaoh ordered that the Hebrew midwives and ultimately the Egyptians themselves kill the newborn children. To save her child, Moses' mother put him in a papyrus basket coated with bitumen and placed it among the rushes on the bank of the Nile. There, Pharaoh's daughter found him and brought him to the court where he grew up and was educated. One day, as an adult, Moses kills an Egyptian who was bullying a Hebrew. Faced with an angry Pharaoh, he had to flee to the land of Midian. Here is a list of parallels between the book of Exodus and Matthew.

<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Exode</b>
Mt 2: 13-14: Herod was going to search for the child to destroy him, so Joseph took the child and his mother and went away	Ex 2: 15: The Pharaoh sought to do away with Moses, so Moses went away.
Mt 2: 16: Herod sent to Bethlehem and massacred all the boys of two years of age and under.	Ex 1: 22: The Pharaoh commanded that every male born to the Hebrews be cast into the Nile
Mt 2: 19: Herod died	Ex 2: 23: The king of Egypt died

Mt 2: 19-20: The angel of the Lord said to Joseph in Egypt: "...go back to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.

Ex 4: 19: The Lord said to Moses in Midian: "...return to Egypt, for all those who were seeking your life are dead."

Mt 2: 21: Joseph took the child and his mother and went back to the land of Israel.

Ex 4: 20: Moses took along his wife and his children and returned to Egypt.

## 2. The Non-Biblical Tradition

The list of parallels is much larger when one turns to the Jewish midrashic tradition on the childhood of Moses (see Appendix VIII). Finding relevant material in the first century CE, when Matthew's gospel was written, is a challenge. But two works stand out, Philo of Alexandria's [Life of Moses](#) and the [Antiquities](#) (II ix; #205-37) where Flavius Josephus recounts the birth of Moses. The details that follow, drawn mainly from Josephus' work, reinforce the parallels we have already identified.

- In addition to wanting to control the Jewish population, Pharaoh is warned in a marvelous way of the birth of a Hebrew who will be a threat to the Egyptian kingdom, just as Herod will see the birth of the messiah as a threat
- This marvelous warning comes to Pharaoh through a sacred scribe, just as Herod learns from the high priests and scribes where the messiah is to be born
- According to other accounts, Pharaoh learns of the birth of the child through a dream that his magicians or occult specialists must interpret. All of this opens up the possibility that Herod, too, could have learned of the messiah's birth in a dream (which we have bracketed squarely in our reconstruction of the pre-Matthean material), a detail of the pre-Matthean narrative that Matthew could have modified after introducing the account of the magi and their star, thus shifting the source of Herod's information
- Pharaoh is troubled by the news of the coming birth of the liberating Hebrew, and the thought of such a birth strikes terror into the Egyptians, just as Herod and all of Jerusalem are troubled by the news of the messiah's birth
- Pharaoh's plan to kill the promised child by executing all male children among the Hebrews is thwarted by God who appears in a dream to Amram, father of Moses, whose wife is pregnant, and tells him not to be discouraged, for the unborn child will escape his enemies and save the race of Hebrews from their slavery. The parallel with Matthew is clear.

The parallel between the Moses legend and the pre-Matthean Jesus story could be further strengthened if, in the pre-Matthean story, Herod had been warned in a dream of the messiah's birth (a detail in square brackets in our reconstruction), as had Pharaoh, even before the angel intervened with Joseph to tell him about the child's future. And this is very possible, because our reconstruction of this pre-Matthean material has preserved the alternating characters pattern typical of Matthew, which was probably not the case with the original material. Moreover, in the Moses legend, God's intervention in Amram's dream is intended to silence his hesitation at the prospect of the birth of a child who would be exterminated anyway, a scene reminiscent of Joseph's hesitation to take Mary into his home. Matthew has probably disrupted the order of the pre-Matthean material to introduce the virginal conception.

### ii. Other Pre-Matthean Episodes

It seems that even before Matthew's editing work, the story of the angel's appearance to Joseph and his struggle against a devious king may have attracted small episodes or vignettes. We will only name them for now, reserving their analysis for later, when we comment on Matthew's text.

- A birth announcement story. When we consider the [table of three angelic dream appearances](#), we can notice that the first appearance (A) is different from the other two (B, C), because it contains two requests (2-A) and a reason for each of these two requests (3-A). This doublet is the result of the fusion of two literary forms: an angelic apparition in a dream and a birth announcement. The latter is an independent form well attested in the OT with well-stereotyped elements:
  - the name of the person who has a vision,
  - the injunction not to be afraid,
  - a message that the pregnant woman will conceive a child,
  - the name that the child will have to bear

It is reasonable to assume that an annunciation account of Jesus' birth must have existed independently, since it is found in Luke 1:26-38 with the announcement to Mary. And it is this account that probably originally contained the conception of the child by the Holy Spirit, a common theme in Matthew and Luke.

- A story of wise men from the east who see the star of a king at its rising and are led by it to Bethlehem. This story presupposes the widespread belief that the birth of a great man was accompanied by an astronomical phenomenon. But the immediate inspiration for the story of the magi came from the story of Balaam (Numbers 22 - 24), a man with magical powers who came from the east and predicted that a star would rise from Jacob. And in Jewish tradition, this star was interpreted as a reference to the Royal House of David, and thus to the messiah. To integrate this Balaam-inspired story into the main pre-Matthew narrative required only minor adjustments, such as having Herod announce the birth of the messiah through the magi rather than through a dream, or delegating the search for the child to the magi rather than through his own intelligence service.

By the time these pre-Matthean traditions reach Matthew, it is likely that they have already been integrated into a single narrative, or at least before he puts the finishing touches on his account.

#### b. The Matthean Editing

By the term "editing" we mean not just the finishing touches to a complete work, but also the rearrangement of material, the retelling of a story in one's own words and the careful integration of it into one's theological vision. Here are the clearest elements.

- The addition of the five formula citations that give new light and emphasis to the original story.
  - i. Although the idea of a virginal conception was already present in the original narrative, the addition of the citation from Is 7:14 ("the virgin will conceive...") showed that the continuation of the Davidic line by virginal conception had long been part of God's plan
  - ii. Although the pre-Matthew narrative around Joseph and Herod already contained the theme of a birth in Bethlehem, the addition of Micah 5:1 ("And you Bethlehem...") provided a scriptural basis for the birthplace, and the addition of 2 Sam 5:2 ("he will feed his people Israel") to Micah's text set the tone for Matthew's understanding of how the newborn will rule
  - iii. the addition of Hos 11:1 ("Out of Egypt I called my son") evoked the exodus and emphasized the parallel between Moses and Jesus
  - iv. The addition of Jer 31:15 ("A voice in Ramah was heard") where Rachel in Ramah weeps over her exiled children evokes the exile of Israel.
  - v. Finally, the addition of "He will be called a Nazarene" (Isa 4:3; Jdg 16:17) showed that Jesus fulfilled the paradoxical expectation of the Messiah to be from Bethlehem and Nazareth, Nazarene being understood by Matthew to mean: from Nazareth.

All these citations constitute a theological geography that evokes the stages of salvation history: the exodus to Egypt, the exile and the ministry of Jesus. And they help answer questions about Jesus: who, where, how, whence.

- But in order to add these citations, Matthew had to make some changes, such as making sure that Joseph did not have a sexual relationship with Mary to preserve the motive of the virginal conception, or providing a plausible reason for moving Jesus from Bethlehem to Jerusalem
- To merge the genealogy with the main narrative, Matthew had to create an introduction (1:18) to ensure a smooth transition and to show that what follows gives the account of the birth of Jesus whose birth record was presented in 1:1-17, and will explain the particular way in which he was born, since in 1:16 it was not said that Joseph "fathered" Jesus. It will be understood that 1:18-25 is the most complex section of the infancy narrative and the one where Matthew's editing work is most apparent.

#### IV. The Conception of Jesus

##### Translation of Mt 1: 18-25

18 Now, as for (Jesus) Christ, his birth took place in this way. His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph; but before they began to live together, it was found that she was with child - through the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph was an upright man, but unwilling to expose her to public disgrace; and so he resolved to divorce her quietly.

20 Now, as he was considering this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home, for the child begotten in her is through the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son; and you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet who said,

23 "Behold, the virgin will be with child And will give birth to a son, And they will call his name Emmanuel (which means 'God with us')."

24 So Joseph got up from sleep and did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him. He took his wife home, 25 but he had no sexual relations with her before she gave birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

### Notes

v. 18

- "Now, as for (Jesus) Christ". The majority of manuscripts have the recension: *Tou de Iēsou Christou* (lit.: then, of the Jesus Christ), which fits well as the beginning of a narrative that follows the genealogy which ends thus: "Joseph, the husband of Mary; of her was begotten Jesus called the Christ" (1:16). Nevertheless, the presence of the word "Jesus" is suspect for the following reasons:
  - i. The name is omitted in a minor manuscript, as well as in Irenaeus and some Latin and Syriac translations
  - ii. The place of the word "Jesus" in the sentence varies among the witnesses who have this variant, the sign of a copyist's addition
  - iii. The addition of the word by a copyist to imitate v. 16 is more likely than its omission to imitate v. 17 which has only the word "Christ"
  - iv. There is no other case in the NT where the expression "Jesus Christ" is preceded by an article (of the Jesus Christ)
- "birth". The same Greek word *genesis* appears in v. 1, a way of linking this narrative with genealogy. Some manuscripts have *gennēsis*, which also means: birth, but whose semantic range is much narrower than *genesis* (birth, creation, genealogy), probably due to the fact that *gennēsis*, which referred to the Nativity, was more familiar than the rarer word *genesis*
- "betrothed". In both Matthew and Luke (1:27; 2:5), the verb *mnēsteuein* (to be betrothed, to be engaged) in the passive and middle form is used to describe the relationship between Joseph and Mary, not the verbs *gamein* and *gamizen* (to marry) or the noun *gamos* (wedding, marriage). In the Jewish world, the matrimonial process took place in two stages: 1) the formal exchange of consents before witnesses (Malachi 2:14), and after about a year, 2) the bride's departure for the groom's home. The consent usually took place when the girl was 12 or 13 years old. The exchange of consents in step 1 constituted the legally ratified marriage in modern terms, for it gave the man all rights over the girl; she was now his wife and any violation was adultery. According to later Jewish commentaries, there were two different customs in Judea and Galilee. In Judea, it was not unusual for the husband to be alone with his wife on occasion even before the period of cohabitation, without such marital relations being condemned. But in Galilee such permissiveness was not tolerated. It is clear, explicitly in Matthew, implicitly in Luke, that Joseph and Mary have passed stage 1, but have not yet reached stage 2. But it is risky to try to apply the customs of Judea or Galilee to their situation, because according to Luke, Joseph and Mary are from Galilee, and thus in a restrictive environment, and even if according to Matthew Joseph and Mary are from Judea, the evocation of the possible scandal fits better with the environment of Galilee
- "before they began to live together (*synerchesthai*)". Living together refers to stage 2, which we have just discussed. The verb *synerchesthai* has a wide range of meanings: to live together, to have sexual relations, to form a family.
- "it was found that she was". Literally: she was found to be. This is not the secret discovery by a snoop, but rather the general sense of "being found" in a specific situation.
- "with child". Literally: "having in the womb", without mentioning a child.
- "through the Holy Spirit". In our translation, we have separated this expression from the rest of the sentence by a hyphen, because it is an explanation from Matthew to his reader: the conception of the Holy Spirit is not part of the story as such and the news will only be revealed in v. 22, but Matthew wanted to spare his audience the same suspicions that haunt Joseph.

Note that the Greek expression "Holy Spirit" is in the genitive and without an article: of Holy Spirit. Even if the translation speaks of a child, we must not imagine that the Holy Spirit is the father of the child. Never does Luke or Matthew suggest that the Holy Spirit is the male element of a union with Mary. Not only is the word "spirit" not masculine (feminine in Hebrew, neuter in Greek), but the type of conception is implicitly creative, not sexual. Moreover, in Matthew (also in Lk 1:35) "spirit" has no definite article, and so is literally translated as: a holy spirit. Let us recall that the relationship of the Holy Spirit with the divine filiation of Jesus was first articulated in reference to his resurrection, and only later was the moment of his baptism included, and much later, after a long theological reflection, the moment of his conception. But we must not assume that Matthew or Luke see the Holy Spirit as a person, let alone the third person of the Trinity. Rather, we must refer to the Old Testament image of the breath of life given by God (Ps 104:30; Mt 27:50), or to the power with which God moves the prophet to speak

(Mt 22:43), or to the principle that animates the whole ministry of Jesus and which descended upon him at his baptism (Mt 3:16) and which he himself communicated to his disciples after his resurrection (Jn 20:22; Acts 1:8).

v.19

- "Her husband ". For Matthew, since Joseph and Mary have passed the first stage of the exchange of consents, they are truly "husband" and "wife". Luke, on the other hand, continues to consider Mary as "betrothed".
- "an upright man (*dikaïos*)". In the present context, *dikaïos* (right, just) would mean: observer of the Law, a meaning also found in Luke's infancy narrative (1:6) where Jesus' parents are presented as models of respect for the Law. However, this does not correspond to the usual meaning of *dikaïos* in Matthew, who uses it 19 times, which leads us to think that the word here comes from the pre-Matthean tradition.

This word has given rise to much debate among biblical scholars: does Joseph's decision to divorce come from the fact that he is an upright man? Or, on the contrary, does his unwillingness to expose Mary to public shame show that he is an upright man, expressing a form of mercy by not wanting to apply the Law rigidly? The various answers proposed can be grouped into three categories, the first two interpreting the beginning of v. 19 as "an upright man and therefore he did not want to expose her to public shame", while the third reads v. 19 as "an upright man but he did not want to expose her to public shame. Let's take a closer look at each of these categories.

- a. Kindness or mercy would be the key factor in Joseph being upright or just. Thus, he shows himself to be upright by not wanting to apply rigorously what the Law requires in the case of adultery and by seeking the easiest possible way out for Mary. This perception is found in Ps 112:4 ("the Lord is tender, compassionate and right"), in Ps 37:21 ("the righteous has compassion and gives"), in Wis 12:19 ("the righteous must be a friend of men"). Unfortunately, this interpretation fails to explain why in v. 20 the angel says to Joseph: "Do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home"; for the angel's message implies that Joseph has a qualm about completing the matrimonial process with step 2, a qualm that is logically related to being upright. Moreover, there is a difference between saying that justice or righteousness consists in mercy, and saying that it is moderated by mercy.
- b. Respect or awe for God's plan of salvation would be the key factor in Joseph's being righteous or just. This interpretation assumes that there is no hyphen in v. 18: "it turned out that she was with child (-) by the Holy Spirit", i.e. the mention of the Holy Spirit is no longer an explanation by Matthew for his reader, but a fact known by Joseph himself. Joseph's reaction would therefore be this: he could not take as his wife the woman whom God had chosen as his sacred vessel. And the angel's message to Joseph not to be afraid would be to reassure Joseph that God's plan includes the final stage of the marriage process to give the child his name and the Davidic heritage. Unfortunately, this explanation runs into serious difficulties. For although it is possible that *dikaïos* could have a connotation of piety or holiness, it presupposes that Joseph would have known in advance that Mary's pregnancy was due to a divine intervention, which the text we have does not say at all. And if Joseph really did have an earlier divine revelation, why didn't that revelation also include the instruction to complete the marriage process with the taking of Mary into his home, rather than having to return with a new message? From the present account, it is clear that Joseph learns from the angel only in v. 20 about the divine origin of the child in Mary's womb. And even if we assume that he already knew that the child was of the Holy Spirit and that it was out of religious fear that Joseph intended to divorce her, how could this decision have protected Mary? One cannot imagine that people who knew of Mary's pregnancy and now knew of the divorce would have immediately concluded that the child was the creative work of the Holy Spirit. Joseph would then have expressed his "righteousness" at the expense of Mary's reputation.
- c. Obedience to the Law would be the key factor in Joseph's being upright or just. This meaning is clearly present in Luke (1:6) when it is applied to Zechariah and Elizabeth ("Both were righteous (*dikaïos*) before God, and they followed all the commandments and observances of the Lord without reproach"). This same understanding of Joseph's righteousness is present in the Protevangelium of James ("If I hide her sin, I am fighting the Law of the Lord", 14, 1). The point of the Law at issue here is made clear by Deut 22:20-21, which deals with the case of a young bride whose husband takes her into his home and discovers that she is not a virgin: the Law requires the stoning of the adulterer, or in a less severe legal system, the need to expunge the evil may be met by the act of divorce. In this framework, Joseph's decision to divorce is a response to the requirement of the Law, and his unwillingness to expose her to public shame leads him to proceed without accusation of a serious crime. Thus, Joseph is a righteous man, but also merciful. According to this interpretation, Joseph assumes that Mary has been unfaithful and has broken the Law, but the angel's role is precisely to convince Joseph that Mary is not adulterous and has not broken the Law, because the child is the work of the Holy Spirit and Mary is still a virgin.

Of the three proposed explanations, only the third is really convincing.

- "but unwilling (*kai mē thelōn*)", literally: and not wanting. We have translated *kai* (and) as "but", to be consistent with the meaning of "right man" in our third explanation above. Note that the expression "not willing" is not part of the Matthean vocabulary
- "to expose her to public disgrace (*deigmatizein*)". The verb *deigmatizein* usually means: to put to shame, to make an example of, hence to mock. In the Greek world, this verb could be used in the context of an adulterous woman.
- "to divorce (*apolyein*) her". Some biblical scholars have tried to minimize the significance of this action, associating it with a "separation of body and property," even though there was no cohabitation yet. But we have no evidence that such a separation existed in Judaism at the time of Jesus. Other biblical scholars have made the dubious assumption that Joseph was simply trying to abandon Mary in order to make it appear that he was the guilty party and take the blame for the separation. All of these hypotheses overlook the meaning of *apolyein* elsewhere in Matthew (5:31-32; 19:3.7-9), which does mean divorce.
- "quietly". It is not clear what is meant by this adverb and how Joseph intended to achieve this goal. According to later rabbinic writings, a completely secret divorce was impossible, because the divorce act required two witnesses. In any case, Joseph could not have kept Mary's pregnancy hidden for long and eventually people would have made the connection between the divorce and the pregnancy. It is likely that Matthew means that Joseph did not plan to make public accusations of adultery and subject Mary to a trial by ordeal, as provided for in Numbers 5:11-31 in a case where there were no witnesses to the adultery. Joseph's option was to accuse her of adultery on lesser grounds, as the Pharisees of the school of Hillel allowed. Thus, "divorce quietly" meant: divorce in a benign manner.

v. 20

- "Now, as he was considering this, behold (*tauta de autou enthymēthentos idou*)". Literally: Then, having considered these things, behold. We have here a beginning of sentence with a participle in the absolute genitive form accompanied by the postpositive *de* and followed by the demonstrative particle "behold", a structure regularly found in Matthew. On the other hand, it is very rare that a continuous action is expressed with an aorist. The verb *enthymesthai* is found only here and in Mt 9:4 throughout the NT.
- "an angel of the Lord. This figure will reappear in 2:13 and 2:19. Most of the time in the OT, the expression "angel of the Lord" is not this personal and spiritual being, an intermediary between God and man, but simply another way of designating the visible presence of God among men. For example, in Gen 16:7 we read: "The angel of Yahweh met Hagar by a certain spring in the desert", and then a few verses later (Gen 16:13): "To Yahweh who had spoken to her, Hagar gave this name..."; thus "angel of Yahweh" and "Yahweh" are interchangeable. Only in post-exilic Jewish thought do angels become intermediaries with their own personality and name. Outside the infancy narrative, the angel of the Lord appears only at the empty tomb (Mt 28:2), an argument in favor of the proposition that the infancy narrative is a vehicle for postpaschal Christology.
- "in a dream (*kat' onar*)". The expression appears five times in the infancy narratives and only once elsewhere in Mt 27:19 (the dream of Pilate's wife) throughout the Bible. In the Septuagint, various words are used for revelations in dreams: *enypnion*, *hypnos* (sleep), and *horoma nyktos* (night vision). Josephus (*Antiquities*, II, v, 1: #63) uses *onar* for a dream that the patriarch Joseph must interpret. Note that in Matthew it is not the dream itself that brings a revelation, but it only provides the context for the intervention of the angel of the Lord from whom the revelation comes.
- "Joseph, son of David". Compare Lk 1:27: "a man from the House of David whose name was Joseph".
- "do not be afraid (*mē phobēthēs*)". This verb in the aorist tense seems to have the meaning: do not hold back out of fear.
- "to take (*paralambanein*) Mary your wife into your home". Literally: to take Mary your wife. Some translate: to take Mary as your wife; this is forgetting that in Jewish matrimonial procedures Mary was already Joseph's wife, even if they were not yet living together. The Syriac translator translates: bring home Mary your betrothed. Note that *paralambanein* also has the meaning of: to bring, to take with oneself (see Mt 2:14, 21)
- "for (*gar*)". The other two occurrences of *gar* in the angelic appearances are in 2:13 and 2:20 where Joseph learns something he did not know. And so it is quite justified to give *gar* a causal meaning: for, because.
- "the child begotten (*en autē gennēthen*)". Literally: what was begotten. The verb *gennaō* (to beget) is of the same root as the word *genesis* (origin, birth) in 1:1,18 and is used throughout the genealogy (A beget B, or A was the father of B), and appears as such in 1:16 (was begotten Jesus)

- "is through the Holy Spirit (*ek pneumatōs estin hagiou*)". Literally: is of a spirit which is holy. See the [note on the subject at v. 18](#).

v. 21

- She will give birth to a son (*texetai de huion*). In Lk 1:31 we have: *kai texē huion* (and you will bear a son). The old Syriac translations add at the end: for you, a way of emphasizing Joseph's paternity, while safeguarding Mary's virginity. These Syriac translations are close to the OT usage, as shown for example in Gen 17:19: "Behold, Sarah your wife will give birth to a son for you."
- "you will call his name Jesus" (*kaleseis to onoma autou Iēsoun*). The awkward expression "to call someone's name X" is in fact a Semitism for: to call someone X, or: to name someone X. The expression reappears in M 1:23.25 and Lk 1:13.31. In Matthew, it is Joseph who names the child, while in Luke it is Mary, both customs being recognized in the patriarchal era (Gen 4:25-26; 5:3).
- "for he will save". The "for" indicates that "he will save" is an etymological interpretation of the name given to the child. *Iēsous* is a Hellenized version of the Hebrew *Yēšūa'*, often shortened to *Yēšū'*. The full Hebrew name is: *Yēhōšūa'*, meaning: Yahweh helps, from the root: *šw'* (to help). But the popular etymology of the name and its shortened form is: *yš'* (to save), and the name *yēšū'ā* (salvation). It is this popular etymology that is reflected in Matthew's interpretation of the name "Jesus": God saves.
- "his people". For Matthew, Israel includes both Jews and Gentiles. The interpretation of "his people" is more difficult in Lk 1:17 in connection to John the Baptist, where it seems to refer only to the Jews

v. 22

- "took place (*gegonen*)". In Greek, the verb is in the active perfect tense, thus referring to an action that took place in the past. But it can have the meaning of an accomplishment that continues cumulatively in time
- "to fulfill". For a list of stereotypical achievement formulas see [the table of citation formulas](#).
- "what the Lord had spoken". In Matthew, what is fulfilled is not simply the plan or intention of God, but the "words" of Scripture
- "by the prophet". The Codex Bezae, the old Latin and Syriac translations add: Isaiah

v. 23

- "they will call". The Septuagint of Isaiah 7:14 has instead: "You (sing.) will call", and this reading also appears in Matthew's Codex Bezae. The Hebrew text has: "She will call".

v. 24

- "So Joseph got up from sleep (*egertheis de ho Iōsēph apo tou hypnou*)". Literally: then, having risen the Joseph from sleep. In the three angelic appearances in the dream (see [table](#)), the description of Joseph's response always begins with: "having risen", except that here Matthew has added: from sleep.
- "and did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him". This is the only time in the three appearance narratives where we find the expression "to do what has been commanded". This emphasis on obedience is not unlike the obedience of the patriarch Joseph in the OT.
- "He took his wife home (*parelaben tēn gynaika autou*)". Literally: he brought his wife, or he took his wife with him. See the note in verse 20 about the order Joseph carries out.

v. 25

- "he had no sexual relations with her before (*ouk eginōsken autēn heōs hou*)". Literally: he did not know her until. This phrase is omitted by the old Latin and Syriac translations, no doubt the work of a copyist who wanted to preserve Mary's perpetual virginity. The question of this perpetual virginity is contentious. To answer it, we must consider how the phrase in v. 25 fits with the immediate context and then with the whole of Matthew's gospel. First, in Greek the phrase *heōs hou* after a negation (do not...until) has no implication about what will happen after the limit expressed by "until" is reached; thus, the immediate context tells us nothing about Mary's situation after Jesus' birth, Matthew being concerned only about Mary's virginity before Jesus' birth so that Isaiah's prophecy about the virgin giving birth would be fulfilled. Thus, v. 25 gives us no information about what happens after Jesus is born. What does the rest of his gospel say? In Mt 12:46-50; 13:55-56, Matthew mentions Mary with the brothers

(and sisters) of Jesus. In antiquity, there is a great debate about the interpretation of the word "brother": for the Protevangelium of James and Epiphanius, these are Joseph's children from a previous marriage; for St. Jerome, they are cousins (the children of Joseph's brother or Mary's sister); for Helvidius, they are blood brothers (the children of Joseph and Mary). But before asking the question of what is really going on, we must first ask the question: Was Matthew in a position to really know the facts? Did he believe that the brothers of whom he speaks were really the children of Joseph and Mary, or was it simply an assumption on his part?

- "she gave birth to a son". Later Greek manuscripts added "his firstborn", probably under the influence of Lk 2:7
- "he called (*ekalesen*)". The Greek verb does not specify whether the subject is masculine or feminine, so that one version of the Syriac translation has opted for the masculine, and another for the feminine. But in the light of v. 21, where the angel specifies what Joseph is to call the child, the subject is clearly male, since it is Joseph

### Comment

#### A. Matthew's Message: the Who and the How - a Christological Revelation

Section 1:18-25 is linked to ch. 2, because the angelic appearances will continue there. But it is also linked grammatically by v. 18 ("Now, as for (Jesus) Christ, his birth took place in this way") to the beginning of the genealogy: "The birth record of Jesus Christ" (1:1) and to the surprising ending of the genealogy: "Joseph, the husband of Mary, from whom Jesus was born, called the Christ". It is therefore time for Matthew to answer the question raised by the genealogy of the *Quis* (who), i.e. son of David and son of God, and the *Quomodo* (how), the two questions related to his identity.

##### 1. The *Quis*: Who Jesus Is

The genealogy of Jesus revealed to us that he is the son of David and the son of Abraham. The "son of Abraham" motif and its connection to the Gentiles will be explained with the story of the magi. Matthew focuses first on the title son of David, and in doing so he also introduces the notion of divine sonship. This is what we now need to explain.

Matthew is interested in the title son of David, which he uses ten times, whereas it is used only four times in Mark and Luke and is absent from the gospel of John. However, in Matthew this title does not express all the mystery of Jesus' identity, because it is never used by Jesus himself or his disciples, but mainly by strangers who recognize him as Messiah because of the miracles he performed. According to Mt 22:41-46 ("The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand...") and Mt 16:16-17 ("You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"), Jesus is not simply the son of David, but primarily the son of God.

The association of the title "Son of God" with the risen Jesus is part of the first Christian professions of faith ("of the lineage of David according to the flesh, appointed Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by his resurrection from the dead", Rom 1:3-4). But by the time the gospels were published in the last third of the first century, Jesus was recognized as the son of God not only in his resurrection, but also during his ministry. This is what Mark tells us (1:11) with the scene of the baptism and the voice from heaven that addresses Jesus directly and calls him beloved son. But in Mark the disciples will never recognize him as the son of God while he is alive. It is different in Matthew as we can see from these parallels (the title son of God is underlined).

#### **Mark 6: 51-52**

And he went up to them in the boat and the wind died down. And they themselves were astonished.

#### **Matthew 14: 32-33**

And as they got into the boat, the wind died down. Those in the boat bowed down to him, saying, "You are truly the Son of God."

#### **Mark 8: 29**

And he asked them, "But what do you say that I am?" Answering, Peter said, "You are the Christ."

#### **Matthew 16: 15-16**

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Now Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

This relationship between son of David or Messiah or Christ and son of God also appears in Matthew's infancy narrative. Since the genealogy is basically a testimony of the OT, it can only establish the divine intention on the Davidic character of the Messiah. Only through the divine revelation of the angel of the Lord will Jesus be presented as "God with us" (Emmanuel) and his conception as the work of the Holy Spirit. From then on, Jesus is no longer the son of God only at the resurrection or at his baptism, but from his birth. If Joseph can recognize Jesus as the son of David by giving him a name, it is God and his Holy Spirit who designate him "son of God".

For Matthew, the two titles "son of God" and "son of David" are harmoniously interrelated, and this comes from the very appearance of the term in 2 Sam 7:8-17 when the prophet Nathan has to transmit this message from God

to David: "I will be a father to him and he will be a son to me". It is a question of a filiation of adoption, as we see in Ps 2:7, used at the time of the enthronement of a king: "You are my son; today I have begotten you".

In the early days of Christian preaching, the resurrection of Jesus was interpreted in the light of Ps 110:1, the psalm of David's enthronement: "The Lord (God) said to my Lord (the king), 'Sit at my right hand'" (see Acts 2:32-36; Mt 22:44). Acts 13:32-33 applies Psalm 2 to the resurrection of Jesus: "You are my son; today I have begotten you. When the proclamation of divine filiation passes from the moment of the resurrection to the baptism of Jesus, Ps 2 will be reused and coupled with Is 42:1: "This is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights". Of course, this begetting of Jesus as son of God is totally figurative. It will be different when we consider that Jesus was the son of God from his birth, and therefore of a real begetting. However, neither in Matthew nor in Luke is it a sexual begetting: the Holy Spirit is the agent of God's creative power.

When Matthew tells us that Jesus, who became a descendant of the Davidic line through the recognition of Joseph as his son, was begotten in Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit, he perceives a very close link between Davidic and divine filiation. This connection will be further strengthened when he introduces the citation from Is 7:4 ("the virgin shall bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel") which deals with both the house of David and the presence of God among his people.

In concluding our presentation on the identity of Jesus, let us note what is indicated by the very name of Jesus (God saves) that Matthew takes pains to interpret in 1:21: "for he will save his people from their sins". We have noted rather that the pre-Matthew material bore the mark of the story of the young Moses, the one who was to save his people from the slavery of Egypt. So there is a parallel between the role of Jesus and that of Moses. But it is not Moses, but Joshua, a name that is a variant of the name Jesus, who will lead the people into the promised land. Jesus will play the role of both Moses and Joshua.

## 2. The *Quomodo* or the "How" of Jesus' Identity

Matthew establishes Jesus' identity as the son of David and the son of God. He must explain how he is.

### a. The son of David

In Matthew 1:21 Joseph is called "son of David," and this is the only instance in the NT where this title is not applied to Jesus. Matthew draws attention to the fact that the source of Jesus' Davidic descent is Joseph. But, at the same time, he insists that this descent is not communicated through the normal sexual relations of a man and a woman. Also, to avoid confusion in his reader, Matthew warns him in advance in 1:18 that Mary's pregnancy is the work of the Holy Spirit. To avoid any ambiguity, he goes even further by stating that Joseph and Mary did not have sexual relations before the birth of Jesus. Therefore, Davidic descent will be transmitted not by biological paternity, but by legal paternity.

Matthew insists that this legal fatherhood is part of God's will, and he does so in two steps: first, God's angel asks Joseph to set aside his plan for divorce and take responsibility for the mother and the unborn child, and then, more importantly, God's angel asks Joseph to name the child Jesus, and thereby recognize him as his child. Jewish law is clear: fatherhood is based on the man's recognition of a child as his own. The *Mishna Baba Bathra* 8:6 establishes this principle: "If a man says, 'This is my son,' he must be believed". This results in a kind of precedence of legal paternity over biological paternity, as seen in the law of levirate where the child is attributed to the deceased husband, and not to the biological father who took the responsibility of making the mother pregnant (See Appendix I).

### b. The son of God

We learn from the voice of the angel of God that Jesus is the son of God, because he is begotten by the Holy Spirit. But Matthew is not very specific about the "how" of the Holy Spirit's action. When he writes that Jesus "was begotten," he gives us the impression that Jesus became the son of God at the moment of his conception.

Let us consider for a moment the evolution of theological language. At the beginning of Christian preaching, various verbs are used to express the Christological vision of the risen Jesus: apart from the verb "to beget", we have "to make" (Acts 2:36: "God has made him Lord and Christ"), "to exalt" (Acts 5:21: "God has exalted him by his right hand"), "to establish" (Rom 1:4: "established as Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness", "to give" (Phil 2:9: "God has given him the Name that is above every name". This language reflects the idea that Jesus became the son of God in his resurrection. But when it was realized that Jesus was the son of God from the beginning of his ministry, at his baptism, it was the language of adoption that was used, while the voice from heaven declared Jesus the beloved son (Mk 1:11), giving the impression that he was not the son of God before. This impression was corrected by establishing divine sonship from the moment of conception, as Matthew and Luke testify. But there was also a Christological movement that went even further and affirmed the pre-existence of the son of God, as witnessed by some NT hymns (Phil 2:6; Col 1:15; Jn 1:1). Conception-oriented Christology and pre-existence-oriented Christology were two ways of dismissing the adoptianist. But the two theological approaches would soon be harmonized, so that the pre-existent Word of God would be presented as taking flesh (see John) in the womb of the virgin Mary (see Matthew and Luke);

hence the virginal conception would no longer be seen as the begetting of the son of God, but as his incarnation.

In Matthew as in Luke, it is the Holy Spirit who is the principal agent of this begetting of the son of God. But Mary has a certain role to play, a major role in Luke, a minor role in Matthew. In our analysis of "how" Jesus is the son of David, we saw the two stages specified by the angel of the Lord. For Jesus the son of God, the stages are also specified by the angel of the Lord ("She will bear a son... the child she has borne is by the Holy Spirit"). But we do not have any more details about the "how" and we learn only indirectly that she is a virgin by the formula of the citation from Is 7:14. In short, the "how" of Jesus' identity as son of God goes hand in hand with that of son of David, of which he is the other facet: thus, Joseph is the one through whom Jesus is begotten as son of David, Mary is the one through whom Jesus is begotten as son of God.

Matthew's presentation is above all theological. But one cannot rule out an apologetic motive in the face of rumors in Jewish circles that Jesus was an illegitimate child. If this rumor was circulating at the time Matthew wrote his gospel, his account can be seen as a response to all the gossip about Jesus' birth. But would such a situation, where Jesus was conceived before Mary and Joseph lived together, be the product of the Christian imagination? It would be hard to understand why a situation would have been invented that would have opened the possibility of scandal, when a scene could have been created in which Joseph and Mary were simply engaged, without a child; the rest of the narrative (1:20-25) would have followed its course unchanged, as is the case in Luke's account, and there would have been no scandal. But if Matthew's account corresponds to real events, then we understand the charge of illegitimacy of some and our account becomes a response to that charge. We also understand why Matthew added these women's names to his genealogy, women with extraordinary or irregular unions with their partners. If in the eyes of those around them their lives seemed scandalous, it is nevertheless through them that the blessed lineage of the messiah continued. The same is true of Mary, except that through her pregnancy the messianic promise was fulfilled.

B. The Formula Citation of Isaiah 7:14

The clearest way for Matthew to answer the "Who" and "How" question of Jesus' identity is this citation from Isaiah. Let's take some time to analyze it.

1. The Placing of the Citation

The placing of the citation is awkward, as it is in the middle of a story, rather than at the end of the story, as it is elsewhere in his gospel. Why didn't Matthew wait for Joseph to do what the angel asked before introducing the Isaiah quote? The most likely answer is that Matthew wanted this episode to end as it does now: "And he called his name Jesus," and thus the reference to Davidic descent, one of the answers to the "who" and "how" of Jesus' identity. Otherwise, the scene would have ended with the mention of Emmanuel, a name which, despite the reference to "God among us", does not interest him as a name and will never be mentioned again.

If this insertion of a citation in the middle of a narrative is unusual, it is nonetheless Matthaean, for the same structure is found in ch. 21 in the scene that precedes Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Setting	1: 18-19: "As for (Jesus) Christ, his birth..."	21: 1: "When they approached Jerusalem..."
Command	1: 20-21: "...do not be afraid to take Mary ..."	21: 2-3: "Meet me in the village across the street..."
Formula citation	1: 22-23: "All this took place to fulfill ..."	21: 4-5: "All this took place to fulfill..."
Execution of the command	1: 24-25: "Joseph ...did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him"	21: 6-7: "So the disciples went and did as they were commanded..."

2. Isaiah 7:14 in the Hebrew and Greek Bibles

Let's compare Matthew's text with the Greek version of the Septuagint and the Hebrew Massoretic text.

Matthew	Septuagint (LXX)	Hebrew (MT)
Behold the virgin ( <i>parthenos</i> ) will be with child ( <i>en gastri hexei</i> ) and will give birth to a son, and they will call his name Emmanuel	Behold the virgin ( <i>parthenos</i> ) will conceive ( <i>en gastri lēpsetai</i> ), and will give birth to a son, and you (sing.) will call his name Emmanuel	Behold the young girl ( <i>ʿalmā</i> ) is (will be) with child and will give birth to a son, and she will call his name Emmanuel

The variation between "young girl" (MT) and "virgin" (LXX) has given rise to some of the most heated debates in the history of exegesis, with conservatives seeing the translation "young girl" rather than "virgin" as a denial of

Mary's virginal conception. The problem comes from a vision of the prophet who would have foreseen the virginal conception of Jesus 700 years in advance. Today, no serious biblical scholar supports the prophet's vision of future events, and it is widely accepted that what the NT claims as "fulfillment" of the OT goes much further than the OT author anticipated. For the latter is primarily concerned with God's challenges in his time, and if he speaks of the future, it is in very generic terms in the event that one accepts that challenge. And if he speaks of messianic salvation, there is no indication that he has foreseen a single detail of Jesus' life.

Here are some remarks on the various versions of Isaiah 7:14.

The Hebrew form of Isaiah 7: 14.

- Isaiah's oracle is addressed to the wicked king Akhaz (c. 735 to 715 BC) during the Syrian-Ephraimite war of -734 to give a sign to the skeptical monarch of a contemporary event
- The child who will be born is not the Messiah, a notion that will develop later, but a Davidic prince who will deliver Judah from its enemies. An ancient Jewish tradition identifies him with the son of Ahaz, Hezekiah, a very religious king
- The word *'almâ* refers to a young girl who has reached puberty and is therefore available for marriage. There is in itself no connotation of virginity, except by the very fact that she is not married and, according to the customs of the time, she should normally be a virgin.
- The presence of the definite article "the" girl makes it likely that Isaiah means someone whose identity the prophet or king Ahaz knew, perhaps someone he had just married and belonged to his harem
- The participial construction of the Hebrew does not allow us to determine whether the girl is pregnant or will become pregnant. However, the birth is certainly a future reality

In short, the Hebrew text does not refer to a virginal conception. The sign given by the prophet points to the imminent birth of a naturally conceived child of the Davidic lineage who will illustrate God's providential care for his people.

The Greek form of Isaiah 7. 14.

In Alexandria, in the 2nd half of the 2nd century BC, when this Greek translation called Septuagint was being completed, the translator opted for *parthenos* to translate the Hebrew *'almâ*, whereas this Greek word was usually used to translate the Hebrew *betûlâ*, which means: virgin. Other Greek translations (Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion) after the Septuagint opted instead for *neanis* (young woman) to translate the Hebrew *'almâ*. Even so, the Septuagint's choice of *parthenos* does not mean that the translator intended to speak of the virginal conception of the messiah, and this conception is clearly placed in the future. All he intended to say is that a woman, who is a virgin at the moment, will conceive a child in a natural way the day she is united to a man. At most he means that it will be a firstborn.

Both the Hebrew and the Greek versions say nothing about the manner of conception, as Matthew does. Thus, Matthew's interpretation goes further than the Isaianic text, and at the same time it is not the Isaianic text that would have planted the idea of a virginal conception by the Holy Spirit in Matthew's mind; at most, the Isaianic text has colored his way of expressing the virginal conception.

3. The Matthean Use of Isaiah 7:14

Matthew saw this passage from Isaiah as supporting the "who" and "how" of Jesus' identity as son of David and son of God. For in Isaiah 7:13, the verse before our citation, the prophet addresses the king as being from the house of David. Then, in v. 14, he speaks of a pregnant virgin about to give birth. So Matthew sees all this as a plan meticulously prepared by God, which he expresses with the phrase, "his birth was in this way," "this way" being first the genealogy which is a precise mathematics of the three sets of fourteen generations to produce a "son of David," and then the voice of the prophet Isaiah who not only announces a "son of David" but also an Emmanuel, a "God with us." For Matthew to accuse Jesus of illegitimacy was downright slanderous. So let's look at how Matthew used Is 7:14.

- Matthew uses *hexei in gastri* (lit.: will have in the womb), rather than the *lēpsetai en gastri* (lit.: will receive in the womb) of the Septuagint (if we take the Codex Vaticanus version of the Septuagint, as the Codex Alexandrinus and Sinaiticus also have *hexei*, which could be an attempt to harmonize the copyist with Matthew's text). Why would Matthew replace *lēpsetai* (receive) with *hexei* (will have)? Since we have here an account of a birth announcement by an angel of the Lord, Matthew would have followed the standard structure of this literary genre in the Septuagint where it does say: to have in the womb (*en gastrei echein*), not: to receive in the womb (see Gen 16:11; 17:17; Jdg 13:3,7).
- Matthew writes "they will call him" rather than "you will call him" of the Septuagint. Why is this? First of all, the Hebrew text has the verb *qārā't*, which normally represents the 2nd person singular, and rightly the Septuagint translated: you shall call him. But the majority of biblical scholars agree that we would have here the ancient Hebrew form of the 3rd person feminine, and that we should translate: she will call. But there is

also the possibility that Matthew had in his hands a version of the Hebrew text similar to a version of the Qumran text of Isaiah (1QIsa) where the root *qr'* could be translated: his name will be called, a translation equivalent to that of Matthew: they will call him. However, the simplest explanation is that Matthew deliberately changed the Septuagint text of Isaiah to fit his narrative: quoting the prophet Isaiah, he could not put in his mouth "you (Joseph) will call him by the name of Emmanuel". By having "they will call him" Matthew changes the subject to a much wider audience, the "they" being able to refer to the people of whom he spoke in v. 21, the people whose sins Jesus will save, a people which seems to include the Gentiles; therefore, if it is this great universal people who will call him "Emmanuel", then Jesus may truly be the son of Abraham, the one in whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

- "Emmanuel (which means "God with us")". Does the explanation of the meaning of the name Emmanuel come from the pre-Matthean material or from Matthew himself. It is likely that Matthew, in adding the citation from Isaiah, also added the explanation of the meaning of Emmanuel, a meaning that must have eluded non-Jewish Christians. This meaning is suggested to him by Isaiah 8:10, a passage that follows 8:8 where the mention of Emmanuel comes up for the second time: "whatever your words are, they will not be fulfilled; for the Lord is with us". It is this interpretation that interests him more than the name Emmanuel itself: it allows him to support Jesus' divine filiation in addition to his Davidic filiation, and it allows him to make an inclusion with the last words of his gospel: "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age". And this inclusion reflects Matthew's vision of the Messiah, which he sees as a presence that is felt eschatologically, i.e., the final and once and for all manifestation of God's presence.

In short, Matthew has not only added this citation from Isaiah to the pre-Matthean material, but he has adapted it to his context and purpose. On the other hand, is he original in perceiving the Christian applicability of this passage, or is he simply reiterating a passage that was already popular in Christian circles? We lack the evidence to give an answer.

### C. Matthew's Use of Pre-Matthean Material

We need to return to the [main pre-Matthean material](#) we identified earlier, specifically to section A on the first appearance of the angel, which is the basis of our section 1:18-25. But this section 1:18-25 contains much more information than the pre-Matthean material: first there are additions from Matthew, but there is also other pre-Matthean material. This is what we now need to explain. We have placed in parallel first (on the left) the main pre-Matthean material identified earlier, and then on the right the actual text of Matthew. The main pre-Matthean text has been underlined. In bold type we have identified what comes from Matthew's pen to fit the narrative to his theology, such as the fact that Joseph does what the angel commands, or the insistence that Mary did not have sexual relations until Jesus' birth to protect the mother's virginity as foretold by Isaiah. In italics is the other pre-Matthean material, which is not from Matthew's pen, but which Matthew used to complete his account, e.g. Joseph as the son of David, Mary who is said to be already pregnant by the Holy Spirit, the child who receives his name before his birth. Where did Matthew get this information? Our hypothesis is that this material comes from birth announcement narratives. This is what we need to examine. In what follows, Matthew's underlined text reflects what comes from the main pre-Matthean tradition, the bolded text comes from Matthew's editing work, and the italicized text would come from another pre-Matthean tradition around the annunciation stories.

#### Main Pre-Matthean Material

Now when Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, behold an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Take Mary your wife into your home, for she will give birth to a son who will save his people from their sins." So Joseph got up from sleep and took his wife home, and she gave birth to a son.

#### Mt 1: 20-25 (without the formula citation)

20 **Now as he was considering this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home, for the child begotten in her is through the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son; and you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."** 24 **Joseph got up from sleep and did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him. He took his wife home, 25 but he had no sexual relations with her before she gave birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.**

### 1. The Annunciation of Birth

We have already pointed out that the first appearance of an angel in a dream (see A in the [table of appearances](#)) is distinguished from the other two (B and C) by the presence of two requests from the angel accompanied by a reason for each of them. It is also distinguished by a different context prefaced by two introductory verses. This is a sign that the account of an angel's appearance in a dream has been merged with that of an angelic birth announcement. Here is the structure of such a birth announcement story which includes five stages.

#### Steps in Annunciation of Birth Narrative

- 1 The appearance of an angel of the Lord (or appearance of the Lord)
- 2 Fear or prostration of the visionary confronted by this supernatural presence
- 3 The divine message
  - a. The visionary is addressed by name
  - b. A qualifying phrase describing the visionary
  - c. The visionary is urged not to be afraid
  - d. A woman is with child or is about to be with child
  - e. She will give birth to the (male) child
  - f. The name by which the child is to be called
  - g. An etymology interpreting the name
  - h. The future accomplishments of the child
- 4 An objection by the visionary as to how this can be or a request for a sign
- 5 The giving of a sign to reassure the visionary

Using the 5-step structure, let's parallel three scenes from the OT, as well as the birth announcements in Luke and Matthew. The brackets indicate verses where the substance of the stage is found, but in an unusual form.

	<b>References for the 5 steps</b>					
	<b>Ishmael [Genesis]</b>	<b>Isaac [Genesis]</b>	<b>Samson [Judges]</b>	<b>John Baptist [Luke]</b>	<b>Jesus [Luke]</b>	<b>Jesus [Matthew]</b>
<b>1</b>	16: 7	17: 1; 18: 1	13: 3	1: 11	1: 26	1: 20
<b>2</b>	16: 13	17: 3; 18: 2	13: 22	1: 12	1: 29	
<b>3a</b>	16: 8	(17: 15)		1: 13	1: 30	1: 20
<b>3b</b>	16: 8	(17: 15)			1: 28	1: 20
<b>3c</b>			(13: 23)	1: 13	1: 30	1: 20
<b>3d</b>	16: 11		13: 3		1: 31	(1: 20)
<b>3e</b>	16: 11	17: 19; 18: 10	13: 4	1: 13	1: 31	1: 21
<b>3f</b>	16: 11	17: 19		1: 13	1: 31	1: 21
<b>3g</b>	16: 11	17: 17; 18: 13-15				1: 21
<b>3h</b>	16: 12	17: 16.19	13: 5	1: 15-17	1: 32.33.35	1: 21
<b>4</b>		17: 17; 18: 12	13: 8.17	1: 18	1: 34	
<b>5</b>		(17: 20-21)	13: 9.18-21	1: 20	1: 36-37	

As can be seen, Matthew's account does not fit as easily into the standard framework as Luke's. The absence of steps 2, 4, and 5 can be explained by the fact that Matthew incorporated it into an account of an angel's appearance in a dream, which had the effect of dislocating it somewhat. For example, step 2 refers to the motif of the visionary's fear, but the second and third dream angel appearances do not contain it, and it is not clear why Matthew would have added such a motif to the first appearance, since it was not part of the story.

Let us compare the message of some of these birth announcement narratives with Matthew (italicized are words that do not belong to the main pre-Matthean text, but rather to a pre-Matthean birth announcement narrative).

<b>Gn 16, 8.11</b>	<b>Gn 17, 19</b>	<b>Lk 1, 13</b>	<b>Lk 1, 28.30-31</b>	<b>Mt 1, 20-21</b>
"Hagar, maid of Sarah,...you re with child and will give birth to a son; and you will call his name Ishmael [i.e., God hears], for the Lord has been attentivve to your humiliation."	(to Abraham): "Sarah, your wife, will give birth to a son for you; and you will call his name Isaac [i.e., he laughs - see 17: 17 and 18: 13-15 where Abraham and Sarah laugh]".	(to Zechariah): "Zechariah, do not be afraid, ...your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will call his name John."	"Hail, O favored one... do not be afraid, Mary, ...you will conceive in your womb and will give birth to a son; and you will call his name Jesus."	(to Joseph): " <i>Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home, for the child begotten in her is through the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you will call his name Jesus, for he</i>

will save his people  
from their sins."

If we take the standard structure of the birth announcements, we note that Matthew's phrase: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid", meets the stages 3a to 3c, that the phrase: "for the child begotten in her... She will give birth to a son, and you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins", meets the stages 3d to 3g. As for the Lucan account of the announcement to Mary, it is noted that it meets stages 3a to 3f. The great difference between Matthew and Luke is that Matthew's account is addressed to a man, Luke's to a woman, just as Gen 16:8 was addressed to a woman, Hagar, and Gen 17:19 is addressed to a man, Abraham. Apart from this point, there are many similarities between Matthew and Luke: the mention of the "son of David" (a man of the house of David in Luke), the theme of salvation, the attribute "upright person" (for Joseph in Matthew, for Elizabeth and Zechariah in Luke). Because of all these similarities and the fact that Matthew and Luke did not know each other and are independent of each other, it must be concluded that they had in their possession a pre-evangelical account of the birth announcement which they each adapted in their own way.

## 2. Begotten of a Virgin through the Holy Spirit

Having seen the similarities of the birth announcement narratives with those of the OT, it is now necessary to consider what is unique about those of the NT: Matthew and Luke agree that the announcement occurred after Joseph and Mary had been engaged, but before their cohabitation, and the two evangelists also agree that Mary will conceive a son through the action of the Holy Spirit.

Let us recall that at the beginning of Christian preaching, the begetting of the son of God was first associated with the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 13:33), then with his baptism (Mt 3:17), and much later, but before the publication of the gospels of Luke and Matthew, with the conception of Jesus. This last vision would have been articulated around the tradition of the birth announcement according to a format well known throughout the Bible for salvific figures, and according to the perception that the figure of the son of God went hand in hand with that of the son of David, as we see with Ps 2:7 on the royal enthronement ("You are my son; today I have begotten you"); thus, with natural procreation was born the one who was at the same time son of David and son of God. On the other hand, if the Holy Spirit was associated with the begetting of the son of God in the resurrection, it was normal that he was also associated with his conception. The prophet Isaiah had announced the birth of this marvelous child who was both from the house of David and the sign of God's presence among us, Emmanuel (Isa 7:13-14), who would sit on David's throne, and would be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isa 9:6-7), and on whom "the Spirit of the Lord will rest: the spirit of wisdom and discernment, the spirit of counsel and valour, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord" (Isa 11:2).

It is therefore easy to explain why the Holy Spirit was associated with the conception of Jesus, but how can we explain the begetting of the Messiah from a virgin? In the birth announcement stories in the Bible, it is to overcome a human obstacle that God intervenes with his Holy Spirit. In the OT, for example, it is mainly the infertility of the mother that is the obstacle. But the Christian authors could not find any example of the obstacle of being a virgin and not having sexual relations with a husband. This idea of a virgin birth does not come from Matthew or Luke, but from a pre-Gospel tradition.

## 3. Summary

We can now understand the composite aspect of Mt 1:18-25. First, there is a kerygmatic proclamation of Jesus as the son of God, begotten of the Holy Spirit, which emerged after a very long Christian reflection where what was first applied to the resurrection of Jesus was now applied to the moment of his conception. Then there was a tradition of angelic annunciation of the birth of a Davidic Messiah created on the model of the OT birth announcements. This annunciation tradition and this kerygmatic proclamation have been amalgamated, thanks especially to the fact that the notion of "son of God" and that of "son of David" have long been associated in Christian preaching. It should be noted that the setting in which the tradition of the birth announcement appeared was that in which Joseph and Mary were engaged, and Mary was still a virgin. This is the pre-Gospel tradition that Matthew and Luke receive.

It is this pre-evangelical tradition that each evangelist will elaborate in his own way. Luke rewrites the annunciation story to create a parallel announcement of the birth of John the Baptist, one addressed to Mary, the other to Zechariah. Matthew, on the other hand, integrates into his annunciation narrative a popular tradition in which the story of Joseph and the infant Jesus is modeled on the adventures of the patriarch Joseph and the infant Moses, adventures structured by a series of angelic appearances in dreams. Thus Matthew expanded the first angelic appearance to include the birth announcement story.

This composite narrative fit perfectly with Matthew's overall theological intent. For example, the strains of Davidic and divine descent that had emerged, he used to establish a genealogy, one that starts from Abraham and proceeds through David to Joseph, and which he concludes in such a way that Jesus can be seen as a descendant of David without being begotten by Joseph. How is this possible? This is what the birth announcement narrative will explain. The integration of the tradition that presents Joseph and Jesus on the model of the patriarch Joseph and the young Moses makes it possible to associate Jesus with a major episode in the history of Israel, the slavery in

Egypt and the Exodus. Thus, the childhood of the one who bore the same name as Joshua and was called to save his people from their sins, would evoke the historical deliverance of Israel from Egypt.

#### V. The Magi Come to Pay Homage to the King of the Jew

##### Translation of Mt 2: 1-12

1 Now, after the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the East came to Jerusalem 2 asking, "Where is the newborn King of the Jews? For we have seen his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was startled, and so was all Jerusalem with him. 4 Assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem of Judea", they told him; "for thus it is written by the prophet:

6 'And you, O Bethlehem (in the) land of Judah,  
Are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
For from you will come forth a ruler  
Who will shepherd my people Israel."

7 Then Herod summoned the magi secretly and ascertained from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 And he sent them off to Bethlehem with the instruction: "Go, search diligently for the child. As soon as you find him, bring me word that I too may come and pay him homage." 9 Obeying the king, they set out; and behold, the star which they had seen at its rising went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were greatly overjoyed. 11 And entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they bowed down and paid him homage. Then they opened their treasure-boxes and brought out gifts for him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 But, since they had been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went away to their own country by another route.

##### Notes

v. 1

- "Now, after the birth of Jesus... behold". In Greek, we have here an absolute genitive, i.e. a genitive participle ("Jesus having been begotten") accompanied by the postpositive particle *de* ("Now") and followed by "behold", a structure that brings a development to what precedes.
- "Bethlehem". Located five miles south of Jerusalem, this city is traditionally the place where David received the royal anointing from the prophet Samuel (1 Sam 16:1-13; 17:12,15; 20:6,28). Matthew does not specify the birthplace either, except that it is the house of Mary (and Joseph), while Luke, on the other hand, tells us that Mary and Joseph were visiting Bethlehem without a place to stay and that the child was placed in a manger, which is the origin of the Christian tradition of a birthplace in a cave. The present basilica of Bethlehem, built by Constantine (325) and rebuilt by Justinian (550), is situated on a series of caves.
- "of Judea". Why this specification? Various explanations have been proposed. First of all, in the Old Testament the expression "Bethlehem of Judah" (Jdg 17:7,9; 19:1-2) is used to distinguish the city from "Bethlehem of Zebulun" (Josh 19:15). Then it has been suggested that this is Matthew's intention to prepare us for the citation in v. 6 where it speaks of "Bethlehem, the land of Judah". But all this ignores the fact that Matthew writes Judea, not Judah. The key to understanding Matthew is probably in v. 2 where he speaks of the king of the Jews, and so he would insist that the king of the Jews was born in Jewish territory, Judea.
- "Herod the king". According to the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (Antiquities vi 4: #167 and ix 3: #213), Herod the Great died after an eclipse of the moon and before the Passover, which brings us to the year 750 of the foundation of Rome or the year 4 BC, more precisely in March/April of the year -4 (the eclipse took place during the night of March 12 to 13, one month before the Passover) According to Matthew (2:16), Jesus was born two years earlier (in the year 6 BC), which is consistent with Luke 3:23, which tells us that Jesus was about 30 years old in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, which in the latter case puts us between October 27 and October 28 of the Christian era. It may seem strange that Jesus was born 6 years before the Christian era, but this is all due to an error by Dionysius Exiguus (Denis the Short) in 533 who, wanting to establish the year 0 of the new calendar using the date of Herod's death, made a mistake of six years in his calculations.
- "magi". What do we know about them? Herodotus (Histories I) describes them as a priestly caste among the Medes (6th century BC) who had the special power to interpret dreams. In the Persian period (around 550 BC), they are identified with the Zoroastrian priests. In the Greek Daniel (2nd century BC), magicians are everywhere in Babylon, along with enchanters, astronomers, those who interpret dreams or receive messages in visions. Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus, distinguishes between scientific magicians and those who are charlatans and magicians. Tacitus (Annals II 27-33) denounces in Rome these astrologers, magicians and all those who interpret dreams (they would have been banished by the emperor around the year 19 of our era, according to Suetonius). For its part, the Acts of the Apostles names some of them: Simon the magician in Samaria (Acts 8:9-24), Elymas or Bar-Jesus in Cyprus (Acts 13:6-11). Josephus (op. cit., vii 2: #142) tells us of Atomos, a Cypriot who

was active in Caesarea Maritime around the year 50. In short, the term "magi" refers to all those engaged in the occult arts, and this covers astronomers, fortune-tellers, and magicians alike.

Various biblical scholars, like Christians in the early centuries of the Christian era (Didache II 2; Ignatius of Antioch: Ephesians xix 3; Justin: Dialogue lxxviii 9), have seen in Matthew's account an apology against false magicians and astrology: just as the sorcerers of Egypt were defeated by Moses, so the power of the astrologers is broken by the coming of Christ; the homage of the magicians is a gesture of submission from defeated people. However, in the text of Matthew there is no indication of this. On the contrary, the magi represent the best of the pagan world that goes to Jesus based on the revelation of nature, just as Balaam in the Old Testament received a revelation from God even though he was not an Israelite.

- "from the East (*apo anatolōn*)". This is the same expression found in the account of Balaam (LXX: Num 23:7). This latter account is part of the context of Matthew, as we shall see in the comment, but without the East designating a more precise place. Nevertheless, biblical scholars have tried to specify this place and can be grouped as follows.

a. Parthia or Persia

The "magus" is traditionally associated with the Medes and Persia. Also, early Christian art depicts them dressed in belted tunics with long sleeves, long pants and wearing the Phrygian cap. The fathers of the Church associated the Magi all the more easily with Persia and its Zoroastrian religion, since, according to their belief, the prophet Zoroaster had predicted the coming of the Messiah. Unfortunately, we have no evidence that Christians in Matthew's day shared this perception.

b. Babylon

The association with Babylon comes from the fact that the Babylonians or Chaldeans had developed a great interest in astronomy and astrology. And since the Jews were exiled there in the 6th century BC and many settled there permanently afterwards, they were able to communicate their messianic expectations to them. And as we noted earlier in connection with the Greek Daniel, it is in the description of the Babylonian court that the word "magus" occurs most often.

c. Arabia or the Syrian desert

This place is suggested by the gifts offered. For, according to Is 66:6 and Ps 72:15, gold and incense are associated with the desert caravans arriving from Midian (northwest Arabia) and Sheba (southwest Arabia). In the Old Testament, the "people of the east" often refers to the desert Arabs, and they had a reputation for wisdom (1 Kings 5:10; Prov 30:1; 31:1). Moreover, since the time of Solomon, Israel's trade relations with southern Arabia were very active. And early Christian generations associated frankincense and myrrh with districts around Arabia.

- "came to Jerusalem" (*Hierosolyma*). Here we have the Hellenized form of the name of the city, as is the case nine times in the gospels. Only Mt 23:27 presents the Semitic form of the name: *Hierousalēm*.

v. 2

- the newborn King of the Jews (lit.: the has been born, king of the Jews)". The order of the article (the), followed by the participle (having been born) and followed by the noun (king) is unusual in Matthew, for usually the sentence begins with the noun followed by the participle which acts as an attribute: the king, having been born. By emphasizing "king of the Jews", the title Herod bore, Matthew presents him as a sort of rival.
- "his star". In ancient times it was widely believed that a cosmic phenomenon accompanied the birth or death of important people, or the arrival of significant events. Examples:
  - i. A star is said to have guided Aeneas to the site where Rome was to be founded (Virgil, The Aeneid II 694)
  - ii. A star and a comet are said to have stood over Jerusalem for a year before the fall of the city in the year 70 (Josephus, The Jewish War, vi v3 #289)
  - iii. Persian magicians would have predicted the birth of Alexander the Great by seeing the burning of the great temple of Diana at Ephesus in the early hours of the morning, because the event was the sign of a great peril for all of Asia (Cicero, Histories I xxiii 47)
  - iv. the births of Mithridate and Alexander Severus would have been accompanied by the appearance of a new star in the sky
  - v. Nero was so alarmed by the presence of a comet for several days, an omen of the death of an important person, that he had several notables killed

Thus, that a star marks the birth of the Messiah or that Herod seeks to kill the child was quite plausible to Matthew's audience. Even if one doubts the historicity of Matthew's account, it is still worth asking the question: is it possible to find an astronomical phenomenon at the time of Jesus' birth? For it is not impossible that

Christians would have remembered an unusual phenomenon and associated it with the birth of Jesus. Three candidates have been proposed, and the third would be the most important.

1. A supernova or "new star".

A supernova comes from the implosion of a star at the end of its life, which is accompanied by a gigantic explosion making its luminosity extremely great, so that it can be visible even during the day. But there is no record of a supernova just before the birth of Jesus.

2. A comet

A comet describes an elliptical movement around the sun and becomes visible only when it approaches the sun and the earth, especially if it develops this famous luminous tail of gas and dust. The most famous is Halley's comet which appears every 77 years and whose first testimony dates from the year 240 BC in Europe, China and Japan. According to astronomical calculations, Halley's comet would have appeared in the year 12 BC, that is to say about 6 years before the birth of Jesus. All this being said, the idea of a comet runs up against a great difficulty: Matthew does not speak of a comet, but of a star. Moreover, the appearance of a comet was usually associated with the announcement of a catastrophe, not with the birth of a salvific figure. Finally, the date of -12 is much too early to associate it with the announcement of the birth of Jesus. But it is possible that the arrival of foreign ambassadors in 10 BC to greet King Herod on the occasion of the completion of the city of Caesarea maritima was combined with the appearance of Comet Halley in 12 BC in the story of the star and the wise men from the east.

3. A planetary conjunction

Jupiter and Saturn are two planets that pass each other every 20 years. It even happens that the planet Mars passes in front of them at the same time or shortly after. Kepler witnessed this in 1604 and calculated that the phenomenon occurs every 805 years, and therefore must have occurred in the year -7 or -6. The phenomenon would have been mentioned in cuneiform tablets: the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn would have occurred in the year -7, and that of Mars early the following year in the constellation of Pisces of the zodiac. Now, this constellation was associated with the last days and the Hebrews, while Jupiter was associated with the rulers of the world and Saturn was identified with the star of the Amorites of the region of Syria-Palestine. Thus, it has been claimed that this conjunction led Parthian astrologers to predict the arrival of a world ruler in Palestine among the Hebrews in the last days. But all this is highly speculative.

- "at its rising". In v. 1 the Greek expression was *apo anatonōn* (lit.: from rising), here it is: *en tē anatonē* (lit.: in rising). The associated verb is: *anattellein* (to rise). Matthew may want to make a pun between the rising of the star and the birth of a king, since the underlying Aramaic word *mwld* can refer to the birth of both a star and a person.
- "and have come". So far there is no indication that the Magi set out following the star that would have accompanied them: they only saw a star at its rising. It is only in v. 9 that this will be specified.
- "pay him homage". The Greek verb *proskynein* appears 13 times in Matthew, including three times in our account. It literally means "to prostrate oneself" and is used to describe the homage paid to a dignitary or an authority, as well as the worship and adoration of the deity. For Matthew's audience, the image of the Magi coming from the East to pay homage to a king by bringing royal gifts must not have had the naive romanticism that it may have today, for it could refer to a number of events.
  - i. In the year 10/9 BC, ambassadors from different countries came to Palestine with gifts for the inauguration by King Herod of the new city of Caesarea Maritima
  - ii. In the year 44 CE, Queen Helen of Adiabene, who had converted to Judaism, came to Jerusalem with a multitude of gifts for the people affected by the famine that was devastating the country
  - iii. In the year 66, Tiridates, king of Armenia, came to Italy with the sons of three rulers of the neighboring Parthian regions to "pay homage" to Nero, and then in the end, did not return to his country by the same route, but by taking the sea (Dion Cassius, [Roman History](#) lxxiii 1-7; Suetonius, [Nero](#) 13). It is worth noting that Pliny ([Natural History](#) XXX vi 16-17) refers to Tiridates and his companions as magi.

v. 3

- "he was startled". The Greek verb *tarassein* (to stir, to agitate, to disturb, to upset) appears only once more in Matthew, at the time of the epiphany of Jesus in the account of the walk on the water, which leads to the confession that Jesus is the son of God by the disciples.
- "all Jerusalem with him". Josephus ([Antiquities](#) II ix 2-3 #206.215) describes the terror of the king (Pharaoh) and the Egyptians upon learning of the birth of a child (Moses) among the Israelites, a child who was to be a threat to the king's authority.

v. 4

- "Assembling". The verb *synagein* is frequent in the passion narrative to describe the fact that the enemies of Jesus gather against him, an echo of Ps 2:2 where the assembly of the rulers gathers against the king-Messiah.
- "all the chief priests and scribes". The Sanhedrin was made up of priests, scribes and elders, and so it seems to suggest a session of this body. Why the plural in the expression "high priests" when there could be only one high priest in office? This is because the term included, in addition to the current incumbent, the previous incumbent if he was still alive, and all the members of the privileged families from which the high priests were chosen.
- "of the people". In the passion narrative (27:1), Matthew speaks of "the elders of the people". Why does he write "scribes of the people" here instead? It is possible that he is depending here on a tradition based on the birth of Moses where they spoke of "priestly scribes" who advised Pharaoh.
- "the Messiah". Herod speaks of the Messiah, while the magi spoke of "king of the Jews". For Matthew, the terms are interchangeable, as we see in the passion narrative, when the chief priests question him about his messiahship, but he will be crucified under the title of "king of the Jews".

v. 5

- "the prophet". The following is a combination of Micah 5:1 and 2 Samuel 5:2.

v. 6

- (in the) land of Judah. The Greek expression is awkward, because it seems to put Bethlehem and "the land of Judah" in apposition. Some manuscripts (Bezae, old Latin) have added: "of" (Bethlehem "of" the land of Judah).

v. 7

- "Then (*tote*)". Here's a word Matthew loves and prefers to Mark's conjunctive phrase "and" (*kai*).
- "ascertained ...the exact". The Greek verb *akriboun* is a technical term in astronomical observation. Matthew prepares us for what follows, the slaughter of children under two years of age.
- "the star had appeared". This refers to the year, month and day the star appeared on the horizon.

v. 8

- "the child (*paidion*)". Matthew uses *paidion* nine times to refer to Jesus, while he will use *pais* and *teknon* to refer to the massacre of the children of Bethlehem and Rachel (on the distinction of all these terms, see the Glossary).
- "bring me word (*apangellein*)". This Greek verb means: to bring news or to announce. Is it simply a matter of sending a word or of bringing the news oneself? According to 2:12, it is the latter.

v. 9

- "Obeying (lit.: having heard).
- "the place where (*hou*)". While the motif of a star leading people to their destination is known from ancient times, driving over a house is unusual.

v. 10

- "were greatly overjoyed". Matthew emphasizes the intensity of joy.

v. 11

- "house". It must be assumed that Matthew, unlike Luke who presents them as visitors, states that Mary and Joseph were residents of Bethlehem. Several biblical scholars have tried unsuccessfully to reconcile Matthew and Luke.
- "treasure-boxes" (*thēsauros*). Unlike Mt 6:21, the word refers not so much to the hoarded treasure itself, but to the chest that contained it.

- "gold". Some biblical scholars have suggested that it should be translated "incense" instead, since the Hebrew word *zāhāb*, reflects the proto-Semitic *ḏhb* (gold) which in southern Arabia refers to incense, and so it is possible that *zāhāb* could also mean: incense. To this we must reply that in Matthew's time the Hebrew word clearly referred to gold.

v. 12

- "warned in a dream (*chrēmatischein*)". Unlike other passages in Matthew (1:20; 2:13,19), it is not an angel who intervenes, and thus leads us to believe that this account was not part of a pre-Matthean set of accounts of angelic appearances in dreams.

### Comment

#### A. Matthew's Message: the Where and the Whence - Reactions to a Christological Revelation

What is remarkable about both Matthew and Luke is that the account of Jesus' birth is an entity in itself, somehow independent of what precedes it. And even the town of Bethlehem is not mentioned until chapter two.

##### 1. The Place of 2:1-12 in the Plan of Chapter Two

Chapter two contains two acts, each with a few scenes that express his theological vision of the story.

#### **Act I (2: 1-12): the Magi from the East receive the revelation of God**

- |                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| Scene 1 (2, 1-6)  | The Magi who come from the East represent the Gentiles who receive God's revelation through nature (star) and need to be further enlightened by the Jewish Scriptures. Once in Jerusalem, they are redirected to Bethlehem. The scene concludes with a citation from Micah 5:1 and 2 Samuel 5:2, which mention Bethlehem |
| Scene 2 (2: 7-12) | The Magi go to Bethlehem to pay homage to the child and offer their gifts, then return by another route. There is the implicit citation from Ps 72:10-11 and Isa 60:6 about the strangers bringing gifts of gold and incense to honor the king, the royal son of God.  |

#### **Act II (2: 13-23): Herod seeks to kill the newborn king**

- |                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| Scene 3 (2: 13-15) | Despite his knowledge of Scripture provided by the Jewish religious authorities, Herod wants to kill the newborn king. So Joseph flees to Egypt with the child and his mother. The scene concludes with a citation from Hosea 11:1, which mentions Egypt |
| Scene 4 (2: 16-18) | Herod orders the massacre of children in Bethlehem. The scene concludes with a citation from Jeremiah 31:15, which mentions Ramah (thought to be near Bethlehem).  |
| Scene 5 (2: 19-23) | Joseph returns with the child and his mother not to Bethlehem, but to Nazareth of Galilee. The scene ends with a citation (Isaiah 4:3 and Judges 16:17?) to mention what comes from Nazareth.  |

##### 2. The Relation of the Plan to Matthew's Message

Chapter 1 answered two questions: who is Jesus and how is he who he is? The answer to the first question was: He is the Messianic son of David and "God among us" as the son of God. The answer to the second question was: He was born of Mary by the Holy Spirit, and he is the son of David by receiving his from Joseph who was of Davidic lineage. Chapter 2 will answer the question: where is he from?

The answer to these questions is required by the Jewish opposition who not only deny his divine origin, but also that he could be the Messiah, given his origin in a humble family of Nazareth. So Matthew intends to show that Jesus comes from Bethlehem, the village of David. Moreover, it is no accident that he was known as coming from Nazareth, for the same God who announced that the Messiah would be from Bethlehem, he also spoke through the prophets of a Nazorean, emphasizing his status as a messianic *nēšer* (descendant), and *nāzir* (the "holy one") of God. And in this move from Bethlehem to Nazareth, Matthew alludes to the exiles of the tribes in the words of Jeremiah to describe the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem, and in sending him to Egypt to return, Jesus experiences both the exodus and the exile of the people of Israel.

Although Matthew seeks to refute the arguments of the Jews of his day, his primary focus is on his own community of Jews and Gentiles. In ch. 1, the reference to Gentiles came in the genealogy through the mention of foreign women and through the mention of both the sons of Abraham with the sons of David, even though the

emphasis was really on Davidic descent, in ch. 2 Matthew focuses on Jesus as the son of Abraham with these Gentiles coming from the East.

By the time Matthew wrote his gospel in the last third of the first century, it was the Gentiles who were flocking to join the Christian community, even though the preaching was first directed to the Jews. The majority of the Jews rejected Jesus as the messiah. All this contributed to the evolution of the Christological moment, i.e. the moment when the revelation of Jesus as Messiah and son of God was situated with the power of the Holy Spirit. In the aftermath of Easter, this moment was linked with the resurrection of Jesus, followed by the proclamation of his lordship first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles, a proclamation that elicited two reactions: acceptance and reverence, or rejection and persecution. But over time this Christological moment shifted to the beginning of Jesus' ministry, at his baptism, with the voice from heaven about Jesus' identity, and the preaching that followed also provoked two opposite reactions, acceptance or rejection, a rejection that would culminate in the trial and execution of Jesus. Finally, this Christological moment has moved again to the beginning of Jesus' life with the revelation of the angel at the moment of his conception, and all of Matthew 2 is the account of the proclamation of this revelation and the double reaction of the listeners.

In ch. 2, the role of proclaiming Jesus as the messiah is given to the wise men from the East, wise and learned among the Gentiles. Since they are Gentiles, the revelation came through nature, the star of the sky, the Star of David. Yet, for a complete revelation about Jesus, they also need the Scripture that was entrusted to the Jews. And this creates a real paradox: on the one hand, the Jews, who possess the scripture and are able to understand the prophets, reject what is proclaimed, as shown by the attitude of Herod, the chief priests, the scribes and all of Jerusalem, while the wise men among the Gentiles pay homage to the king of the Jews. This portrait of Matthew echoes first of all what was happening in his time with the conversion of the Gentiles and the persecution of the Christians in the synagogues and the sanhedrins by the Jews. But it also echoes the passion narrative when the secular authorities, the chief priests and the elders of the people will bring Jesus to justice and condemn him under the title of "king of the Jews". But while it is through his resurrection that Jesus will triumph over death, in the infancy narrative it is through his flight to another country and his return that Jesus will escape his opponents. In both cases, it is the realization of Ps 2:2 where God confounds the kings and rulers who have gathered against his messiah.

Thus, ch. 2 completes ch. 1 in the sequence of revelation, proclamation and double reaction, making the infancy narrative a gospel in miniature.

## B. Matthew's Use of Scripture in the Service of His Message

### 1. The Formula Citation of Micah 5:1 and II Sam 5:2 in Scene 1

The coming of the Gentiles from the East illustrates the theme of Jesus, son of Abraham, through whom "all the nations of the earth will be blessed" (Gen 22:18). But the themes of the son of Abraham and the son of David run together throughout the infancy narrative, and it is not surprising to find here the theme of the son of David through the citations from Micah 5:1 and 2 Samuel 5:2. The first citation affirms that from Bethlehem will come the one who will be the leader of Israel, and the second is set in the context of the tribes of Israel asking David to become their leader.

Let us compare the original texts of the Hebrew and Septuagint texts with the quotation given by Matthew.

<b>Mt 2: 6</b>	<b>Septuagint (LXX)</b>	<b>Masoretic Hebrew (MT)</b>
And you, O Bethlehem (in the) land of Judah,	(Mic 5: 1a) And you, O Bethlehem, house of Ephrathah,	(Mic 5: 1a) And you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
are by no means least among the rulers ( <i>hēgemōn</i> ) of Judah;	(Mic 5: 1b) are too small to be among the thousands ( <i>chilias</i> ) of Judah;	(Mic 5, 1b) small to be among the clans (lit.: thousands) of Judah;
for from you will come forth a ruler ( <i>hēgoumenos</i> ),	(Mic 5: 1c) from you there will come forth for me a leader ( <i>archōn</i> ) of Israel	(Mic 5: 1c) from you there will come forth for me one who is to be a ruler in Israel.
who will shepherd my people Israel	(2 Sam 5: 2a) You wil shepherded my people Israel	(2 Sam 5: 2a) You will shepherd my people Israel

Let's comment on these different versions.

Line 1: Matthew omits the mention of Ephrathah and replaces it with "land of Judah". The reason is probably theological: the term "Judah" reminds the reader that the messiah is descended from Judah, whereas the term "Ephrathah" must have meant little.

Line 2: Matthew refuses to consider Bethlehem as an insignificant hamlet, as Micah 5:1b asserts, since for him Jesus was born there. If this is a deliberate Christian modification, it is not so in the following, where "thousands" becomes "chiefs": the Hebrew consonants 'lp (thousands) can be read as 'allupē (chiefs, heads of clans) or as 'alpē (thousands, clans).

Line 3: Matthew has shortened the text of Micah 5:1c, first eliminating "Israel" which will be mentioned in line 4, and then "for me." The reference to the leader is made with *hēgoumenos*, presumably to match it with *hēgemōn* in line 2.

Line 4: Note a simple minor grammatical change required to weld the two citations together.

Analysis of these differences leads us to conclude that these changes were made with scholarly care. It is possible that the gospel version of Micah 5:1 came to Matthew in a form already fixed by Christian usage and to which he would have added 2 Sam 5:2. The evangelist leads us to believe through the characters in the story that Micah 5:1 was already accepted by the Jews as a reference to the birthplace of the messiah.

Some biblical scholars refuse to consider Mt 2:5b-6 as a formula of citation/fulfillment, because we do not find the usual formula: "All this happened so that what the Lord had said by the mouth of the prophet might be fulfilled". To this we must reply that we have here a direct style in which it is precisely the specialists in Scripture who interpret the text correctly, and therefore makes the usual introduction unnecessary. Moreover, like the other formula citations of ch. 2, we have a reference to a geographical place.

## 2. The Implicit Citation of Isa 60:6 and Ps 72:10-11 in Scene 2

In scene 2 of act 1, the magi bring gifts to the newborn Jesus. But unlike scene 1 where there were explicit citations from the Old Testament, here everything is implicit. For at the basis of Matthew's account of the Magi, there is the account of Balaam (Num 24:17) as we shall see below, and this account which speaks of the star at the rising may have suggested to him other passages of the OT which speak of light at the rising, such as Isa 60:1: LXX "Be enlightened, O Jerusalem, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Then a few verses later:

LXX "Then you will see, and you will be in awe, and you will be ecstatic in your heart; for the wealth of the sea, the nations and the peoples will be brought to you. And there shall come to thee herds of camels, and the camels of Midian and Gephah shall cover your ways. All the men of Sheba shall come laden with gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the good news of the salvation of God" (Isa 60:5-6)

Thus, this passage from Isaiah allowed Matthew to add details to his sketch from Balaam's account, in particular by pointing out that the representatives of the nations, the magi, bring gifts of gold and frankincense, for the light and glory of the Lord has risen upon them. Another OT text probably offered him material to color this scene further:

LXX The kings of Tharsis and the islands will give him gifts; the kings of the Arabs and of Sheba will bring him their offerings. And all kings shall worship him, all peoples shall serve him (Ps 72:10-11; LXX: 71:10-11)

Thus, while the citations from Mic 5:1 and 2 Sam 5:2 in Scene 1 emphasize Jesus' Davidic traits and the fact that he is the king of Israel, the citations from Isa 60:6 and Ps 72:10-11 in Scene 2 emphasize his role as the son of Abraham in whom all the nations of the earth are blessed; Jesus is not only the king of Israel, he is the king of the nations.

## C. The Pre-Matthean Background of the Magi Story

### 1. History and Verisimilitude

#### a. Intrinsic implausibility

Here is a list of implausible items:

- That a star rose in the east, then appeared over Jerusalem, then turned south toward Bethlehem before landing over a house would have been a celestial phenomenon without parallel in astronomical history; yet there is no record of such a phenomenon at the time.
- To say that Herod was able to gather priests and scribes for consultation betrays a complete ignorance of the opposition that existed between him and the priests
- Our story suggests that the birthplace of Jesus was unknown and was a matter of scholarly research by scribes, whereas John 7:42 tells us that everyone knew it
- It is unlikely that Herod, who was so suspicious, could have let the Magi go to Bethlehem, five miles from Jerusalem, without having them followed by his security service, and without discovering the

whereabouts of the child, whereas exotic Magi with all their gifts would certainly not have gone unnoticed in the village.

- The massacre of children under two years of age is not mentioned by the Jewish historian Josephus, although he gives us the details of Herod's horrors.

b. Irreconcilability with Luke

Luke, who also tells us about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, completely ignores the intervention of Herod or the coming of the Magi or the massacre of children or the flight to Egypt. And his account that Jesus was brought to Jerusalem after 40 days is irreconcilable with Matthew's so-called stay in Egypt.

c. Conflict with accounts of Jesus' ministry

The claim that all of Jerusalem was troubled by the news of the birth of the king of the Jews and that it was known that this king was born in Bethlehem clashes with the gospel account in which the people of Nazareth are unaware of this and misunderstand Jesus' behavior and claims (Mk 6:1-6), and in which the people of Jerusalem are unaware of a Bethlehem birth of Jesus (Jn 7:40-42). Moreover, Herod Antipas seems to have no prior knowledge of Jesus, despite the measures his father (Herod the Great) would have taken against him.

Some have tried to underline certain plausible elements of the story, such as the expectation of a leader from Judea, certain astronomical phenomena (conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn) around the time of Jesus' birth, the interest in astrology at the time, the reputation of the magi among Jews and Gentiles, or certain embassies from the East who brought gifts to Jerusalem and Rome as a tribute. But all of this merely underlines the cultural acceptability of the story in Matthew's time, and does not constitute conclusive evidence of historicity. It only helps us to understand that in the East, where there were large Jewish communities, the Gentiles' knowledge of the messianic expectation of the Jews could be dramatized as a readiness to welcome the birth of Jesus.

2. The Balaam Narrative

We argued earlier (see "[Detecting Pre-Matthean Material](#)") that the basis of Matthew's account of Jesus' birth came from pre-Matthean material structured around angelic dream apparitions and inspired by Old Testament accounts of the patriarch Joseph, a dream interpreter who went to Egypt, and of the birth of Moses, the child who escaped the king's evil plans and became the savior of his people. We presented earlier this ancient tradition that Matthew would have had in his hands, but let us take up an extract that concerns more precisely Mt 2:1-12:

Now Jesus was born in the days of Herod the king. When Herod the king heard this [in a dream], he was startled, and so was all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem of Judea," they told him. Then he sent (secretly) to Bethlehem with the instruction: "Go and search diligently for the child."

Unfortunately, as we can see, this pre-Matthean material does not allow us to explain the arrival of the magi from the East nor the existence of a star at its rising that leads them to the place where the child is.

Moreover, in the present account of the Magi, there are inconsistencies that are indications of a tinkering with two accounts that were merged. For example, why didn't the star lead the magi directly to where the child was in Bethlehem, avoiding the unnecessary stop in Jerusalem. Or Herod's failure to find the child would be perfectly understandable if there were no magi from the East and if Herod simply had a general knowledge of Bethlehem from Scripture to guide him. Finally, the total absence of Joseph in the narrative is inexplicable if Matthew only had in his hands the ancient tradition that we presented earlier and which was precisely centered around the figure of Joseph. So, with very precise criteria, it is possible to isolate in Mt 2:1-12 what was probably the pre-Matthean material, and which gives us the following account:

Now, after the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea, behold, magi from the East came to Judea saying, "Where is the newborn King of the Jews? For we have seen his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage." And behold, the star which they had seen at its rising went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. (When they saw the star they were greatly overjoyed.) And entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they bowed down and paid him homage. Then they went away to their own country.

Thus, our present account would be the fusion of two ancient traditions that Matthew had in his hands, one centered on Herod who is disturbed to know that a king is born and is told that it is in Bethlehem that the messiah is to be born without any further precision, which leads him to send for him, and the other centered on the magi who saw a star rise and which led them to the child's house in Bethlehem where they paid him homage. Matthew's art was to merge the two narratives, creating connections and modifying them slightly to create a certain coherence, for example, by introducing the Magi's stop in Jerusalem, or by having them return "by another way" to their country.

But then the question arises: where does this tradition centered on the Magi come from? Just as the Joseph-centered tradition is inspired by the patriarch Joseph in Egypt and the story of the birth of Moses, the Magi-centered tradition is inspired by which passage of the Old Testament? The most likely candidate is Numbers 22-24 which tells us the story of Balaam.

Let's recall this story. King Balak once summoned a famous seer named Balaam to put a curse on Israel. Balaam is a curious figure, a non-Israelite, an occult visionary who practiced sorcery. Philo of Alexandria (born around 20 BC, died around 50 AD), in his commentary (*Vita Moysis* I, L #276) calls him a magician and recognizes in him a true spirit of prophecy. Now, this Balaam arrives from the East with two servants (Num 22:22), and he thwarts the hostile plans of king Balak by delivering oracles predicting the future greatness of Israel and the arrival of a royal leader.

Let us now examine the oracles and visions of Balaam. The vision of a future leader becomes explicit in Num 24:7: (LXX) "There will come a man out of his (Israel's) seed, and he will rule many nations ... and his kingdom will be increased". But the most famous description is in Num 24:17:

Hebrew version (MT)	Septuagint version (LXX)
"I see him, though not now;	"I will point to him, though not now;
I behold him, though he is not near;	I bless him, though he has not drawn near;
a star will come forth from Jacob,	a star will rise from Jacob,
and a scepter will rise from Israel"	and a man will stand forth from Israel".

In Jesus' day, this passage was applied to the Messiah, the anointed king; the star clearly refers to a king. So Balaam predicts that a star symbolizing the Messiah will rise. Now, this star rising symbolizing the Messiah is exactly what the magi in Matthew saw. Of course, in Balaam's story the star does not guide him to the Messiah's location. But the ancient tradition about the magi may have borrowed this motif from the Exodus story when the light shone on the people by night and preceded them for guidance (Ex 13:21; 40:38). For Matthew, it is now the Gentiles who receive this privileged light.

The story of Balaam ends with the latter returning to his country, just like the Magi. This detail was valuable for Matthew, because it allowed him to explain why Herod could not question the magi, and theologically, it allowed him to explain why, in the next chapter when Jesus' ministry begins, there are no believers around him (only the magi know his identity, but they are no longer there).

In short, the ancient tradition centered on the figure of Herod presents us only with characters hostile to Jesus. But the insertion of the ancient tradition around the magi/Balaam introduced positive figures on stage. This is how the evangelist was able to give us the double reaction to the revelation and proclamation of Jesus' identity. The echo of the Balaam story could remind the reader familiar with the Bible and the Jewish midrashic tradition, as it was in Matthew's community, that already in the Old Testament God had revealed his salvific plan for the Gentiles.

#### D. The Magi in Subsequent Christian Piety

Very early on, the figure of these "wise men" struck the popular Christian imagination, much more than the shepherds of Luke. In the catacombs, frescoes of the Magi were found as early as the 2nd century, whereas the shepherds did not appear until the 4th century. Relics of the Magi were brought from Persia to Constantinople in 490 by the emperor Zeno. Today, these relics are in the Magi Chapel of Cologne Cathedral. It is only recently that biblical scholarship has taken the trouble to explain the fictional nature of the Magi story.

Yet Matthew's account of the magi is a remarkable example of Christian midrash (see Appendix VIII on the literary genre of midrash). And if midrash is understood as the popular and imaginative exposition of Scripture in support of faith and piety, then it may well be applied to the way in which the Christian tradition has interpreted and embellished the stories of the magi. And the first step in this tradition was to elevate them from the 2nd century (see Tertullian, *Adversus Marcion* iii 13) to the rank of kings, to become the "Magi-Kings", no doubt because of Matthew's reference to Ps 72:10-11: "The kings of the Arabians and of Sheba will bring him their offerings. And all the kings will worship him". Another step in this midrashic process was to specify the number of Magi, mostly "three", presumably because of the number of gifts (but the numbers range from two to twelve). Finally, there was the step of giving them names, the earliest of which appear in Eastern tradition (perhaps in the fourth century): Hormizdah, king of Persia, Yazdegerd, king of Saba, and Perozadh, king of Sheba. In the West, the tradition known through *Excerpta Latina Barbari*, a Latin translation of a Greek chronicle of the 6th century, speaks of: Balthasar, Melchior and Gaspar. It is under these names that the Magi appear on the mosaic of S. Apollinaris in Ravenna in the 6th century. Finally, the symbolism of the gifts brought by the Magi appeared in the 2nd century with Irenaeus of Lyon, who associated gold with the king that is Jesus, incense with his divinity and myrrh with the son of man called to die.

One can smile at all these anachronistic descriptions. But this work of the imagination is not too far from Matthew's anticipation of the coming of non-Jewish Christians into his community. These Christians, guided only by their closeness to nature, were able to open themselves up to God, and then through contact with the Scriptures of the Jews, began to believe in and honor Jesus. This midrashic process continued through the centuries and took on the colors of different cultures and different times. Elements of the Creed were used to describe their gesture: the Magi worshipped him as man and as God. And the gifts were used to describe the everyday Christian life filled with good works, prayers and sacrifices. Of course, this is all naive. But it is a valid effort at hermeneutics and actualization.

#### VI. Herod Unsuccessfully Seeks to Destroy the King of the Jews

##### Translation of Matthew 2: 13-23

13 Now, when the magi had gone away, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Get up; take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him." 14 So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went away to Egypt, 15 where he stayed until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet who said,

"Out of Egypt have I called my Son."

16 Then, when Herod saw how he had been deceived by the magi, he fell into a furious rage. He sent into Bethlehem and the regions all around it and massacred all the boys of two years of age and under, according to the exact time he had ascertained from the magi. 17 Thus was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah who said,

18 "A voice was heard in Ramah,  
weeping and loud mourning,  
Rachel crying for her children;  
and she would not be consoled,  
because they are no more."

19 Now, when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, 20 saying, "Get up; take the child and his mother and go back to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." 21 So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went back to Israel.

22 But when he heard that Archelaus was king over Judea in place of his father Herod, Joseph was afraid to return there. And being warned in a dream, he went off to the district of Galilee. 23 There he went to dwell in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled:

"He will be called a Nazorean."

##### Notes

###### v.13

- "Now...". Much of the vocabulary and grammar of the sentence reflects the stereotypical structure of angelic appearances in dreams (see [appearances chart](#))
- "the magi. The Greek text has simply: they
- "appeared". Despite the aorist verb tense in 1:20, we have here a historical present tense in the Greek text as well as in 2:19; the Vaticanus codex "improves" the text by using the aorist.
- "child". *Paidion* (See [note on v. 8](#))
- "for". The conjunction *gar* introduces a proposition that gives the reason for the angel's request.
- "is going to search". The idea is that it is imminent: he has already made his decision to seek
- "to destroy him". The same verb (*apollynai*) appears in the passion narrative in Mt 27:20: "The chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for the release of Barabbas and [to destroy Jesus](#)."

###### v.14

- "So...". It is a constant motive for Joseph to do exactly what the angel asked of him.
- "went away to Egypt". Herod's power did not extend into Egypt, which had been under Roman control since 30 BC. It is a classic theme to flee to Egypt for those fleeing persecution in Palestine.

- "Solomon sought to kill Jeroboam; Jeroboam arose and fled to Egypt to Shishak, king of Egypt, where he remained until Solomon's death" (1 Kings 11:40)
- "king Yoyaqim, with his guards and his ministers, having heard them, sought to kill him. When Uriyahu heard of it, he was afraid, and fled and went to Egypt" (Jeremiah 26:21)

(Josephus, *Antiquities*, XII ix 7: #387). It is probably this classical theme that influenced Matthew's account. The effort of some conservative biblical scholars to limit this journey to a simple stay at the Egyptian border in Gaza, in order to salvage the historicity of the narrative, is therefore totally unnecessary.

The Christian midrashic tradition on infancy narratives has been prolific around this stay in Egypt:

- Miracles are said to have protected them from dragons, lions and leopards paid homage to them, palm trees prostrated themselves as they passed (*Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, located between the 4th and 8th c.)
- The family would have gone to Matariyah, near Cairo, where Jesus would have been responsible for the growth of balsam trees whose balsam was considered a universal remedy in the Middle Ages among both Christians and Muslims (*Arabic Infancy Gospel* 24, circa 5th c.)
- Several sites claim to have been visited by the holy family: the church of Abu Serghis, near the old Qarait synagogue in Cairo; Hermopolis Magna, on the banks of the Nile, about 175 miles south of Cairo, where idols are said to have fallen to the ground as they passed; the monastery of Deir el-Muharraq, near El Qûsîya, 50 miles further south, where the holy family is said to have stayed for six months

v.15

- "the death of Herod". On the date of March/April of the year -4, see [note on v. 1.](#)
- "This was to fulfill". For fulfillment Citations, see [table on formula citations](#)
- "the prophet". It is Hosea 11: 1.

v.16

- "Then, (*tote*) when Herod". The same adverb *tote* that introduces an action of Herod and followed by a formula citation was also used in 2: 6.
- "deceived (*empaizein*)". The verb *empaizen* carries a note of mockery, and it will be the same verb used for the mockery of Jesus as king in the passion narrative (Mt 27:29,31,41).
- "He sent into Bethlehem ...and massacred . Literally: "And having sent, he massacred in Bethlehem..."
- "all the boys (*pais*)". While Matthew uses the word *pais* here, in v. 18 he will use the word *tecknon* (child) when quoting Jeremiah. By repeating "all" the surrounding regions and "all" the boys, he gives us the impression of a great number. Some biblical scholars, forgetting the narrative's storytelling atmosphere, set out to calculate the exact number of deaths, taking into account the mortality rate of the time and a population of a thousand, to arrive at the result of about 20 boys killed. And of course, the Christian midrashic tradition took over the story: the Byzantine liturgy on the innocent saints sets the number at 14,000, the Syrian calendar of saints at 64,000, and finally 144,000 under the influence of Revelation (14:1-5).
- "of two years of age and under". This cut-off date, based on the birth star of the king of the Jews at its rising, has led biblical scholars to date Jesus' birth to 6 BC, two years before Herod's death. It is difficult to argue against this date, knowing that Luke dates the conception of John the Baptist 15 months before the birth of Jesus ("in the days of Herod").

v.17

- "Thus (*tote*) was fulfilled". Literally: "then", oddly enough a second *tote* in a row after the one in v. 16. This formula citation in reference to Jeremiah 31:15 is different from the one found in 1:22; 2:15b; and 2:23b where Matthew indicates the purpose or intention of an action of God: "All this happened so that what the Lord had said through the prophet might be fulfilled". Why this change here? It is likely that the evangelist did not want to make the killing of the boys an intention of God. He will do the same thing in the case of Judas and his thirty pieces of silver (Mt 27:9).

v.18

- "Ramah". How could Rachel's voice be associated with Ramah? According to Gen 35:19; 48:7, Rachel died and was buried "on the road to Ephrathah". And according to 1 Samuel 10:2 Rachel's grave is located "in the territory of

Benjamin at Zelzah", i.e. near Bethel, which is about eleven miles north of Jerusalem. The same location is implied in Jeremiah 31:15 which Matthew quotes. But it happened that a number of the clan of Ephrathah came later to the Bethlehem area and the name (Beth-)Ephrathah became associated with Bethlehem; hence the tradition of Rachel being dead and buried on the road to Ephrathah became associated with Bethlehem (see Micah 5:1), which led the copyists to add this gloss to Gen 35:19 and 48:7: "on the road to Ephrathah, that is, Bethlehem". It is this late (and erroneous) tradition that Matthew uses here. Even today, Muslims still venerate Rachel's tomb just outside Bethlehem.

- "loud mourning". Literally: much mourning.
- "Rachel crying". In Jeremiah, Rachel's cries probably refer to the deportation and captivity of the tribes of the northern kingdom (Manasseh and Ephraim, as well as Benjamin) by the Assyrians in 722/721 BC. But it is possible that Jeremiah is referring only to the Benjaminites who were also mixed up with the southern kingdom that was conquered by the Babylonians in 597 BC and 587 BC. According to Jer 40:1, the captives of Judah and Jerusalem were taken to Ramah. To complicate matters, how did Matthew himself interpret the text of Jeremiah? In any case, the evangelist changes the meaning of the text of Jeremiah. Whereas in the prophet's text a message of hope is given with the announcement that the children will return from captivity, nothing of the sort is found in Matthew.
- "children". See [note on v. 16](#).

v.19

- "Now...". Much of the vocabulary and grammar of the sentence reflects the stereotypical structure of angelic appearances in dreams (see the [chart on appearances](#)).
- "appeared". See [note on 2: 13](#).

v.20

- "the land of Israel". This expression appears only here in the entire New Testament. A possible influence is Ezekiel 20:36-38: "As I established my right over your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so will I do with you... I will bring them out of the land where they have migrated, but they will not enter the land of Israel."
- "for those who were seeking the child's life are dead". Matthew quotes the Septuagint almost verbatim on Exodus 4:19 ("for all those who sought your life are dead"). Why does Matthew use the plural ("those"), when it is only Herod? This is probably an allusion to the other members of the plot (all of Jerusalem; the chief priests and scribes) who disappear from the scene when the attempt fails.

v.21

- "So...". It is a constant motive for Joseph to do exactly what the angel asked of him.

v.22

- "when he heard". This source of information seems to come from something other than revelation; this is surprising, given that absolutely everything has come to Joseph in the form of revelation so far. This is a clue that vv. 22 and 23 come from Matthew's pen, not from the pre-Matthean source that ends in v. 21.
- "Archelaus was king over Judea". Literally: "that Archelaus reigns over Judea", a present tense as in a direct style. At Herod's death in 4 BC, his kingdom was divided between his sons: Archelaus and Herod Antipas (son of the Samaritan woman Malthace) received Judea-Samaria-Idumea and Galilee-Perea, while Philip (son of Cleopatra of Jerusalem) received the eastern and northern regions around Lake Galilee. As ethnarch of Judea, Archelaus proved authoritarian and cruel, slaughtering 3,000 people at the beginning of his reign, and his brutality became so intolerable that a Jewish delegation to Rome succeeded in having him deposed and exiled in 6 CE, after a reign of 10 years (Josephus, [The Jewish War](#), II, vi 2: #89; [Antiquities](#), XVII xiii 2: #342-44)
- "to return there". For Matthew, Mary and Joseph are citizens of Bethlehem, so it is natural that they should return there. So he has to explain instead why they end up in Nazareth. In Luke it is the other way around: Mary and Joseph are citizens of Nazareth, so he must explain why they are in Bethlehem.
- "to the district of Galilee". Three geographical locations, all introduced by the preposition *eis* (to, in, into), appear in turn with an ever-narrower scope: the land of Israel, the district of Galilee, Nazareth. Herod Antipas, the one we find in Jesus' ministry, reigned from 4 BC until 39 BC, before being deposed by Rome.

- "Nazareth". Archaeological excavations have shown that the site has been occupied since the 7th century BC. Unfortunately, there is no mention of the city in pre-Christian Jewish documents. In the New Testament, there are twelve occurrences of the name, ten in the form *Nazaret(h)*, and two in the form *Nazara* (in Document Q: Mt 4:13 || Lk 4:16). *Nazara* is a neuter plural noun, but understood by Matthew as a feminine singular noun. This form also appears in a writing of Julian the African (c. 221). When Jewish writings finally mentioned the city in the 8th century CE, the name appeared in Hebrew as *Naṣrat(h)*. But in the Greek transliteration, the Hebrew ṣade (ṣ) took the Greek form of zeta (z- Nazareth), rather than the normal Greek sigma form (s- Naṣareth), a peculiarity found in some Septuagint manuscripts of Job 1:1, Gen 13:10, Jer 48:34 (LXX: 31, 34). And it would seem that we would be looking at a feature of the Palestinian Aramaic dialect where the Hebrew ṣade (ṣ) between two voiced (sonant) consonants is equated with a Hebrew zayin (z). Finally, let us mention that in the lectionary of the Jerusalem church, which reflects the pronunciation of Palestinian Christian Aramaic, the name appears as *Nāzōrāt(h)*.
- "what was spoken by the prophets". The following citation is not a word-for-word citation or an adaptation of a known passage of Scripture. Biblical scholars have gone in four different directions to interpret the text of Matthew.
  - a. Matthew would quote known OT passages, but in a loose combination. In our commentary, we will explore the possibility that it is Isaiah 4:3 and Judges 16:17
  - b. Matthew would quote a book of Scripture that was not later retained as part of the canonical group; recall that the Jewish canon was not fixed until the second century CE. But the hesitations about the canon concern only the third part of Scripture (i.e. the Writings), not the first two parts (the Torah and the Prophets). It has been suggested that Matthew could mean "prophet" in a broad sense, as in Mt 13:35, where "prophet" refers to a psalmist, and thus to a book that is part of the Writings. The problem with all this is that Matthew, whenever he mentions a prophet in a formula citation, always refers to known books of the OT.
  - c. Matthew would quote a text for which he did not know the Old Testament sources, drawing from a kind of storehouse of citations from Jewish writings that the Christians used
  - d. Matthew did not intend to quote any particular text, but either referred generally to all the prophetic messages about Jesus as Nazarene, or, considering that the expression "said" does not follow the word "prophet", he should translate: "so that what was announced by the prophets was fulfilled by the fact that (*hoti*) he was called Nazarene. This interpretation is difficult to accept, since the conjunction *hoti* normally introduces a citation, and this is also seen in Matthew (4:16; 21:16). And it would run counter to the general pattern of the fulfillment formulas.
- "He will be called". This "he" refers to Jesus, even though the first "he" in the sentence refers to Joseph. Here is another example of the awkwardness that comes from Matthew's editing work, as here he adds a citation to a text that he added to the pre-Matthew material.
- "a Nazorean (*Nazōraios*)". What does this word mean and where does it come from? Before addressing this discussion, a word of caution is in order. First, one cannot use phonological rules alone, for in the biblical world etymologies are often the result of analogy. Secondly, the various possible origins of a word are not exclusive, the biblical attitude often being to say: one and the other, rather than: one or the other. With that in mind, let's look at three theories about the meaning and source of "Nazorean".

- a. A name derived from Nazareth

This is certainly an interpretation that Matthew accepts. In the gospels, two adjectives are applied to Jesus: *Nazarēnos* (Nazarene) which appears four times in Mark, twice in Luke, but never in John and Matthew; and *Nazōraios* (Nazorean) which appears eight times in Luke/Acts, three times in John, and twice in Matthew. The two terms seem equivalent (compare Mk 14:67 (*NazarēnosNazōraios*)). But while it is easy to see that the term *Nazarēnos* is derived from Nazareth (e.g., *Magdalēnos* (Magdaleine) comes from Magdala, *Gadarēnos* (Gadarenes) comes from Gadara)), it is more difficult with the term *Nazōraios*.

But we have precedents for *Nazōraios* in terms for sects: *Saddoukaios* (Sadducee), *Pharisaioi* (Pharisee). Now, in Acts 24:5 the Christians are called "the sect of the *Nazōraioi*." Moreover, if we take into account the phonology of the particular dialect of Galilean Aramaic, it is likely that *Nazōraios* could have been derived from the name Nazareth. But once this etymology is accepted, there is no reason why other etymologies could not have been added, such as the following.

- b. A name derived from *Nāzir*

*Nāzir* refers to someone who has consecrated himself to God by a vow, and thus has become holy. The Semitic root *ndr* means: to take vows. The description of this is given to us by Numbers 6:1-21: he must separate himself from other men by not drinking wine or strong drinks, by not cutting hair, and by having no contact

with the dead. The OT gives us two great figures of nazir, Samson (Jdg 13:2-7) and Samuel (1 Sam 1:11). The ideal of the Nazirite is propagated in Christian memory, as we see in Luke, where a word of Jesus about John the Baptist ("he eats no bread, he drinks no wine", Lk 7:33) is translated in the infancy narrative by a Nazirite figure in the words of the angel to Zechariah: "he will drink neither wine nor fermented beverage" (Lk 1:15). James, the brother of Jesus and head of the Jerusalem church, was considered a Nazir by Hegesippus (around 180).

Could Matthew have had the Nazir figure in mind when he speaks of Jesus as a Nazarene? It is possible. Recall that the three great Nazir figures (Samson, Samuel, John the Baptist) are always presented in the context of their birth. And Luke's infancy narrative draws a parallel between Samuel the Nazir and Jesus (see the parallel between Mary's hymn in Lk 1:46-55 and the hymn of Samuel's mother Hannah in 1 Sam 2:1-10; see also the description of Jesus in 2:52 and Samuel in 1 Sam 2:25). Of course, it is not from the point of view of asceticism that the connection with Jesus could be made, but rather from the point of view of consecration to God from the womb.

To this we can add the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew *nāzîr* by: *naziraios* (nazir), or translated by: *hagios* (saint). The similarity is quite clear between *naziraios*, a Nazir, and *Nazaraios*, *Nazēraios*, and even *Nazōraios*, the one from Nazareth. One can imagine that Matthew might have appreciated the irony of a title of Jesus linked to his hometown with a similarity to heroes like Samson and Samuel. The synonym "saint" for Nazir was also associated with Jesus by tradition in the form of "the Holy One of God" (Mk 1:24; L 4:34; Jn 6:69), which Matthew would express as "he will be called a Nazarene.

c. A name derived from *NēzerNēzer*

On this point, the key passage is Is 11:1: "There will come forth a shoot from the root (gr.: riza) of Jesse (David's father), and from his roots a branch (Heb.: *nēšer*; gr. *anthos*) will blossom." The prophet Isaiah was referring to the arrival of a king from the house of David who would succeed the reigning monarch, but Judaism thereafter will see it as the announcement of the expected Messiah. In Christian circles this passage from Isaiah will be the object of Christological reflection. Justin (*Dialogue* cxxvi 1) sees Jesus in the "branch" (*nēšer*). Jerome does the same in commenting on this text from Isaiah: "...and from his root will grow (the) Nazorean". Even Jewish tradition keeps the memory that Jesus would have been referred to as *Nōšrî* and the Christians as *Nōšerîm*.

How likely is it that Matthew had this passage from Isaiah in mind when he wrote: he will be called a Nazorean? The strongest clue comes from the fact that this offspring that will spring up is the Emmanuel announced by Is 7:14, and which Matthew mentioned in 1:22-23. As for the philological difficulty of the Hebrew *šade* (š) of *nēšer* which would have become a Greek zeta (z) in Nazorean, we have shown instead that it is quite normal when this letter is preceded and followed by a pronounced consonant, i.e. *nšr*. Some biblical scholars have objected that of the four occurrences of *nēšer*, three do not refer to the Messiah (i.e. Is 14:19; 60:21; Dan 11:7). To this we must reply that this occurrence of *nēšer* in Is 11:1 is the most influential among Jews in the NT era, as evidenced by a Qumran document (11QH vi 15, vii 19, vii 6.8.10) where *nēšer* designates the community elected to participate in final salvation.

In the same vein, one could add other names that also have a messianic flavor and that Nazorean could evoke.

- *šemah* (branch, shoot): "In that day a shoot of Yahweh will be magnificent and glorious" (Is 4:2)
- *šōreš* (root) "Before Him, this one vegetated like a shoot, like a root coming out of a dry land" (Is 53:2)
- *maṭṭa'at* (planting) "Your people, yes, all of them, will be righteous, forever they will inherit the Land, they, the offshoot of my plantings" (Is 60:21)

## Comment

### A. Matthew's Message as Enhanced by His Use of Scripture

Chapter 2 includes two acts that describe two opposite attitudes towards the Christological revelation of the virginal conception of Jesus: in act I, we have the acceptance of the revelation by the Gentiles represented by the magi; in act II, we observe the rejection of this revelation by the Jewish authorities and the persecution of Jesus. Note that Matthew does not speak of rejection by all the Jews, because part of his community is composed of Jews, but of the secular leader, the chief priests, the scribes of the people and all of Jerusalem. Moreover, to reflect that, if Jesus was crucified and died, he also rose again, he presents us with a Jesus who escapes the wrath of his persecutors, and after some time, returns to the land of Israel for a new presence. Joseph, an upright man, representative of all the Jews truly faithful to the Law and the Prophets, is the instrument of this deliverance from the hand of the persecutors.

Act II, which we are now analyzing, includes three scenes, each of which ends with a formula citation that gives us the theological key.

#### 1. Chap. Two, Scene 3 (v. 13-15)

The basic scenario, which comes from a pre-Matthean tradition, is that of the rescue of the child savior from the hands of the wicked king by fleeing to Egypt. This scenario is in part an echo of the rescue of the child Moses from the hands of the wicked Pharaoh. The quote from Hosea 11:1 ("Out of Egypt I called my Son") that ends this scene refers to Israel's exodus from Egypt. For Matthew, the people of Israel are now summed up in Jesus, who by his very life relives the destiny of his people. Hosea uses the expression "my Son" to express the idea that Israel, as a people, is a son of God. For Matthew, this title applies all the more to the one who "will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). The reference to Jesus as the son of God is indirect here, for only God can reveal directly who his son is.

This will happen at Jesus' baptism when God says, "This is my beloved son" (Mt 3:17). At this point Jesus is led into the desert for 40 days and 40 nights before returning to his ministry, a symbolic reenactment of Israel's 40 years in the desert before entering the promised land. Whether it is the infancy narrative or the baptism of Jesus, there is a fundamental Christian insight that the preparation for Jesus' ministry was the story of Israel in Egypt and the Exodus, accompanied by the gift of the covenant, a model that would serve to structure the beginning of the story of the new covenant.

Let us note in closing that this scene 3 echoes only in part the story of Moses and the Exodus. The details that we have are very spare and are far from the Christian midrashim that proliferated later (see [note 14](#)). For if the child is saved, it is by going to Egypt, like the patriarch Joseph who left Canaan to go to Egypt. Joseph, the father of Jesus, thus finds himself walking in the footsteps of the patriarch who brought Jacob/Israel to Egypt.

## 2. Chap. Two, Scene 4 (v. 16-18)

The scenario of this scene, which comes from the pre-Matthean material, focuses on the slaughter of the male children of Bethlehem and the surrounding areas, and echoes the slaughter of the Hebrew male children by Pharaoh. But by adding the citation from Jeremiah 31:15 that concludes this scene, Matthew also echoes another tragedy of Israel, the exile, both to Assyria and to Babylon. In Israel's theology, the persecution in Egypt and the exile were two great trials, and two moments when Yahweh will demonstrate his saving power. The parallelism between the two events is clear in Deutero-Isaiah, which presents the exile as a second Exodus. Matthew's genius is therefore not to put the exile and the Exodus together, but to link them to what happened in Bethlehem: on the one hand, he evokes the persecutions in Egypt, and on the other, through the mention of Rachel's tomb in Bethlehem and her weeping for her children, which is heard as far as Ramah, the exile. Thus Jesus relives the great moments of Israel's past.

Matthew's exegesis through his citations could be considered a bit fanciful. But for the evangelist the important thing is to grasp God's plan. For the three formula citations in ch. 2 mention Bethlehem, the city of David, Egypt, the land of the Exodus, and Ramah, the place where the exile is mourned, three places in the theological history of Israel in the form of a geographical miniature.

## 3. Chap. Two, Scene 5 (v. 19-23)

This scene has two parts: 19-21 which comes from a pre-Matthew tradition, and 22-23 which represents the addition of Matthew. If Moses' childhood was in the background until now, now we move to the adult Moses who, after the death of Pharaoh, will begin his mission to lead his people to the promised land, anticipating that of Jesus who, after the death of Herod, will be able to go to the place where his mission will begin.

The axis of the narrative passes through three geographical points, each introduced by the Greek preposition *eis* (2:20, 22, 23): the land of Israel, the district of Galilee, and a city called Nazareth, each point representing an ever more clearly defined place. The indication of these geographical places comes from a revelation, because for Matthew, in his theology, all this responds to a plan of God:

- i. the return to the land of Israel allows Jesus to relive the journey of the people of God leaving the slavery of Egypt for the promised land;
- ii. the detour to Galilee, called the land of the Gentiles, allows him to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah (8:23-9:1) which Matthew will specify in 4:14-16: "Galilee of the Nations! The people who were in darkness have seen a great light...";
- iii. Finally, the word Nazorean not only evokes the city of Nazareth which is the starting point of his ministry, but also evokes the Nazir that he was like Samson and Samuel, consecrated to God from the womb, the "holy" of God, just as it evokes the *nēšer*, the offspring that blossomed from the Davidic root that was foretold in Is 11:1, who is in fact Emmanuel.

It should be noted that the first two geographical indications (Israel, Galilee) suggest the two major groups that make up Matthew's community: Jews and Gentiles. The last geographical indication brings us to the place where Jesus' ministry will begin. These indications give Matthew the opportunity to explain why the Messiah, though born in Bethlehem, began his public life in Nazareth. Finally, let us note Matthew's ingenious symmetry:

- i. He uses the themes of Isaiah in his first citation ("And they will call him Emmanuel", Is 7:14), and in his last ("He will be called a Nazarene", Isa 11:1);

- ii. The first citation concerns his conception, birth and identity, the last concerns his mission and destiny;
- iii. the announcement of the child's birth ends with Joseph naming the child Jesus, and the whole story ends with Joseph bringing the child to Nazareth so that he can be called a Nazarene.

We now have the full identity of Jesus: son of David, son of Abraham, and finally son of God by his title of Nazorean.

B. The Three Formula Citations

It is in this section 2:13-23 that the formulas of citation are most abundant, as nowhere else, constituting a third of its content. Let us try to clarify their origin, both from the point of view of their characteristics and of their previous use in Christian circles.

1. The Citation of Hosea 11:1 in Matt 2:15b

The location of the citation is surprising: why did Matthew not place this citation about "coming out of Egypt" at the point where Joseph leaves Egypt (after 2:21), rather than here where he goes to Egypt instead? One possible answer is that he wanted to emphasize the journey to Nazareth for the return from Egypt, and thereby to evoke the Exodus first before evoking the exile with the citation from Jeremiah that follows.

Let us compare the text of Matthew with that of the Hebrew text and the Septuagint translation (what is similar to Matthew in the LXX and the MT is underlined).

Matthew	Hebrew text (MT)	Septante (LXX)
Out of Egypt have I called ( <i>kalein</i> ) my Son	From <u>Egypt have I called my son</u>	<u>Out of Egypt have I</u> summoned ( <i>metakalein</i> ) his children ( <i>tekna</i> )

It is clear that Matthew did not copy the Septuagint, but a Greek version closer to the Hebrew text. But did he follow a Christian practice that attributed this passage from Hosea 11:1 to the ministry of Jesus? For Christians who usually used the Septuagint, it is hard to see how they could have associated "his children" with Jesus, especially since the context of Hosea is that of a condemnation of an unfaithful people. It is therefore likely that we are dealing with an original touch by Matthew in the updating of Hosea 11:1. Let us also note that of the four formula citations we have seen so far, the two that could have been used in Christian circles (Isa 7:14; Mic 5:1) are quoted in a different form from the Hebrew text, whereas it is the opposite with those that seem to come from an observation proper to Matthew (2 Sam 5:2; Hos 11:1).

2. The Citation of Jer 31:15 in Matt 2:18

Let us compare the version of Matthew with the Septuagint (LXX), the version of the Codex Vaticanus (B), then that of the Codex Alexandrinus (A), and finally with the Hebrew Massoretic text (MT). Similarities with Matthew are underlined, similarities with the Hebrew text (MT) are in italics.

Matthew	LXX (B)	LXX (A)	MT
(1) <i>A voice was heard in Ramah,</i>	<u><i>A voice was heard in Ramah</i></u>	<u><i>A voice was heard</i></u> on high	<u><i>A voice</i></u> is (or was) <u>heard in Ramah</u> ,
(2) <i>weeping and loud mourning,</i>	<i>of lamentation and <u>weeping and mourning</u>;</i>	<i>of lamentation and <u>weeping and mourning</u>;</i>	lamentation and bitter <u>weeping</u> .
(3) <i>Rachel crying for her children (teckna);</i>	<u><i>Rachel</i></u> , who was <u>crying</u> ,	of <u><i>Rachel's crying over her sons</i></u> ( <i>huiois</i> );	<u><i>Rachel</i></u> weeping over <u>her sons</u>
(4) <i>and she would not be consoled,</i>	would <u>not</u> cease on behalf of <i>her sons</i> ( <i>huiois</i> ),	<u>and she would not be consoled</u> ,	refusing to <u>be consoled</u> over her sons,
(5) <i>because they are no more</i>	<u><i>because they are no more</i></u> .	<u><i>because they are no more</i></u> .	<u><i>because they are no more</i></u> .

Let's analyze each line.

- i. Matthew remains faithful to the MT as does LXX (B) by referring to Ramah, without attempting to interpret this reference as does LXX (A).
- ii. The MT has three words (lament, weeping, bitterness), but the last two are linked together in Hebrew in a constructed form, which leads one of the two words to become an adjective (bitter weeping). Now LXX (B)

and LXX (A) have missed this nuance, whereas Matthew has captured it well in the form: loud mourning. Moreover, Matthew has correctly grasped MT which appends "lamentation and weeping" to "a voice", which LXX (B) and LXX (A) have not understood and which has transformed it into a noun complement, i.e. a genitive construction (of lamentation, weeping and mourning). On the other hand, Matthew somehow reversed the order of "weeping... mourning" in the MT, while the two LXX versions kept the same order in the first two.

- iii. It is surprising that Matthew translates the Hebrew *bānīm* (son) as *tekna* (the plural of *teknon*: child), whereas son is said in Greek *huios*, as did LXX (A) and (B). This is all the more surprising since earlier in v. 16 he used the word *pais* (boy, but in the plural can refer to both sexes) to refer to those whom Herod had slaughtered. So we must believe that Matthew sometimes adapts his citations according to the context, sometimes he is content with the standard Greek translation.
- iv. Matthew and the LXX (A) agree with MT in speaking of Rachel's refusal to be comforted (LXX (B) speaks rather of ceasing).
- v. No Greek text exactly matches the strange MT lesson with the singular, and this may be because our MT version is corrupt.

To summarize, it is clear that the Greek version of Matthew is more faithful to the Hebrew than the Septuagint in the Vaticanus version (LXX B). From this point of view, it is closer to LXX (A), but knowing that LXX (A) probably represents an effort to be more faithful to the Hebrew text (MT). The differences between Matthew and MT may be explained by the fact that the evangelist had a better Hebrew version of Jeremiah. Finally, the fact that such a faithful citation from the Hebrew could hardly have come from Greek-speaking Christian circles, and that it is difficult to imagine that these circles would have applied this passage from Jeremiah to Jesus, forces us to conclude that we are dealing here with the work of Matthew himself.

### 3. The Citation of Isa 4:3 and Judg 16:17 in Matt 2:23?

Where does the quote, "He shall be called a Nazarene" come from? In [note 23](#) we presented three possibilities from which the word Nazarene would come: from the name of the city of Nazareth, from *nēšer* (a branch of the house of David), and Nazirite, the one consecrated to God from birth. It was probably Nazirite that Matthew had in mind when he wrote, "what was foretold by the prophets". These prophets are Isaiah ("He who remains in Zion and abides in Jerusalem will be called holy", 4:3) and Judges (Judges belongs to the section of prophets in the Hebrew Bible) ("I have been a Nazirite of God since my mother's womb", 16:17). Let us examine the various versions of the OT, that of the Septuagint (LXX), according to the Vaticanus (B) or the Alexandrinus (A) when there is a divergence, and the Hebrew Massoretic text (MT).

Matthew	LXX (Isa 4: 3)	MT (Isa 4: 3)	LXX B (Judg 16: 17)	LXX A (Judg 16: 17)	MT (Judg 16: 17)
He will be called a Nazorean ( <i>Nazōraios klēthēsetai</i> )	They will be called holy ( <i>hagioi klēthēsontai</i> )	He will be called holy ( <i>qādōš</i> )	I am a holy one ( <i>hagios</i> ) of God	I am a Nazairite ( <i>naziraios</i> ) of God	I have been a Nazirite ( <i>nāzîr</i> ) of God

To understand Matthew's use of the OT in his citation, it is necessary to know that the Hebrew word *nāzîr* is sometimes translated into Greek as *naziraios* (LXX A) or *hagios* (saint) (LXX B). The Greek translation *hagios* (saint) is applied only once in the Bible to an individual, Samson, in Judg 16:17 (LXX B). However, the Hebrew text in this passage speaks of Samson as a Nazirite, which LXX A has translated more literally as *naziraios*. This *hagios/naziraios* connection probably reminded Matthew of this other passage: "He will be called a saint (*hagios*)" (Isa 4:3). Since there is an equivalence between *hagios* (saint) and *naziraios* (Nazirite), it was not a problem for Matthew to read Isa 4:3 as "he shall be called a *naziraios*". And it was legitimate for him to apply it to Jesus, who was a saint by virtue of his consecration, and that *naziraios* evoked his homeland: Nazareth. Moreover, the comparison with the Nazirite Samson was legitimate since the latter is presented as the one who will save Israel from the hand of the Philistines (LXX A: Judg 13:5), and Jesus is presented as the one who will save his people from their sins (Mt 1:21).

This type of exegesis may seem confusing to us. But for Matthew it is the same God who speaks through the prophets and who planned the birth and career of his son in great detail. If he was able to detect such a plan in Scripture, it was by virtue of his skill as a scribe versed in the intricacies of translating the Law and the Prophets, "a scribe instructed in the Kingdom...who draws from his treasure both the new and the old" (Mt 13:52).

### C. The Pre-Matthean Background of the Herod Story

Is the story of the flight to Egypt and the massacre in Bethlehem historical, or is it the product of reflection from the OT and Jewish themes?

#### 1. History and Verisimilitude

Let us begin with the flight to Egypt. There are no echoes of such an event in the account of Jesus' ministry, and such a stay in Egypt is inconsistent with Luke's account of an uneventful and expected return from Bethlehem to Nazareth soon after Jesus' birth. The Jewish polemical writings against the Christians in the second century cannot be considered as an independent testimony, because they are based on infancy narratives which they seek to ridicule: Mary would have taken refuge in Egypt because of Jesus' scandalous birth, and Jesus would have learned black magic there in order to deceive the people.

For the Bethlehem massacre, there is no mention in the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who nevertheless well documented Herod's cruelty during the last years of his reign. Biblical scholars have tried to find support in various texts. For example, around the year 400, Macrobius ([Saturnalia](#), II iv 11) presents a pun to demonstrate the cruelty of Herod the Great who had three of his sons killed: it is better to be Herod's pig than his son. Now this pun is presented in the setting where children up to two years old would have been killed by Herod. But it is likely that it is Matthew's account that provided Macrobius with his setting. Similarly, Revelation 12:1-5, which speaks of a dragon wanting to devour the child of a woman about to give birth, for it is in fact a reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Finally, there is the Jewish writing of the first or second century CE, the [Assumption of Moses](#) (6:2-6), which speaks of an insolent king who will destroy young and old as the Egyptians did; but this is such a vague statement that there is no way to link it to the event of which Matthew speaks.

There are therefore serious reasons for considering the flight into Egypt and the massacre at Bethlehem as unhistorical. But nonetheless, Matthew had to present his theological account in such a way that it would appear plausible to the audience of his day. The well-known massacre of male children by the Pharaoh of Egypt could be plausibly attributed to the cruel Herod the Great, especially in the last years of his life. And this slaughter was all the more plausible because it stemmed from Herod's fear of a possible rival king; Josephus ([Antiquities](#), XVII ii 4: #43) tells us that Herod had Pharisees slaughtered who had predicted that his throne would be taken away from him for the benefit of his brother and his wife and any children born to them. Matthew's setting is very evocative: Herod was buried in the highly visible fortress of Herodium, a few miles from Bethlehem, the city of David, contrasting God's anointed and the wicked king. As for the flight to Egypt, see the [note on v. 14](#) where we have presented Egypt as the usual place of refuge for those fleeing the tyranny of the kings of Palestine, and so Matthew's audience must have found the event plausible.

## 2. The Joseph/Moses Narrative

We have already suggested that Matthew did not rely on an account of historical events, but rewrote a tradition that associated the birth of Jesus, son of Joseph, with the patriarch Joseph and the birth of Moses. Earlier (see [reconstruction of pre-Matthean material](#)), we thus reconstructed this pre-Matthean tradition with respect to Herod.

Now, when Herod had done this [i.e., sent to Bethlehem to search for the newborn Messiah], behold an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream saying, "Get up; take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him." So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went away to Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod.

Then Herod [when the search for the child was unsuccessful] fell into a furious rage. He sent into Bethlehem and the regions all around it and massacred all the boys of two years of age and under [according to the time he had ascertained from the dream].

Now, when Herod died, behold an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Get up; take the child and his mother and go back to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went back to the land of Israel.

If we remove the formula citations from 2:13-23, we notice that Matthew has added little to the pre-Matthean tradition, except for some "seams".

- 2, 13a: "when they (the magi) had gone away"
- 2, 16a: "when he (Herod) saw that he had been deceived by the magi"
- 2, 16d: "according to the exact time he had ascertained from the magi"

The fact that the two pre-Matthean narratives (Jesus' birth and the magi) can be easily separated is the strongest argument for their original independence. The pre-Matthean account of the birth of Jesus already contained motives of hostility to the revelation of the Messiah's birth, as well as to God's intervention. The first motif also appears in Lk 2:34-35 (Simeon's prophecy to Mary that the child will be a contested sign) and confirms for us that it is a motif that appeared before the gospels. Matthew's work was to integrate his sources into a gospel message.

## VII. Epilogue

Matthew has shown great skill in sewing together disparate traditions to produce a preface to his gospel. For the ministry of Jesus was prepared not only by the ministry of John the Baptist, but also by the whole activity of God in Israel as recorded in the Law and the Prophets in Scripture: this is what Matthew intends to show by his genealogy going back to Abraham, by a narrative based on some important events in the Law, and by explicit references to the prophets.

The infancy narrative is the place where the old and the new meet, i.e. the OT and the gospel. On the one hand, Jesus relives the major events of his people such as the Exodus and the exile, and Joseph, the main thread of the narrative, is an upright Jew, faithful to the Law, and it is he who protects his son from hostile forces and will lead him safely to the Galilee of the Gentiles. On the other hand, the revelation of Jesus' identity in the gospel is already present through his titles: son of Abraham, messiah or Christ, son of God. The rejection of this revelation, which will reach its climax with the story of the passion and the crucifixion, is already anticipated by the hostility of Herod and the Jewish authorities and of all Jerusalem, while the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles is anticipated by the story of the magi. The infancy narrative is a gospel in miniature.

The effectiveness of Matthew's dramatization of the gospel message is demonstrated by the popularity of the infancy narrative even among those who know almost nothing about the gospel. It has been the subject of countless paintings, hymns, plays and poems. Some are embarrassed by such popularity and see it as an obstacle to the true gospel. Yet, while the infancy narrative is a drama that easily captures attention, it is also in essence a proclamation of the coming of the reign of God and its possible rejection. Of course, the characters in this drama seem to wear exotic clothes like oriental potentates or a Jewish king with priests, but that is precisely why they are not forgotten. But behind these clothes we can see the believers of Matthew's time and their opponents, and even the drama of Christian proclamation of all times.

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## Book Two: The Lucan Infancy Narrative

### I. General Observations on the Lucan Gospel and Infancy Narrative

#### A. The Lucan Gospel

Since Luke's Greek is the best of the four evangelists, it is highly probable that his native language was Greek. And with the absence of Hebrew words, Palestinian color, and reference to the Hebrew text of the OT, one imagines that his audience was composed almost exclusively of Christians from the Gentile world, perhaps from a church founded by Paul. And according to a tradition of the 2nd century (the canon of Muratori, Irenaeus), the evangelist would be named Luke, a companion of Paul, who would have produced his work in Greece around the year 80.

Luke's gospel does not have an apologetic aim, as can be found in Matthew, who has to defend himself against his orthodox Jewish brothers. The mission to the Gentiles does not come from the failure of the mission to Israel, but is part of God's plan from the beginning. Even the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem saw the harmony between the mission to the Gentiles and the mission to Israel (see Acts 15:25). To express all this, Luke uses geographical markers: the gospel is centered on this long march to Jerusalem, the center of Judaism, and even the appearances of the resurrected Jesus will only take place in Jerusalem; but with the Acts of the Apostles, it is the long march from Jerusalem to the center of the universe, i.e. Rome. Luke's interest in the whole universe is expressed in the multiple references to the Roman emperors in both the infancy narrative and the body of the gospel. And the atmosphere of the gospel is one of kindness expressed by many scenes that feature women, including the infancy narrative centered on Mary, whereas Matthew is centered on Joseph.

Before turning to the infancy narrative itself, let's immediately make two points about its historical value.

- i. Some have thought that they could support its historical value by invoking the links between the gospel of Luke and the gospel of John (e.g., the miraculous fishing in Jn 21 and Lk 5) as a case of multiple attestation. While it is true that Luke and John may have had access to common written or oral traditions, their use of them is so different that it is clear that the two evangelists did not know each other and never had access to each other's work. And there is no valid argument that the beloved disciple was John son of Zebedee, and that he lived with Mary for a number of years, from which he would have had access to privileged information about the birth of Jesus.
- ii. The preface of the gospel must be interpreted carefully ("I too, having been informed of everything from the beginning, have decided to write a detailed account for you, based on what has been handed down to us by those who were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word...", Lk 1:2-3). Some see this as an argument for the historicity of his infancy narrative. This overlooks the fact that "eyewitnesses" refers primarily to Jesus' companions and apostolic preachers, and has nothing to do with people who were eyewitnesses to Jesus' birth. Moreover, when he uses the adverb "exactly", it is not a question of chronological accuracy, but of logical accuracy. For example, there are a number of chronological inaccuracies in his Acts of the Apostles. On the other hand, he allows himself some literary freedom in order to present a more logical account than Mark's, for example by reversing the order of Mk 1:16-31 on the calling of the disciples to first tell of the miracles of Jesus before the calling of the disciples.

#### B. The Lucan Infancy Narrative

## 1. The Relation of Chs. 1-2 to the Rest of Luke/Acts

Let us begin with the question: Did Luke write his gospel beginning with the infancy narrative? In our analysis of Matthew, we concluded that the evangelist began writing his work with the infancy narrative. But in the case of Luke, the evidence leads us to the opposite conclusion: the infancy narrative was added after the completion of his two works, i.e., the gospel and Acts. Here are the main arguments.

- i. Lk 3:1-2 ("In the fifteenth year of the principate of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, Philip his brother was tetrarch of the land of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, under the pontificate of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness) appears as a true beginning of the Gospel
- ii. Starting the gospel with John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus is the normal starting point of a gospel as we see in Mark and John
- iii. Acts 1:22 (Peter's speech: "...beginning with the baptism of John until the day he was taken from us") limits the gospel to the period of Jesus' ministry
- iv. The genealogy of Jesus placed in ch. 3 would be easily explained if this chapter were the beginning of the first version of the gospel
- v. No element of the infancy narrative is echoed in the rest of the gospel: the infancy narrative could be removed and it would have no impact on the whole gospel.

This being said, there is no doubt that Luke himself added the infancy narrative to his gospel after the fact. This raises a new question: were these two chapters of the child's story composed entirely by Luke, or are they dependent on a number of sources? This is what we will try to clarify in the following analysis.

### a. The theological relationship of ch. 1 - 2 with the rest of the Gospel-Acts

If the theological connection is strong, then Luke was forced to alter his source material to fit his view. If it is not, then the theory of a pre-Lukan source becomes the plausible explanation for the discrepancies between the infancy narrative and the rest of the gospel. This latter case is supported by some biblical scholars. But our analysis leads us rather to conclude that Luke's infancy narrative is a true introduction to the major themes of his gospel. In this respect, it plays the same role as the first two chapters of the Acts of the Apostles in relation to the rest of the work: the latter provide a transition between the period of Jesus and the period of the Church, and the apostles provide this link between the two, while the Holy Spirit intervenes after Jesus' departure to ensure continuity. A similar role is played by the infancy narrative, which provides the transition between the story of Israel (represented by Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna and Mary's hymn about the little remnant of Israel) and the story of Jesus (represented by John the Baptist and Jesus). Thus, if Luke composed his infancy narrative after completing his entire gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, it is understandable that he might have wanted to replicate somewhat his introduction to Acts in his infancy narrative, so that the latter detracts somewhat from the rest of his gospel (while it is forced to follow the pattern of Mark and Document Q), and more closely resembles the atmosphere found in Acts, i.e.

- the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:15.41.67.80; 2:25-27) as at Pentecost or after Pentecost,
- the hymns that play the same role as the discourse of the Acts to explain the events,
- the angelic apparitions (Lk 1:11,26; 2:9) which disappear during Jesus' ministry and reappear in Acts (5:19; 8:26; 10:3; 12:7; 27:23)
- the title "Christ (Messiah) Lord" given by the angels (Lk 2:11), which is repeated in Acts (2:36)
- the parallelism between Jesus and John the Baptist, which repeats the parallelism between Peter and Paul in Acts

The infancy narrative truly reflects a Lucan motif.

### b. The nature and scope of possible sources

What sources did Luke use? There is a plurality of sources. The sources proposed by biblical scholars can be grouped into three types:

- i. There would be a special source for the canticles or hymns, i.e., the Magnificat (1:46-55), the Benedictus (1:67-79), the Gloria (2:13-14) and the Nunc Dimittis (2:29-32). They have their own poetic style and some, like the Magnificat and the Benedictus, are hardly Christian, and could have come from Jewish as well as from Christian Jewish circles.
- ii. Sources for one or more units of ch. 2, i.e. 2:1-20 (the birth of Jesus and the announcement to the shepherds); 2:22-39 (the presentation of Jesus in the temple and the prophecies of Simeon and Anna); 2:41-51 (the young Jesus in the temple). This ch. 2 is totally different from ch. 1 and could exist without it: it has its own introduction and ignores the virginal conception and the identity of Jesus' parents as well as the person of John the Baptist, and seems to have a conclusion in 2:40, so that the account of the young Jesus in the temple (2:41-51) seems an afterthought.

- iii. sources for the ch. 1 narratives around John the Baptist and Jesus. Several biblical scholars propose that the tradition around the Baptist came from his disciples. And some even go so far as to assert that even the material of ch. 1 such as the Magnificat was originally spoken by Elizabeth, that the annunciation was first addressed to Elizabeth (in parallel to the announcement to Zechariah), and that even the presentation in the temple (2:22-39) was initially about John the Baptist (an echo of the Nazarene in Samuel).

All these proposals will be discussed when we comment on the specific passages.

c. The language of presumed sources

To detect the use of a source by an evangelist, one can resort either to content analysis or to linguistic analysis. Unfortunately, the linguistic analysis of Luke's infancy narrative, which has a more Semitic color than the rest of his gospel, has given rise to a fierce debate among biblical scholars without reaching a consensus: for some Luke had recourse to an oral or written tradition, either Aramaic or Hebrew, for others Luke deliberately used the Semitic style of the Septuagint. So we will use the content of the narrative and its thought pattern to detect Luke's sources.

Let us begin with ch. 1. We believe that some elements of the narrative came to Luke in the form of a tradition, for example the names of John the Baptist's parents. Long before Luke, there was a tendency to compare the birth of Jesus to the way the OT presents the conception of certain salvific figures through the use of motifs like the annunciation or the virginal conception. Luke's art was to sew together these various traditions, to flesh them out, to integrate into them faith forms and portraits of John the Baptist and Mary gleaned from the gospel account of Jesus' ministry. It was his sense of parallelism that led him to parallel the conception of John the Baptist with that of Jesus, while taking care theologically to place one below the other. To construct the figures of Zechariah and Elizabeth, he used those of Abraham and Sarah so that the infancy narrative would be a bridge between Israel and Jesus. Once the outline of ch. 1 was completed, Luke would have added and adapted two hymns, the Magnificat and the Benedictus, both of which may have come from a Jewish-Christian community.

The composition of ch. 2 could be explained by the theory of a source. For example, 2:41-51 (Jesus with the temple teachers) could come from a popular tradition of wonderful things happening before Jesus' ministry, similar to the wedding at Cana (Jn 2:1-11). The core of the story following the birth of Jesus seems to come from a source in the form of a series of reflections that Matthew also had access to and that Luke dramatized in his own way: there is a similarity in the story line and theology. In order to connect these various sources, Luke has created connections with his pen (the idea of a census, 2:1-5; the incomprehension of the parents at Jesus' escape from the temple, 2:40; the circumcision of the child and the purification of Mary, 2:21-24). Finally, Luke has added the Gloria and the Nunc Dimittis to this whole.

2. The Internal Organization of Chs. 1-2

Biblical scholars disagree about the structure of the first two chapters. This disagreement probably stems from the failure to recognize that there were two stages in the writing of the infancy narrative in Luke: first a basic narrative written by Luke, and then some later additions by Luke. In analyzing the structure, the following must be taken into account:

- Basically, there are seven episodes: 1) the annunciation concerning John the Baptist; 2) the annunciation concerning Jesus; 3) the visitation; 4) the birth/circumcision/choosing of the name of John the Baptist; 5) the birth/circumcision/choosing of the name of Jesus; 6) the presentation in the temple; 7) the discovery of Jesus in the temple
- All agree that Luke wanted to draw a parallel between John the Baptist and Jesus. The closest parallelism is between episodes 1 and 2 (the two announcements), and between episodes 4 and 5 (the two births)
- Episode 3 (the visitation), which establishes a link between the mother of John the Baptist and that of Jesus, escapes this parallelism.
- There is no parallel in John the Baptist for episodes 6 and 7.
- There are references to the growth and progress of the child in episodes 4, 6 and 7, the first concerning John the Baptist, the other two concerning Jesus
- The hymns fit awkwardly into this analysis
  - a. The second canticle (Benedictus) refers to John the Baptist, while the first (Magnificat) and the fourth (Nunc Dimittis) refer to Jesus

- b. There is a strong parallel between the Magnificat and the Benedictus, but they belong to episodes (3 and 4) that are not parallel
- c. On the level of episodes, the Benedictus and the Nunc Dimittis are close to each other and are all prophetic canticles after the birth of the child and referring to his destiny
- d. The Gloria is more general than the others

As we have proposed, Luke would have composed his infancy narrative in two stages. The first step was to draw a parallel between John the Baptist and Jesus, hence this structure:

- I. Two Announcements of Conception
  - 1. Annunciation of John the Baptist (1: 5-23) and the pregnancy of Elizabeth and a praise to God (1: 24-25)
  - 2. Annunciation about Jesus (1: 26-38) and Elizabeth's praise of Mary's pregnancy (1: 39-45.56)
- II. Two birth stories / circumcision / naming and announcement of future greatness
  - 1. Narrative about John the Baptist (1:57-66) and transitional statement about his future ministry
  - 2. Narrative about Jesus (2:1-27, 34-39) and transitional statement about his future ministry (2:40)

The first diptych consists of two sections of equal length. It culminates in Elizabeth's praise of Mary as the mother of Jesus, an indication that the future greatness of Jesus is superior to that of John. The second diptych makes this superiority of Jesus more explicit: it is no longer a question about the identity of John the Baptist ("What will this child be?"), but a proclamation by an angel that identifies him as Messiah and Lord, followed by a prophecy of Simeon filled with the Holy Spirit.

In a second stage, Luke added important material, but which broke the balance of the whole, especially the diptych motif. The canticles are very beautiful, but awkward in relation to the structure. It was during this second stage that the episode of the young Jesus found in the temple was added, forcing the addition of a second conclusion (2:52).

## II. The Annunciation of the Birth of John the Baptist

### Translation of Luke 1, 5-25

5 In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a certain priest named Zechariah who belonged to the division of Abijah. He had a wife descended from Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 In God's sight they were both upright, blamelessly observing all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord. 7 Yet they had no children, inasmuch as Elizabeth was barren and both were on in year.

8 Now, while Zechariah was serving as priest, during the time that his division was on Temple duty in God's presence, 9 there were lots cast according to the custom of the priesthood; and he won the privilege of entering the sanctuary of the Lord to burn the incense. 10 At this hour of incense the whole multitude of the people was there, praying outside. 11 There appeared to Zechariah an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 On seeing him Zechariah was startled, and fear fell upon him. 13 However, the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard.

13d And your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son,

13e and you will call his name John.

14a And you will have joy and gladness,

14b and many will rejoice at his birth.

15a For he will be great before the Lord,

15b and he will drink no wine or strong drink.

15c And he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb,

16 and he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God.

17a And he will go before Him

17b in the spirit and power of Elijah

17c to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children

17d and the disobedient unto the wisdom of the just,

17e to make ready for the Lord a prepared people."

18 But Zechariah said to the angel, "How am I to know this? I am an old man, and my wife is on in years." 19 The angel responded, "I am Gabriel; I stand in the presence of God. I have been sent to speak to you and announce to you this good news. 20 And behold, you will be reduced to silence and unable to speak until the day that these things will happen, because you did not believe my words which, nevertheless, will be fulfilled in due time."

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, astonished at his delay in the Temple sanctuary. 22 And when he did come out, he was not able to speak to them; so they realized that he had seen a vision in the Temple sanctuary. For his part, Zechariah communicated with them by signs, remaining mute. 23 When his time of priestly service was completed, he went back to his home.

24 Afterwards Elizabeth his wife conceive, and for five months she kept herself in seclusion. 25 "The Lord has dealt with me in this way," she reflected, "in the days when He looked to take away my disgrace among men."

#### Notes

v. 5

- "In the days of Herod, king of Judea". The expression "in the days of" is a Semitism, as in Mt 2:1. Biblical scholars agree that this refers to Herod the Great, who was not only king of Judea, but of all Palestine. Luke probably refers to a part of the whole, just as today we might refer to Holland, a province, as the whole of the Netherlands (see Lk 7:17 and Acts 10:37).
- "a certain (*tis*) priest". The mention of an indefinite priest removes any possibility of seeing a high priest, as does the Protevangelium of James.
- "named Zechariah". Literally: "by name", an expression that appears 25 times in the Gospel of Luke and Acts. In the two books of Chronicles, the name Zechariah appears 7 times as a priest or Levite. The most famous Zechariah is this prophet (son of Berechiah, 6th century BC) who belongs to the list of the twelve minor prophets in the OT. Note that Luke does not make the same mistake as Mt 23:15, who confused this prophet with another Zechariah (son of the priest Jehoiada, 9th c. BC; see 2 Chr 24:20-21), as we see in Lk 11:51. This confusion of the two Zechariahs is found in the Protogospel of James and in Origen. The latter adds this story where Zechariah defends Mary when she goes to the temple and joins the virgins, for which he will be killed between the temple and the altar. This story has played an important role in the patristic tradition on the continuity of Mary's status as a virgin.
- "who belonged to the division (*ephēmeria*)". The word *ephēmeria* can refer either to the period of priestly service (Neh 13:30), or as here a division of serving priests (1 Chr 23:6). Originally there were 24 divisions of priests, but only 4 divisions will return from exile (Ezra 2:36-39; 10:18-22). But it must be assumed that these 4 divisions were later subdivided into 24. According to Josephus (Against Apion II 8 #108), each division contained over 5,000 men. The biblical scholar Jeremias (Jerusalem, 198-206) estimates that there were about 18,000 priests and Levites in Palestine at the time of Jesus. "
- "a wife descended from Aaron". Literally: "wife of the daughters of Aaron". It was not obligatory for a priest to be married to a woman of priestly lineage (priest or Levite), but the rabbinic sources are severe on women of priestly lineage who do not marry a priest.
- "and her name was Elizabeth". Literally: "and her name, Elizabeth", an unusual construction in Luke which is also found in Lk 1:27: "the name of the virgin, Mary". In the OT, the only mention of an Elizabeth is the wife of the high priest Aaron (Ex 6:23).

v. 6

- "In God's sight". For Luke, although for many infertility was a sign of some sin or guilt ("my disgrace among men", Lk 1:25), it is not so in the eyes of God.
- "upright, blamelessly observing all the commandments and ordinances". Literally: "upright, walking in all things...". We are faced with "Semiticised" Greek expressions, an echo of the Septuagint (1 Kings 8:61). Zechariah and Elizabeth are presented in the same way that Matthew presents Joseph as an upright man who makes it his duty to observe the Law.
- "of the Lord". In Luke's gospel "Lord" refers to both God and Jesus. But in the OT atmosphere of the infancy narrative, only two occurrences refer to Jesus (1:43; 2:11).

v. 7

- "Yet (*kai*)". Literally: "and", but it is an adverse "and", because they had no children despite their piety.
- "inasmuch as (*kathoti*)". *kathoti* is an exclusively Lucan word throughout the NT and means: according to that, because, inasmuch as."
- "both were on in year". Literally: "advanced in days", a Hebrew expression. Technically, this is not the reason why they did not have children, but Luke simply means that this is no longer possible.

v. 8

- "while Zechariah was serving as priest (*hierateuō*)". Literally: "while Zechariah in his priesting", a grammatical construction found in Lk 3:21.
- "the time that his division was on Temple duty". Each of the 24 divisions was on duty for one week every half year.

v. 9

- "there were (*egeneto*) lots cast ...and he won (*lagchanō*)". Literally: "it happened he won by lots". This sentence structure, which begins with *egeneto* (it happened) followed by a verb in the finite tense (22 times) or *kai* (and) with a verb (12 times) in Luke's gospel, is a form of semitism. The verb can mean: to draw lots, or to win by lot. Our translation has tried to combine these two meanings. Let us note that during the service period of a division, the distribution of tasks was done by drawing lots. There were four in the morning, i.e. for the burnt offering, for the meal offering, for the incense offering and for the maintenance of the candelabra. In the afternoon there was only the casting of lots for the incense, to fulfill the commandment of Ex 30:7-8 ("Aaron shall burn incense there; morning by morning, when he arranges the lamps").
- "the privilege ...to burn the incense". We have added the word "privilege" to facilitate the understanding of the text. In fact, offering incense was a great privilege that happened only once in a lifetime, because the one who had been chosen by lot to do so became ineligible for the next selection until all the others had had the chance to do so.
- "entering the sanctuary (*naos*) of the Lord". The *naos* refers to the holy place, as opposed to the various courts of the temple and the Holy of Holies where only the high priest entered on the Day of Atonement (see a diagram of the temple at the bottom of the Jerusalem map). The priest would take incense in a bowl and sprinkle it on glowing coals (Mishnah, *Tamid* 3: 6.9; 6: 3).

v. 10

- "the whole multitude (*plēthos*) of the people was there". *plēthos* (multitude) is a stereotypical expression from Luke (25 times) that makes it difficult to imagine the number. Some biblical scholars have deduced that it must refer to the evening incense offering (3:00 p.m.), called the "hour of prayer" by Acts 3:1 and corresponding to the appearance of Gabriel in the OT (Dan 9:21) at the evening sacrifice.
- "praying outside". It must therefore be assumed that the smoking of incense was the signal for the beginning of the prayer. People stood in either the men's court or the women's court, both of which were separated from the sanctuary by the court of the priests (see a diagram of the temple at the bottom of the Jerusalem map). But it is not clear that Luke was familiar with the geography of the temple.

v. 11

- "There appeared".. Literally: "was seen (*ōphthē*)". We are faced with a very Lucan expression, but one that gives little clue as to the manner or reality of the appearance.
- "an angel of the Lord". It is a familiar figure in all the annunciation stories. As mentioned in [Mt 1:20](#), it is not usually a person, an intermediary being between God and men, but a way of describing the divine presence among men. However, Lk 1:19 will identify this character with Gabriel, which corresponds to the postexilic period of angelology where it is now a personal being. This is a new concept, accepted by the Pharisees, rejected by the Sadducees.
- "the right side of the altar of incense". This altar is described in Ex 30:1-0; 37:25-29. Since the temple faced east, the right side of the altar, the place of honor, was on the south side, between the altar and the golden candelabra (see a diagram of the temple at the bottom of the Jerusalem map)

v. 12

- "was startled, and fear fell upon him". We are facing a standard reaction to the presence of the divine (Ex 15: 16; Judith 15: 2; Mt 28: 4; Lk 2: 9; Acts 19: 17).

v. 13

- "Do not be afraid". This is one of the items in the standard patterns in biblical birth announcements where the person making the revelation invites not to be afraid (Mt 1:20; Lk 1:30; 2:10).

- "your prayer is heard". The reference here is to the unspoken prayer of Zechariah and Elizabeth mentioned in vv. 6-7. Indirectly, since the child will bring the sons of Israel back to his Lord, it is also Israel's prayer.
- "And your wife Elizabeth". The style of this part of the text is semi-poetic and we have divided it into three strophes: the first is about the participation and reaction of others, the second announces what the child will be, and the third repeats some themes from the second strophe.
- "you will call his name John". We are faced with a Semitism that reappears in 1:31 (see [Mt 1:21](#)). The name *Yehoḥanan* or *Yoḥanan* ("Yahweh has given grace") was quite common in this period; it is found in the family of priests of the Maccabees (e.g., the grandfather of Judas Maccabees in 1 M 2:2 and John Hyrcanus).

v. 15

- "before (*enōpios*) the Lord". The idea comes from Mal 3:1: "Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me (Heb.: *lēpānāy*, LXX: *pro prosōpou mou*)". By using the preposition *enōpios* (37 times in Luke-Acts), Luke deviates a bit from Malachi, but he will do the same in 7:27, a clue to his loose composition.
- "wine or strong drink". It is a pairing that we find in the OT (Lev 10:9; Judg 13:4; Prov 20:1; Mi 2:11). The term "strong drink" refers to alcohols that do not come from grapes, such as cider or beer.
- "filled with the Holy Spirit". The phrase "filled with" occurs 22 times in Luke/Acts, compared to only once in Mark and Matthew respectively. Note that the Greek term for "Holy Spirit" has no definite article ("a Holy Spirit"), so we are far from a Trinitarian concept. In his gospel, the expression is usually without an article (1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25), the exception being 2:26; in Acts (18 times without an article, 23 times with one).
- "even from his mother's womb". It is a Semitism that can refer to the period of pregnancy (Judg 13:3-5) or to the moment of birth (Ps 22:11[10]). Here it refers to the period of pregnancy.

v. 17

- "go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah". Elijah was known for his ability to perform miracles and his gift of the prophetic spirit, which he would pass on to Elisha (2 Kings 9:15). Just as the phrase "before the Lord" in v. 15 was an echo of Mal 3:1, so our v. 17 is an echo of Mal 3:23 ("Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before (*pro*) the day of the Lord comes"). The pronoun "Him" refers to God, not to Jesus: even if for Luke John the Baptist preceded Jesus, he could not announce through the voice of Gabriel that John the Baptist would precede Jesus when he has not yet informed his reader of the birth of the messiah; he is content with a vague reference to the prophet Malachi where the Lord refers to God.
- "to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children". Luke borrows the expression from Malachi 3:24 and Sir 48:10. He shows a certain freedom from the text of Malachi (the differences from Luke have been underlined), especially with regard to the singular and plural:

Lk 1, 17	Mal 3: 24 (Hebrew)	Mal 3: 24 (Septuagint)
to turn the hearts of the fathers to ( <i>epi</i> ) the children	He will turn (the) <u>heart</u> of the fathers to (the) <u>sons</u>	Who will reunite (the) <u>heart</u> of the father toward ( <u>pros</u> ) (the) <u>son</u>

- "the disobedient unto (*en*) the wisdom of the just". The Greek preposition *en* is normally translated as: in. But because of the parallelism with *epi* (to) at the beginning of the verse, it should be translated: unto the wisdom of the righteous. The mention of wisdom is surprising, because one would have expected a change of behavior, i.e. from disobedience to obedience to the Law. But in the postexilic atmosphere, wisdom has come to be identified with the Law (Baruch 4:1).
- "to make ready ...a prepared people". Grammatically, it is likely that "to prepare" in v. 17e should be read in parallel with v. 17c ("to turn"), and that these two verbs make explicit v. 17a: "he will go before Him". The verb "to prepare" is typical of the Septuagint (2 Sam 7:24; Sir 49:12), but the use of it with "a people who are ready" is odd and can only be explained by a desire to echo Malachi 3:1 applied to John the Baptist, as Luke will do in Lk 7:27.

v. 19

- "Gabriel". This name means: "man of God", or "God showed himself strong". In the OT he appears only in the book of Daniel (8:15-16; 9:21) where he is described as a man. In the apocryphal book of 1 Enoch he is described as one of the four presences (40:2) that look down on the earth from heaven (9:1); he is a holy angel (20:7), above the powers (40:9), in charge of paradise, the dragons and the Cherubim (20:7), with the power to destroy the wicked (9:9-10; 54:6)

- "I stand in the presence of God". There are said to be a total of seven angels in the presence of God (Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Sarial, Gabriel, Remiel, see 1 Enoch 20); see Testament of Levi 8; Ezek 9:2; Tit 12:15; Rev 8:2, 6. On the idea of standing before God, see Job 1:6; Dan 7:16.
- "I have been sent". Note that the Hebrew word for "angel" is *māl'āk*, which means: messenger.
- "announce to you this good news (*euangelisasthai*)". Literally: "to evangelize you". The verb *euangelisasthai* is related to the word *euangelion* which gave us the name "gospel", i.e. good news. The birth of John the Baptist is part of the good news.

v. 20

- "And behold (*idou*)". The expression *idou* occurs ten times in Luke's infancy narrative, including four times in the form *kai idou* (and behold) (1:20.31.36; 2:25), an indication of Semitism.
- "you will be reduced to silence". It seems that he became deaf as well as dumb, because he had to be communicated with by signs (Lk 1:62).
- "my words which (*hostis*)". Luke uses the relative pronoun *hostis* (which often denotes a characteristic quality) as if it were an ordinary relative pronoun.
- "fulfilled". The same formula as Matthew to express the fulfillment of the prophecies.
- "in due time (*kairos*)". The word *kairos* refers to the time chosen by God.

v. 21

- "astonished at his delay". Luke might want to put some pathos into the scene here, unless he wants to reflect the ancient legend of the old man who went to the temple every year with Simon the righteous (high priest around 300 BC) for the Day of Atonement offering, and when one day he did not come out of the temple, Simon knew that his death was near. The Babylonian Talmud (*Yoma* 39b) requires that the priest not linger in the temple sanctuary.
- "in the Temple sanctuary". See [note on v.9](#).

v. 22

- "he was not able to speak to them". Normally, Zechariah would have pronounced Aaron's blessing (Num 6:24-26) with the assistant priest on the steps of the sanctuary (Mishnah, *Tamid* 7:2). Luke's account assumes that Zechariah is alone.
- "they realized that he had seen a vision in the Temple sanctuary". Such a statement would seem illogical if there were not already a tradition of appearance in the sanctuary (see e.g. Josephus, Antiquities, XIII x 3; #282-83, who speaks of divine revelation to the high priest John Hyrcanus while offering incense in the temple sanctuary).

v. 23

- "his time of priestly service". The conclusion of the story of the Annunciation returns to the motives that introduced the story.
- "he went back". Literally: "it happened (*egeneto*)...that he went back (*aperchesthai*)". The construction with *egeneto* is the same as that of v. 9. The theme of departure ends six of the seven scenes of the infancy narrative.
- "to his home". A city of Judea in the hill country (1:39)

v. 24

- "Afterwards". Literally: "after these days".
- "for five months she kept herself in seclusion". The usual way of calculating the time of pregnancy at that time was by lunar months, for a total of ten months (Wis 7:2-3), i.e. 40 weeks or 280 days. Thus, Elizabeth is in her 6th (lunar) month when the annunciation is made to Mary (1:36) and Mary will remain with her for three (lunar)

months (1:56), with time left to return home before the child is born. According to the Protevangelium of James, it is Mary who must isolate herself during these three months from the children of Israel, because she is known to be a consecrated virgin.

v. 25

- "The Lord". Literally: "That (*hoti*), so to me did (the) Lord". The conjunction *hoti* (that) is to be interpreted here as an introduction to a citation.
- "He looked to take away my disgrace among men". Some translations complete "He looked" with "on me", or anticipate the object of the second verb: "He looked on my disgrace to remove it".

### Comment

It is a complete account of God's announcement of John the Baptist's conception and could be structured as follows:

- 1: 5-7 : Introduction of the dramatis personae
- 1: 8-23 : Annunciation of the conception, delivered by an angel of the Lord (Gabriel) to Zechariah in the Temple sanctuary:
  - 8-10: Setting;
  - 11-20: Core
  - 21-23: Conclusion
- 1: 24-25 Epilogue concerning Elizabeth's pregnancy and her praise of God

The structure and stylistic characteristics of the annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist and that of Jesus are so similar (see [the comparative table](#)) that they cannot be accidental. Thus, there are various positions among biblical scholars: 1) Luke would have first composed the account of the annunciation of the birth of Jesus, and on this basis he would have created the account of the birth of John the Baptist; 2) Luke would have first composed the account of the annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist, and the account of the annunciation of the birth of Jesus would have been composed on this basis; 3) the two accounts would have been composed simultaneously. The last two positions open the door to another question: did Luke invent the information about John the Baptist, or did he receive it in whole or in part from a tradition? And would this tradition be complete or would it contain only bits and pieces of information?

#### A. Introduction (1: 5-7)

In this introduction, four pieces of information are provided:

1. The time: during the reign of Herod the Great
2. The name of the Baptist's parents: Zechariah and Elizabeth
3. They are all of priestly descent
4. They are old and Elizabeth is barren

Did Luke invent this information, or does it come from tradition (historical or not)? Let's start with the first item, time: that Jesus' birth was near the end of Herod's reign seems quite plausible. But items two and three are more problematic.

Some biblical scholars have proposed that the association of Zechariah with the priestly lineage comes from the fact that the book of Malachi, to which Luke often refers in speaking of John the Baptist, is addressed to priests and is immediately preceded by the book of Zechariah, while the name Elizabeth comes from the fact that Aaron's sister was named Elizabeth. These arguments are not convincing, especially since Matthew and Mark also use the book of Malachi to speak of the Baptist, but ignore this priestly lineage altogether; and this does not explain certain details, such as the fact that Zechariah was of the division or class of Abia, or the procedures concerning the incense offering.

It is more likely that this tradition about the names of John the Baptist's parents and their priestly lineage, as well as the Herodian date, come from a tradition (historical or non-historical) to which Luke had access. Let us remember that Luke mentions the existence of a group of followers of John the Baptist who continued to exist after the death of Jesus (Acts 19:1-7) and that the Christians in Jerusalem continued to frequent the temple (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 5:21,42; 21:23-26), that among the converts there were priests (Acts 6:7). Traditions about John the Baptist, his priestly lineage and the cult may have been known in these circles.

This being said, Luke does not offer any elaboration on the fact that John the Baptist was a priest. His only interest was that this was a time of preparation for him. Indeed, in his theology, Luke sees the institutions of Judaism as having enabled people to be receptive to the Jesus event. Of course, by the time he writes his gospel, the temple has been destroyed, and its destruction was seen as God's punishment. But for Luke, if there was a conflict between the Jewish

authorities and Jesus, this does not mean that there is an intrinsic opposition between Judaism and the Christian faith; on the contrary, there is continuity. This is why he insists on the Jewishness of Zechariah and Elizabeth, respectful of all Jewish laws and traditions, and of Joseph and Mary. And it is to them, representatives of the best in Israel, that the good news will be announced, a good news that includes both John the Baptist and Jesus, who both belong to the new era.

What about the information that the Baptist's parents were old and that Elizabeth was barren? Here we are probably looking at Luke's theological work that reuses well-known themes around two sets of OT parents. Let us remember that Luke presents John the Baptist as a Nazirite, who will not drink wine or strong drink (1:15). Now a famous OT Nazirite is Samuel and Luke draws a parallel between Samuel's parents and the parents of the Baptist:

#### Lk 1: 5

there was a certain priest named Zechariah... He had a wife... and her name was Elizabeth

#### 1 Samuel 1: 1-2

there was a man... his name was Elkanah... He had two wives: one was called Hannah

Hannah, like Elizabeth, is barren. Elkanah and Hannah are very religious and go to the temple every year. One day, during one of these pilgrimages, while Hannah is praying in the temple, the priest Elijah gives her the revelation that her prayer has been heard. The story of Samuel will recur in the two chapters of the infancy narrative in Luke.

The other set of parents is Abraham and Sarah (Gen 18). Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, Abraham and Sarah are elderly (Gen 18:11). And like Elizabeth, Sarah is also a barren woman. Moreover, as in our story, the divine revelation will be addressed to the father.

Thus, Luke has linked the annunciation story of the birth of John the Baptist with the early history of Israel, especially with the book of Genesis. This is a way of emphasizing continuity: the Jesus event is not a break, but a renewal of the covenant made with the patriarchs.

### B. The Annunciation (1:8-23)

The appearance of the angel takes place in the sanctuary: for Luke, it is important that the good news of the beginning of God's plan of salvation be announced in the place of God's presence.

#### 1. Echoes of Daniel in the Appearance of Gabriel

The figures of Zechariah and Elizabeth evoke those of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis, the first book of Jewish Scripture. The figure of the angel Gabriel evokes the book of Daniel, the last book of Jewish Scripture, where he appears for the last time (Dan 8:16ff; 9:21ff). If Luke was aware of this, then the choice of Zechariah and Gabriel as characters in his narrative was intended to cover the whole of Israel's holy history, from beginning to end.

What is clear is that in his description of the appearance of the angel Gabriel, Luke intends to evoke the atmosphere of Daniel.

- Lk 1:22 ("they realized that he had seen a vision in the Temple sanctuary") speaks of vision (*optasia*), a word used six times in Dan 9-10
- In Lk 1:10-11 ("At this hour of incense...") as well as in Dan 9:20-21 ("...the hour of the evening sacrifice") Gabriel appears at the time of the liturgical prayer
- In 1:13 ("your prayer is heard...") Zechariah expresses a prayer of distress like Daniel in Dan 9:20 ("...as I prayed... as I cried out for mercy before the Lord my God...")
- In 1:12 ("...fear fell upon him") as in Dan 8:17 ("while he was coming I was struck with fear..."; also 10:7) the appearance of Gabriel causes fear
- In 1:19 Gabriel says: "I have been sent to speak to you", just as he says in Dan 10:11: "... understand the words I speak to you... I have been sent to you".
- In 1:13 ("Do not be afraid") and in Dan 10:12 ("Do not be afraid") the visionary is invited not to fear
- In 1:20.22 ("Behold, you will be reduced to silence") and in Dan 10:15 ("I fell on my face to the ground and was filled with fear") the visionary is silenced

Luke takes up the theme of the 70 weeks of Dan 9:24-27 ("Seventy weeks have been appointed for your people and for the holy city, that sin may be ended, that sins may be abolished...") and uses it as a background for Gabriel's annunciation to Zechariah; for him, the time when sin is abolished and eternal righteousness established has now arrived. He takes the eschatological atmosphere of Daniel to create the setting for the annunciation to Zechariah.

#### 2. The Message(13-17)

a. The First strophe (v. 13-14).

This strophe is about the birth announcement and the reaction it will elicit not only from Zechariah, but from many. Earlier, we have presented the typical [structure of birth announcement](#) stories, and the one about John the Baptist is one of the most complete, especially in terms of the content of the message:

<b>John Baptist</b>	<b>Standard message structure</b>
13b Zechariah	a. The visionary is addressed by name
	b. A qualifying phrase describing the visionary
13b Do not be afraid	c. The visionary is urged not to be afraid
	d. A woman is with child or is about to be with child
13d And your wife... will bear you a son	e. She will give birth to the (male) child
13e and you will call his name John	f. The name by which the child is to be called

The angel evokes the joy and gladness that his birth will bring. This joy and gladness is the same as that linked to the resurrection of Jesus ("And as they rejoiced...", Lk 24:41; "So my heart rejoiced and my tongue was glad...", Acts 2:26). As we have mentioned, the Christology attached to the resurrection has been transposed into the infancy narrative.

b. The Second strophe (v. 15-16)

This verse is about the future ministry of the child and what he will do. All that is stated here does not require a special source, but refers to what is already known from his ministry:

- "He will be great" (15a) is simply an echo of "I tell you, there is none greater than John among the children of women" (Lk 7:28)
- "before the Lord" (15a) is an echo of "Behold, I send my messenger ahead of you to prepare your way before you" (Lk 7:28), a reference to Mal 3:1
- "he will drink no wine or strong drink" (15b) is an echo of "John the Baptist came indeed, neither eating bread nor drinking wine" (Lk 7:33), and a reference to Judg 13:4-5 where an angel asks Samson's mother not to drink wine or strong drink, for she will bear a son who will be a Nazirite, a reference also to 1 Sam 1:9-15 where Samuel's mother prays before the Lord and promises that, if God gives her a son, he will be consecrated to Him, and that she did not drink wine or strong drink

"And he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb" (15c). This is the Holy Spirit associated with all the prophets: it is the Spirit who came upon Saul (1 Sam 10:10), through whom David spoke (2 Sam 23:2), and with whom Elijah and Elisha were filled (2 Kings 2:9-16). For Luke, John the Baptist is a prophet, even the greatest of the prophets (Lk 7:28-20:6). In the OT, another way of expressing that the Holy Spirit is given to a prophet is when the word of God is said to have come to someone: "In the second year of the reign of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah, son of Berechiah" (Zech 1:1; see also Isa 2:1; Jer 1:2; Joel 1:1). Luke also uses this expression for John the Baptist at the beginning of his ministry: "In the fifteenth year of the principate of Tiberius Caesar ... the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah" (Lk 3:1-2).

"he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God" (16). To speak of "bringing back" or "turning" to the Lord is a standard way in the OT of speaking of repentance and conversion (Deut 30:2; Hos 3:5; 7:10). Thus, the prophetic activity of John the Baptist will have an impact on Israel, a statement also found in John 1:31: "I came to baptize in water for the purpose of his manifestation to Israel.

c. The Third strophe (v. 17)

"And he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah". This would be an anticipation of a theme common to the synoptics (Mk 9:13: "Well, I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him whatever they wanted to do, according to what is written about him"); it is likely that for Mark this word on Jesus' lips refers to John the Baptist. Moreover, the way he describes his clothing refers to a prophet like Elijah, and his presentation of the Baptist in opposition to Herod and Herodias is similar to Elijah's opposition to Ahab and Jezebel. Finally, the whole of v. 17 can be seen as an allusion to Elijah.

<b>Luke 1: 17</b>	<b>Malachi 3: 1</b>	<b>Malachi 3: 23-24</b>	<b>Sirach 48: 10</b>
17a And he will go before Him	I send my messenger to prepare the way before	I send you Elijah the prophet	[Elijah], it is written, you are destined in time

<p>17b in the spirit and power of Elijah 17c to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children 17d and the disobedient unto the wisdom of the just, 17e to make ready for the Lord a prepared people</p>	<p>me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His Temple</p>	<p>before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the heart of the fathers toward the children, and the heart of the children toward the fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse.</p>	<p>to put an end to wrath before [...] to turn the heart of the fathers toward the children and to restore the tribes of Jacob.</p>
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For Malachi, the messenger who is sent to smooth the way before God (3:1) is Elijah (3:23). The role that Malachi and Sirach assign to Elijah is that of reconciliation before the day of judgment. When Mark 1:2-4 first introduces the person of John the Baptist ("Behold, I send my messenger ahead of you to prepare your way. A voice cries out in the wilderness"), he combines Mal 3:1 ("Behold, I send my messenger...") and Isa 40:3 ("The voice of one crying in the wilderness is heard: Make ready the way of the Lord"). Luke does exactly the same here in his infancy narrative ("to prepare for the Lord a people who are ready", 17). But it is this combination of two texts that makes the sentence a bit awkward.

Vs. 17c and 17d are more difficult to understand. To shed some light on them, remember that strophes two and three provide a clarification to the preceding strophe.

**Statement of strophe 2**

**Clarification of strophe 3**

15a For he will be great before the Lord

17ab And he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah

16 and he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God

17cd to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient unto the wisdom of the just,

Another problem with vv. 17cd is that one would have expected a better parallelism, as in Mal 3:24 ("turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, the hearts of the sons to their fathers"), whereas Luke writes instead: "to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient unto the wisdom of the just". Who are the disobedient? Who are the justs? One possible solution is to associate the disobedient with the children, and the just with the fathers, so that the verse could be written: "to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient (children) to the wisdom of the justs (fathers)"; the idea would be to see in this a form of chiasmus or semantic inclusion, where the last character (righteous) corresponds to the first character (father), and the penultimate character (disobedient) corresponds to the second one (child).

But a more normal solution would be to associate the disobedient with the fathers and the wise with the just in order to respect the parallelism of the sentence which begins with the "good" and ends with the "bad". For in Luke's theology of salvation history, most of the Jews, the patriarchs or fathers, rejected Jesus, while many of the Gentiles, the children of Abraham, welcomed him (Acts 28:25-28). And the evangelist puts these words into Jesus' mouth as he addresses the crowd: "Do not say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father. For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones' (3:8). In the same vein, in Lk 7:31-35 Jesus reproaches the Pharisees and the lawyers for not having welcomed John the Baptist and says to them: "To whom then shall I compare the men of this generation? To whom can they be compared? ...For John the Baptist came, he ate no bread, he drank no wine, and you say, 'He is out of his mind ... But Wisdom was recognized as just by all his children.'" So the welcoming of John the Baptist produces a new generation that possesses the wisdom of the just.

3. Zechariah's Response (18-20) and the Conclusion (21-23)

Zechariah's response fits the [standard structure of birth announcements](#), specifically step 4: An objection from the visionary as to how it will happen or a request for a sign. The scene is strongly colored by the OT. Here Luke repeats Abraham's objection ("How will I know?", Gen 15:8), which refers to his and Sarah's old age. To understand the angel's answer, we must refer to the prophet Daniel, where the angel Gabriel identifies himself (Dan 8:16; 9:21) and mentions that he is standing in the presence of God (Dan 7:16). The sign of being reduced to silence evokes Dan 10:15. Also, the recognition that the angel Gabriel's response to Zechariah reproduces the atmosphere of the book of Daniel makes the question superfluous: why was Zechariah punished in his objection, while a very similar objection on the part of Mary is not punished; the parallel with Daniel required a sign, and Luke found that of becoming mute to copy what happened to Daniel.

The conclusion (vv. 21-23) brings us back to the atmosphere of the temple. The angel Gabriel had promised a positive and a negative thing. The positive thing, the birth of the child, will come true later, while the negative

thing, becoming mute, is happening now. The mention that the people were waiting, and that Zechariah was unable to speak, could suggest that Zechariah was unable to pronounce the blessing on the people. If so, Luke offers us an extraordinary symmetry between the beginning of his gospel, where the priestly blessing cannot be given, and the end of his gospel, where the blessing will finally be given by Jesus, who raises his hands to bless his prostrating disciples before being taken up to heaven (Lk 24:50-52). This ending in Luke picks up on Sirach 50:19-23, which presents Simon son of Onias, the ideal high priest, descending the steps of the sanctuary and raising his hands to bless the congregation of Israel as they bowed down. Now the risen Jesus has replaced the temple and its priests.

#### C. The Epilogue (1: 24-25)

Various theories have circulated among biblical scholars to clarify these two verses: Luke may have had a source on John the Baptist that he split into segments, or he may have omitted parts of his source. Yet everything can simply be explained by Luke's pen and his theology.

First, it is not strange that the announcement of John the Baptist's birth is addressed only to Zechariah, leaving out Elizabeth: this is exactly the case in the Abraham/Sara story. And the transition from v. 23 to v. 24 ("he went back to his home, and Elizabeth his wife conceive..."), which seems too abrupt, is in fact an echo of the story of Samuel's parents: "then he went back home to Ramah, and the Lord remembered Hannah, and she conceived" (1 Sam 1:19-20). Finally, the mention of Elizabeth's five months of isolation is not so obscure: it is not to hide from her entourage, when the pregnancy is not apparent; rather, Luke wants to prepare the sign that the angel will give to Mary: "And behold, your relative Elizabeth, despite her old age, has also conceived a son; indeed, this is the sixth month for a woman who was deemed barren." (1:36). Thus, since Elizabeth's pregnancy was not known, it is the angel who will reveal it to Mary, and this will be a sign for her.

In short, the epilogue that follows the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist is a Lucan composition and does not presuppose any source.

#### D. The Relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus

If Luke composed the infancy narrative using a few pieces of information, why did he place the annunciation narrative of John the Baptist's birth before Jesus'? To answer this question, we need to reconstruct the history of the respective ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus.

Historically, we know that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, and then for a time he was a disciple of John the Baptist, continuing his baptismal ministry. It was only after the arrest of the Baptist that Jesus went his own way in his preaching and healing ministry. Thus, in the Palestine of the late 20s, there were two salvific figures, each proclaiming the imminence of God's eschatological action, and each having died a martyr, after a number of contacts during their ministry and showing a certain harmony in their thinking.

This harmony between the two prophets has created uneasiness in Christian circles because of the risk of confusion. Some have sought to eliminate the memory of the Baptist completely. Others preferred to reinterpret their respective ministries, subordinating one to the other, so that the Baptist became the forerunner of Jesus. From then on, John the Baptist was assigned the role of Elijah through an exegesis of Malachi 3:1.23 ("Behold, I send my messenger...; Behold, I will send you Elijah") combined with Isaiah 40:3 ("A voice cries out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'"). This exegesis not only helped to better situate one in relation to the other, but also to try to convince the still unconverted disciples of John the Baptist. Unfortunately, over time, some of John the Baptist's unconverted followers became hostile to the Christian movement, which accentuated the effort among Christians to subordinate John the Baptist to Jesus. This effort is very clear in John's gospel, which states that the Baptist is not the light (1:8), that he is neither the messiah nor Elijah (1:20-21), and that he must decline while Jesus grows (3:30). His role is simply to bear witness to Jesus (1:7, 30-31).

This development of theological reflection on John the Baptist is reflected in Luke's infancy narrative where he becomes the one who prepares the way for the conception of Jesus. He remains subordinate to Jesus, for Jesus' conception will be greater than his, since it includes the miraculous element of a conception without male parents, whereas in John the Baptist's parents are only old and the mother only barren. When the two mothers meet, Elizabeth praises Mary as "mother of my Lord" and John the Baptist in the womb bears witness with his joy (1:41-46). On the other hand, there is no rivalry between the two prophets, for it is the same angel Gabriel who announces the two conceptions. While the evangelist John makes John the Baptist a proto-Christian, Luke will do something similar by making the Baptist a relative of Jesus on his mother's side, a detail incompatible with Jn 1:33 where John the Baptist says he was completely unaware of Jesus' existence beforehand. Luke's assertion of such a kinship is incomprehensible on the level of genealogy and history, but it becomes intelligible on the level of Luke's symbolic etiology: the movement of the Baptist and that of Jesus are not incompatible, but point in the same direction, and are therefore kin, and the followers of the Baptist and those of Jesus should experience some form of kinship.

### III. The Annunciation of the Birth of Jesus

#### Translation of Luke 1: 26-38

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee known as Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed to a man of the House of David whose name was Joseph, and the virgin's name was Mary. 28 He came and addressed her thus: "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you." 29 Now she was startled at what he said and wondered what such a greeting might mean. 30 But the angel said to her: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.

31a And behold, you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son,  
31b and you will call his name Jesus.  
32a He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High.  
32b And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David;  
33a and he will be king over the House of Jacob forever,  
33b and there will be no end to his kingdom."

34 However, Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have had no relations with a man?" 35 The angel responded,

35b "The Holy Spirit will come upon you,  
35c and power from the Most High will overshadow you.  
35d Therefore, the child to be born will be called holy - Son of God.

36 And behold, your relative Elizabeth, despite her old age, has also conceived a son; indeed, this is the sixth month for a woman who was deemed barren. 37 Nothing said by God can be impossible." 38 Mary answered, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it happen to me according to your word." Then the angel went away, leaving her.

### Notes

v. 26

- "In the sixth month". This is Elizabeth's pregnancy (see [v. 24](#)). Since she isolated herself for the first half of her pregnancy, no one knew about it until it was revealed to Mary.
- "to a city of Galilee known as Nazareth". For Matthew, the annunciation to Joseph took place in Bethlehem, where the family was living, and it was only on their return from Egypt that the family moved to Nazareth. On Nazareth, see [Mt 2: 23](#).

v. 27

- "to a virgin betrothed (*mnēsteuein*) to a man ...whose name was Joseph". Both Luke and Matthew use the verb *mnēsteuein* to describe Mary's marital status. Although Luke is less explicit than Matthew in defining the meaning of the verb, the fact that Mary is both virgin and betrothed means that consent has been exchanged with Joseph, but cohabitation has not yet begun. For an explanation of the custom, see [note on Mt 1: 18](#).
- "a man of the House of David". Matthew clearly specifies that Joseph was of Davidic lineage (Mt 1:20). Here the sentence is less clear, because if we move the punctuation we would have: "a virgin, betrothed to a man, from the house of David", and then "from the house of David" could refer to the virgin. This is what Origen understood, while John Chrysostom attributes the Davidic lineage to both. Grammatically, it is the word "man" that is closest to "house of David", and besides, if Luke intended to designate Mary, he would not have felt the need to reintroduce her in the proposition that follows ("and the virgin's name is Mary"). And elsewhere, it is always David who is of Davidic lineage (Joseph goes to Bethlehem "because he was of the house and lineage of David", Lk 2:4).

Thus, one would look in vain for data in the NT to support the idea that Mary was of Davidic lineage. Besides, Luke, in making Mary a relative of Elizabeth, makes her rather someone from the house of Levi or Aaron (1:5.36). The church fathers were divided on the subject. The various statements about either the Davidic or the Levitical lineage of Mary are primarily theological. For example, non-Jewish authors did not understand how Jesus could be of Davidic lineage when it was not Joseph who fathered him, and therefore felt compelled to see Mary as belonging to the Davidic lineage. On the other hand, those who saw Jesus as a priest looked for Levite ancestors. We have no idea where the [Protevangelium of James](#) found the names of Joachim and Anna as Mary's parents; the account in 1 Samuel 1:2 where Anna is the mother of Samuel may have played a role.

- "and the virgin's name was Mary". See [note on v. 5](#).

v. 28

- "Hail, (*Chaire*), O favored one (*kecharitōmenē*)". These two Greek verbs have the same root. *Chaire* refers to the noun *chara*: joy. *Kecharitōmenē* comes from the verb *charitoō*, a transitive verb that requires a complement to perform its action: to favor someone, to give someone grace; it is the same root as *charis*: grace, favor. If one assumes a knowledge of Hebrew in the narrative, then *kecharitōmenē* virtually translates the name Hannah (*hannā*), which means: filled with grace.

- "the Lord is with you". Literally: "The Lord with you". When the author does not use a verb as here, the sentence has the meaning of a declaration, not a wish: I declare that the Lord is with you. But this sentence should not be interpreted to mean that Jesus is already in her womb.
- v. 29
- "she was startled (*diatarassō*)". The expression is a bit stronger than that of 1:12 (*tarassō*), which was also translated as "being startled." Luke's intention is not to give us a snapshot of Mary's psychology, but to follow the standard pattern of a birth announcement narrative (see step 2 of the standard structure of birth announcements); Mary's reaction is to the great grace or favor the angel announces to her.
  - "might mean". Literally: "might be", with a verb in the optative. This is a tense that only Luke uses repeatedly, even with indirect speech.
- v. 30
- "you have found favour (*charis*) with God". On *charis*, see [note on v. 28](#). The expression "find favour" is a Semitism; e.g., "Noah found favour with the Lord God," LXX: Gen 6:9).
- v. 31
- "And behold". See [note on 1: 20](#).
  - "you will conceive". The participial form in Hebrew in a birth announcement can be understood as a present (already pregnant) or as a future. In Luke, the meaning is a future as in 1:35.
  - "you will call his name". This is a Semitism as in 1:13; see [note on Mt 1:21](#). It is a command, not a simple prophecy of what will happen. Whereas in Mt 1:21.23 it is Joseph who gives Jesus his name, here it is Mary. But there are precedents in the OT for women giving names: Hagar (Gen 16:11), Leah (Gen 30:13), Samson's mother (Judg 13:34), and Samuel's mother (1 Sam 1:20).
  - "Jesus". See [note on Mt 1: 21](#).
- v. 32
- "will be called". "To be called" expresses the identity of a person, and therefore means: what he or she will be. The following two phrases are equivalent and interchangeable: "They will be called sons of God" (Mt 5:9) and "you will be sons of the Most High" (Lk 6:35).
  - "Most High". In the NT, this way of referring to God is found especially in Luke (1:35.76; 6:35; Acts 7:48; etc.).
- v. 34
- "How can this be...?". This question is omitted by some manuscripts such as old Latin of the 4th or 5th century, probably due to a copyist who saw in it a lack of faith on the part of Mary.
  - "since (*epei*)". This causal conjunction appears only here in Luke. But this is no reason to consider it as non-lucan. It is infrequent in all the evangelists (Mt = 3; Mk = 1; Lk = 1; Jn = 2; Acts = 0). Luke on the other hand uses its synonym five times: *epeidē* (Mt = 0; Mk = 0; Lk = 2; Jn = 0; Acts = 3).
  - "I have had no relations (*ginōskō*) with a man (*anēr*)". Literally, "I do not know a man. The verb "to know" (*ginōskō*) is a semitism for sexual relationship (see Mt 1:25: "He did not know her until she bore a son"). The verb "I do not know" is a present tense, but it is a state resulting from past behavior, hence our translation: "I have had no relations." As for the word *anēr*, it refers to the male, the husband, as opposed to *anthrōpos*, the generic man. But here we should not translate *anēr* as husband, for Luke has a more general purpose: Mary knew no man, and therefore she is a virgin (1:27).
- v. 35
- "The Holy Spirit". In the Greek, the name has no article. See [note on Mt 1:18](#) for the justification of the addition of the article in the translation.
  - "will come (*eperchomai*) upon you". The verb *eperchomai* (to come upon) is a Lucan word that appears seven times in Lk/Acts, and only twice in the rest of the NT. In Acts 1:8 it describes the anticipation of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples. This is a common way of translating God's action: "until the spirit is

poured out on us from on high" (Isa 32:15); "and the spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day on" (1 Sam 16:13). There is nothing sexual.

- "power (*dynamis*)". This is a very Lucan word: Mt = 15; Mk = 10; Lk = 17; Jn = 0; Acts = 10. The combination of power and Holy Spirit is also very Lucan (Lk 1:17; 4:14; Acts 1:8; 6:5,8; 10:38). Power and Holy Spirit are synonymous here.
- "will overshadow you (*episkiazō*)". In the commentary, we will discuss the use of *episkiazō* (to shade, to cover with shadow) in the OT to describe God's presence in the sanctuary, and in the transfiguration account to express the fact that a cloud of glory covers the figures with its shadow.
- "Therefore (*dio kai*)". Literally: "And that is why". The expression *dio kai* appears nine times in the NT, including three times in Lk/Acts. It expresses a certain causality.
- "the child to be born (*gennōmenon*)". Literally: 'the to be born'. *Gennōmenon* is the verb *gennaō* in the neuter passive present participle. It means: to beget, when the subject is a man; to give birth, when the subject is a woman. See [note on Mt 1: 1.16](#) and on [Mt 1: 20](#). In Matthew, the point of view in the conception is that of Joseph, in Luke it is that of Mary, and therefore we must speak of "giving birth." Even if the verb is a present participle, its meaning refers to the future, hence our translation "to be born". Why is the participle in the neuter tense? Perhaps the neuter noun *tecknon* (child) is meant.
- "will be called holy - Son of God". See [note on v. 32](#) where we said that the expression "he will be called" is equivalent to "he will be", and therefore his identity as Son of God begins with his conception. This verse is difficult to translate because the adjective holy can either qualify the subject ("The holy child to be born will be called the Son of God") or play the role of predicate ("The child to be born (will be) holy; he will be called the Son of God"). But a close analysis leads us to consider "holy" as a predicate: earlier, in v. 32 we find two predicates (great, son of the Most High), just as we have two predicates here (holy, Son of God). And logically, the child must be called "holy" because the Spirit came upon Mary. Later, the word "holy" will also be used as a predicate for children ("Every male who opens the womb will be holy to the Lord", 2:23). This is also found in the Septuagint (Isa 4:3: LXX "all that are appointed to life in Jerusalem, shall be called holy.").

v. 36

- "And behold". See [note to v. 20](#): this is the exact parallel to what we have here.
- "your relative Elizabeth (*suggenē*)". The word *suggenē* is very vague about the degree of relatedness. It was the English biblical scholar John Wycliffe (14th century) who came up with the idea of "cousin". On this topic, see section: [The Relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus](#).
- "despite her old age ...deemed barren". Both of these factors were mentioned in 1:7 in connection with Elizabeth, but in his objection Zechariah refers only to age.
- "this is (*kai outos*)". For this construction, see Lk 16:1; 20:28.

v. 37

- "Nothing said by God can be impossible". Literally, "For it will not be impossible from God every word (*rēma*)". This maxim from the OT (Gen 18:14; Job 42:2; Zech 8:6) contains several semitisms, such as the double negation and the use of the Greek word *rēma* (word) to reflect the Hebrew *dābār* (word, thing).

v. 38

- "handmaid" (*doulē*). *Doulē* is the feminine form of *doulos*: servant; see Acts 2:18.
- "Let it happen to me". The verb tense is the optative, the expression of a wish. See [note on v. 29](#).
- "according to your word (*rēma*)". The same word *rēma* as in v. 37.
- "the angel went away, leaving her". This is a common formula in angelic accounts of appearances, since such a presence from heaven is temporary (Judg 6:21; Acts 12:10). But it is also a Lucan motif to signal the end of a scene in the infancy narrative. See [note on 1: 23](#).

#### Comment

##### A. The Structure and the Annunciation Pattern

Let's first compare the two annunciation stories.

### Comparative table of the two annunciations

5 In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a certain priest named Zechariah who belonged to the division of Abijah. He had a wife descended from Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 In God's sight they were both upright, blamelessly observing all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord. 7 Yet they had no children, inasmuch as Elizabeth was barren and both were on in year.

8 Now, while Zechariah was serving as priest, during the time that his division was on Temple duty in God's presence, 9 there were lots cast according to the custom of the priesthood; and he won the privilege of entering the sanctuary of the Lord to burn the incense. 10 At this hour of incense the whole multitude of the people was there, praying outside.

11 There appeared to Zechariah an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 On seeing him Zechariah was startled, and fear fell upon him. 13 However, the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard.

13d And your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son,  
13e and you will call his name John.  
14a And you will have joy and gladness,  
14b and many will rejoice at his birth.

15a For he will be great before the Lord,  
15b and he will drink no wine or strong drink.  
15c And he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb,  
16 and he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God.  
17a And he will go before Him  
17b in the spirit and power of Elijah  
17c to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children  
17d and the disobedient unto the wisdom of the just,  
17e to make ready for the Lord a prepared people."

18 But Zechariah said to the angel, "How am I to know this? I am an old man, and my wife is on in years." 19 The angel responded, "I am Gabriel; I stand in the presence of God. I have been sent to speak to you and announce to you this good news. 20 And behold, you will be reduced to silence and unable to speak until the day that these things will happen, because you did not believe my words which, nevertheless, will be fulfilled in due time."

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, astonished at his delay in the Temple sanctuary. 22 And when he did come out, he was not able to speak to

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee known as Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed to a man of the House of David whose name was Joseph, and the virgin's name was Mary.

28 He came and addressed her thus: "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you." 29 Now she was startled at what he said and wondered what such a greeting might mean. 30 But the angel said to her: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.

31a And behold, you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son,  
31b and you will call his name Jesus.

32a He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High.  
32b And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David;  
33a and he will be king over the House of Jacob forever,  
33b and there will be no end to his kingdom."

34 However, Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have had no relations with a man?" 35 The angel responded,

35b "The Holy Spirit will come upon you,  
35c and power from the Most High will overshadow you.  
35d Therefore, the child to be born will be called holy - Son of God.

36 And behold, your relative Elizabeth, despite her old age, has also conceived a son; indeed, this is the sixth month for a woman who was deemed barren. 37

them; so they realized that he had seen a vision in the Temple sanctuary. For his part, Zechariah communicated with them by signs, remaining mute. 23 When his time of priestly service was completed, he went back to his home.

Nothing said by God can be impossible." 38 Mary answered, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it happen to me according to your word." Then the angel went away, leaving her.

Let's take the two stories and analyze them as a diptych (for the numbering of the stages, see the [standard structure of birth annunciations](#)).

**1: 5-25**

**Annunciation about John the Baptist**

Introduction of the dramatis personae: Zechariah and Elizabeth, of priestly family, aged, barren (5-7)

Annunciation of the conception of John the Baptist delivered by an angel of the Lord (Gabriel) to Zechariah in the Temple (8-23)

Setting (8-10): The priestly customs: Zechariah's turn to offer incense.

Core (11-20):

1. Angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah
2. Zechariah was startled
3. The message:
  - a. Zechariah
  - b. Do not be afraid
  - c. Do not be afraid
  - d. You will conceive
  - e. Elizabeth will bear you a son
  - f. You will call his name John
  - g. He will be great before the Lord, etc. (15-17)
4. How am I to know this?  
The angel's response (19)
5. The sign: Behold you will be reduced to silence

Conclusion (21-23): Zechariah emerged from the Temple unable to speak. He went back home.

Epilogue: Elizabeth conceived; she reflected in seclusion in praise of the Lord (24-25).

**1: 26-45.56**

**Annunciation about Jesus**

The angel Gabriel sent to Mary, a virgin betrothed to Joseph of the House of David (26-28)

Annunciation of the conception of Jesus delivered by Gabriel to Mary in Nazareth.

1. Gabriel came to Mary
2. Mary was startled
3. The message:
  - a. Hail...Mary
  - b. Favored one
  - c. Do not be afraid
  - d. You will conceive
  - e. and give birth to a son
  - f. You will call his name Jesus
  - g. He will be great, etc. (32-33)
4. How can this be?  
The angel's response (35)
5. The sign: Behold your relative has conceived.

Mary responded with acceptance and the angel went away.

Epilogue: Mary went to the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth, who was filled with the Holy Spirit and proclaimed the praise of the mother of the Lord. Mary returned home (39-45.56).

Let's comment on the diptych starting with the right side, i.e. the annunciation of the birth of Jesus.

- There is no real introduction, equivalent to 1: 5-7: the presentation of the characters and the setting is reduced to a minimum
- There is no detailed conclusion as in 1:21-23
- There is no atmosphere of the book of Daniel where the appearance takes place in the temple at the hour of prayer
- On the other hand, the epilogue has been expanded with the insertion of the magnificat to become a scene in itself with the visitation
- The real parallel is limited to the angel's message.

What to conclude? The annunciation around Jesus has a simpler structure, and the real parallel is between the core of the annunciation around John the Baptist (1:11-20) and the whole annunciation around Jesus (1:26-38). This suggests that the annunciation itself to Zechariah was created by Luke by analogy to the annunciation of Jesus' birth.

When we now consider the core of the annunciation narrative in the diptych in relation to the standard structure of birth annunciations, we notice that all the stages are present: 1) angel appearance; 2) fear; 3) message; 4) objection; 5) sign. In the message, seven out of the eight items are present (only item "g)" concerning the etymology of the child's name is absent).

From this adherence to the standard structure, two observations can be drawn.

- a. This literary structure explains the entire annunciation narrative, except for the virginal conception, the description of the future fulfillment of the child (32-33.35), and the portrait of Mary (34.38).
- b. Adherence to such a structure raises the question of the historical value of the narrative. If Luke only had a general idea of a birth proclamation, he could have created an entire narrative by incorporating this idea into the standard structure of the OT without the aid of historical data. This would be all the more understandable if in pre-Lucan circles a tradition about the birth of Jesus had developed. We have argued instead that Matthew made use of a pre-Gospel tradition of announcing the birth of Jesus as the Davidic messiah, and Luke may also have had access to this tradition. Thus each evangelist may have developed this tradition in his own way, Matthew developing his story around Joseph because he had a tradition based on the patriarch Joseph and baby Moses in Egypt, Luke developing his story around Mary because he saw the symbolic possibilities of representing the "poor" remnant of Israel (in Hebrew, the *anawim*), unless the Jewish legend (mentioned by Pseudo-Philo, *Biblical Antiquities*, 1st c. modern) about Moses played a role. of the modern era) about Miriam, sister of Moses, who receives an angelic appearance in a dream that informs her that through the unborn child (Moses) of her parents God will save his people.

At this point, let's make one thing clear. Just because the appearance of an angel to Mary is not part of a historical tradition does not mean that some divine revelation of the birth of Jesus should be rejected. Since there are elements that cannot be explained by recourse to the literary structure of birth announcement, such as the virginal conception, we must look for other sources, which may have historical value. Mary may have had some form of experience of divine revelation. To translate all this, Luke would have used what the OT offered him.

## B. The Virginal Conception (1:34)

Twice in v. 27 Luke tells us that Mary was a virgin. Yet there is nothing in the literary structure of the annunciation narratives from the OT figures to suggest such an idea: they will speak of an old or barren person, but never of a virgin. It is time to address this question, not historically (that will be dealt with in Appendix IV), but in terms of Luke's intention in writing his account.

### 1. Does the Present Account Contain a Virginal Conception?

When one reads Luke's account for itself, forgetting the text of Matthew, all the details of his account can be explained in the context of a normal birth, for Luke, unlike Matthew 1:25, does not explicitly say that Mary did not have sexual relations after the annunciation. Theoretically, if Mary and Joseph had sexual relations and the child was naturally conceived, this would not prevent Luke from seeing Jesus' conception as the work of the Holy Spirit on the basis that the angel foretold this conception and that the child would have a unique role as God's son.

However, there is a consensus among biblical scholars that Luke intends to present a virginal conception. First, let us recall that all the evangelists agree that John the Baptist preceded Jesus in their respective ministries, but at the same time they subordinate him to Jesus. Luke has extended this perspective into the infancy narrative with a birth announcement of the Baptist that precedes that of Jesus: one comes first, but the other surpasses him.

- John the Baptist is "great before the Lord" (1:15a), but Jesus is absolutely great (1:32a: no qualifier)
- John the Baptist is "filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb" (1:15c), but the conception of Jesus itself involves the Holy Spirit "coming upon" Jesus' mother (1:35b)
- John the Baptist "prepares a ready people for the Lord" (1:17) but Jesus will reign over the house of Jacob/Israel and has an eternal kingdom (1:33a.b)

But such a demonstration of Jesus' superiority would fall apart completely if Jesus had been conceived normally. Let us remember that Elizabeth was old and barren, and the power of God was manifested in spite of this obstacle by a normal birth. What would be the obstacle for a young and not barren woman who would require God's intervention? It is to a virginal conception that Elizabeth refers when she says to Mary: "Yes, blessed is she who has believed in the fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (1:45); a normal birth would not have required this faith of which Elizabeth speaks.

A study of the literary motifs of the two annunciation narratives also points to a virginal conception. In the first annunciation, Zechariah says, "How shall I know? I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years" (1:18); this is a reference to the obstacle that God's power must overcome. In the second annunciation, Mary says, "How can this be, since I have not had relations with a man? (1:34); this is a reference to the obstacle of her virginity already mentioned twice in 1:27 and which the power of God must overcome. Finally, let us mention a detail from Lk 3:23

("Jesus, in his early years, was about thirty years old. He was the son, it was believed, of Joseph"). This "believed" would have no meaning if for Luke Jesus was the natural son of Joseph.

## 2. Did the Original Account Contain a Virginal Conception?

The question arises because some biblical scholars have suggested that Luke's original account did not mention the virginal conception, and that it was added after the fact: thus in the original account we go from v. 33b ("and there will be no end to his kingdom") to v. 36 ("And behold, your relative Elizabeth..."), and only later in a second phase were vv. 34-35 added ("However, Mary said to the angel, "How can this be..the child to be born will be called holy - Son of God").

This suggestion does not hold water.

- i. The main reason is that vv. 34-35 belong to an essential stage in the [standard structure of the annunciation narratives](#), stage 4, which we have called the objection. Moreover, the absence of vv. 34-35 would destroy the parallelism with the annunciation to Zechariah, which also contains the objection stage. And it is also implausible that Luke would have suddenly added a whole new theological notion and managed to harmonize it with his whole narrative.
- ii. The proponents of the addition think that this solves the problem: why was Zechariah punished by his objection and not Mary? The problem disappears when we admit that we are dealing with a Lucan composition, that for Zechariah he used the setting of the book of Daniel where the latter is silenced, and that for Mary he used the figure of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, whose hymn (1 Sam 2) will be used for the composition of the Magnificat, and therefore afflicting her with anything did not serve his purpose
- iii. the supporters of the addition have also invoked the presence of a different Christology in v. 35 ("son of God") compared to v. 32-33 ("son of the Most High"). But in fact the two titles are synonymous, as shown by an Aramaic fragment from Qumran (4Q243) where they are paralleled. To speak first of sons of the Most High and then of sons of God merely reproduces the sequence of the first creeds, as we see for example in Romans 1:3-4.

One conclusion is obvious: the whole annunciation story was composed by Luke and vv. 34-35 were always part of it.

## 3. The Logic of Mary's Question in 1:34

The various proposals of biblical scholars to explain the question of Mary can be grouped into two categories.

### a. Psychological explanations

In the stages of marriage in Palestine (see [Mt 1:18](#)), Mary has already passed the stage of commitment, awaiting cohabitation. But when the angel tells her that she will bear a son, why does she ask the question "how? Where is the difficulty? Shouldn't she assume that the conception will take place at the time of cohabitation, eliminating of course the naive idea that the question would come from the fact that Mary had had no sexual education?

An old answer is to assume that Mary had already taken the vow of virginity and to rephrase the question: how is this possible, since I will not have sexual relations with a man? This theory has been popular in circles that believe that Mary was a virgin all her life. This theory assumes that her marriage to Joseph was a marriage of convenience in which he committed himself to her vow of virginity and to protect her from possible suitors. Supporting this theory is the image of Joseph as an elderly widower. This theory was very popular at the time when many Christian women entered ascetic and monastic orders to live a celibate life, especially in the 4th century when the persecutions ceased and a new way of living the requirement of martyrdom was sought. The earliest evidence for this theory comes from the East through Gregory of Nyssa in 386, but it appeared in the West through Ambrose and Augustine, and became the classic way of interpreting Lk 1:34. But although such an interpretation makes Mary's reaction intelligible, it is not plausible in the context of Palestinian Judaism: nothing can explain why a twelve-year-old girl would have wanted to enter into a marital contract with the intention of preserving her virginity, and thus not having a child, especially when one knows that not having a child was a "disgrace" (1:25) at the time.

Other biblical scholars have tried to defend the theory of Mary's vow of virginity by referring to the sect at Qumran that placed a high value on virginity and celibacy. In fact, the Qumran scrolls say very little on the subject, and the description of Essene celibacy comes from authors like Josephus, Philo and Pliny, and what is inferred is simply that their celibacy is an extension of the abstinence required of priests before offering sacrifices in the temple. All this is temporary, and the priority remains to produce children to preserve the Zadokite lineage. In any case, all this does not shed any light on the vow of virginity of a village girl who has already entered into a matrimonial contract.

Some biblical scholars have proposed that Mary meditated on Isaiah 7:14 ("Behold, the young woman is with child and will bear a son, and she will call his name Emmanuel"), and understood that the Messiah must be born of a virgin. This explanation is not plausible: first of all, there is no allusion to Isa 7:14 in Lk 1:34, secondly, there is no evidence that the Jews read this passage in a messianic perspective, and thirdly, the passage contains no allusion to a virginal conception.

While rejecting the theory of Mary's vow of virginity, some biblical scholars have proposed that v. 31 is a present tense verb: "you are conceiving and giving birth to a son," and that Mary's question becomes, "How can this be? I have not had sexual relations with a man". Although the verbs with the participial form in Hebrews in the annunciation narratives can be understood as present or future tense, in Luke the verbs are clearly in the future tense. And here, to imagine a present tense would violate Luke's intention to subject Jesus' conception to Mary's free acceptance.

Another proposal by biblical scholars is to imagine that in an original account Mary was simply an unmarried virgin. In such a context Mary's question about the possibility of conceiving in such a situation is self-evident. But Luke would have had an independent tradition in hand, reflected in 2:4-5 (where Joseph is of the House of David, and Mary is his betrothed), and so would have modified the original account, in particular by adding in v. 27: "to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David". All this would have made Mary's reaction in v. 34 incomprehensible, whereas everything was understandable before. Such a proposal poses more problems than it solves: why would Luke have introduced a story related to the Davidic lineage, when it was not mentioned in the original story? This proposal also destroys the parallelism between the two announcements where the objection is part of the basic structure and offers a sign.

In short, neither of these propositions is really acceptable.

b. Literary explanation

This explanation assumes that Mary's response can be clearly explained with the actual text, and it abolishes any response based on the psychological and historical dialogue between the angel Gabriel and Mary. It assumes that we are dealing with a composition by Luke that intends to inform, not Mary, but the reader how the child was conceived and what his identity is.

Vs. 34-35 reflect the standard structure of birth announcements, especially steps 4 and 5 (the objection and the reassurance by a sign). And so the "how" in Mary's mouth and the angel's response is Luke's way of explaining the identity of the Davidic Messiah whose birth has just been announced in vv. 31-33, i.e., son of God begotten by the power of the Holy Spirit. V. 34 vocalizes in Mary's mouth the objection of the reader who has learned in v. 27 that Mary was a virgin; the idea is to invoke a human impossibility that God must overcome. What guides Luke in the writing of his account is the tradition that he receives where the divine plan excludes a human conception of the child. And so, with the conjunction "since" ruling out human intervention, Luke can explain the intervention of God's creative force. Thus, both Mary and the angel are spokespersons for Luke's Christological message and offer us the portrait of the conception of the Messiah as the son of God, a conception not by sexual intercourse (which Mary explains), but the Holy Spirit (which Gabriel explains).

The annunciation of a Davidic Messiah and a son of God by the action of the Holy Spirit is part of a pre-Gospel tradition. It is possible that it was the popular tradition of a Davidic Messiah that later became the vehicle for a Christological affirmation of the begetting of the son of God. In any case, it is from such a tradition that Matthew and Luke composed their birth narratives, each elaborating it in their own way.

C. The Future Accomplishments of the Child (1:32.33.35)

We have argued that Luke follows the standard structure of the annunciation narratives which explain much of his composition. At the same time, we have argued that there are elements that cannot come from this structure, in particular the idea of a virginal conception. Now we must consider another element that cannot be explained by this structure, i.e. the details of the child's future accomplishments. Let us say at once that if Matthew insisted above all on Jesus as the son of David, and that he was not conceived physically through Joseph, of Davidic lineage, but through the action of the Holy Spirit, who made him Emmanuel or son of God (Mt 2:15), Luke does a little of the same, but speaking rather of a Davidic Messiah (vv. 32-33) and, in a clearer way than Matthew, of "son of God" (v. 35).

1. The Davidic Messiah (32-33)

The pre-evangelical tradition that Luke uses probably already contained the theme of the birth of the Davidic messiah, inspired by 2 Samuel 7:8-10, the promise of the prophet Nathan to David, which served as the basis for the messianic expectation. Let us compare Luke's text with Samuel's, underlining the crucial phrases.

**Luke 1: 32-33**

**2 Samuel 7**

32a He will be <u>great</u> and will be called Son of the Most High.	9 I shall make for you a <u>great</u> name...
32b And the Lord God will give him the <u>throne</u> of his father David;	13 I shall establish the <u>throne of his kingdom forever</u> .
33a and he will be king over the <u>House</u> of Jacob <u>forever</u> .	14 I shall be his father, and he will be <u>my</u> son...
33b and there will be <u>no end to his kingdom</u> ."	16 And your <u>house</u> and your <u>kingdom</u> will be made sure <u>forever</u> .

This promise to David is echoed in several royal psalms concerning the coronation and lineage of a Davidic king: Ps 2:7 (which Luke applies to Jesus in 3:22); Ps 89:30 (29): "I will establish his dynasty forever, and his throne for the duration of heaven.

It is possible that the annunciation of a Davidic messiah existed in pre-Christian Judaism, as evidenced by this *pesher* (interpretation of Scripture) found at Qumran. We have placed the selected text of 2 Sam 7 and the Qumran commentary side by side.

## 2 Samuel 7

## 4Q174, line 10-13

11. The Lord declares that He will build you a House. 12 I shall raise up your lineage after you. 13 I shall establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I shall be his father, and he will be my son.	The "he" is the Shoot [ <i>šemah</i> ] of David who will arise with the Interpreter of the Law who [will rule] in Zion in the last days. At is it written, "I shall raise up the fallen hut of David" [Amos 9:11] -- the "fallen hut of David" is he who shall arise to save Israel.
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As can be seen, the Qumran interpretation shifts the emphasis from a succession of kings to a single Davidic king, the messianic seed that will arise in the last days; likewise, it is no longer a succession of endless reigns, but an eschatological description of the last days. Luke does the same thing, but for him it is Jesus who is this seed. In a way, vv. 32-33 are not particularly Christian, except that the expected Messiah is Jesus.

## 2. The Son of God through the Power of the Holy Spirit (35)

It is in the answer to Mary's question that Luke gives us the most Christological aspect of Jesus' identity:

35b The Holy Spirit will come upon you,  
35c and power from the Most High will overshadow you.  
35d Therefore, the child to be born will be called holy - Son of God

Here again we have echoes of the OT such as Isa 11:1-2 ("A branch will come forth from the stump of Jesse...upon it will rest the Spirit of the Lord...") or Isa 4:2-3 ("In that day, what the Lord will cause to sprout...the survivors of Jerusalem will be called holy..."). But Luke combines all these ideas to take us beyond the Jewish expectation into the world of early Christian faith. For the Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High do not come upon a Davidic king, but upon his mother; it is no longer a question of God's adoption of a son at the time of the king's coronation, but of the conception of a son in Mary's womb by the creative power of God.

These are the first creeds that can shed light on what Luke intends to express here, such as Rom 1:3-4

3 Born of the seed of David according to the flesh,  
4 designated Son of God in power according to the Holy Spirit [Spirit of Holiness] as of resurrection from [of] the dead.

Here Paul takes up a pre-Pauline formula. The movement goes from Davidic descent to conclude with "son of God", just as in Luke it goes from the Davidic Messiah (v. 32-33) to conclude with "son of God". In both Paul and Luke the same group of words appear: son of God, power, Holy Spirit. All this is not by chance. For Paul, the Christological moment when Jesus is recognized as the son of God takes place at the moment of his resurrection from the dead, but by the time the gospels are written, this Christological moment has shifted to begin with the baptism of Jesus with the same words (power, Holy Spirit, son of God; see Acts 10:37-38). And now, in his infancy narrative, Luke has moved this Christological moment to begin at Jesus' conception with the same words. However, there is a significant difference: whereas the enthronement of Jesus either at the resurrection or at his baptism involved a symbolic begetting, here in the birth narrative the begetting is more literal: by covering Mary with his shadow the Holy Spirit really begets the child as the son of God. There is nothing sexual about this begetting and the Holy Spirit does not replace the male principle in a sexual relationship with Mary; rather, it is the creative power of God.

When we compare the annunciation to Zechariah and to Mary, the contrasts are striking.

- Elizabeth is barren and God cooperates with the husband to give birth to the child, while Mary is not barren, but rather is a virgin, and thus God's action will be totally her own.
- The annunciation to Zechariah the priest takes place in the temple, in continuity with Jewish institutions, while the annunciation to Mary will take place in Nazareth, a place where there is no expectation in the OT, a sign of the newness of what God is undertaking
- The prophetic spirit filled John the Baptist from his mother's womb, while the Spirit comes upon Mary much as the Spirit of God hovered over the surface of the waters in the creation story, when the earth was deserted and empty, but this time the Spirit fills the emptiness of Mary's womb with a child who is His Son
- In the annunciation to Zechariah, God answers the prayer of the elderly couple who wanted a child, while with Mary, still a virgin, there is no expectation of a child, and so we are faced with the free initiative of God
- The annunciation to Zechariah mentions the evil of not believing ("you did not believe in my words", 1, 17d), while the announcement to Mary is only positive, reflecting a good creation by the Creator

There is, however, an expression in the Christological formulations that has not been mentioned when referring to the Christological moment of Jesus' resurrection or baptism: "will overshadow you". However, the expression appears in Luke's account of the transfiguration (9:34ff. and par.) where the cloud signals the divine presence that covers those present and a voice from heaven: "This is my Son". It is a parallel story to that of the baptism of Jesus: in one case a cloud covers, in the other the Holy Spirit descends; but in both cases the divine voice gives the same message. The baptism reveals to the reader the Christological mystery of divine sonship, while the transfiguration reveals it to chosen disciples. Both accounts offer an alternative way of expressing how God is active in establishing and confirming this sonship. Thus, Luke is correct in placing the two images in parallel: 1:35b and 1:35c.

Thus, for Luke, not only is Jesus the Davidic Messiah who became son of God at his resurrection as Paul asserts, he was son of God from birth.

D. The Portrait of Mary as Handmaid (1:38)

Mary reacts to the angel's response with these words: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it happen to me according to your word". There is no equivalent in the parallel annunciation to Zechariah. And this is not part of the standard structure of a birth announcement. What then did Luke rely on to introduce these words of Mary? The answer lies in what the account of Jesus' ministry says about her.

There is only one real scene in the synoptic tradition in which Mary plays a role, reported by Mark and repeated by Luke and Matthew. Let us compare the text of Mark and Luke, underlining the words in common and italicizing what is particular to each evangelist.

**Mark 3: 20-21.31-35**

**Lk 8: 19-21**

*20 And he came to (the) house and the crowd gathered there again, so that they could not even eat bread. 21 And when they heard, his own people went out to seize him, for they said, "He is out of his mind.*

*31 And come and his mother and his brothers and, standing outside, they sent him (someone) to call him.*

*32 And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Behold, your mother and your brothers and your sisters, outside, are looking for you." 33 And answering them, he said, "Who is my mother, and my brothers?"*

*34 And looking at those who sat in a circle around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers:  
35 he who does the will of God, that one is my brother and (my) sister and (my) mother."*

*19 Now came near him his mother and his brothers, and they could not reach him because of the crowd.*

*20 He was told, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside desiring to see you."*

*21 He, responding, said to them, "My mother and brothers, are those who hear the word of God and do it.*

Mark's presentation of Jesus' family is very harsh: they think he has lost his mind, a way of saying that they are not believers. And Mark in vv. 32-35 creates a kind of opposition between the family of Jesus, who remained outside, and those inside, sitting in a circle around him and on whom Jesus looks, saying: "Here are my mother and my brothers". This replacement of the natural family by the spiritual family could be seen as a rejection, especially when we see that later on Mark (6:4) will have this scene where Jesus complains that a prophet "is despised only in his own country, in his own kindred and in his own house".

Luke, who has this text of Mark in front of him, modifies it completely. First of all, he omits vv. 20-21, where Jesus' family judges that he has lost his mind. He also omits the question in v. 33 of Mark ("Who is my mother, and my brothers?"). In short, he has omitted everything that creates an opposition between Jesus' family and those who believe in him. For Luke, "my mother and my brothers" who listen to the word of God include his natural family. And of course, when he takes up Mk 6:4 (the prophet despised in his homeland, his kinship and his house) in Lk 4:24, he completely eliminates the allusion to kinship and house, so that Jesus only complains that a prophet "is not well received in his homeland". Similarly, when he describes the prayer meeting of the young Christian community of 120 people, he logically includes "Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers." (Acts 1:14).

It is in this context that we must understand why Luke has put these words of our v. 35 on Mary's lips: she is one of those who "listen to the word of God and do it". It is not necessary to assume a special source from which Luke drew: he had only to reflect his description of the only appearance Mary makes in his gospel. He also speaks for a Christian intuition that the virginal conception was the beginning of Mary's confrontation with God's mysterious plan. And in this first confrontation, Luke assures us that Mary showed herself to be the ideal disciple: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it happen to me according to your word".

The whole of vv. 36-38 also sheds light on Mary's reaction. In v. 36 we return to the theme of the six months during which Elizabeth was isolated, so that her pregnancy is a sign and good news revealed to Mary. And Luke returns with a reference to Abraham and Sarah, for when Sarah heard the announcement that she would be pregnant, she laughed, skeptical; then the Lord said, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" (Gen 18:14). This is echoed by Gabriel in v. 37: "Nothing said by God can be impossible". In this context, Luke presents Mary's opposite response to Sarah, a response he borrows in part from that of Hannah, the mother of Samuel: "May your servant find favor in your sight" (1 Sam 1:18). With great art, by ending this scene with an allusion to Samuel's mother, Luke prepares us for the Magnificat, a narrative that parallels Hannah's hymn in 1 Sam 2:1-10.

#### E. Mary and Old Testament Symbolism

Since the annunciation of Jesus' birth is made to a female figure in Luke, and not to a male figure as in Matthew, some biblical scholars have tried hard to see a symbolism from the OT. Let's take a closer look.

##### 1. Daughter of Zion in the Old Testament

Before speaking of Mary as "daughter of Zion", we must first know the meaning of the word. Let us recall that Zion was originally the name of the fortified hill south of pre-Israelite Jerusalem; David's first feat of arms was to conquer the "fortress of Zion" (2 Sam 5:6-10). As the city expanded northward, the name Zion came to designate the hill on which the temple is located, and later it designated the western hill. For practical purposes, Zion could be said to refer to all of Jerusalem.

Now, the expression "daughter of" in a geographical context refers to a subdivision, whether of a country, a city or a village. Thus the cities of a country are the daughters of the country ("daughters of Judah," Ps 97:8; "daughters of the Philistines," Ezek 16:27), just as the daughters of a city or village are suburbs ("Heshbon and its daughters," Num 21:25; "Bethshan and its daughters," Jos 17:11).

The expression "daughter of Zion" appears for the first time in Micah 1:13 (around 700 BC), and would designate a new district of Jerusalem, north of the temple, where refugees had fled from the Northern Kingdom after the fall of Samaria in 721 BC. These were poor and displaced people in need of the prophet Micah's encouragement and message of hope. Eventually, as a part can refer to the whole, "daughter of Zion" came to personify all of Jerusalem, and even all of Judah or Israel. But the connotation of poor and miserable people remained.

Before returning to Mary, we need to examine the term "virgin" as applied to Zion in the OT. The ravaging of nations and cities by foreign conquerors was often compared to the rape of a virgin, and most OT references to Israel or Zion as a virgin refer to a state of oppression, and even misguidance of a person giving in to the love desires of strangers and unfaithful to God.

Therefore, we can conclude that the passages concerning a virgin of Zion or of Israel are quite inappropriate as a background to Luke's description of Mary as a virgin. It is true that she may be one of the poor, but she is not an oppressed woman, and she is totally faithful to the word of God.

##### 2. The Salutation in 1:28

While abandoning the reference to the virgin in the OT, a number of biblical scholars nevertheless see a reference to the "daughter of Zion" in the annunciation to Mary, especially in the greeting of v. 28, interpreted in the light of vv. 30-31.

v. 28	v. 30-31
<i>Chaire</i> ("Hail") = "Rejoice"	"Do not be afraid"
<i>kecharitōmenē</i> ("favored one") = "Full of grace"	"You have found favor ( <i>charis</i> ) with God"
"The Lord is with you"	"You will conceive in your womb"

Let's analyze each of these three lines.

a. *Chaire* as "Rejoice"

It is true that the verb *chairein* literally means: to rejoice. But in the everyday life of the Greek world Luke addresses, it means: hail, hello, good day, greetings, and has been translated in Latin as *ave*, in Syriac of the Peshitta as the equivalent of "peace" (the equivalent of the Hebrew "shālôm" for greeting).

Despite all this, some biblical scholars are adamant about translating *chaire* as "rejoice". According to them, Luke should have used *eirēnē* (peace; Heb. *shālôm*) if he had meant to express a simple greeting, since this is the usual formula in a milieu with a Semitic background. To this we must reply that Luke understands very well the difference between *chaire* and *eirēnē*: when he uses *eirēnē* in 10:5 and 24:36, the vocabulary comes from a source that speaks of peace; but when he is in a free composition, as in the annunciation to Mary, he chooses the standard meaning of *chaire* in the Greek world.

Proponents of "rejoice" use Zephaniah 3:14-17 especially as an argument. Let us take a selection from the text of Zephaniah against the text of Luke.

LXX Zephaniah 3: 14-17	Luke 1: 28.30-31
Rejoice ( <i>chaire</i> ), O Daughter of Zion,...	Rejoice ( <i>chaire</i> ), O favored one,
The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst ( <i>en mesō sou</i> )	the Lord is with you ( <i>meta sou</i> )
Take heart, Zion...	Do not be afraid, Mary,
The Lord your God is in you ( <i>en soi</i> );	for you have found favor with God...
the Mighty One will save you.	You will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son.

We make this connection because the text of Zephaniah with "the Lord is in your midst" and "the Lord is in you" evokes the "Lord is with you" of Luke and the fact that Mary has a child in her womb. But the first question to ask is: when hearing Gabriel's greeting to Mary, would the Greek reader of Luke have perceived a link with the text of Zephaniah which does not speak of the birth of a child at all? In the Septuagint, the verb *chaire* does not always have a salvific meaning, and the Greek reader of Luke hears this word every day with the meaning of "hail", "hello". To take a contemporary example, if someone says "Goodbye" today, will the reader see in it the religious connotation of the word's origin, i.e. God be with you? If Luke really wanted to evoke messianic joy, why did he not use a non-ambiguous verb like *euphranein* (to rejoice), as he does in 15:32 or Acts 2:26, a verb used by Zechariah 2:14-15 ("Rejoice [*euphranein*] O Daughter of Zion, for behold I come and dwell in your midst [*en mesō sou*], says the Lord").

In short, the Zephaniah text's argument with "rejoice" is too flimsy to think that Luke had this passage in mind or that he was thinking of Mary as a daughter of Zion. The verb that follows (*kecharitōmenē*) evokes God's favor through the Messiah and thus may evoke an atmosphere of joy, but this religious joy comes from the whole context, not from *chaire*.

b. "The Lord is with you"

One of the arguments of proponents of the connection between the greeting to Mary and the Zephaniah text is the expression "the Lord is in your midst (*en mesō sou*)" (Zep 3:15). But this connection is extremely dubious. In Zephaniah it is a reference to the Lord in the temple or to His presence with the forces of His people (Ex 34:9). In Luke, on the other hand, it is an ordinary greeting, as in Ruth 2:4 ("Now Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, "The Lord be with you!"); its purpose is simply to reassure Mary that the divine visit is benevolent and that there is nothing to fear. If Luke intends to evoke a passage from the OT, it is rather Judg

6:12: "The angel of the Lord appeared to him (Gideon) and said, 'The Lord is with you, valiant warrior!'," a context similar to that of Mary.

c. *Kecharitōmenē* as "full of grace"

The discussion around this verb is not related to the phrase "daughter of Zion," but it does illustrate the tendency to want to extract from 1:28 every last drop of theology or Mariology. Of course, *kecharitōmenē*, which we have translated as "favored," carries a theological significance: it is usual for a birth announcement narrative to give attributes to the visionary in connection with the message being conveyed. For example, the differences in rank between Ishmael and Isaac is announced by qualifiers such as "Hagar, Sarah's handmaid" (Gen 16:8), and "Sarah, your wife" (Gen 17:15), or "son of David" attributed to Joseph in Mt 1:20, or "valiant warrior" attributed to Gideon (Judg 6:12). Thus, *kecharitōmenē* says something about the annunciation that follows.

*Kecharitōmenē* is the verb *charitōō* in the passive participle, a verb derived from the noun *charis*: grace, favor, charm. It means that Mary was favored by God, i.e. God did her a favor. This explains Mary's subsequent question as to what all this means. The angel's answer goes in the same direction: "You have found favor with God". And as the reader will learn, this grace or favor is that of conceiving the son of God.

Thus, the emphasis is on the favor granted by God, not on any intrinsic quality of Mary. This is why the translation of *kecharitōmenē* as "full of grace," which has come down to us in Latin as *gratia plena*, is too strong and has given rise to all sorts of derivations: that Mary would have possessed all the possible perfections of a creature. This is not Luke's message in the account of the annunciation.

3. The Ark of the Covenant in 1:35?

Many biblical scholars who believe that Luke presented Mary as the "daughter of Zion" also believe that Luke also saw in Mary the Ark of the Covenant or the Tent of Divine Glory. Their argument is the phrase: "power from the Most High will overshadow you [*episkiazein*]" (1:35c). We saw earlier that "to overshadow" is a parallel expression to "the Holy Spirit will come upon you," an echo of the early Christology that appears at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration. Now, at the transfiguration, in addition to the cloud that covers the figures, there is Peter's proposal to build tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. All this evokes the cloud of God's glory that covered the Tent of God's presence in the desert (Ex 40:35; Num 9:18. 22), where the cloud that covered Mount Zion and the festive gatherings of the people (Isa 4:5), the cloud that covered the Israelites when they left their camps in the wilderness (Num 10:34); similarly, God covered his chosen ones with his shadow (Deut 33:12; Ps 91:4), and in the temple, the cherubim covered the ark of the covenant with their wings (Ex 25:20; 1 Chr 28:18).

So, to imagine that Luke, by using the verb *episkiazein* (to overshadow) here about Mary, would propose to see in her the Tent or Ark of the Covenant which the divine presence covers with its shadow, or which contains that divine presence, is all pure supposition. In the OT, it is the cherubim, not God, who cover the Ark of the Covenant with their shadow, not to mention that the Ark and the Tent are not the only places that God covers with his presence.

We do not intend to deny the influence of the OT on Luke. On the contrary, we believe that his presentation of Mary as a mother who gives birth to a son is deeply influenced by OT figures, such as Hannah whose name means: filled with grace. Moreover, by emphasizing Mary's willing acceptance of God's word, Luke begins to associate her with the "poor" (*anawim*) of Israel who are totally dependent on God's support. This is what he will develop with the Magnificat.

IV. The Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth

Translation of 1: 39-56

39 At that time Mary arose and went hastily into the hill country to a Judean city. 40 There she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 and when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby jumped in her womb; and she was filled with the Holy Spirit,

42 Elizabeth proclaimed with a loud cry:

42b "Blessed are you among women,  
42c and blessed is the fruit of your womb.  
43a Who am I  
43b that the mother of my Lord should come to me?  
44a For behold the moment your greeting sounded in my ears,  
44b the baby in my womb jumped with gladness,  
45a Fortunate is she who believed  
45b that the Lord's words to her would find fulfillment."

46 And Mary said:

46b "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,  
 47 and my spirit has found gladness in God my Savior:  
 48a Because He has regarded the low estate of His handmaid -  
 48b for behold, henceforth all generations will call me fortunate,  
 49a Because He who is mighty has done great things for me.  
 49b And holy is His name,  
 50a and His mercy is from generation to generation  
 50b on those who fear Him.  
 51a He has shown His strength with His arm;  
 51b He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.  
 52a He has put down the mighty from their thrones  
 52b and has exalted those of low degree.  
 53a He has filled the hungry with good things,  
 53b and the rich He has sent away empty.  
 54a He has helped His servant Israel  
 54b in remembrance of His mercy,  
 55a as He spoke unto our fathers,  
 55b to Abraham and his posterity forever."

56 Now Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months and then returned home.

### Notes

v. 39

- "At that time". Literally: "in those days". This chronological indication is less well defined than the opening of the previous section with "in the days of Herod". But it is comparable with "in those days" in Lk 2:1 and is typically Lucan.
- "arose (*anistanai*) and went. Luke uses *anistanai* three times as often as the rest of the NT. Here the verb has no specific meaning, except to mark the beginning of the action.
- "hastily". Why the hurry? Various psychological reasons have been suggested (to prevent the neighbors in Nazareth from knowing she is pregnant, or to show her determination), forgetting that we must put ourselves in Luke's perspective: to reflect Mary's obedience to the word revealed by the angel, a plan that includes Mary's pregnancy.
- "into the hill country to a Judean city". Luke has already mentioned that Zechariah did not live in Jerusalem (1:23). It is estimated that only one-fifth of the priests lived in Jerusalem; many lived in Judean cities (Neh 11:3; 1 Mac 2:1). Some biblical scholars find it implausible that a young girl would have undertaken a journey of several days from the hills of Galilee to the plain of Esdrelon, then to the mountains of Samaria before arriving in the hills of Judea. This is to forget that in Luke Judea sometimes means all of Palestine ("Herod, king of Judea", 1:5; "Jesus preached in the synagogues of Judea", 4:44), and therefore includes Galilee.

Luke literally writes: "in a city Judah" (*eis polin Iouda*), without the name of the city being in the genitive, i.e., noun complement (one would have expected instead *eis polin tēs Ioudaias*: "in a city of Judah"); Judah is here in an indeclinable form. Biblical scholars have proposed various explanations (a pre-Lucan source, a source translated from Hebrew, the name of a district of Jerusalem). In our opinion, Luke probably had only vague information about John the Baptist's parents, such as the fact that they were of a priestly class and that many priests lived in the vicinity of Jerusalem. He combined all of this with what certain passages in the OT said, such as 2 Sam 2:1: ("Shall I go to one of the cities of Judah? - *eis mian tōn poleōn Iouda*) where Judah is also in an indeclinable form, or 1 Sam 1:1 ("There was in the mountains of Ephraim") which speaks of the place of residence of Samuel's parents. This dependence on the OT would explain why Luke calls the region Judah, rather than Judea.

Tradition has refused to keep this city anonymous. Since the legend mistakenly made Zechariah a high priest (see [note 1: 5](#)), and since the high priests had a palace near Jerusalem, which the pilgrims of the 6th century identified with the town of Ain Karim, then tradition made this settlement about 5 miles west of Jerusalem the residence of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

v. 40

- "the house of Zechariah". Some have suggested that this is a translation of the Hebrew *Beth-zechariah*, a city mentioned in 1 Mac 6:32, about 12 miles south of Jerusalem. This hypothesis presupposes that Luke is using a Semitic source, which we reject.

v. 41

- "the baby jumped (*skirtan*) in her womb". The sentence begins with *egeneto* as Luke often does: "And it came to pass as ... the baby jumped" (see [note 1:9](#)). Some biblical scholars have seen the word *skirtan* (to jump) as a medical term for the movement of the baby in the womb, and thus would confirm that Luke was a physician (Col 4:14) and author of the gospel. But this verb is a general term for jumping, hopping, like sheep in a field, and it is applied to the baby in the womb in Gen 25:22.
- "she was filled with the Holy Spirit". In 1:15, Gabriel promised that John the Baptist would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. That moment has arrived. Note that in Greek the word spirit has no definite article (see [note 1:15](#)).

v. 42

- "proclaimed (*anaphōrein*) with a loud cry". Literally: "she cried out with a great cry". Luke has allowed himself a form of tautology to translate the feeling of overflowing joy. The poetic parallelism of the first two lines (42bc) suggests that we are dealing with Elizabeth's canticle, a hymn of praise, to be followed by Mary's response, the Magnificat. This idea is supported by the fact that the Septuagint regularly uses the verb *anaphōrein* (to proclaim) in reference to liturgical music (1 Chr 15:28; 16:4.5.42).
- "Blessed (*eulogēmenos*) are you among women". There are two groups of biblical words that must be kept distinct even though they both refer to the blessing of God
  - The passive participial form: in Hebrew *bārûk*, in Greek *eulogētes* or *eulogēmenos*, in Latin *benedictus*, in English: blessed.
  - The adjectival form: in Hebrew *ʾāšrē*, in Greek *makarios*, in Latin *beatus*, in English: fortunate or happy or blessed

The phrases in the NT where the adjectival form of the word occurs are called: beatitudes or macarisms (from the Greek *makarios*). They do not confer a blessing, but recognize an existing state of happiness or blessing; it is a proclamation that approves a situation, often meaning that eschatological joy has arrived. This is the case in Lk 1:45.48. But with *eulogēmenos* we have the passive participial form where God is usually addressed to be blessed by a human being. When this blessing extends to human beings, it takes the form of a wish for them to receive divine favor. Here, in v. 48, the Holy Spirit enables Elizabeth to recognize that this blessing or favor has already been granted by God to Mary. Note that Luke does not write: "more than other women", but "among women", because the same thing can happen to other women (Judg 5:24; Jdt 13:18).

- "blessed (*eulogēmenos*) is the fruit of your womb". As at the beginning of the verse, we have the passive participial form. The expression "fruit of the womb" is a Hebraism (Gen 30:2; Lam 2:20).

v. 43

- "Who am I". Literally: "Whence this to me?"
- "the mother of my Lord (*kyrios*)". The title *kyrios* undoubtedly refers to Jesus. See [note on 1:17](#).

v. 44

- "For (*gar*) behold (*idou*)". We have already discussed the general use of *idou* in [note on 1:20](#). Here we have the expression *idou gar*, which occurs six times in Luke, and only once in the rest of the NT (2 Cor 7:11). Of the six occurrences, three belong to the infancy narrative (here, and in 1:48; 2:10).
- "with gladness (*agalliasis*)". We do not have the word *chara* (joy) here, but *agalliasis*. The two words appear together in the promise to Zechariah in 1:14: "And you will have joy and gladness" (see Acts 2:26).

v. 45

- "Fortunate (*makarios*)". On the difference between *makarios* and *eulogēmenos* (or the adjective *eulogētos*), see [note on 1:42](#). Macarisms are frequent in Luke and Matthew.
- "believed that the Lord's words to her would find fulfillment (*teleiōsis*)". Literally: "believed that that there would be a completion to the things spoken to her by the Lord". It is also possible to translate: "believed because there will be a completion," a translation promoted by the Vulgate and the Reformers. Even if the words were spoken by an angel, they are considered to have come from the Lord. The noun *teleiōsis* comes from the verb *telein* (to complete, to finish). Note that in 1:20, to describe the fact that the angel's promise will be fulfilled despite Zechariah's unbelief, Luke instead uses the verb *plēroun* (to fill, to fulfill), which is much more common to speak of the fulfillment of Scripture. But *telelein* and its synonym *teleioun* are also used (Jn 19:28).

v. 46

- "And Mary said". The majority of the manuscripts support the "Mary" reading. But some of them present rather the reading "Elizabeth". More precisely:
  - a. The old Latin a, b, 1 (the original version) from the 4th to the 8th century
  - b. A manuscript of Irenaeus, [Against the Heretics](#) IV vii 1.
  - c. Jerome's Latin translation of Origen's [In Lucam Homiliae](#) 7 (the mention of Elizabeth may come from Jerome rather than Origen)
  - d. Niceta of Remesiana (Serbia), [De psalmodiae bono](#) (or [De utilitate hymnorum](#)), bishop around the year 400 would be the earliest witness to this reading and would confirm that this version of the Magnificat would be restricted around Italy

The textual witnesses are so limited to the Latin world that they would not have received much attention except for the support of a number of biblical scholars over the past 100 years. It has been suggested that the original text of Luke simply said, "And she said," and the majority of scribes would have interpreted this as referring to Mary, while others would have understood it to mean Elizabeth.

To resolve this issue, consider the following.

- a. Some lines of the Magnificat are more appropriate for Elizabeth ("regarded the low estate" = barren state, "He who is mighty has done great things for me"), while others are more appropriate for Mary ("His handmaid", "blessed" refers to "blessed is she who has believed"). This is not decisive, since it is likely that originally this was a general hymn for the oppressed of Israel, which Luke would have adapted to the present context in v. 48, and this verse fits better with Mary than with Elizabeth
- b. The mention of Mary in v. 46 and the repetition of her name after the Magnificat in v. 56 is strange; the sequence would be more harmonious if in v. 46 it were Elizabeth's name that appeared. But then Elizabeth would be mentioned twice in a row in vv. 41-42 and 46. The solution will be presented in our commentary: the Magnificat would have been introduced by Luke in a second stage and that originally v. 45 was followed by v. 56.
- c. Why did Luke place the Magnificat during the visit to Elizabeth, and not after the annunciation to Mary or after the birth of Jesus? This is probably a literary approach where Mary's hymn is a response to Elizabeth's hymn of praise.
- d. The Magnificat uses Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2 as a model. One might think that Hannah's barren situation is closer to Elizabeth's. But then why did Luke omit 1 Sam 2:5 ("So the barren woman gives birth seven times, and the fruitful mother withers") which would have clearly referred to Elizabeth's situation? The whole of Hannah's hymn may describe Mary's situation.
- e. Proponents of Elizabeth argue that, textually, it is easier to understand that copyists would have replaced Elizabeth's name with that of Mary, who was the object of devotion, than vice versa. But this argument loses all its force if the original text was: "And she said".
- f. The strongest argument for assigning the Magnificat to Mary derives from the fact that in the second stage of his editing, Luke would have inserted both the Magnificat and the Benedictus. His intention was probably to attribute these two hymns of praise to the two recipients of the annunciations, Mary and Zechariah. Why was the Magnificat not inserted after the birth of Jesus, as the Benedictus was after the birth of John the Baptist? It is because the birth of Jesus is already greeted by the angelic canticle, the Gloria, and by the canticle of Simeon, the Nunc Dimitis.

In short, the question is difficult, but the best answer is the one where Luke assigns the Magnificat to Mary.

- "My soul (*psychē*)... and my spirit (*pneuma*)". Although *psychē* and *pneuma* represent two different components of the person in Hebrew and Greek anthropology, here in this parallelism they are identical and mean: "I" (see Job 12:10 "Has he not in his hand the life [*psychē*] of all that exists and the breath [*pneuma*] of every man?" and Wis 15:11 "because he has disregarded Him who created him, who endowed him with a creative soul [*psychē*], who inspired him with the spirit [*pneuma*] of life").
- "proclaims the greatness (*megalunein*)". Literally: "magnify", as in Ps 69:31 ("I will be able ... to magnify him with thanksgiving") and Sir 43:31 ("Who will magnify him to the extent that he is?").

v. 47

- "has found gladness (*agallan*)". The verb *agallan* (to find joy, to rejoice) is here in the aorist tense (past tense and completed), whereas "to magnify" in the previous verse was in the present tense. See [note on gladness in v. 44](#).

- "God my Savior (*sōtēr*)". In the Septuagint, *sōtēr* is applied far more often to God (35 times) than to men (5 times). See Ps 24:5 ("For you, O God, are my Savior, and I have waited for you all day") and Isa 12:2 ("This is my God and my Savior; in him I will put my trust").

v. 48

- "Because (*hoti*)". For proponents of a Hebrew origin to the Magnificat, the conjunction *hoti* would translate the Hebrew *kî*, a conjunction used by several psalms to present the list of reasons to praise God.
- "low estate (*tapeinōsis*)". Other translations of *tapeinōsis* are possible: humility, humiliation, poverty, barrenness. In the OT, the word often describes the persecution or oppression from which God delivers his people (e.g., Deut 26:7; Ps 136:23). In 1 Samuel 1:11 (the story of Hannah), which is almost certainly the background to the Magnificat, *tapeinōsis* translates the Hebrew *ʿōnî*, a word related to the concept of Anawim.
- "handmaid". A repetition of Mary's self-description in v. 38.
- "for behold". A very Lucan expression. See [1:44](#).
- "henceforth (*apo tou nyn*)". Literally: "from now on". This expression appears six times in Luke/Acts and only once elsewhere (2 Cor 5:16). In most cases it refers to the moment of salvation (12:52; 22:18; 22:69; Acts 18:6).
- "call me fortunate (*makarizein*)". The verb *makarizein* (to esteem happy, proclaim or call blessed) is related to the noun *makarios*; see [note on v. 42](#).

v. 49

- "He who is mighty (*dynatos*)". In the Septuagint *dynatos* often refers to a human being, but in Zeph 3:17 the Lord is given this title in the sense of "Mighty Warrior", translating the Hebrew *Gibbôr*.
- "great things (*megala*)". The word *megala* belongs to a set of expressions for God's marvelous achievements in the exodus (Deut 10:21; 11:7; Judg 2:7).
- "holy (*hagios*) is His name". Although *hagios* here is an adjective, it could be translated as a noun: the Holy One. The God of Israel is holy (Lev 11:44-45; 1 Pet 1:16).

v. 50

- "His mercy (*eleos*)". *Eleos* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *hesed*, the love of the covenant God who chose Israel as a partner without merit on his part (Ex 34: 6; 2 Sam 7: 15).
- "from generation to gen". This Greek expression *eis geneas kai geneas* is not found as it is in the Septuagint, but only in the [Testament of Levi](#) 18:8.
- "those who fear Him". Fear is the fundamental reaction of the OT in recognizing the sovereignty of God.

v. 51

- "He has shown His strength". Literally: "has made strength", an expression that is not of Greek origin. This phrase should be read as a parallel to God's other actions: "He scattered the proud", "He brought down the mighty", etc. The beneficiaries of God's power are those who fear him. This strength does not only consist in saving the poor, but also in punishing the enemies.
- "with His arm". This is a common Semitic expression for the great deeds of God in liberating Israel from Egypt: "I will deliver you with an outstretched arm" (Ex 6:6; Deut 4:34).
- "the proud (*hyperēphanos*)". The proud person is the one who looks down on others, because he does not want to look up to God, and in the Bible the proud person is constantly presented as the enemy of God (Isa 13:11).
- "in the imagination of their hearts". The ability to reason is located in the heart (1 Chr 29:18), and therefore it can be the seat of pride: "The pride of your heart had made you drunk" (Obadiah 1:3).

v. 52

- "the mighty (*dynatēs*)". *Dynatēs* can mean "potentate, prince" (Gen 50:4); and they can be rivals of God who is "the only *Dynatēs*" in 1 Tim 6:15, and whom Luke has called "mighty" (*dynatos*) in v. 49.

v. 53

- "the rich He has sent away empty". It is a common idea in the Bible that the wealth of the rich will be taken away (Job 15:29; Jeremiah 17:11). Rather than saying that the rich have been impoverished, their emptiness is mentioned here to contrast with the good things given to the poor in the previous line. The contrasts in Hannah's hymn are more balanced by speaking of the hungry and the full, the poor and the rich. Luke uses the expression "sending away empty" in the parable of the murderous vinedressers (Lk 20:10-11).

v. 54

- "He has helped (*antilambanein*)". The image behind *antilambanein* is that of taking hold of someone in order to sustain him. The same verb is used to describe God taking hold of his servant Israel from the ends of the earth (Isa 41:8-9).
- "His servant (*pais*) Israel". For the state of being a servant, *pais* is used here, rather than *doulos* as in v. 38 and 47. This is the term for Jacob or Israel in the servant songs in Deutero-Isaiah (41:8; 44:1; 45:4; etc.).
- "in remembrance (*mimnēkein*) of His mercy". Literally: "to remember his mercy"; the verb is in the infinitive. The same verb in the infinitive is also used in the Benedictus in v. 72 to define the help given. This could be a Semitic turn of phrase. On mercy, see [note on v. 50](#).

v. 55

- as He spoke unto (*pros*) our fathers. The fact that here we have the preposition *pros* followed by "fathers" in the accusative, and that the sentence that follows has Abraham in the dative instead, has raised doubts among some biblical scholars that 55a and 55b are really parallel. But Luke sometimes makes such variations.

v. 56

- "about three months". The chronology is for Elizabeth's pregnancy, and this number must be added to the six months of 1:26,36. The calculation is based on a presumed pregnancy of ten lunar months (see [note to 1:24](#)), so Mary leaves just before the birth mentioned in 1:57.
- "returned (*hypostrephein*)". The verb *hypostrephein* is Lucan and occurs 33 times in Luke/Acts, compared to four times in the rest of the NT. For the theme of leaving to end a scene in the infancy narrative in Luke, see [note on 1:23](#).
- "home". At the time of the annunciation, Mary had not yet had sexual relations with Joseph, her betrothed, and therefore the cohabitation had not yet begun. If the annunciation took place in her home, and she then went in haste to Elizabeth's house, this means that she returned, not to Joseph's house, but to her parents' house. Luke never specifies when the cohabitation with Joseph began, although he mentions in 2:5 that she traveled with Joseph. It is not certain that Luke was familiar with the matrimonial customs of Palestine, those described in the [note to Mt 1:18](#).

## Comment

### A. The Structure and Composition of the Scene

We have already noted that Luke composed the two annunciation scenes as a well-balanced diptych (see the [parallel structure](#)). The visitation scene breaks this balance, unless we eliminate the Magnificat, which appears as a foreign body: then we would have the whole of 39-45,56 (Mary visits Elizabeth and she proclaims the praise of the Lord's mother) which becomes an epilogue to the narrative of the annunciation to Mary, in parallel to the epilogue to the annunciation to Zechariah. We have therefore proposed that the Magnificat was added to the narrative in a second stage of composition. With this proposal, we reject two approaches put forward by some biblical scholars.

1. We reject the thesis of a pre-Lucan source on John the Baptist which would have begun in 1:5-25 and continued with the scene of the visitation: this thesis has no convincing argument. Apart from the Magnificat, the whole style is Lucan. And the dominant theme of Elizabeth with baby John the Baptist paying homage to Mary and Jesus is part of Luke's theology.
2. We reject the thesis that there were pre-Lucan hymns to Mary in the early Church. First of all, no serious biblical scholar accepts the idea that the Magnificat was composed by Mary herself. Moreover, with the exception of v. 48, which is thought to be an addition by Luke, there is no reference to Mary in the Magnificat, which instead

describes Israel, specifically the poor and oppressed remnant. It was Luke's idea to take this independent hymn and put it in the present context, because he judged that Mary belonged to the poor group. The situation is a little different for the hymn that Elizabeth addresses to Mary. Some biblical scholars have seen it as a pre-Lucan hymn that the early Christians sang in honor of Mary. Unfortunately, this is totally unlikely. For one thing, according to the earliest writings we have, Paul never names Mary or shows any interest in her, and Mark's only scene about her is not very favorable. On the other hand, the text is very Lucan and merely reflects his account of Jesus' ministry (see Lk 11:27-28: "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts you sucked...").

B. The Visitation (1:39-45.56)

1. Introduction: v. 39-41

The visitation begins in v. 40 with Mary's greeting to Elizabeth that ends her isolation. Just as it was by revelation that Mary had learned of Elizabeth's pregnancy, it is also by revelation that Elizabeth learns of Mary's situation, i.e. the action of the baby in her womb jumping of joy, greeting the beginning of the messianic age. Filled with the Holy Spirit, this is the first prophetic action of John the Baptist. This allows Elizabeth to perceive that not only is Mary carrying a child, but that this child is the Messiah. Indeed, had she not learned from the angel that her child would walk before the Lord? So the joy of her child can only be explained if she is the mother of her Lord. Now, as each mother has received the revelation of what God has done for the other, Luke puts in the mouths of each a song of praise, while respecting the superiority of Jesus over John the Baptist, as he did in the two annunciations: what God has done for Mary is greater than what he does for Elizabeth and Zechariah.

2. Elizabeth's canticle: v. 42 and 45

Here we have echoes of OT motifs as well as an anticipation of the motifs that will appear in the gospel.

i. "Blessed are you among women" (42b)

We have similar blessings for women in Israel's history. In her song, the prophetess Deborah proclaims, "Blessed be Yael among women" (Jdg 5:24); similarly, Uzziah proclaims to Judith, "Blessed be you, my daughter...among all the women who are on the earth" (Jdt 13:18). Yael and Judith are blessed because God used physically weak people to destroy a powerful enemy.

ii. "and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (42c)

This blessing is subordinate to the previous one: Mary is blessed among women in that the fruit of her womb is blessed. This reflects the blessing promised by Moses to Israel if Israel is faithful to the voice of God (like Mary to the word of her Lord, 1:38): "Blessed shall be the fruit [LXX: child] of your womb" (Deut 28:1.4). This suggests that this blessing is not only personal, for in conceiving the Messiah, Mary's role will have the dimension of a whole people.

iii. "Fortunate is she who believed" (45a)

This phrase anticipates what Luke will write in 11:27-28: "(a woman in the crowd said), 'Blessed is she who bore you and nursed you,' but Jesus said, 'Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it.'" Like the woman in the crowd, Elizabeth first praised the mother who physically gives birth to the messiah (42bc). But just as Jesus corrected the woman in the crowd by locating the true bonds at the level of faith, so Elizabeth now raises her praise to the level of faith: blessed is she who has believed, i.e. who hears and observes the word of God. This faith concerns the virginal conception, the work of God's unique creative action, without the physical participation of a man. Faith is Mary's contribution, in contrast to Zechariah's initial attitude.

iv. "Who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me? (v. 43)

The expression "mother of my Lord" indirectly evokes Ps 110:1: "The Lord said to my Lord". Luke mentions this psalm both in 24:41-44 and in Acts 2:34. According to the belief in Israel, it was David who wrote this psalm. Now the figure of Elizabeth may have evoked for Luke another scene that features David in 2 Samuel 6, a scene that also takes place in the mountainous region of Judea, as in the visitation. Having asked to bring the ark of the covenant to the outskirts of Jerusalem, David was suddenly afraid, remembering that it had caused the death of a man who had touched it, and he said, "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?" (2 Sam 6: 9). This question is similar to that of Elizabeth, especially since David decided to put the ark in a man's house for three months, just as Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months.

v. For behold the moment your greeting sounded in my ears, the baby in my womb jumped with gladness" (v. 44)

This sentence is a repetition of what we learned in the introduction. It is a typical Lucan technique that we have seen in the two annunciation stories (v. 18 repeats v. 7; v. 34 repeats v. 27). It allows Luke to emphasize and remind us that it is through the prophetic action of John the Baptist in her womb that Elizabeth knows that Mary is the mother of her Lord. In doing so, Luke picks up on a familiar theme from the OT where babies

in the womb anticipate their destiny (see Jacob and Esau in Gen 25:22-23). As a baby, the Baptist has already begun his ministry, the ministry as Luke knows it from the tradition reported by Mark.

3. Conclusion: "Now Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months and then returned home" (v. 56)

We have already discussed the fact that, in an early stage of the infancy narrative, v. 56 followed 39-45 (Elizabeth's hymn). This very brief scene of Mary staying with Elizabeth for three months before returning home has given rise to much speculation by biblical scholars who have adopted a historical and psychological perspective: it is hard to understand why Mary abandoned Elizabeth when she was about to give birth and needed her, unless she rushed back to Joseph to avoid scandalous rumors about the origin of the baby, given that she was three months pregnant. This perspective completely ignores Luke's scenic dramatization of his theology: it is important that Mary disappear from the scene before the birth of John the Baptist is told. For the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus have their own well-balanced storyline, featuring both parents and the newborn child; having Mary in the scene of the Baptist's birth would have broken this balance. So why did Luke create this visitation scene? We saw that the evangelist wanted John the Baptist to be a parent of Jesus in order to fit him into the framework of Christian theology. The visitation allows him to dramatize this kinship.

C. The Lucan Canticles in General

The Magnificat cannot be approached in isolation from all the other Lucan canticles: the Benedictus (1:67-79), the Gloria in Excelsis (2:13-14), and the Nunc Dimittis (2:28-32).

1. The Composition of the Canticles

For now, let's set aside the Gloria for our discussion. In the debate about the origin of the hymns, there are four competing theories.

- a. The hymns would have been composed by those who proclaim them: the Magnificat by Mary, the Benedictus by Zechariah, the Nunc Dimittis by Simeon. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that these completed poetic works were composed on the spot by ordinary people. No serious biblical scholar supports this naive hypothesis.
- b. The hymns would have been composed by Luke at the same time as the whole infancy narrative. Unfortunately, this hypothesis is implausible, for the style of the hymns is too different from the rest of the narrative, and removing them would not only not detract from the flow of the narrative, but would make it more harmonious. Few biblical scholars support this hypothesis.
- c. The hymns were composed by Luke, but added in a second stage to the existing narrative. Several serious biblical scholars support this hypothesis.
- d. The hymns were not composed by Luke, but Luke added them as a second step to the existing narrative. In this hypothesis it is debated whether these hymns originated in Jewish or Jewish-Christian circles, and whether they were composed in the Greek or Semitic language. Many biblical scholars have adopted this hypothesis. For our part, we believe that these hymns are a Jewish Christian composition.

These hymns are reminiscent of the speeches found in the Acts of the Apostles where Luke gives the floor to Peter or Paul in certain scenes in order to clarify the action. This should not be seen as pure fiction, for Luke is trying to represent a certain type of piety that the hymn will express. Thus, he writes in 1:40 that Mary greeted Elizabeth, without giving us any words; the words will be given to us with the Magnificat. In 1:64 he writes that Zechariah began to praise God, without giving us any words; the words will be given to us with the Benedictus. In 2, 34-35 he writes that Simeon blessed the parents and spoke to Mary, the content of what was said appears rather with the Nunc Dimittis.

When we compare the hymns with each other, we note similarities and differences. Among the similarities we can say that they evoke a lot of the OT and certain intertestamental passages, so that we can speak of a mosaic of pieces taken from the OT that have been glued together. On the other hand, the poetic style varies a lot, whereas one finds much more poetic parallelism in the Magnificat than in the Benedictus. On the whole, the style is very Semitic, different from that of Luke, except for particular verses (1:48; 1:76-77).

The connection of the hymn with its context is remarkable, for it is almost independent of it. Indeed, the Benedictus does not apply specifically to the situation of Zechariah or John the Baptist, just as the Magnificat does not apply specifically to the situation of Mary or Jesus. For example, how do phrases like "showed his strength with his arm" (51a), or "he scattered the proud" (51b), or "he brought down the mighty from their thrones" (52a) apply to the conception of a child? If Luke had composed the hymns, he would have ensured greater overall harmony.

The most satisfactory solution to their origin is that these hymns were composed in a non-Lukan circle and were originally intended to praise God's salvific action without specific reference to the events of which Luke speaks in his infancy narrative. When Luke became aware of these hymns, he thought he could integrate them into his main plot with the minimum of effort, especially since the piety and the concept of salvation found in them

corresponded to what could be expected from his main characters; all he had to do was add some fairly rough stitches.

Can we be more specific about the circle of writers behind these canticles? One can see a parallel between these hymns and the Jewish hymns and psalms in the literature that stretches from 200 BC to 100 AD, i.e., 1 Maccabees, Judith, 2 Baruch, 4 Ezra, the thanksgiving psalms at Qumran. Since these hymns exist in both Greek and Hebrew, it is difficult to determine whether those who composed the Lucan hymns were Greek or Hebrew speaking. For example, at times the Magnificat and the Benedictus seem to depend on the Septuagint; this may mean either that they were composed in Greek or that someone familiar with the Septuagint translated them from Hebrew.

## 2. The Canticles and the Jewish Christian Anawim

Let us try to be more precise by proposing that these hymns would have come from Christian Jewish circles, particularly those marked by the piety of the Anawim. Recall that the word Anawim is the plural of the Hebrew word *ʿānāw* (poor, humble, afflicted), and related to the more generic word *ʿōnī* (poverty, humiliation). Originally, the word may have referred to those who were physically poor, but it expanded to include those who no longer put their trust in their own strength, but in God's: the humble, the poor, the sick, the afflicted, the widows and orphans.

In the history of Israel, the Anawim have also been associated with the "small remnant". When the Northern Kingdom, called Israel, was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BC, the Southern Kingdom, called Judah, considered itself to be this small remnant. When the elite of the Southern Kingdom were sent into captivity to Babylon, first in 598 BC and then in 587 BC, those who remained in Palestine tended to consider themselves the small remnant. Eventually, under the impact of multiple defeats and persecutions, the small remnant was redefined not in tribal or historical terms, but in terms of piety and way of life. It is to them that a psalm such as Ps 149:4 refers: "For the Lord favors his people; he adorns the lowly (*ʿānāwīm*) with victory."

The Qumran community can be considered a sectarian group of Anawim. We first hear of them in 1 Maccabees 2:42 when some Hasideans (*Ḥasīdīm* or "pious") joined Mattathias, father of Judas Maccabees, outraged at the blasphemy of a Syrian king and his Hellenized Jewish allies. But the Hasideans distanced themselves from the Maccabees who had political ambitions to establish a dynasty, while their interest was above all religious. The rupture, recounted by 1 Mac 7:9-16, took place around 162 BC, and it seems that around 150 BC, after the Maccabees had usurped the role of high priest (which was to belong only to the Zadokite lineage), a group of Hasideans took refuge at the Dead Sea under the leadership of the Master of Justice, and became what we call the Qumran community. This sectarian group went off on a different tangent from the other Jewish Anawim by having their own interpretation of the Law under the direction of the Master of Justice, by living their community life apart, by opposing the Temple of Jerusalem, by changing their messianic hope to a Messiah of the House of Aaron, in addition to the Davidic Messiah. Nevertheless, this group had in common with the Anawim the sharing of goods, intense piety and the feeling of being persecuted. Among their writings are the *Hodayoth* (Psalms of Thanksgiving), in which the author describes himself as "the poor man" (perhaps the founder of the sect), and which has a great deal of stylistic kinship with the Lucan hymns. For example: "You have, O Lord, given assistance to the soul of the poor and needy against him who is stronger than He. You have redeemed my soul from the hand of the powerful" (1QH v 13-14).

It is possible, therefore, that Luke obtained these hymns from a similar Jewish Anawim community that had converted to the Christian faith. Unlike the Qumran community, it would have remained faithful to the temple and to Davidic messiahship. Considering the figure of Jesus who blessed the poor, the hungry, the afflicted, the persecuted, having been persecuted himself and having decided to put himself in God's hands until death, the Anawim community would have seen in this figure the fulfillment of messianic expectations. The hymns would then have served to express their gratitude to God for what he had accomplished in Jesus. This whole setting sheds light on the meaning of the Magnificat and the Benedictus. It should be noted that there is no deep Christology in these hymns, but only a truly basic Jewish concept of salvation.

Thus, Luke would have taken some of these hymns joyfully celebrating salvation in Jesus and inserted them into his infancy narrative, giving them a specificity that was not the original author's intention: the joy has been moved to apply now to the birth of Jesus and John the Baptist. Luke was all the more justified in his decision because his main characters embodied the piety of the Anawim: Mary is the servant of the Lord, faithful to his word and believing in the fulfillment of what was said to her; Zechariah was an upright priest of the temple who observed without fail the commandments and ordinances of the Lord with his wife, despite the ordeal of being childless; Simeon was an upright and devout older man, waiting for the consolation of Israel.

We should not think that these Jewish Christian Anawim are purely hypothetical. They are the ones Luke describes when he speaks of the Jewish community in Jerusalem (Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-37): they sold their possessions to give to the needy, they were assiduous in prayer and went regularly to the temple, they praised God without ceasing. The fact that the four hymns are proclaimed in the vicinity of Jerusalem perhaps gives us a clue to their place of composition.

Are we to conclude that the hymns are ancient hymns that would have been composed in the Semitic language, i.e. Aramaic or Hebrew, the language of the first Christians in Jerusalem? Not necessarily. The epistle of James is



Gen 29: 32 (Leah after a childbirth)  
Because the Lord has regarded my low estate.

IV Ezra 9: 45 (Zion speaking as a barren woman)  
God heard your handmaid and regarded my low estate,  
and considered my distress and gave me a son.

*48b for behold, henceforth all generations will call me fortunate,*

Gen 30, 13 (Leah after a childbirth)  
Fortunate am I, for all women call me fortunate.

*49a Because He who is mighty has done great things for me.*

Deut 10: 21 (Moses to Israel)  
He is your God who has done great things in you.

Zeph 3: 17 The Lord your God is in you,  
a Mighty One will save you.

*49b And holy is His name,*

Ps 111: 9 Holy and awesome is His name.

*50a and His mercy is from generation to generation  
50b on those who fear Him.*

Ps 103: 17 But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting  
upon those who fear Him

Ps. of His mercy upon those who fear Him.  
Solomon 13:  
11

### Second strophe

*51a He has shown His strength with His arm;  
51b He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.  
52a He has put down the mighty from their thrones  
52b and has exalted those of low degree.  
53a He has filled the hungry with good things,  
53b and the rich He has sent away empty.*

1 Sam 2: 7-8 (Hannah's hymn)  
The Lord makes poor and makes rich;  
He reduces to lowliness and He lifts up.  
He lifts the needy from the earth,  
and from the dung heap He raises up the poor  
to seat them with the mighty,  
making them inherit a throne of glory.

Ps 89: 11 (a hymn praising God's action for the Davidic king)  
You have reduced the proud to lowliness like a wounded thing;  
and by your powerful arm you have scattered your enemies.

Sir 10: 14 He has put down the thrones of princes  
and has seated the humble before them

Job 12: 19 He has overthrown the mighty.

1QM xiv 10-11 You have raised the fallen by your strength,  
and have cut down the high and mighty.

Ezek 21: 31 (26) Having reduced the proud to lowliness,  
and having exalted the man of low degree.

Ps 107: 9 He has filled the soul of the hungry with good things.

### Conclusion

54a He has helped His servant Israel  
 54b in remembrance of His mercy,  
 55a as He spoke unto our fathers,  
 55b to Abraham and his posterity forever."

- Isa 41: 8-9     You, O Israel,  
                   my servant Jacob whom I chose,  
                   seed of Abraham who I loved,  
                   whom I have helped from the ends of the earth.
- Ps 98: 3        He has remembered His mercy to Jacob  
                   and His goodness to the House of Israel.
- Ps. of  
 Solomon 10:  
 4                And the Lord will remember His servants in mercy.
- Mic 7: 20       You will give truth to Jacob and mercy to Israel,  
                   as you have sworn to our fathers from days of old.
- 2 Sam 22: 51   (David's hymn at the end of his life)  
                   Showing mercy to His anointed one,  
                   to David and to his posterity forever.

a. Introduction (46b-47)

The original hymn, said to have been composed by a Jew who became a Christian, celebrated the general salvation in Jesus Christ. The author probably believed that what the prophet Habakkuk (3:18) was looking for had now been realized. Luke, on the other hand, put this hymn on Mary's lips because he considered her to have been the first Christian disciple and spokesperson for the Anawim. He probably felt justified because he could find several precedents in the OT, such as Hannah, the mother of Samuel, who sang the Anawim hymn. And he could also let Mary speak of salvation, for once associated with the death/resurrection of Jesus, this salvation was now associated with the birth of Jesus. As a representative of the Anawim, she can proclaim the presence of the Messiah, a truth revealed to her. Even though Luke gives Mary much prominence with all these first person verbs, he never loses sight of the fact that this prominence is a gift from God: Mary has "found favor with God".

b. First strophe (48-50)

Let us begin with v. 48. We have already pointed out that this verse is an insertion by Luke into the original hymn, where he reuses its vocabulary, such as servant (v. 38) or blessed (v. 45), which is also found in Hannah's hymn. The term "lowly estate" is usually applied in the OT to the barren woman, but Luke applies it to Mary who is not barren, but a virgin. For Luke, it is similar, because both situations represent an obstacle to having children (it is necessary to avoid projecting onto virginity the noble status that it will have in later Christianity). With the terms "handmaid" (i.e. a female slave) and low status, Luke associates Mary with all those poor people in the OT who can only rely on God's strength, whether they are childless women or oppressed people.

In vv. 49-50 we find the traditional language of the Anawim, e.g., "the Mighty One (*ho dynatos*)". In the OT, as seen in Zephaniah 3:17, God shows his power as a warrior in the battle to save Israel. For the Jewish Christian Anawim, this saving power was manifested in Jesus in his actions in his ministry (Acts 2:22). In the words of Mary, this power refers to the power of the Most High who overshadowed her in the conception of Jesus. All this illustrates the angel's statement: "Nothing said by God can be impossible" (1:38).

Another example of reinterpretation is v. 49b: "And holy is His name". In the OT, the perception that God is holy (Ps 111:9) comes from a statement of the God of the covenant (Lev 11:44-45). For the Jewish Christian Anawim, Jesus crucified and risen was the embodiment of God's holiness (Acts 3:14; 4:27,30). To Mary this holiness was revealed when she was told that the Holy Spirit would overshadow her and that she would bear a son, and he would therefore be holy.

As for the statement "and His mercy is from generation to generation on those who fear Him", a common theme in the OT, Mary can testify to this through her personal experience.

c. Second strophe (51-53)

In the second strophe, the motives for praising God are less personal and become more general. Vv. 52-53 have a certain proximity to the song of Hannah (1 Sam 2), which perhaps explains the parallelism of the verses (the powerful versus the lowly, the hungry versus the rich) with a form of Semitic inclusion. V.51

escapes this parallelism somewhat, for it extends v.50 ("those who fear Him") to speak of the situation of the Anawim who rely on God to show the strength of his arm, and thereby oppose the proud.

It is surprising that all the verbs are in the past tense (aorist in Greek), as if the salvation had taken place, even though Jesus had not yet been born. It should be remembered that this is a composition of a Jewish Christian Anawim after the death and resurrection of Jesus, expressing his feelings about the power of God who has scattered the proud and the powerful, the rulers and the princes who had gathered against his anointed one, i.e. the Messiah, and has exalted him to his right hand (Acts 4:24-27). By putting these words on Mary's lips, Luke projected onto Jesus' conception the post-paschal soteriological vision: with Jesus' conception, the victory had already begun.

Poverty and hunger are primarily spiritual in the Magnificat. But they are also physical, as the first Christians attest. The first followers of Jesus were from Galilee, the land that suffered from the lack of landowners, and the breeding ground for the first revolts against the oppression of occupation and the burden of taxation. The first Christian communities in Jerusalem were so poor that Paul had to organize a collection to help them (Gal 2:10; 1 Cor 16:1-4). An echo of the Christians of the Jewish Diaspora comes to us from the epistle of James who denounces the rich (5:1-6). For his part, Luke is the evangelist who most addresses the question of wealth (6:24-26; 12:19-20; 16:25; 21:1-4), an echo no doubt of his own community. With the Magnificat, he anticipates a number of themes in his gospel where wealth and power are not real values before God. By introducing it as a leitmotif, he already begins to speak of the scandal of the cross as part of the good news. And since he has made Mary the model of discipleship, it is only fitting that he places this hymn in the mouth of the one who described herself as a "handmaid", i.e. a slave woman.

d. Conclusion (54-55)

It is now clear that the Jewish Christian Anawim sees himself as belonging to the new remnant of Israel that God has rescued, in memory of his covenant of mercy. This is consistent with the theme at the beginning of the hymn where Mary proclaims praise for her Savior. For this Anawim, "Abraham and his descendants" represents all of Israel. But Luke expands this notion of the sons of Abraham when the prophet John the Baptist, who jumped of joy in his mother's womb, proclaims: "God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones" (3:8); henceforth, the sons of Abraham include all peoples.

Thus ends this scene where two great figures met. Elizabeth's shorter song praised Mary as mother, and Mary's longer song transferred the praise to God who plays the main role in the drama of salvation. And this scene also confirmed the respective destinies of John the Baptist and Jesus.

V. The Birth and Naming of John the Baptist; Zechariah's Prophecy

Translation of Luke 1: 57-80

57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. 58 When her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown His great mercy to her, they rejoiced together with her.

59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. 60 "No, you don't," his mother intervened, "He is to be called John!" 61 But they argued with her, "There is no one in your family with that name." 62 So they made signs to the father to find out what he would want the child called. 63 He asked for a writing tablet and astonished all by inscribing, "John is to be his name." 64 With that, Zechariah was able to open his mouth; and with his tongue at last freed, he began to speak in praise of God. 65 This brought fear upon all their neighbors, and all these events were the talk of the whole hill country of Judea. 66 All stored up what they heard in their hearts, wondering "What then is this child going to be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

67 But Zechariah his father was filled with the Holy Spirit, so that he uttered this prophecy: (in *italic* what was probably added by Luke to the hymn)

- 68a "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel:
- 68b Because He has visited
- 68c and accomplished the redemption of His people,
- 69a and has raised up for us a horn of salvation
- 69b in the House of David His servant,
- 70 as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old:
- 71a salvation from our enemies
- 71b and from the hand of all those who hate us,
- 72a Showing mercy to our fathers
- 72b and remembering His holy covenant,

- 73 the oath which He swore to our father Abraham,  
To grant us 74 that, without fear,  
Delivered from the hands of our enemies,  
We might serve Him 75 in holiness and justice,  
Before Him all the days of our live.
- 76a *But you, child, will be called prophet of the Most High;*  
76b *for you will go before the Lord to make ready His ways,*  
77a *to grant to His people knowledge of salvation*  
77b *in the forgiveness of their sins.*
- 78a Through the heartfelt mercy of our God  
78b by which there has visited us a rising light from on high,  
79a appearing to those who sat in darkness and the shadow of death,  
79b guiding our feet into the way of peace.

80 And as the child grew up, he became strong in Spirit, He stayed in the desert until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

### Notes

v. 57

- "the time came for Elizabeth to give birth". Literally: "for Elizabeth the time of her bearing was fulfilled". The Semitism "the days of her bearing were fulfilled" is used in Gen 25:24 to describe Rebekah giving birth to Jacob and Esau, and also by Lk 2:6 to describe the birth of Jesus. The time mentioned here is after Mary's three-month stay (1:56). On the ten lunar months of pregnancy, see [note on 1: 24](#).
- "bore (*gennan*) a son. The same verb *gennan* is used in the promise to Zechariah in 1:13.

v. 58

- "her neighbors and relatives heard". Elizabeth's pregnancy was unknown, because she had isolated herself (1:24) and only Mary learned of it by revelation after six months (1:36).
- "the Lord had shown His great (*megalunein*) mercy to her". Literally: "the Lord magnified his mercy to her". This is the same verb that is used at the beginning of the Magnificat and that we have translated as: "proclaim the greatness" (1:46). Luke's description could be an echo of Lot when he proclaims in Gen 19:19: LXX "Your servant has found mercy before you, and you have magnified your justice which you have done for me".
- "they rejoiced together with her". Both with her and for her. See Gen 21:6 on Sarah's laughter.

v. 59

- "On the eighth day". Although circumcision may have originally been performed at puberty, the biblical law specifies the eighth day (Gen 17:12). This practice was observed for Isaac (Gen 21:4) and for Paul (Phil 3:5). According to what is known of the Jewish custom, witnesses were required and a blessing was pronounced.
- "they came to circumcise". Literally, "It happened (*egeneto*) ...they came". Another construction with *egeneto* (see [note on 1: 9](#)). Circumcision could be performed by a man or a woman (Ex 4:25).
- "the child (*paidion*)". The word *paidion* is used four times in this section (59, 66, 76, 80). It is used for the newborn in Gen 17:12; 21:8, and also in Mt 2 (see [note on Mt 2: 8](#)) for Jesus - see Lk 2: 17.27.40.
- "to name him ...after his father". Literally: "to call him by the name of his father". The use of the preposition *epi* (by) with the verb *kaloun* (to name, to call) is attested in the Septuagint text of Neh 7:63. It is not known whether it was customary to name the child on the occasion of circumcision at that time, although this seems to be the case for Moses in the rabbinic tradition. In patriarchal times, the child was named at birth (Gen 4:1; 1:3; 25:25-26), but even then the naming and circumcising of the child was done in close proximity (Gen 17:5 and 10; 21:3 and 4). The custom of naming the child after the father is attested in the second century CE according to the legal documents of Wadi Murabba'at.

v. 60

- "his mother intervened". In the patriarchal era, the mother as well as the father could give his name to the child (see [note on Mt 1: 21](#)), but in NT times this was usually the right of the father. The indication that Mary would give the name Jesus to her child because of the virginal conception is an understandable exception (see 2:21).
  - "He is to be called John". Since Zechariah is mute, he could not inform Elizabeth about the angel's request. Luke probably wants his reader to see this as a spontaneous decision by Elizabeth and a confirmation of God's wonderful plan.
- v. 61
- "no one in your family with that name". Yet the name John is well known in priestly circles (John, the grandfather of Judas Maccabees, John Hyrcanus), and Elizabeth was of priestly lineage (1:5).
- v. 62
- "they made signs ". Luke assumes that Zechariah is not only mute, but also deaf (1: 22.64).
- v. 63
- "astonished". Indeed, since Zechariah was deaf, he did not hear Elizabeth say his name, so people were surprised when he chose the same name as his wife.
- v. 64
- "With that" (*parachrēma*). This word *parashrēma* (immediately) is typically Lucan (17 occurrences out of a total of 19 in the NT).
  - "Zechariah was able to open his mouth; and with his tongue at last freed". Literally: "His mouth was opened and his tongue". This is a zeugma, i.e. a figure of speech where the verb affects two words that are not on the same semantic level; for the verb "to open" is not appropriate for a tongue.
  - "he began to speak in praise of God". Zechariah regains the use of speech, and his first action is to praise God, which is appropriate in the circumstances.
- v. 65
- "This brought fear ". Literally: "fear came". Luke not only likes this Greek construction, but also this theme. Along with Zechariah (1:12) and Mary (1:30), he mentions fear in the face of an impressive divine intervention.
  - "all their neighbors ...all these events ...the whole hill country". Luke wants to emphasize the magnitude of the events (the surprising name given to the child and the father regaining speech), as he demonstrates by inserting a hymn of praise. A similar reaction will follow the birth of Jesus (2:17-20). On "hill country", see [note 1: 39](#).
  - "were the talk of (*dialalein*)". The verb *dialalein* appears only here and in 6:11 throughout the NT.
- v. 66
- "All stored up what they heard in their hearts". Literally: "All who heard stored them up". This is a typically Lucan theme (2:19; 3:15; 5:22); a similar formula is found in 1 Sam 21:13; Dan 1:8; Mal 2:2.
  - "What then is this child going to be?" The use of the neuter "what" rather than "who" suggests that the issue is the child's role. The conjunction "then" (*ara*) is common in Luke.
  - "the hand of the Lord was with him". The expression "hand of the Lord" is a particularity of Luke (see Acts 11:21).
- v. 67
- "But Zechariah his father". Luke contrasts Zechariah with "all who heard" and wondered what the child would be; Zechariah knows. Luke again identifies Zechariah as the subject, which is consistent with the thesis that Luke adds in vv. 67-79 in a second stage of his editing.
  - "filled with the Holy Spirit". In Greek, "spirit" has no article here (see [note 1: 15](#)).
- v. 68

- "Blessed be (*eulogētos*)". Literally: "Blessed". Elizabeth's hymn began with the verb *eulogēmenos*, while Zechariah begins with the adjective *eulogētos* (see [note on 1: 42](#) for the translation). Since the hymn is addressed to God, the blessing is an exhortation, and so the meaning is: "blessed be", rather than "blessed is".
- "Because (*hoti*)". The conjunction *hoti* introduces the motif of praise, as in the Magnificat (see [note on 1: 48](#)).
- "visited (*episkeptesthai*)". The verb *episkeptesthai* (to examine) may have the connotation of inspecting and supervising; but in biblical Greek it refers to God's gracious visit, helping his people. This usage is frequent in the [Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs](#) (Levi 4:4; Judah 23:5; Asher 7:3), a work that betrays Jewish Christian influence with a vocabulary parallel to the Benedictus.
- "accomplished the redemption of His people". Literally: "he made redemption", a Semitism, though the expression is not found in the biblical Greek. It must be assumed that redemption is from enemies (71a) or "from the hand of enemies" (74).

v. 69

- "raised up (*egeirein*) for us a horn of salvation". A raised horn is an OT metaphor probably derived from the image of the ox or bull standing alert in all its strength, and subsequently referring to the horned helmet of the victorious warrior. This fits well with the Jewish expectation of a triumphant messiah from the house of David. To express the idea of raising a horn, the Septuagint uses the verbs *hypsoō* (to lift), *epairein* (to raise), *exanatellein* (to spring up), whereas here we have the verb *egeirein* (to awaken, to rise), used in the imagery of God raising people (judges, priests and kings). Its use in the Jewish Christian canticle suggests that the "horn of salvation" was personified in Jesus the Savior whom God raised up (Lk 7:16; Acts 4:10,12). There is a parallel here with the Magnificat (1:47). The variations around "savior" and "salvation" (*sōtēr, sōtēra, sōtērion*) is peculiar to Luke and frequent in the infancy narrative.
- "David His servant". In the Bible, the *pais* (servant) of God is Israel, as in the Magnificat (1:54). The only other instance where David is called a servant is in Acts 4:25. Nevertheless, this is well attested in Judaism contemporary with the early Christians, especially in the prayers (1 Mac 4:30; 4 Ezra 3:23; the fifteenth blessing of the [Shemoneh Esreh](#)). It continues in the Christian liturgy used by the [Didache](#) ix 2.

v. 70

- "by the mouth". The use of this expression to designate an oracle in the OT appears in 2 Chr 36:22, in reference to the words of Jeremiah. In the NT, it is a peculiarity of Luke and is attested in particular in the speeches associated with the primitive community of Jerusalem (Acts 1:16; 3:18,21; 4:25).
- "holy prophets from of old". This is good Greek style and sounds like Acts 3:21. Luke likes the adjective "holy," and the phrase "of old" appears elsewhere in the NT only in Acts (3:21; 15:18; see LXX Gen 6:4). The phrase "holy prophets" is found only in the late Septuagint (Wis 11:1); see also 2 Baruch 85:1.

v. 71

- "salvation". See [note on v. 69](#).
- "from our enemies". In the psalms, these are pagans hostile to Israel or personal enemies of the psalmist.

v. 72

- "Showing mercy ...remembering". Literally: "to make mercy ...to remember". These two infinitive verbs without an article in the Greek define God's help and present it primarily as a result, rather than an intention; this reflects a Semitic construction (see [note on 1:54](#)). The phrase "to make mercy with" reflects a Hebrew expression for goodness (*hesed*) in God's covenant, which here and in 1:50 is translated into Greek as "mercy."
- "remembering His holy covenant". With *hesed*, the Hebrew also uses the verb "to keep" in addition to "to make." The words "mercy" and "covenant" reflect two facets of the same reality: it is within his covenant that God expresses his mercy or goodness. The expression "holy covenant" begins to appear only in the intertestamental period (1 Mac 1:15.63). The parallelism with the following verse indicates that it refers to the covenant with Abraham and his descendants.

v. 73

- "oath". As in the Magnificat ([note 1:55](#)), the grammar does not reflect the parallelism between "oath" (accusative) and "covenant" (genitive), yet they are indeed in apposition. For the oath is part of the covenant with Abraham

(Gen 17:4). God took an oath (Gen 22:16-18), and the words that follow simply recall that oath (Gen 26:3; Deut 7:8). See also the parallelism between "covenant" and "oath" in reference to David in Ps 89:4.

- "to grant". This infinitive is accompanied by the article and interrupts the sequence of infinitives without article begun in v. 72 (see [note on v. 72](#)). We have here rather an explanatory infinitive to express the content of the oath (see LXX Jer 11:5 where this time the oath concerns the promised land).

v. 74

- "without fear (*aphobōs*)". This adverb precedes and modifies the two verbs "delivered" and "we might serve".
- "Delivered". This past participle modifies the underlying subject "we" of the infinitive verb (serve), a correct Greek construction.
- "enemies". See [note on v. 71](#).
- "We might serve (*latreuein*)". Literally: "to serve". Unlike the verb *doulein*, the verb *latreuein* in the Septuagint and the NT often carries a religious note and a note of cultic service (Ex 3:12), especially in relation to the God of the covenant (Deut 11:13).

v. 75

- "in holiness and justice". This pair of names appears in Wis 9:3, an echo of the Hebrew *'emet* and *tāmīm*, an expression often translated as "truth and justice." (Jos 24: 14; Judg 9: 16.19). These are attributes of the covenant.
- "before (*enōpion*) him". The verb "to serve" governs both the pronoun "him" in v. 74 and the expression "before him". The preposition *inōpion* in the Gospels is almost exclusively Lucan.

v. 76

- "called". Or "acknowledged as", because the name expresses what the child is (see 1: 32.35).
- "the Most High". See [note on 1: 32](#). The phrase "prophet of the Most High" does not appear in the OT, but in the [Testament of Levi](#) 8:15 in reference to a king "who shall arise in Judah and establish a new priesthood after the manner of the Gentiles". Since this scripture has Jewish Christian features, it could be Jesus.
- "go before the Lord ". This is what was promised to John the Baptist in 1:15, 17.
- "to make ready". We have here an infinitive without article, which will be followed in v. 77 by an infinitive with an article (to grant), the same construction as in v. 79 ("appearing... guiding"). The verbs are complementary, describing the same basic action.

v. 77

- "knowledge of salvation". This is not a phrase from the OT where it would be knowledge of God. "Knowledge" here is defined as "experience"; salvation is the experience of forgiveness of sins.
- "forgiveness of their sins". Again, this is not a phrase from the OT, although it does speak of forgiveness. The clearest parallels are found in Qumran. This expression is very Lucan (8 occurrences out of a total of 11 in the NT). These verses display too much Christian language for the song to come from the non-Christian circle of disciples of John the Baptist.

v. 78

- "heartfelt mercy (*splanchna*)". Literally: "the innermost parts of mercy". The word *splanchna*, often translated as "the bowels of mercy", refers to the upper inner parts of the body, i.e. the heart, lungs and liver, which were thought to be the seat of emotional control. The idea is that this mercy is really felt deep in the heart. The expression is found in the Testament of Zebulun 7:3; 8:2; Col 3:12 presents a similar idea with "sincere mercy". What has been done by sincere mercy? It seems to be all of the above.
- "has visited (*episkeptesthai*)". On the verb *episkeptesthai*, see [note on v. 68](#). The problem here lies in the textual criticism between a verb in the past tense ("has visited") and a verb in the future tense ("will visit"). In support of the past tense there is a very large number of manuscripts, among them: the codex Sinaiticus 2nd correction, Alexandrinus, Ephraemi Rescriptus, Bezae, etc., the old Latin, the Byzantine lectionary. In support of the future we find some important codices like the original version of the Sinaiticus, the Vaticanus, and a great number of

minuscules. In textual criticism, the most difficult reading is the one usually preferred. Now, the difficult reading is that of the verb in the past tense, because being still in Mary's womb, Jesus cannot have already visited us. It is this reading that should be preferred, because it is easier to imagine that a copyist has modified a verb originally in the past tense by a future tense, noting that Jesus cannot have already visited us, and perhaps also under the influence of the two verbs in the future tense that precede, than to imagine that a copyist has modified for an unknown reason a verb originally in the future tense to introduce a verb in the past tense.

- "a rising light (*anatotē*) from (*ex*) on high (*hypsous*)". The Greek phrase *anatotē ex hypsous* can also mean: "a Messiah from the Most High [God]," i.e. sent from the Most High. The word *anatotē* (the arising, the rising) may be a name for the Messiah as witnessed by LXX Zech 3:8 6:12, whereas the Hebrew speaks of the "branch" or "shoot of David" (*šemaḥ*). However, the term *anatotē* literally means: the rising, just as we see in Mt 2:2 with the expression: "his star at his rising." (see [note on Mt 2: 2](#)). The attribute "from above" and the reference to darkness in the next line, which suggests a contrast with light, leads us to think that Luke intends to describe the light of heaven at its rising; and Matthew's analogy suggests a star at its rising. Of course, ultimately it is about the Messiah. Some Psalms (102:20; 144:7) use the expression "from above" to describe the highest heaven from which God intervenes to offer help to those on earth.

v. 79

- "appearing (*epiphainein*)... guiding (*kateuthynein*)". The verb *epiphainein* has given us the word: epiphany. Both verbs are in the infinitive, the first without an article, the second with an article; this is the same combination as in v. 76 ("to make ready... to grant"). They express the result of the visitation by the Messiah.

v. 80

- "Spirit". It is difficult to determine whether this is really the Holy Spirit. But so far John the Baptist has been so closely associated with the Holy Spirit that the capital letter seems appropriate.
- "day of his public appearance (*anadeixis*)". The verb *anadeixis* means: "to reveal" and "to appoint", and thus there is an atmosphere of appearance that God prescribed to John the Baptist. The use of the word "day" to designate a period of time reflects the Semitic style.

#### Comment

As in the two annunciations, we have in the two births of John the Baptist and Jesus a diptych with parallel motifs: the circumcision/attribution of the name is accompanied by the announcement of the future greatness of the child, in relation in the case of the Baptist to the wonders surrounding the choice of the name, in relation to his birth in the case of Jesus. This beautiful balance is somewhat broken by the hymns added in a second stage, the Benedictus for John the Baptist, the Nunc Dimittis for Jesus.

#### A. The Birth and Naming (1:57-66.80)

The birth of John the Baptist is concentrated in two verses marked by the OT atmosphere of barren wives to whom God gives the joy of fertility. V. 57 echoes the birth of Esau and Jacob by Rebekah (Gen. 25:24), while v. 58 echoes the aftermath of Isaac's birth by Sarah: "God gave me cause to laugh" (Gen. 21:6); Mary was the first to learn of the pregnancy and came to greet Elizabeth, and it is now the turn of the other parents to come and rejoice with her.

In vv. 59-66, Luke emphasizes that the conception and birth of John the Baptist is a divine work. He does this in two ways.

#### 1. The marvelous events surrounding the birth of John the Baptist

While Zechariah knows from the angel Gabriel that the birth of John the Baptist is the work of God, those around him do not know. How do they find out? First, through the miraculous event where Zechariah, deaf and dumb, and therefore not having heard his wife's choice of name, chooses the same name for the child (for the reader of Luke, there is also the fact that Elizabeth gives the child the same name that Gabriel asked for, even though Zechariah was unable to communicate this information to her). Then, by the miraculous event where Zechariah who regains speech.

#### 2. Everything that the angel Gabriel announced is coming true

#### **Annunciation by Gabriel**

13e and you will call his name John.

#### **It has been fulfilled**

60b He is to be called John

14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth 58b they (relatives and neighbors) rejoiced with her.

20 you will be reduced to silence and unable to speak until the day these things happen 64 Immediately, Zechariah could open his mouth; and, his tongue finally freed, he began to speak

In v. 80 Luke gives us a stereotypical summary of John the Baptist that is only semi-biographical. About the Baptist, he knows that he began his career in the wilderness, and so he says of him, "he remained in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance." He knows that he played a semi-prophetic role during his ministry, and so "he became strong in the Spirit" to prepare for that role. Luke's presentation echoes passages in the OT, such as the one about Isaac, son of Abraham and Sarah, about whom it is said, "the child grew" (Gen 21:8), such as the one about Samson about whom it is said, "the child grew, and the Lord blessed him, and the Spirit of the Lord began to accompany him" (Judg LXX 13:24-25), such as the one about Samuel about whom it is said, "the child grew up in the presence of the Lord" (1 Sam 2:21). For Luke, John the Baptist relives the history of Israel.

## B. The Benedictus (1:67-79)

Like the Magnificat, the Benedictus most likely comes from a circle of Christian Jews who share with their Jewish brethren the military language of the Psalms and even that of the Qumran War Scroll (1QM), except that now God has intervened, and the Messiah has come. This circle has the same mentality of the Anawim as the one who composed the Magnificat: they are hated by their enemies (71, 74), they sat in darkness and the shadow of death (79), and God's deliverance is the sign of his merciful covenant with his people (72-73), for they are the "remnant" who have remained faithful in holiness and righteousness (75). There is no developed Christology in the hymn that will appear later in the NT. Several clues lead us to situate this circle in the Christian community in Jerusalem, the one described by Luke in Acts 2, a community filled with the Holy Spirit and with an emphasis on prophecy.

### 1. The Setting and the Structure

#### a. The Setting

We have already noted that the Benedictus appears as an addition by Luke in a second stage of his gospel writing. If the hymn were omitted, the whole of 1:57-66 would end smoothly with v. 80. Another clue to the addition is that in v. 64 Zechariah opens his mouth to praise God, but the content of this praise does not appear until v. 67.

The scene was composed with a certain parallelism with the scene of the Magnificat.

<b>Magnificat</b>	<b>Benedictus</b>
The scene ends with a hymn of praise for what God has done, a hymn sung by Mary who received the announcement of Jesus' birth	The scene ends with a hymn of praise for what God has done, a hymn sung by Zechariah who received the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist
Luke adds a few lines to the hymn to make it appropriate to the present context (Mary as a handmaid), with a verb in the future tense about the role of the figure mentioned in the previous scene ("all generations will call me fortunate", 48)	Luke adds a few lines to the hymn to make it appropriate to the present context with a verb in the future tense about the role of the figure mentioned in the previous scene ("you will go before the Lord to make ready his ways", 76)
It is by being filled with the Holy Spirit that Elizabeth was able to perceive the grace with which Mary was favored	It is while being filled with the Holy Spirit that Zechariah pronounces his prophecy about John the Baptist
Mary is praised for her preparatory role in the coming of Jesus	John the Baptist is praised for his preparatory role in the coming of Jesus

We mentioned that the whole of vv. 57-66 was intended to show that what the angel Gabriel had announced was now coming true. The hymn will refer to another of the angel's annunciations that is coming true, that of John the Baptist's role to "prepare for the Lord a people who are ready"; now Zechariah knows that it is now a matter of preparing the way for Jesus.

#### b. The Structure

Like the Magnificat, the Benedictus resembles a hymn of praise, and thus has three parts:

##### i. An introduction praising God (68a)

- ii. The body of the hymn giving a list of reasons for praise, beginning with "because" (68b), continuing with two well-balanced strophes (6b-71b; 72a-75), and a third strophe added in reference to John the Baptist (76a-77b)
- iii. The conclusion in 78a-79b that recapitulates some of the motifs of the hymn

Despite the similarities with the Magnificat, the Benedictus does not appear to be by the same author, and grammatically it is a long sentence with the main verbs in vv. 68-69 ("has visited", "has accomplished the redemption", "has raised up a horn of salvation"). It is only at the level of the parallelism of ideas that we can make a division into two main strophes, each beginning with the reminder of God's mercy for the people or the fathers, and then continuing with what he has done for us, in fidelity to his promises to David and to Abraham. After this evocation of the OT, Luke mentions John the Baptist who is the bridge between the OT and Jesus. The hymn ends with the eulogy of Jesus (78-79) through which the theme of God's visitation, with which the first strophe began, and the theme of God's mercy, which began the second strophe, are realized.

While Luke borrowed this hymn from the Anawim circle in Jerusalem that celebrated in Jesus the fulfillment of OT expectations, he added vv. 76-77 to apply it to the context of John the Baptist's birth. But he added it to the hymn in such a way as to respect the order: the OT, John the Baptist, Jesus; John the Baptist ends the cycle of the Law and the Prophets, he precedes Jesus, but the climax is reached with the Messiah who ends the hymn for which the Baptist only prepares the coming.

## 2. The Contents

Like the Magnificat, the Benedictus is a mosaic whose pieces are inspired by the biblical and intertestamental background. Here is a list of them.

### **The Background of the Benedictus**

#### Introductory Praise

*68a Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel:*

Ps 41, 14; (Ending of three books of the psalter)  
72, 18; 106, Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,  
48

1 Rois 1, 48 (David, after Solomon's enthronization)  
Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,  
who today has placed one of my offspring upon my throne  
and has allowed my eyes to see it.

1QM xiv 4-5 ("Hymn of Return" after victory):  
Blessed be the God of Israel,  
who keeps mercy toward His covenant  
and the appointed times of salvation  
with the people He has redeemed

#### First strophe

*68b and accomplished the redemption of His people,  
69a and has raised up for us a horn of salvation  
69b in the House of David His servant,*

Document of Damascus i Three hundred and ninety years after He had given them into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar  
5-12 of Babylon, He visited them and caused a root of a plant to spring from Israel and Aaron to  
inherit His land... He raised up for them a Teacher of Righteousness to guide them in the way of  
His heart.

Ps 111: 9 He sent redemption to His people.

Judg 3: 9 And the Lord raised up a savior for Israel.

Ps 132: 16- I shall clothe her priests with salvation...  
17 I shall make a horn to sprout for David.

Ezek 29: 21 On that day I shall make a horn sprout for all the House of israel.

1 Sam 2: 10 (Hannah's hymn)  
He will exalt the horn of His anointed [Messiah]

Ps 18: 3 M God...the horn of my salvation.

Shemone (15th Benediction)  
Esreh (1st c. AD) Let the shoot of David (your servant) speedily spring up  
And raise his horn in Your Salvation...  
May you be blessed, O lord, who les the horn of salvation flourish

*70 as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old:*

2 Chr 36: 22 That the word of the Lord through the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord raised up the spirit of Cyrus the Persian king.

Wis 11: 1 She made their affairs prosper through the holy prophet.

II Baruch 85: 1 In former times and in generations of old our fathers had helpers, righteous men and holy prophets.

*71a salvation from our enemies  
71b and from the hand of all those who hate us,*

Isa 49: 6 (to the Servant of the Lord)  
I have placed you as a covenant with the people,  
as a light to the nations,  
that ou should serve for salvation to the ends of the earth.

Ps of Solomon 10: 9 The salvation of the Lord be upon the House of Israel.

Ps 106: 10 (in reference in "our fathers" in Egypt)  
He saved them from the hands of those who hated  
and redeemed them from the hand of the enemy.

Ps 18: 18 He delivered me from my strong enemies  
and from those who hate me.

1QM xviii 7-11 You have kept your covenant with us from of old  
and opened the gates of salvation many times.  
For the sake of the covenant you have removed our misery...  
causing the enemy to fall back.

### Second strophe

*72a Showing mercy to our fathers  
72b and remembering His holy covenant,  
73 the oath which He swore to our father Abraham,  
To grant us...*

Mic 7: 20 You will show fidelity to Jacob and mercy to Abraham,  
as you have shown to our fathers from days of old.

Ex 2: 24 (cf Lv 26: 42) God has remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Ps 106: 45      And for their sake He remembered His covenant  
and relented according to the abundance of His mercy.

Gen 26: 3      (God to Isaac, giving his Canaan)  
I shall stand by my oath which I swore to your father Abraham.

Ps 105: 8-9.11      He is forever mindful of His covenant...  
the covenant which He made with Abraham  
and His oath to Isaac...  
saying, I shall grant to you the land of Canaan.

Jer 11: 5      That I may stand by the oath which I swore to your fathers  
to grant them a land flowing with milk and honey...

Ps 89: 4      I have made a covenant with my chosen one;  
I have sworn to David my servant.

*74 ...that, without fear,  
Delivered from the hands of our enemies,  
We might serve Him 75 in holiness and justice,  
Before Him all the days of our live.*

Ps 18: 18      He will deliver me from my mighty enemies.

Jos 24: 14      Fear the Lord and serve Him in truth and justice.

1QH xvii 13-14      Those corrected by Your judgment You will deliver  
that they may serve You in fidelity,  
so that their posterity may be before You all their days.

1 Kings 9: 4-5      If you will walk before me as David your father walked, in holiness of heart and uprightness,...I  
shall establish your royal throne over Israel forever.

Isa 38: 20      The Lord is our savior;  
we shall sing to stringed instruments  
in the house of the Lord  
all the days of our lives.

### Conclusion

*78a Through the heartfelt mercy of our God  
78b by which there has visited us a rising light from on high,*

Testament of Zebulun 8: 2      Because in the last days God will send his heartfelt compassion on the earth; and where he finds  
heartfelt mercy, there He will dwell.

Testament of Levi 4: 4      His star will arise as of a king,  
giving light, the light of knowledge.

Isa 60: 1      Be enlightened, O Jerusalem, for your light has come;  
and the glory of God has arisen upon you.

Mal 3: 20      For you who fear My name, there will arise  
the sun of justice with its healing rays.

Num 24: 17      A star will arise from Jacob,  
and a man will stand forth from Israel.

Testament (Christian passage?)  
of Levi 18: 3 His star will arise as of a king,  
giving light, the light of knowledge.

*79a appearing to those who sat in darkness and the shadow of death,  
79b guiding our feet into the way of peace.*

Isa 42: 6-7 (to the Servant of the Lord)  
A light to the nations  
to open the eyes of the blind,  
to bring out prisoners from confinement  
and from the dungeon, those who sit in darkness.

Isa 9: 1 O people walking in darkness, you will see a great light;  
O dwellers in the region and shadow of death, a light will shine upon you.

Ps 107: 9-10 He fills the hungry soul with good things,  
those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.

Isa 59: 8 They do not know the way of peace.

Testament Then there will arise for you a star from Jacob in peace,  
of Judah 24: and a man from my seed will stand forth,  
1 as a sun of justice, walking with men in meekness and justice.

Let's take a look at each of the components of the Benedictus.

a. Introduction (68a)

In terms of content, the Benedictus is a prophecy, but in literary terms it is a hymn of praise. And even though it celebrates something new, it refers to a continuity with what God has accomplished in the past, in particular the promise of a Davidic messiah, of a salvation in fidelity to his covenant. That is why, like the Psalms, 1 Kings 1:48 and the Qumran War Scrolls proclaim that we must bless the Lord.

b. Strophe One (68b-71b)

This strophe reflects the same mentality that is found in the Qumran writings where God visits his people by raising up a leader. To speak of this leader, the Benedictus uses traditional liturgical language that evokes the horn or strength of the anointed one, i.e. the Messiah. As we see in Peter's speech in Acts (3:21), God's final action is seen in the context of a long line of prophets who have set the stage. It is an action of deliverance from enemies, enemies who represent every form of persecution, such as that evoked by the figure of the servant in Deutero-Isaiah.

c. Strophe Two (72-75)

After presenting salvation as God's faithfulness to the promises made to David through the prophets, the Benedictus now focuses on the covenant with Abraham and his descendants. The strophe begins with the qualities of God as one of the covenant partners, and ends with the qualities of the other partner, the people. The purpose of salvation is to be able to serve God in holiness and righteousness, language that has a liturgical flavor and would be appropriate to Jerusalem Christians and their temple piety; thus, God's intervention is seen as a renewal or revitalization of the old covenant (this will not be the case later when Christians see it as a new covenant or replacement of the old covenant).

Jewish tradition speaks of oaths, covenants and the covenantal qualities of God's dealings with both Abraham and David. Also, the two strophes are very similar and evoke the two figures who were most often part of the Christian preaching as predecessors of Jesus.

d. Strophe Three (76-77)

This strophe would not be part of the original hymn, for it repeats the narrative of vv. 59-66, and like those verses, it is a composition of Luke. It is intended to answer the question of v. 66: "What then will this child be?" V. 76 repeats v. 17 ("And he will go before him... to prepare for the Lord a people who are ready") which was part of the angel's message to Zechariah, a message that echoes Lk 3:4 ("Voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord'"), an amalgam of Isa 40:3 and Mal 3:1.33. The expression "prophet of the Most High" articulates Jesus' sentiments in Lk 7:26: "A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet."

In v. 77, the hymn states that John the Baptist will grant "knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of their sins," which is never stated directly in the account of his ministry. Nevertheless, Luke is the only one to relate that John the Baptist gave specific instructions on how to repent (3:10-14), which is a way of sharing the knowledge of salvation. Moreover, in 3:3, Luke tells us that John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance "for the remission of sins".

e. Conclusion (78-79)

A conclusion recapitulates what has been said. Now, the first strophe mentioned God's visitation, the second God's covenant of mercy, the third John the Baptist who precedes the Lord to prepare his ways, and now the conclusion speaks of the "rising light (*anatolē*) from above" by which God "visited us" and showed his "mercy," i.e. Jesus whom John the Baptist will precede. Among Greek-speaking Jews, the word *anatolē* (the rising) was used to describe the expected Davidic king, and among early Christians it will be associated with the Messiah. Thus, the Benedictus evokes two great symbols, the horn of salvation in the house of David (v. 69) and the rising light from on high, two symbols that are brought together in the prophet Ezekiel: "In that day I will raise a horn for the house of Israel."

The image of the rising light calls to mind those who "sit in darkness and the shadow of death". Here, the Benedictus evokes Ps 107:9-10: "For he satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things. Some sat in darkness and in gloom". The Magnificat had taken up the first part of this citation, the Benedictus takes up the second part. All this confirms that the hymn comes from the circle of the Anawim.

We have already introduced v. 80, but it is worth making a final remark about a literary technique used by Luke, that of making one character disappear in order to give all the space to another. This is what happens, for example, in ch. 3, where he describes the ministry of John the Baptist, including his imprisonment by Herod, before telling us that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist; this is completely illogical, for how can the Baptist baptize if he is in prison? But this is typical of Luke's literary technique: removing one character from the scene before focusing on another. This is the same technique we find here in v. 80: he tells of John the Baptist's growth and his stay in the desert before telling of Jesus' birth, even though only a few months separate these two births; it is Luke's way of signaling a change in our attention, by making John the Baptist disappear from the scene, to make room for Jesus.

VI. The Birth and Naming of Jesus

Translation of Luke 2: 1-21

1 At that time an edict went out from Caesar Augustus that a census should be taken of the whole world (2 This was the first census under Quirinius as governor of Syria.) 3 And so all went to be inscribed in the census, each to his own city. 4 Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, into Judea to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to have himself inscribed in the census with Mary, his betrothed, who was pregnant.

6 Now while they were there, the time came for her to give birth; 7 and she gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him down in a manger, since there was no place for them in the lodgings.

8 In that same region there were shepherds, pasturing their flock and taking turns watching over it by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, so that they were filled with great fear. 10 "Do not be afraid," the angel told them. "For behold, I announce to you good news of a great joy which will be for the whole people: 11 To you this day there is born in the city of David a Savior who is Messiah and Lord. 12 And this will be your sign: you will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger!"

13 Then suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heaven host praising God, saying:

14a "Glory in the highest heavens to God,  
14b and on earth peace to those favored (by Him)."

15 When the angels had gone from them back into heaven, the shepherds urged one another, "Now let us go over to Bethlehem and see the event that has taken place, as the Lord has made known to us." 16 And setting forth with haste, they found Mary and Joseph, with the baby lying in the manger. 17 Having seen this, they made known the event as it was told them concerning this child. 18 All who heard were astonished at what the shepherds told them; 19 but Mary kept with concern all these events, interpreting them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as He had told them.

21 Now eight days later when the time came to circumcise the child, he was called Jesus, the name by which the angel called him before he was conceived in the womb.

Notes

v. 1

- "At that time". Literally: "In those days"; compare with "in these days" in 1:39 and "in the days of Herod, king of Judah" in 1:5.
- "an edict (*dogma*)". If Luke gives a technical meaning to *dogma*, then it is an action taken after consultation with the Roman senate, distinct from *psēphisma*, a vote of the people's assembly.
- "went out". Literally: "It happened an edict went out", a Semitized Greek expression, probably under the influence of the Septuagint. On *egeneto*, see [note on Lk 1: 9](#).
- "Caesar Augustus". It is Octavian, the grand-nephew of Julius Caesar, who was joined by Mark Antony after the assassination of Julius in 44 BC to punish and defeat Brutus and Cassius at Philippi in 42 BC. Initially forming a triumvirate with Lepidus and Antony, Octavian became the sole leader after subduing Lepidus (36 BC) and defeating Antony and Cleopatra at Actium (31 BC). He received the title of Augustus from the Senate and the people in 27 BC. He died in 14 CE, having appointed Tiberius Caesar, his son-in-law, as his successor; it was in the fifteenth year of his reign that Jesus began his ministry (Lk 3:1).
- "that a census should be taken (*apographein*)". Literally, "for the whole world to present itself for enrollment," if the verb is to be understood in the middle (reflexive) form, not the passive form. The verb *apographein* and the noun *apographē*, even though they generally mean "to enroll," or "registration," serve more specifically to translate the Latin terminology around *census*. The purpose of this alleged census would be for taxation, rather than for military service from which the Jews were exempt.
- "the whole world (*oikoumenē*)". The Greek word *oikoumenē* means: *orbis terrarum*, the entire civilized world under the control of the Roman emperor (see Acts 11:28 for the same expression). Since no census is known from the time of Augustus, some biblical scholars have suggested that this might be a census in a province, forgetting that Luke uses the word *gē*, not *oikoumenē* to refer to a province (see 4:25).

v. 2

- "This was the first (*prōtos*) census under". Greek syntax and textual variants allow for other translations: "The first census was under"; or "This census was earlier than the one under"; or "This census was before the governorship of". The last two translations substitute the comparative *proteros* (earlier than) or adjective *proteros* (earlier) or the preposition *pro* (before) for our adjective *prōtos* (first), for the sole purpose of protecting Luke's accuracy by putting forward the unproven assumption that there would have been several censuses under Quirinius. The reality is that the census is called "first" because no census took place in Judea before Quirinius' census in 6-7 CE (a census that Luke erroneously assigns to the time of King Herod the Great by association with 1:5 ("In the days of Herod, king of Judea")).
- "Quirinius". Publius Sulpicius Quirinius became legate of Syria in 6 CE and was in charge of restructuring Judea as a Roman province, after deposing Archelaus, the son of Herod the Great (Mt 2:22), who reigned from 4 BC to 6 CE.
- "as governor (*hēgemoneuein*) of Syria". The verb *hēgemoneuein*, like the noun *hēgemonos*, was used to translate Roman offices, such as that of *legatus* and *procurator*, with Syria having a *legatus*, and Judea a *prefectus* (or later a procurator).

v. 3

- "And so". V. 3 follows v. 1, whereas v. 2 was only a parenthesis.
- "all". After the phrase "the whole world" in v. 1, this word should refer to the entire population of the Roman Empire. Unfortunately, our evidence from the reign of Augustus indicates that separate censuses were taken for Roman citizens and non-Roman inhabitants of provinces, such as Syria. Historically, the census of 6-7 CE was limited to Judea.
- "each to his own city". Although Joseph's "own city" refers to his ancestral city of Bethlehem, Nazareth is called "their own city" in 2:39 to refer to their place of residence. For Roman censuses, we really have no evidence of a practice of registering in one's ancestral city (see [note on v. 4](#)).

v. 4

- "went up (*anabainein*)". The verb *anabainein* is the standard expression of the Septuagint, taken up by the NT, to translate the ascent to the mountainous region of Judea, more particularly to Jerusalem (see Mk 10:32; Jn 2:13; Lk 2:42).

- "from Galilee". Luke assumes that the census also covers Galilee; but we know that the first Roman census under Quirinius in 6-7 CE covered only Judea, after Archelaus was deposed (Galilee remained a tetrarchy under the control of Herod Antipas, the "Herod" of Jesus' ministry).
- "from the city of Nazareth". The city where Joseph and Mary lived (2:39), a statement that contradicts Mt 2:11, which states instead that Joseph and Mary lived in Bethlehem.
- "into Judea ...Bethlehem". See [note on Mt 2: 1](#).
- "to the city of David". The expression normally refers to Jerusalem, as in 2 Sam 5:7-9. Bethlehem was David's home town (1 Sam 16) to which he returned for family events (20: 6.28-29).
- "because he was". The old Syriac version (Sinaiticus) reads "because both of them", assuming that Mary was also of Davidic lineage; see [note on 1: 27](#).
- "of the house (*oikos*) and lineage (*patria*) of David". Here, as in 1:27, Luke asserts that Joseph is of Davidic lineage, a claim found elsewhere in both genealogies and in Mt 1:20. Is there a difference between *oikos* (house) and *patria* (lineage)? It doesn't seem so. Some biblical scholars have thought that these terms might mean that Joseph had a residence (*oikos*) or property (*patria*) in Bethlehem, and that he would have gone to Nazareth only to fetch Mary, overlooking Luke's clear expression in 2:39: "their own city of Nazareth."

v. 5

- "with Mary". What are we to understand here? Did Mary also have to register for the census (not an impossibility in Roman practice), or are we to think that Mary accompanied Joseph so that they could be together at the birth of the child? The motive is not clear. But the theory that Joseph brought Mary with him to dispel suspicions of illegitimacy and to recognize the child as his own, a theory born of an effort to harmonize with Matthew, must be totally rejected; in Luke there is no hint of any suspicion of illegitimacy.
- "his betrothed". On Luke's use of the word, see [note on 1: 27](#), and on its meaning, see [note on Mt 1: 18](#). Some manuscripts like the old Latin and the old Syriac (Sinaiticus) offer rather the reading: his wife. The question is therefore: did the original text read with "betrothed" that copyists would have modified, or the opposite? One could argue that the word "spouse" would make more sense, since Joseph and Mary now seem to be living together, which was not the case earlier in 1:27:24. If they were not living together, how could they travel together? But this argument presupposes that Luke had a good understanding of the stages of marriage in the Jewish world, an understanding that is not made explicit here (as Mt 1:24-25 does). And one can very well assume that Luke is simply reiterating without much thought the word "betrothed" that he had used earlier in 1:27 to refer to Mary. Therefore, it is quite possible that Jewish copyists assumed that Mary and Joseph were living together, since they were traveling together, or that Gentile copyists did not understand that in the Jewish world true marriage began with the betrothal and would have been scandalized by the situation of traveling together, and so in both cases these copyists would have replaced "betrothed" by "wife". In short, all the hypotheses are well defended. Our final decision is based on the fact that the best manuscripts favor the original reading of "betrothed".
- "who was pregnant". Some biblical scholars add "because she was pregnant" to justify the journey together. Unfortunately, the "because" is not in the original text, and this makes the story too psychological. Rather, Luke wants to prepare the reader for the birth story that follows.

v. 6

- "while they were there". Luke places Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem for some time before the birth of the child. In the [Protevangelium of James](#) 18:1, the child is born in a cave before reaching Bethlehem.
- "the time came for her to give birth". Literally, "It happened (*egeneto*) while they were there that the days (*hemera*) of her giving birth were fulfilled." On constructions with *egeneto* in Luke, see [note on 1:9](#). A similar birth description is found with Elizabeth in 1:57, this time with the word "time" (*chronos*). Both passages are an echo of Rebekah's giving birth to Jacob and Esau in Gen 25:24.

v. 7

- "and she gave birth (*tiktein*)". This is the same verb *tiktein* that is used in the promise to Mary in 1:31; see [note on 1: 57](#) on the use of *gennan* (give birth) in the case of Elizabeth.

- "to a son, her firstborn (*prōtotokos*)". Although *prōtotokos* is sometimes equivalent to *monogenēs* (only begotten), as in Psalms of Solomon 13:8; 18:4; 4 Ezra 6:5, many biblical scholars see it more as meaning "firstborn among many." Since the time of Helvidius (380 AD), this verse has given rise to lively discussions about whether Jesus was an only child or whether Mary had other children after Jesus (the brothers and sisters of Jesus mentioned in Mk 6:3); see the [note to Mt 1:25](#). Why does Luke speak of "firstborn"? Clearly, *prōtotokos* means that there is no child before Jesus, and so according to the OT, Jesus shares the privilege of the firstborn (Ex 13:2; Num 3:12-13; 18:15-16). Thus, Luke simply wants to prepare the reader for the consecration of Jesus as firstborn in 2:22-23. And one can be firstborn while being an only child, as evidenced by this inscription on a tomb near Leontopolis in Egypt around 5 BC: "In the pains of giving birth to a firstborn, Fate brought me to the end of my life." In short, *prōtotokos* in Luke cannot serve as an argument for or against Mary's birth of multiple children.
- "She wrapped (*sparganoun*) him in strips of cloth". Literally, "She swaddled him". The Greek verb *sparganoun* is derived from the noun *sparganon*, one of the cloths or strips of fabric used to wrap newborns. Swaddling a baby is a sign of parental care (Wis 7:4), and neglecting swaddling expresses neglect in the allegorical description of Jerusalem in Ezek 16:4. Note that the very fact that it is Mary herself who swaddles the child does not at all prove that the birth was miraculous or painless.
- "and laid him down in a manger (*phatnē*)". The Greek word *phatnē* refers to a "stall" for tethering animals, or a "manger," i.e., a trough for feeding them. A stall may be external or internal; the latter case is assumed in Lk 13:15 where a man unties his animals from the *phatnē* to bring them to drink. A feeding trough may be a movable trough placed on the ground, or in a small rock cavity. Luke does not give us enough details to be definite. The swaddling of the baby and the laying down of the baby suggests a cradle-type feeding trough. Christmas scenes with the cradle were popularized by St. Francis of Assisi who fixed the type of manger. The ox and donkey were introduced into the nativity scene by combining the reference to the *phatnē* (the stall and manger presuppose the presence of animals) and the lamentations of God in the Septuagint text of Isaiah 1:3: "The ox knows his owner, and the donkey the *phatnē* of its lord [*kyrios* as in Lk 2:11], but Israel has not known me."
- "since there was no place". The phrase "no place" is ambiguous. Does it mean that there was no room for the family at all (so they were outside the lodging), or that there was no "appropriate" room for the child (so they are in the lodging). The first case seems more likely, but it all depends on what "lodging" means.
- "in the lodgings (*katalyma*)". In the Septuagint, *katalyma* translates five different Hebrew terms and is difficult to translate. By itself, the term refers to the place where the traveler deposits (*katalyein*) his luggage and makes a stopover on his journey. In 1 Sam 1:18 (LXX), Elkanah and Hannah stay in a *katalyein* when they visit the holy place of Shiloh where Hannah's prayer for a child will be answered. Luke's context of a trip to Bethlehem, an ancestral city that is not his home, is consistent with the idea of a traveler's stopover. In the scene of the feeding of the crowds where the disciples suggest that Jesus send the crowd away to find lodging for the night, Luke uses the verb *katalyein* (Lk 9:12; also 19:7). Sometimes the synagogue could offer rooms in the main building for hospitality.

Basically, there are three proposals among biblical scholars for interpreting *katalyma* in Luke.

i. A private home.

This custom of travelers staying in a private house is attested to by 2 Kings 4:8-10. But by using a definite article ("the" lodgings), Luke seems to rule out the idea of an unidentified house. And Luke would certainly have given more information about a relative's refusal to accommodate them.

ii. A room in an unidentified place.

In Lk 22:11 we have an example of a room where Jesus wants to eat with his disciples. And this proposal has often been linked to that of a cradle hanging from the ceiling, due to lack of space in the room. But in Greek, such a hammock is designated by *aiōra*, not *phatnē*. And the fact that "dwelling" is preceded by the definite article rules out the idea of an indefinite place.

iii. An inn at or near Bethlehem.

The inns of the time were not comfortable places, but resembled caravansery where large groups of travelers were housed under one roof; people slept in cots or slightly raised platforms, with the animals on the floor sharing the same room. According to Jer 41:17 there was such a caravansery near Bethlehem. Unfortunately, when Luke speaks of an inn in the account of the good Samaritan who brings the greatly injured man to the inn (Lk 10:34), he uses the word *pandocheion*, not *katalyma*.

This is why, given the impossibility of being more precise, we have opted for the general translation of "lodging".

While Luke is imprecise about the type of dwelling, he is also imprecise about the place where Jesus was born. Subsequent tradition has fixed the site in a cave. The tradition was well established by the 4th century for

Constantine to build a basilica in the year 325 over a series of caves in Bethlehem. St. Jerome (347 - 420) lived in a cave adjacent to the one attributed to the birth of Jesus. This tradition of a cave may have come in part from Luke's mention of a *phatnē*, which is an animal stall or feeder, and the shepherds for whom the caves served as animal shelters or stores. This is found in Justin, *Dialogue*, lxxviii 5. For the *Protevangelium of James* 17-18, Joseph chose a cave to hide the shame of the birth of an illegitimate child. But for Luke, all these details are irrelevant.

v. 8

- "In that same region (*chōra*)". The Greek word *chōra* means: open country. Today, the fields we refer to as the "Shepherds' Fields" are located two miles from Bethlehem toward the Dead Sea. Those who believe Luke's information to be historical have sought to pinpoint the date of Jesus' birth to the time when the shepherds bring their animals to graze in the fields, so they have come up with the theory of a birth on May 20 or April 20. But it is unlikely that a reliable tradition about the exact date of Jesus' birth has survived.
- "taking turns watching over it by night". Literally: "watching the watches of the night". Luke likes cognate combinations. It is this passage that was used to establish the birth of Jesus in the night. And midnight was suggested by Wis 18:14-15: "When all things were in quiet silence, and the night in its swift course was half spent, Your all-powerful word leaped down from heaven's royal throne."

v. 9

- "an angel of the Lord". Luke is right to use the expression "angel of the Lord", because in v. 15 the message comes from the Lord. See [note to Mt 1: 20](#).
- "appeared (*ephistēmi*)". The verb *ephistēmi* is a favorite verb in Luke (18 occurrences out of the total 21 in the NT). See [note to 1: 11](#).
- "filled with great fear". Literally: "feared a great fear," another case of related wordplay. Fear is the standard reaction to an angelic apparition (1: 12-13.29-30).

v. 10

- "For behold". See [note to 1: 44](#).
- "I announce to you good news (*euangelizesthai*)". Literally, "I evangelize you". *Euangelizesthai* (related to the noun *euangelion*, "gospel"), is another favorite word of Luke's (10 occurrences out of the total of 11 in the Gospels). He also used this verb for the birth of John the Baptist in 1:19.
- "for the whole people". In Greek, the expression "all the people" is in the dative, which is common in Luke after the verb "to be". What people are we talking about? The present context of a Davidic savior suggests that it is only the people of Israel (see Lk 3:21; 7:29 8:47 etc.).

v. 11

- "To you". We can assume that these are the shepherds and the people.
- "this day (*sēmeron*)". *Sēmeron* is one of Luke's favorite words (20 occurrences), and expresses his vision of a realized eschatology, i.e., within reach. It may be noted that such an expression would be perfectly appropriate for a celebration of Christ's birth, but such a celebration is not attested so early.
- "the city of David". See [note on 2: 4](#).
- "a Savior (*sōter*)". Earlier (1:47) Luke used this term to apply to God, but in 1:69 Jesus was already referred to as "a horn of salvation". Neither Matthew nor Mark uses *sōter* to refer to Jesus; see John 4:42.
- "Messiah (*christos*) and Lord (*kyrios*)". The combination *christos kyrios* (literally: "Christ, Lord", without an article) appears nowhere else in the NT; other possible translations are "Christ the Lord" and "the Anointed Lord". Elsewhere, it appears once in the Septuagint in a mistranslation of Lamentations 4:20 and Psalms of Solomon 17:36. There have been several proposals to explain this unusual expression: a mistranslation of a Hebrew phrase of constructed form that should be "Anointed or Messiah of the Lord" (as in 2:26), or a scribal error. In any case, Luke is the only evangelist to use the name "Lord" so often to designate Jesus (14 occurrences, while Matthew and Luke use it only once).

v. 12

- "your sign". Literally: "a sign to you". This reading is supported by the Codex Vaticanus, while several other manuscripts such as the Codex Bezae present the reading: "the sign for you". The presence of the definite article is undoubtedly borrowed from Ex 3:12; 1 Sam 2:34; 14:10; 2 Kings 19:29; 20:9; Isa 37:30 38:7).
- "a baby (*brephos*)". The term *brephos* (here and in v. 16) refers to a newborn child. See the use of *paidion* (child) in v. 17.
- "and lying". The verb is omitted by the codex Sinaiticus and Bezae.

v. 13

- "Then suddenly (*egeneto*)". Another construction with *egeneto*. See [note to 1: 9](#).
- "with the angel". The old Syriac version of Sinaiticus adds: "with him". This variant and the one at the beginning of v. 15 in relation to the angels point to the awkwardness of 13-14 in the present context. In my commentary I will suggest that this is another hymn added by Luke in a second stage in his edition of the infancy narrative.
- "a multitude". The heavenly army is innumerable; the multitude here does not exhaust their number.
- "praising (*ainoun*)". The verb *ainoun* is another favorite word in Luke (six or seven occurrences, compared to two occurrences elsewhere in the NT). The verb is a plural participle that modifies a singular noun (multitude), a rough construction; the word order perhaps bears the mark of a Semitic influence.

v. 14

- "Glory". In 2:9 the "glory of the Lord" has the connotation of a manifestation of the divine majesty; here "glory" is rather the honor that men and angels must give to God.
- "in the highest heavens". The traditional expression: "Glory to God in the highest" is sometimes mistakenly understood to mean: "in the highest degree", which the Greek text does not say.
- "and on earth peace to those (*anthrōpōis*) favored (*eudokia*) [by Him]". What meaning should we give to *eudokia*? According to the dictionary this word means: goodwill, favor, pleasure, wish, desire. But the question is: is this reality human or divine? Note that the best manuscripts give us a word in the genitive (noun complement): men of *eudokia*. The Syriac version of the Peshitta and Tatian interpret this verse as a reference to those who are the object of the esteem or favorable opinion of their fellow men. The Vulgate and Catholic tradition have translated the phrase as "men of good will". Today, biblical scholars tend instead to view *eudokia* as a divine reality, and thus must add "by him" to the text to make it intelligible, as the Coptic Sahidic version did. The RSV translated: "Among men with whom He is pleased." A parallel with the Dead Sea Scrolls suggests that *eudokia* refers to the will or favor of God in choosing people. In Lk 10:21, Jesus will praise his Father, the Lord of heaven, for revealing himself to the little ones, "for such is your *eudokia*." This meaning of *eudokia* conveys the idea that the peace granted by God extends also to the people he has chosen, just as in Solomon's Psalm 8:39 (33): "For us and our children forever (you reserve) your lovingkindness (*hē eudokia*): Lord, our savior, we shall not stagger any more, even to the end of time."

Now consider the whole sentence. There are no verbs, suggesting a Semitic pattern. The phrase "Glory (be) to God" appears to be more of an exhortation than a simple statement ("God is glorified"): the way in which God has manifested his glory and brought peace is to be proclaimed and acknowledged on this day. Two models of versification have been proposed for this verse.

a. a tricolon

Glory in the highest to God,  
and on earth peace  
 (and) among men divine favor.

The words or expressions are grouped into three categories: a noun in the nominative (underlined), i.e. "glory" and "peace"; the expression of a location (double underlined), i.e. "in the highest", "on earth"; a phrase that expresses a direction (underlined in the form of a wave), i.e. "to God", "among men". The first verse has three elements, the second and third two each. A nominative noun appears in each line, the directional phrase in the first line is paired with the directional phrase in the third line, and the location phrase in the first line is paired with the location phrase in the second line. This model requires that *eudokia* (divine favor) be in the nominative, which is found in the Syriac and Coptic Boharic version, as well as in the majority of later Greek manuscripts, such as the one known to Luther and the committee that produced the King James translation. Unfortunately, most biblical scholars consider that the nominative of *eudokia* was introduced by a copyist to

make it consistent with the other two words in the nominative ("glory," "peace"), especially since the genitive of the original text, an echo of a Semitic turn of phrase, appeared to be a barbarism.

b. a bicolon

Glory in the highest to God,  
and on earth peace among men favored (by Him).

In this structure, each verse has three elements: a nominative noun (underlined), a locational expression (double underlined), and a directional expression (underlined as a wave). Unfortunately, the parallelism is imperfect, as the second verse is longer than the first (some biblical scholars believe it was Luke who added the word "favored" to the original text, causing the verse to become unbalanced). Here, *eudokia* is in the genitive (noun complement), a version supported by the best Greek manuscripts and the old Latin and Coptic Sahidic versions. The Dead Sea Scrolls have revealed equivalent texts in both Hebrew (children of His good will, 1QH iv 32-33; xi 9) and Aramaic (a man of His good will, 4Q 18). A final argument in favor of this bicolon versification is given by the parallel with Lk 19:38 which will be discussed in our commentary.

v. 15

- "When (*egeneto hōs*) ...heaven, the shepherds". Another Lucan construction with *egeneto*. See [note to 1: 9](#). Literally, "And it happened that when ... heaven, the shepherds". The time conjunction *hōs* appears 58 times in Lk/Acts.
- "the angels had gone". Many old Latin manuscripts have the singular; See [note to v. 13](#).
- "urged". Literally: "kept saying".
- "go over (*dierchesthai*)". The verb *dierchesthai* occurs three times more frequently in Lk/Acts than in the rest of the entire NT.
- "see the event (*rēma*)". It is a Semitism: the word *rēma* means "word"; but here and in vv. 17 and 19 it translates the double connotation of the Hebrew word *dābār*, "word, deed." Here it is a deed that speaks.
- "the Lord". In fact, it was an "angel of the Lord" who made the revelation; see [note to 2: 9](#) and [1: 45](#).

v. 16

- "with haste (*speudein*)". Literally: "to hasten". Luke is the only one to give this verb an intransitive meaning, so that it takes the form of an adverb accompanying a verb. This haste implies the immediate obedience of the shepherds to the revelation. See [note to 1: 39](#).
- "found (*aneuriskein*)". The verb *aneuriskein* is found elsewhere in the NT only in Acts 21:4; it is the cognate verb *euriskein* (find) that was used in v. 12.
- "Mary and Joseph". The old Syriac version of the Sinaiticus reverses this order. Placing Mary first could reflect a great respect for the mother of the Messiah, as in Mt 2:11 in the scene of the magi: "They saw the child with Mary his mother.

v. 17

- "seen this". What they saw was the baby in the manger, which was the sign the angel had given them (v. 12) and the event they wanted to see.
- "they made known". It seems that it is not only the parents who are targeted here, but also the audience first mentioned in the next verse.
- "the event". See [note to v. 15](#).
- "this child (*paidion*)". The vocabulary changes from *brephos* ("baby," vv. 12 and 16) to *paidion* (here and 2: 27.40), the diminutive of *pais* ("boy, servant"). Mt 2:11 uses *paidion* in a similar scene.

v. 18

- "All who heard". Until now, there has been no mention of the presence of an audience at the birthplace. The same expression was used in 1:66 after the circumcision and naming of John the Baptist, but by then we were prepared

by the information that neighbors and relatives were present and that the news had spread to "the whole hill country" (1:58.65). The two accounts of birth and naming are interrelated.

- "were astonished". The Greek verb is typically Lucan, and this same reaction occurs in 1:21.63 and 2:33.

v. 19

- "but Mary". Luke continues his description of the reactions of the cast of characters: the shepherds (17), those who heard (18), and now the mother. In the other ten occurrences in the infancy narrative, Mary's name appears in its Hebrew form *Mariam*, but here several manuscripts have *Maria* (as in 1:41).
- "kept with concern (*synterein*)". Luke uses the verb *synterein* here, and *diaterein* in the parallel scene of 2:51. What is being expressed is more than just the memory of events, for *synterein* is to be understood in connection with the verb that follows, *ymballein* (to meditate): the difficult events that have occurred are to be remembered for the purpose of interpreting them correctly.
- "all these events (*rēma*)". The plural of *rēma* ([note to v. 15](#)). The position of "all" is emphatic.
- "interpreting (*ymballein*) them". The verb *ymballein*, often translated as "to converse with, to reflect on, to meditate on, to compare, to encounter", literally means: "to throw side by side". It thus expresses the idea of seeking to interpret obscure events, often finding an answer with divine help.
- "in her heart". The expression is related to the verb *ymballein* (interpreting). But the equivalent expression in Gen 37:11 (LXX: "as for the father, he kept (*diaterein*) these things (*rēma*)") leads us to think that the scope of the expression also includes the preceding verb.

v. 20

- "the shepherds returned". About verbs of departure to end a scene in the infancy narrative, see [note to 1: 23](#).
- "and praising... all". The combination of "glorifying" and "praising" appears in the Septuagint of Dan 3:26.55. This combination was already associated with the heavenly host in 2:13-14.

v. 21

- "Now (*kai*)...when (*hote*)". This "*kai hote*" structure appears 22 times in Lk/Acts, but only three times in the rest of the NT.
- "eight days later". The circumcision of John the Baptist was dated "on the eighth day"; see [note to 1: 59](#). The same dating is used by Luke 9:28 for the transfiguration (as opposed to six days in Mark 9:2), but this seems purely coincidental.
- "when the time came to circumcise the child". Literally: "when the eight days were fulfilled to circumcise him. The expression "the days were fulfilled" is also found in the account of Jesus' birth (v. 6) and purification (v. 22), and it is Luke's way of linking the three events. But it is a rather awkward expression, because it could also mean that the time for circumcising the child had passed. But in v. 6 the expression clearly means that the time for giving birth had arrived, and this seems to be the case also in v. 22. The verb "circumcise" is introduced in the Greek by a genitive article, and such a structure plays the role of a consecutive proposition, i.e. it describes the result of the eight days being fulfilled; this is a structure that Luke uses quite often. According to the best manuscripts, it is a circumcision of "him". To remove any ambiguity, several copyists clarified the phrase by changing "him" to *paidion* (child), as we have done here.
- "he was called Jesus, the name". Literally and tautologically: "his name was called Jesus", as in 1:31: "you shall call his name Jesus"; for this Semitism, see [note to Mt 1: 21](#). The statement about Jesus after his circumcision practically combines the statements made by the two parents of John the Baptist after his circumcision: "He must be called John" (1:60), and "John will be his name" (1:63).
- "before he was conceived in the womb". Again, Luke deliberately evokes the wording of the angel's message in 1:31: "You will conceive in your womb."

#### Comment

A. The Structure of the Story in 2:1-40

Just as he presented the two annunciations in the form of a diptych, Luke also presents the two births in the form of a diptych.

**Birth Diptych**  
(first stage of lucan composition)

1: 57-66.80

2: 2-12.15-27.34-40

**Birth/Naming/Greatness of JBap**

**Birth/Naming/Greatness of Jesus**

Notice of Birth: rejoicing by neighbors (57-58)

Scene of Birth (1-20) :

Setting (1-7): Census involving the two parents;  
birth at Bethlehem

Scene of Circumcision/Naming (59-66)

- Two parents involved in wonders surrounding the naming, indicating the future greatness of the child

Annunciation (8-12) : \*

1. Angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds nearby
2. Shepherds filled with fear
3. The message
  - c. Do not be afraid; great joy
  - e. This day there is born in the city of David
  - f. A Savior who is Messiah and Lord
5. The sign: a baby wrapped and lying in a manger

Reactions (15-20) :

- All astonished;
- Zechariah spoke praising God;
- All the neighbors feared;
- All who heard stored the events up in their heart.
- Shepherds went to Bethlehem, saw the sign; made known the event;
- Hearers astonished
- Mary keeps these events in her heart;
- Shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God

Notice of Circumcision / Naming

Scene of Presentation in Temple (22-27.34-38);

- Setting (22-24): Purification of parents; consecration of firstborn, according to the Law
- Greeting By Simeon (25-27.34-35); moved by the Holy Spirit, Simeon blessed parents, and prophesied the child's future
- Greeting by Anna (36-38)

Conclusion (80)

- Refrain on growth of the child.
- His stay in the desert.

Conclusion (39-40) :

- Return to Galilee and Nazareth
- Refrain on growth of the child

\* See table on [steps in the birth annunciation](#)

The general sequence of this diptych is clearly similar: the birth/circumcision/naming sequence is followed by audience reactions and ends with a refrain about the growth of the child, a transition to their ministry. But it is in the detail that we note a number of discrepancies: the scene about John the Baptist focuses on the circumcision and naming, with the parents present, while the scene about Jesus focuses on his birth with the parents present; the reaction of the entourage occurs at the circumcision of John the Baptist, while it occurs at the annunciation of his birth by the angel in the scene about Jesus. This last point supports the idea that the focus is not on the birth of

Jesus, but on the angelic annunciation interpreting the meaning of this birth for the shepherds, and their reaction to this good news.

In this perspective, the sequence of the story can be presented as follows.

1. Setting (1-7):
  - a. The occasion of the census brings Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem (1-5)
  - b. While there, Mary gives birth to Jesus; she swaddles him and lays him in a manger (6-7).
2. Annunciation (8-14):
  - a. Nearby, an angel of the Lord announces to shepherds the birth of the Savior, Messiah, and Lord, giving them the sign of the baby in the manger (8-12)
  - b. A multitude of the heavenly host appears and recites the Gloria (13-14)
3. Reactions (15-20):
  - a. The shepherds go to Bethlehem to see the sign; and finding it verified, they make known what was told them (15-17)
  - b. The hearers are astonished; Mary keeps these events in her heart; the shepherds return, glorifying and praising God (18-20).

The climax of the scene is in the third part when all the characters of the first part (Joseph, Mary, baby) are joined by those of the second part (the shepherds) who praise God for having fulfilled his word for them. But it is in the second part that heaven and earth meet, and the significance of the birth in Bethlehem is interpreted by the angels.

If we are to look for a true parallel to the annunciation to the shepherds, we will find it in the account of the Magi in Mt 2:1-12. In both evangelists, after a first chapter in which one of the parents is informed about the upcoming birth of Jesus, the second chapter presents the same sequence of events:

- a brief mention of the birth in Bethlehem,
- the revelation of this birth to a group that was not present (the shepherds, the magi),
- the arrival of the group in Bethlehem guided by a revelation
- the discovery of the child with Mary (and Joseph),
- a recognition on their part of what God has accomplished
- the return to the place where they came from

This group that receives a revelation is the central point of the story, because the birth of Jesus is a Christological moment. We have already explained that for the young Christian community, the resurrection of Jesus was the Christological moment, with the apostles as the first recipients, who proclaimed the good news of salvation and provoked a double reaction: acceptance/homage or rejection/persecution. Much later, this Christological moment was moved to the birth of Jesus himself. The recipients of the good news are now another group (magi, shepherds). The revelation is made through another channel: a star for the magi, the angelic announcement for the shepherds. This revelation provokes a double reaction: on the one hand, the welcome and the expression of homage on the part of the magi and the shepherds, on the other hand, the rejection and persecution on the part of Herod, the priests, the scribes as well as on the part of these events announced by Simeon.

## B. The Setting at Bethlehem (2:1-7)

### 1. The Census of the Whole World (1-5)

Luke begins his account with a census of the entire world ordered by the emperor Augustus, and conducted by Quirinius, which forced Joseph to leave Nazareth in Galilee and go to his ancestral town of Bethlehem. This provided the opportunity for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem at the time of Herod the Great, king of Judea. See Appendix VII for an analysis of the historically questionable value of this information. It is sufficient to note two important points here.

- There is no evidence of any census under Emperor Augustus that covered the entire empire, nor of a census that required people to register in their home town
- The only census conducted by Quirinius, then legate of Syria, occurred around 6 or 7 CE, ten years after the death of Herod the Great

What does this mean? Writing more than 80 years after the birth of Jesus, Luke may not have been aware that there had been two troubled periods related to the kings of Judea, one at the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC, the other at the death of his son Herod Archelaus in 6 CE, when the Jews revolted against the census of Quirinius.

Why does Luke resort to this confused memory to create the setting for Jesus' birth? He probably felt compelled to find a way to explain Joseph and Mary's move to Bethlehem, since he assumed that the couple were residents of Nazareth in Galilee (for Matthew, Mary and Joseph were residents of Bethlehem, not Nazareth). But is this his

unique and most important motivation? Why did he choose the occasion of a census? Here are four possible answers that are not mutually exclusive.

a. A solemn beginning

When the gospels were written, the Christological moment, i.e., the recognition of Jesus as Christ and Lord, originally located at the time of Jesus' resurrection, had moved to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Mark will emphasize the solemnity of this moment by quoting Isa 40:3 ("A voice proclaims, 'In the wilderness make a way for the Lord' ") which greeted the realization of the dream of the return from exile. John 1:19 emphasizes the beginning of the great trial that summarizes his gospel by bringing in John the Baptist as the first witness. Luke, for his part, will underline this great moment of the beginning of Jesus' ministry by situating it in the context of the great rulers of the world and the local rulers (the emperor Tiberius Caesar, the prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate) who will be involved in the great changes that are coming. With his infancy narrative, Luke now shifts the Christological moment to the conception and birth of Jesus. And he then proceeds in the same way by placing this event in the context of world and local leaders (the emperor Augustus Caesar, the Syrian legate Quirinius).

b. Augustus, the peaceful savior

If Luke emphasizes that Jesus was born during the reign of Augustus, it is because he probably remembered that it was the emperor who had pacified the world. Indeed, Augustus had succeeded in putting an end to the internal wars following the assassination of Julius Caesar, so that in the year 29 BC the doors of the sanctuary of Janus, which had been opened in times of war, were closed. In the pacification by Augustus, we saw the realization of the mystical promise described by Virgil in his fourth Eclogue (see appendix IX). Also between the year 13 and 9 BC, a monument was erected propagating the ideals of Augustus, a monument, with an altar and an inscription (*Ara Pacis Augustae*), which still exists today in Rome. Meanwhile, in the Greek cities of Asia Minor, they adopted September 23, the date of birth of Augustus, as the first day of the year, designating the emperor as "savior of the world. It is not by chance that Luke presents the birth of Jesus with this background: for him, true peace for the world is brought by Jesus; the testimony of the *pax Christi* is not that of the altar made with human hands, but that proclaimed by the heavenly host to those chosen by God; the birth that marks the beginning of the new times did not take place in Rome, but in Bethlehem; the inscription of Priene ("The birth of god marked the beginning of the good news to the world") was reinterpreted by: "I announce to you good news of a great joy which will be for the whole people: To you this day there is born in the city of David a Savior who is Messiah and Lord".

c. Memories evoked by the census

For those who know the OT, there is a famous census that has attracted attention, the one ordered by King David (2 Sam 24), despite the opposition of his general Joab. Once the census was completed, David was punished by God for having encroached on his sovereignty: the plague devastated the country and stopped in Jerusalem, in the place that would become the temple. For Luke, the memory of this census was perhaps associated with the city of David and the temple. Quirinius' census for tax purposes must also have left its mark on his imagination, for it triggered the rebellion of Judas the Galilean, the founder of the Zealot and ultranationalist movement that would culminate in the Jewish revolt against Rome, bloodily suppressed with the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. When the Gospels were written, the Jewish messianic movement had bad press in the Roman world. This sensitive political situation has left its mark on Luke's passion narrative: he insists on Jesus' innocence of any political ambition, and three times he puts in Pilate's mouth (23: 4.14.22) the affirmation of Jesus' innocence of the charges against him, in particular that of refusing to pay the tax. Is it in continuity with this debate that Luke presents the parents of Jesus as obeying the same census that led to the revolt of Judas the Galilean, thus disassociating Jesus from any form of rebellion? According to this perspective, Luke would contrast two censuses: the first that causes a disaster, the second that brings the Savior of the world.

d. The census in Ps 87: 6

The question remains: what led Luke to associate the census with the birth of Jesus theologically? It may be Psalm 87, which describes with joyful exaggeration how people from different nations come to Jerusalem and get to know the Lord, who in turn enrolls them as citizens of Zion, so that everyone finds a spiritual home there. Ps 87:6 says more explicitly: "The Lord writes in the book of the people: 'In this place such and such a man was born'". But there is a Greek translation, which was part of Origen's *Hexapla*, called *Quinta* (referring to the 5th column of the Greek versions), and reported by Eusebius of Caesarea (*Commentary on the Psalms*), which reads this verse as "In the census of the peoples, this one will be born there." Since the Septuagint speaks of the birth of princes and the Aramaic version of the psalm speaks of the raising of a king, the "this one" in the *Quinta* version could be interpreted as the prophecy of the future birth of the messianic king in a census of the people. Since this basic version of the *Quinta* shows great affinities with a revised version of the Septuagint that biblical scholars date to the 1st century CE, it can be hypothesized that Luke knew the *Quinta*, as witnessed by Acts 2:18. Thus, Ps 87:6, in the version of the *Quinta*, happening to announce the birth of the messiah during the census, may have been the catalyst in Luke for associating the birth of Jesus with the

census of Quirinius (accidentally associated with the evil king Herod), and with a touch of exaggeration, extending it to the entire universe.

## 2. The Birth, the Swaddling, and the Manger (6-7)

The description of Jesus' birth is very brief: while Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem, the time came for Mary to give birth, and she gave birth to a firstborn. Curiously, Luke's interest is more focused on what she does with her baby: she swaddles him and lays him in a manger, a detail he will repeat in vv. 12 and 16. This detail must be significant. Unfortunately, perhaps under the influence of the custom of the Christmas crib popularized by St. Francis of Assisi, famous for his love of poverty, popular piety has seen in this scene the expression of the destitution and poverty of Jesus' parents and the insensitivity of some innkeeper. This is not the meaning that Luke intends to give to this scene.

What is the significance of the manger? Let us remember that the angel presented it as a sign (v. 12). The answer to this question probably comes to us from the Septuagint version of Isa 1:3: "The ox knows his owner, and the donkey the manger (*phatnē*) of his master; for Israel he has misunderstood me, and my people have not known me." Luke's point is that this phrase of Isaiah is no longer valid, because through the shepherds who went to the manger to find their Lord and began to praise God, it was the whole people who recognized the manger of their Lord.

The significance of the lack of lodging can be illuminated by Jer 14:8, a plea to the Lord and Savior of Israel, "Why do you behave like a stranger in the land, like a traveler who dwells in lodging (*katalyma*)?". Now the Lord and Savior no longer dwells in a traveler's lodging.

The significance of swaddling is reflected in Wis 7:4-5 in which Solomon, the richest of the kings of Judah says, "I was carefully swaddled and cared for. No king started out differently at birth". The swaddling may be a sign that Israel's Messiah is not an outcast among his people, but one who is welcomed and cared for.

In short, Jesus was born in the city of David, not in a dwelling like a stranger, but in a manger where God supports his people. His swaddling does not contradict his royal role.

## C. The Annunciation to the Shepherds (2:8-14)

### 1. The Symbolism of the Shepherds (8)

Today, shepherds in infancy narratives project an idyllic image of kind and noble people. Yet, in Judaism, they were considered dishonest, lawless people who let their flocks encroach on other people's territory, so they were ineligible to be witnesses or judges. But what role does Luke want them to play?

The Mishnah *Shekalim* 7:4 tells us that the animals found between Jerusalem and Migdal Eder (near Bethlehem) were used for temple sacrifices. Now, Migdal Eder, "Tower of the Flock," could be the key that ties the shepherds and their flock together in the Bethlehem area. Let us remember that the angel in his message refers to the city of David where a Savior who is Messiah and Lord was born, and in their response the shepherds urge each other to go to Bethlehem to see the event that has just happened. This tradition of the Messiah being born in Bethlehem is mentioned in Jn 7:42: "Does not the scripture say that he will be of the lineage of David and that he will come from Bethlehem, the little town from which David came?" This is probably a reference to Micah 5:1 ("And you, Bethlehem... from you shall come forth for me the one who is to rule Israel"). It is therefore worthwhile to look at Micah chapters 4 and 5, since they seem to provide the background for understanding the shepherd scene in Luke.

Micah's setting is first the humiliation of Jerusalem/Zion by the Babylonian armies, but while it is thought to be doomed, the prophet predicts that its sufferings are in fact those of a woman in labor and that the Lord will come to its aid in the face of its enemies, and the final result will be that the nations will come to the mountain of Jerusalem/Zion, and there, the place of the "Tower of the Flock" (Migdal Eder), the kingdom of old will be restored. This final victory will be assured by a leader from the city of David, Bethlehem. Several motifs from Micah are found in Luke. Mary experiences the pains of a woman in labor as Micah evokes. Augustus' census brings a movement of peoples similar to that spoken of in Micah about Jerusalem; thus Joseph "goes up" from Galilee to Bethlehem, the same vocabulary for the ascents to Jerusalem. But by calling Bethlehem "city of David", the traditional name for Jerusalem, Luke changes Micah's reference to Jerusalem to "the mountain of the Lord's house" which is now Bethlehem; it is now to Bethlehem that one must go to see the Lord. In this context, the reference to shepherds feeding their flocks in the Bethlehem area could reflect his understanding of Migdal Eder, Micah's "Tower of the Flock," which is now in the vicinity of Bethlehem, rather than in Jerusalem. This is indeed possible when one considers that Jewish tradition could read Micah 4:8 and Micah 5:1 in parallel.

#### Mic 4: 8

And you, O Migdal Eder,  
hill of the daughter of Zion,  
to you will come back the former dominion,  
the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem

#### Mic 5: 1

And you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
small to be among the clans of Judah;  
from you there will come forth for me  
one who is to be a ruler in Israel

Thus, the city of David and the Tower of the Flock constituted the city from which a leader would come and where the kingdom would be restored. An echo of a messianic reading of these texts comes from the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (which could be from the first century CE) on Gen 35:21: "The Tower of the Sheep, the place where it will happen that the King Messiah will be revealed at the end of days.

In his infancy narrative, Matthew explicitly quotes Mic 5:1 when King Herod inquires about the birthplace of the Messiah. Luke does not quote directly from Micah, but he borrows several of his motifs, including the restoration of the former kingdom in the vicinity of the Tower of the Sheep by a leader from Bethlehem. Thus God reveals to shepherds tending their flock that a savior is born to them in Bethlehem.

## 2. The Annunciation by the Angel of the Lord (9-12)

In this annunciation story, the main steps of the standard structure of annunciation stories are present, even if some steps are missing (see the diptych with the numbered steps): the appearance of an angel, the fear of the shepherds, the instruction not to be afraid. Some changes were necessary to the content of the message, because the context is no longer that of a promise, but of the realization of a promise. However, the gift of a sign and the departure of the angel(s) remain.

The core of the message is good news: "To you this day there is born in the city of David a Savior who is Messiah and Lord". Since one of the backgrounds of the title Savior is that of the Roman emperor, this announcement takes the form of an imperial proclamation. But Isa 9:5 is probably the most important background: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given". The context of Isaiah is that of the heir to the throne of David, to whom the prophet attributes a number of titles: "Wonderful Counselor, Divine Hero, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace". While taking up this annunciation from Isaiah, Luke modifies the titles in favor of the Christian kerygma: Savior, Messiah (Christ), Lord. These titles, which were born with the faith in the resurrection of Jesus and the Parousia (see Phil 3:20: "For our city is in heaven, from which we expect the Lord Jesus Christ as our savior"), are now placed by Luke at the time of Jesus' birth. The expression "this day" is the same today as Ps 2:7 ("You are my son; today I have begotten you"), a verse at the resurrection of Jesus in Acts 13:32, applied by Luke to the birth of Jesus.

It is therefore very likely that it was the prophet Isaiah who guided Luke in writing the message of the good news, and it is in the light of Isaiah 52:7 (the good news of peace and the reign of God addressed to Jerusalem / Zion that Luke redirects to Bethlehem) or 61:1 ("The Lord has indeed made me a messiah; he has sent me to bring good news to the afflicted") that the announcement of the angel to the shepherds must be understood.

## 3. The Canticle of the Heavenly Host (13-14)

With vv. 13-14 the context suddenly changes: it is no longer that of the angel of the Lord, but that of the heavenly host, i.e. the spirits who dwell in the presence of God in heaven or in the temple, singing his praises. The literary genre is no longer that of an annunciation but that of a theophany. Luke had prepared us for this in v. 9 with "the glory of the Lord shone around them", a typical feature of theophanies.

The hymn of the heavenly host probably has as its antecedent that passage of Isaiah where the prophet, before the divine presence in the temple, hears the Seraphim sing: "Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh Sabaoth, his glory fills the whole earth." In the Jewish literature of the time, we find the idea that when the angels saw what God had done in creation, they sang a hymn of praise. The "this day" mentioned by the angel in Luke is the equivalent of a new creation.

The hymn of the heavenly host, added by Luke in a second edition of his gospel, was probably composed by the Jewish Christian community of the Anawim, just as the Anawim of Qumran composed hymns to be sung by angels. Like the Magnificat and the Benedictus, the hymn begins with praise to God, just as we see in the Jerusalem community described in Acts 2:47. The second line offers a parallel very close to that found in the Qumran literature, for both groups of Anawim consider themselves chosen by God and the object of his favor. In Lk/Acts the closest parallel to the Gloria is found in the acclamation of Jesus on his entry into Jerusalem (Lk 19:38) where only Luke has the following expression in the mouth of the multitude of disciples:

Peace in heaven  
and glory in the highest heavens.

Thus, while the hymn that the multitude of the heavenly host proclaims peace on earth, the multitude of the disciples in Jerusalem proclaims peace and glory in heaven: the two songs answer each other. These hymns are born of the Christological moment of Jesus' resurrection, but Luke moves them to insert them into Jesus' career. What the multitude of the heavenly host sings in v. 14 will only be discovered after Jesus' resurrection.

## D. The Reaction as the Shepherds Go to Bethlehem (2:15-20)

All the characters in the story now find themselves in front of the manger, whose symbolism evokes Isa 1:3: "The ox knows his owner, and the donkey the manger (*phatnē*) of his master; for Israel he has misunderstood me, and my people have not known me." The focus is on the various reactions around the manger. The first reaction is expressed

in v. 18: "All who heard were astonished". This is a parallel to the circumcision scene of John the Baptist, but at that point Luke adds that they held these events in their hearts. Here there is no such thing, so perhaps Luke intends to associate them with those in the parable of the sower who hear the word with joy, but have no roots (8:15).

The shepherds, for their part, glorify and praise God for all they have heard and seen (v. 20). Their mission is now over, and they return to their flock. They are not called to be part of the apostolic community, but simply represent the future believing community that glorifies and praises God for what they have heard and seen. In this respect, they are like the magi in Matthew who are not said to have kept all these events in their hearts; that will be a task accomplished much later.

Between the large group of listeners and the shepherds is Mary, whom Luke says "kept with concern all these events, interpreting them in her heart" (v. 19). It would be a mistake to interpret this verse as supporting the idea that Mary was an eyewitness to the infancy narrative. Luke's point is to present Mary as a believer and disciple, and therefore able to grasp the deeper meaning of the events and the sign that was given. For Luke's key words about Mary are "interpreting" and "events". Let us consider some parallels to Luke's description:

- Gen 37:11 (after a mysterious dream in which a revelation is hidden under celestial symbols representing the members of his family), the author writes: "but his father kept with concern the event".
- Dan 4:28: LXX (after Daniel's interpretation of the dark dream of a tree, the author writes: "Nebuchadnezzar kept with concern these words in his heart".
- Testament of Levi 6:2: After the angel opened the gates of heaven and showed Levi the holy temple and the throne of glory of the Most High, and after Levi was guided to find the mysterious shield, it is said of him that he kept with concern these events in his heart

Mary is therefore faced with confusing events that she keeps in her heart. She will be able to interpret them correctly when Jesus completes his ministry at his heavenly enthronement. Then, with the community gathered to receive the gift of Jesus' Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1:14), she will hear the proclamation of the glorified Jesus as "Lord, Messiah, Savior (Acts 2:36; 5:31), and will be able to fully understand the meaning of what the shepherds said.

Another background for understanding Lk 2:19 is that of sapiential literature. For to keep in one's heart also means to put into practice in one's life the message heard. This is the meaning of several passages such as Sirach 39:1-3 (keep the parables, prophecies and mysterious words in order to reflect on them and put them into practice), Prov 3:1 (the wise man "keeps my words in his heart"), Ps 119:11 addressed to God ("In my heart I keep your commands so as not to sin against you"). All of this applies to Mary, and it anticipates her attitude during Jesus' ministry, so that she will be one of those about whom Jesus says: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it."

#### E. The Circumcision and the Naming (2:21)

Circumcision is central to the birth of John the Baptist, with a prominent role for the parents. Nothing of the sort in the case of Jesus, and the parents are not even named; one has the impression of being faced with a secondary notice. But this is a very Lucan composition. The fact that three times he uses the expression "the time came" to give birth (2:6), to circumcise the child (2:21) and to purify them (2:22) indicates a carefully planned motive: circumcision is the intermediary between birth and purification.

Biblical scholars have tried to give theological significance to Jesus' circumcision as an expression of Jesus' solidarity with human nature, or with Judaism. One would look in vain for a clue in this sense in Luke. The evangelist simply wants to show that calling the child "Jesus" fulfilled the angel's command; for the angel had asked Mary to call him that, and she answered: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it happen to me according to your word". Thus, Jesus' parents are obedient to the word of God, and the next section will show that they are also obedient to the Law.

#### VII. The Presentation; Simeon and Anna Prophecy about Jesus

##### Translation of 2: 22-40

Now when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, the parents brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord - 23 as it is written in the Law of the Lord: "Every male child who opens the womb will be considered consecrated to the Lord" - 24 and to offer a sacrifice, according to what is dictated in the Law of the Lord: "A pair of doves or two young pigeons."

25 And behold, it happened that in Jerusalem there was a man by the name of Simeon who was upright and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him; 26 and it had been disclosed to him by this Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27 And so, led by the Spirit, Simeon came into the Temple court. When the parents brought in Jesus to perform for him what was customary according to the Law, 28 Simeon embraced the child in his arms and blessed God, saying:

29a "Mighty Master, now you may let your servant depart  
29b in peace, since you have kept your word.

30 For my eyes have seen this salvation  
31 that you made ready in the sight of all the peoples:  
32a a light to be a revelation to the Gentiles  
32b and to be a glory for your people Israel."

33 The father and mother were astonished at these things which were said about the child. 34 Simeon blessed them and said to Mary the mother:

34c "Behold, he is set for the fall and rise of many in Israel  
34d and for a sign to be contradicted -  
35a indeed, a sword will pass through your own soul -  
35b so that the inmost thoughts of many may be revealed."

36 There was also a prophetess, Anna daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher, who was well on in years; for she had married as a young girl and lived with her husband seven years, 37 and then by herself as a widow for eighty-four years. She never left the Temple courts; day and night she worshiped God, fasting and praying. 38 Now at this very moment she too came on the scene and gave thanks to God; and she spoke about the child to all those waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

39 Then, when they had finished all their duties according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee and their own city, Nazareth. 40 And the child grew up and became strong, filled with wisdom and favored by God.

#### Note

v. 22

- "when the time came". Literally: "when the days were fulfilled". This expression may mean that the time for purification has passed; but the same formula in 1:57; 2:6,21 (see [note to v. 21](#)) indicates that Luke simply means that the time designated for impurity is over and that the time for purification has arrived. It was birth, not conception, that made the woman unclean, and so for Luke the virginal conception does not remove the need for her to be cleansed.
- "their purification". The possessive adjective "their" indicates that Joseph must also be purified, even though there is no Jewish tradition of purifying the father. Some copyists saw the problem and changed "their" to "her" (e.g., Codex Bezae, Old Syriac Sinaiticus, some Old Latin), but the best manuscripts do have "their".
- "the parents...Jesus". Literally: "they... him". We have anticipated the identification of the characters in v. 27.
- "Jerusalem (*Hierosolyma*)". The name of the city has two spellings in the NT: *Hierousalēm*, which is a transliteration of the Hebrew, and *Hierosolyma* which has a more properly Greek form. The Gospel according to Luke shows a marked preference for *Hierousalēm* (26 times) over *Hierosolyma* (4 times); in Acts, the occurrences are more equal (39 times and 25 times respectively). One would look in vain for any logic in these seemingly non-deliberate variations.

v. 23

- "written... 'Every'". Literally, "it is written... that (*hoti*) 'Every'". The conjunction *hoti* could have a causal meaning (because). See [note to 1: 25](#).
- "in the Law of the Lord". Literally: "in the law of the Lord". The noun "law" has no article here, whereas in the other four cases (2: 22.24.27.39) the article is present. This detail is too insignificant to see the trace of another hand.
- "Every male child who opens the womb". Luke's citation is a mixture of the Septuagint text of Ex 13:2,12,15 and perhaps Num 8:15-18. The phrase simply refers to a firstborn. Some Roman Catholic biblical scholars have felt the need to assert defensively that this verse does not contradict the church's doctrine that the birth of Jesus kept Mary's physical virginity intact, the hymen not having been broken, and thus the womb not having been opened (see Appendix IV). To this we must reply that it is likely that Luke did not even ask himself this question, and that if he had really wanted to refer to a miraculous birth, he would not have used an expression like "opening his mother's womb".
- "considered consecrated". Literally: "shall be called holy". It is the same expression used in 1:35 that Luke intends to echo.

v. 24

- "A pair of doves or two young pigeons". The phrase comes from the Septuagint of Lev 12:8. These are the only birds permitted by the Law for sacrifice; and pigeons were sold in the Temple court for this purpose (Mk 11:15; Jn 2:14). Rock pigeons are a year-round variety in Palestine, to be distinguished from the seasonal species. Doves are a smaller variety of pigeon.

v. 25

- "And (*kai*) behold (*idou*), it happened (*egeneto*)". We find the expression *kai idou* (see [note to v. 1: 20](#)) plus the pattern with *egeneto* (see [note to 1: 9](#)).
- "Jerusalem (*Hierousalēm*)". Here we have the spelling *Hierousalēm*, rather than *Hierosolyma* from v. 22 (see [note to v. 22](#)).
- "a man by the name of Simeon". The style of the Greek text indicates that an unknown character is being introduced to the reader, making it impossible to identify him with Simeon, the famous son of Hillel and father of Rabbi Gamaliel the Elder. In the second century the [Protevangelium of James](#) made him a high priest successor of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist (on this subject see [note to 1:5](#)). There is no indication in Luke's description that Simeon was a Levite priest, despite the fact that he blesses the parents in v. 34. His presence in the Temple is presented as purely coincidental, unlike Zechariah's, who was there to fulfill his priestly duties. The mention in the *Nunc Dimittis* that he is ready to die suggests that he was old.
- "upright (*dikaios*)". This is the same adjective used for the parents of John the Baptist in Lk 1:6 and for Joseph in Mt 1:19; *dikaios* is variously translated as "upright, pious, holy. The characters in the infancy narrative who do not appear in the rest of the gospel are presented as possessing the piety of Israel.
- "devout (*eulabēs*)". This adjective, which appears only in Lk/Acts in the whole NT, denotes attention to religious duties.
- "waiting for the consolation of Israel". Lk 23:50-51 will describe Joseph of Arimathea as a man "good and upright...who was waiting for the kingdom of God," so that Simeon is his equivalent before Jesus' ministry. Another parallel to this description is the audience of the prophetess Anna who is said to have been "waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:38).
- "The Holy Spirit". Literally: "Spirit was holy". The noun has no article here and the adjective is separated from the noun by a verb. This is the same construction as in Mt 1:18,20 and Lk 1:15.35.41.67 (see [note on Mt 1:18](#) and [Lk 1:15](#)). The use of the expression "Holy Spirit" in the next verse shows that Luke intends to refer to the Holy Spirit, but it is not clear whether he sees a difference between the gift of the Holy Spirit before and after Easter.

v. 26

- "disclosed (*chrēmatischein*)". This verb designates a divine oracle or answer; for example, in Acts 10:22 Luke uses it when an angel gives Cornelius the direction to go to a place.
- "by this Holy Spirit". Literally: "by the Holy Spirit". This is the first time Luke uses the article in reference to the Holy Spirit in the infancy narrative. See [note on 1: 15](#).
- "not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah". Luke plays with the theme of sight to prepare us for *Nunc Dimittis*: "For my eyes have seen this salvation" (2:30). The expression "Messiah of the Lord" also appears in Psalms of Solomon 18:7.
- "before (*prin ē an*)". This expression with a verb in the subjunctive appears only here in the entire NT; the normal form would be the accusative with a verb in the infinitive.

v. 27

- "led by the Spirit". Literally: "in the Spirit". The word "Spirit" is preceded by the article. Luke intends to present the encounter with Jesus' parents as prepared by God.
- "the Temple court". Luke knows the difference between *hieron* (the Temple or Temple court) and *naos* (the Temple sanctuary where only priests enter), which he used in 1:9. 21-22. As Simeon meets Mary, he must be either in the court of the Gentiles or the court of the women. Later Christians imagined that he was a priest, and therefore wrongly portrayed him and his parents as being in the temple sanctuary.
- "Jesus". Literally: the child, a term we will use in the next verse. See [note to 2: 17](#).

- "to perform for him". In Greek, "for him" modifies the phrase "what was customary according to the Law".
- v. 28
- "embraced (*dechomai*)". Literally, "he received" the child in his arms. From this verse, Simeon became known in Christian hagiography as *Theodochos*, "receiver of God."
- v. 29
- "Mighty Master (*despotēs*)". The term *despotēs* is uncommon in the NT for God, but used by the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew *'ādōn*. The term reappears in Acts 4:24 in the prayer of the Christian community in Jerusalem, a community that may ultimately be the source of this hymn.
  - "you may let". The verb is indicative and declarative; it is not an imperative or an imprecation.
  - "servant (*doulos*)". The term *doulos* refers to both slave and servant. Because of the use of *despotēs* in the verse to express God's absolute control over death, the translation "slave" would be appropriate here. However, because of the history of black slavery in America, a very different situation from slavery in the Greco-Roman world, we have opted for the translation "servant," echoing Mary's title of "handmaid."
  - "depart (*apolyein*)". The verb *apolyein* (to untie, to release, to deliver) is an euphemism for "to die" as in the Septuagint of Num 20:29, perhaps in the sense of being freed from the cares of life (Tobit 3:6.13).
- v. 30
- "my eyes have seen". It is not an expression to be taken literally, as some have done by imagining that Simeon was blind, as Zechariah was mute, and that his healing led him to sing this hymn.
  - "salvation(*sōtērios*)". Three of the four uses of *sōtērios* in the NT come from Luke. In 3:6 and Acts 28:28 he refers to God's salvation.
- v. 31
- "made ready (*hetoimazein*)". This verb was used for John the Baptist in 1:17.76 (and will be used in 3:4).
  - "in the sight of all the peoples". In Is 52:10, which is the inspiration for this hymn, it speaks rather of "all nations", i.e. the Gentiles. Why did the Nunc Dimittis prefer the word "peoples"? This word in the plural appears elsewhere in the NT only in Acts 4:25-27 to designate Israel and is contrasted with "nations" (the Gentiles). Whatever the meaning of "peoples" may have been in the pre-Lucanian stage of the hymn, it is more plausible to think that by "peoples" Luke includes here the two groups mentioned in the next verse, i.e., the Gentiles (nations) and the people of Israel, both of whom Luke considers to be the people of God.
- v. 32
- "a light to be a revelation". Literally: "light unto revelation". The noun "light", which is in apposition to "salvation", is the object of the verb: made ready. What is the relationship of the nouns "light" and "revelation" to the noun "glory" in the next line? It is likely that "glory" is in apposition to "revelation," so that revelation to the Gentiles or pagans and glory to Israel are both equivalent aspects of the salvation and light that God has prepared. Neither is subordinate to the other.
  - "to the Gentiles (*ethnos*)". Literally: "revelation of the Gentiles", with the word "Gentiles" in the genitive (noun complement), and so the genitive could mean "by": the Gentiles reveal the light, or "of", the Gentiles are revealed under the light, or "for", the Gentiles receiving a revelation from the light. This last possibility seems most appropriate in the context, for the next line also has a genitive for the word "people": "glory for your people Israel".
- v. 33
- "The father". Some copyists substituted the name "Joseph" for "father" because they felt that using the word "father" contradicted the virginal conception.
  - "were astonished". The expression is typically Lucan, and we have the same reaction in 1:21.63; 2:18. This reaction to a divine revelation is a stereotype found everywhere.
- v. 34

- "Simeon blessed them". This action contributed to the theory that Simeon was a priest (See [note to v. 25](#)).
- "is set (*keimai*)". The verb *keimai* can mean "to be placed, to lie"; but the image is not associated with the position of the child in Simeon's arms, but with the stones of a building.
- "rise (*anastasis*)". Usually *anastasis* refers to resurrection, but here the word is opposed to destruction. The combination of the two nouns "fall and rise" (like "day and night" and "fast and pray" in v. 37) is a Lucan characteristic.
- "of many in Israel". Jesus will have an impact on the whole nation. As in Mk 14:24, the word "many" is not to be taken as an exception to "all" but is used to emphasize the extent of Jesus' influence.
- "to be contradicted (*antilegomenos*)". The verb *antilegomenos* is a present participle, but refers to a future. Luke has a predilection for words with the prefix "anti". Compare, for example, Lk 21:15 ("which none of those who oppose [*antikeimai*] you will be able to thwart [*anthistēmi*] or contradict [*antilegō*]") with Mk 13:11 ("but what will be given to you in that hour, say [*laleō*] ; for it is not you who will speak [*laleō*], but the Holy Spirit"), and with Mt 10:19-20 ("whatever you have to say [*laleō*] will be given to you in that hour, for it is not you who will speak [*laleō*], but the Spirit of your Father who will speak [*laleō*] in you"). Of the ten occurrences of *antilegomenos* in the NT, six are from Luke.

#### v. 35

- "indeed". The verse literally begins with: "And (*kai*) from you (*sou*) then (*from*)". Luke used the same construction in 1:76 (Luke's addition to the Benedictus). We have translated the *sou* as "your own", and *kai... de* as "indeed". The idea is that what was stated in v. 34 is clarified here: Mary will also be affected by the sign of contradiction that Jesus will be.
- "a sword". There are some Syriac versions that have the "spear" reading instead, probably under the influence of Jn 19:34, since Jn 19:25-27 was seen as the fulfillment of Simeon's prediction.
- "pass through (*dierchesthai*)". The verb *dierchesthai* appears 42 times in the NT, three-fourths of them in Lk/Acts. The Septuagint rarely uses it to describe the action of a weapon, hence the importance of Ezek 14:17 which will be explained in our commentary.
- "soul (*psychē*)". The *psychē* was the seat of emotions and affections, the heart.
- "so that (*hopōs an*)". While the phrase *hopōs an* can have a causal meaning ("with the result that"), it usually has a final meaning ("in view of"). The purpose could be to fulfill the Scriptures (see Mt 13:13-15). This subordinate clause is governed by the verb "he is set" in v. 34c. Is it also governed by the verb "will pass through"? The answer depends on a decision about whether v. 35a is a parenthesis. Indeed, the particle *an* introduces a hypothetical element: intimate thoughts will be revealed, but the precise timing is not specified.
- "inmost thoughts (*dialogismos*)". The 13 occurrences of *dialogismos* in the NT all have a negative connotation: bad thoughts, vain thoughts, doubts. In Luke, the other five occurrences refer to hostile thoughts about Jesus or questioning him. The word *dialogismo* of 35b continues the idea of the contested sign of 34d, for the contestation will be expressed with hostile thoughts.

#### v. 36

- "a prophetess". Apart from the perverse Jezebel "who calls herself a prophetess" (Rev 2:20), Anna is the only woman in the NT to be given this title, even though there are numerous references to women who prophesy in the Christian community (Acts 2:17; 21:9; 1 Cor 11:5). In the OT women called prophetesses include Miriam, Deborah, Huldah and the wife of Isaiah (Ex 15:20; Jdg 4:4; 2 Kgs 22:14; Isa 8:3).
- "of the tribe of Asher". The identification of this tribe is problematic, since the Israelites in Jerusalem were mainly from Judah (hence the word "Jew") or Benjamin, or Levi. The women called Anna in the Bible belong to the northern tribes: Samuel's mother was an Ephraimite (1 Sam 1:1-2), and Tobit's wife was from the tribe of Naphtali (Titus 1:1.9), a Galilean neighbor of Asher, and an associate according to Gen 49:20-21 and Deut 33:23-24. The tribe of Asher was not important, for Asher was the last of the sons of Jacob/Israel in Moses' list of blessings on the tribes (Deut 33:24). Some biblical scholars have proposed that the names have a symbolic meaning: Asher means: fortunate, and the name Phanuel (father of Hannah) means: face of God. It is interesting to note that Leah's exclamation at the birth of Asher ("Fortunate am I! For all the women call me fortunate", Gen 30:13) served as a Lucan background in 1:42b.48b.

- "well on in years". This is an even more emphatic form of the expression used to describe Zechariah and Elizabeth in 1:7 (See [note on this verse](#)).
- "she had married as a young girl". Literally: "from her virginity". It is to be assumed that she was a young girl of about twelve years of age at the time of her marriage.

v. 37

- "and then by herself (*autē*)". This translation reads *autē* as an intensive pronoun (*autos*), not as a simple personal pronoun, despite its frequent use in Luke.
- "as a widow for eighty-four years". Literally: "a widow until eighty-four years". Does the 84 years refer to her time of widowhood or to her total age. If it is the former, then she would be 105 years old (12 years at marriage plus 7 years of marriage).
- "never left the Temple courts (*hieron*)". Again, Luke is talking about *hieron*, not *naos*. (See [note to v. 27](#)).
- "day and night". The Greek text literally says "night and day" (see Acts 26:7). We cannot be sure that Luke is reflecting here the Hebrew way of calculating where the day begins with sunset. For both names, see [note to v. 34](#).
- "worshiped (*latreuein*)". The verb *latreuein* is very popular in Luke and is intended here to mean his participation in the hours of sacrifice and observance of the weekly fasts.

v. 38

- "at this very moment". Literally: "at that same hour", an expression that appears 9 times in Lk/Acts and is typically Lucan.
- "came on the scene (*ephistanai*)". Of the 21 occurrences of *ephistanai* in the NT, 18 are Lucan.
- "spoke". In Greek, the tense is in the imperfect tense: "she was talking".
- "waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem". We have a similar description in v. 25 about Simeon "waiting for the consolation of Israel"; in both cases reference is made to messianic deliverance. Any attempt to interpret these words in a purely nationalistic setting, i.e. a political liberation of Jerusalem from the Romans, clashes with the idealism of the Anawim and Simeon's prayer for the Gentiles.

v. 39

- "they had finished (*telein*)". The old Syriac version of Sinaiticus specifies "Joseph and Mary" as the subject, which is certainly Luke's intention, even though the next "they" includes the child. The verb *telein* (to complete) conveys a sense of accomplishment, and will be extended in the next verse with the verb *pleroun* (to fill, fulfill).
- "they returned". On the use of departure verbs to end a scene in the infancy narrative, see [note to 1: 23](#).
- "their own city, Nazareth". Bethlehem was "his city" for Joseph in 2:3.

v. 40

- "the child grew up and became strong". This is word for word what is said about John the Baptist in 1:80.
- "favored by God". Literally: "the favor of God was upon him".

### Comment

#### A. The Sequence and Internal Structure

##### 1. The Sequence

In discussing the diptych of the birth of the Baptist and Jesus, we noted several differences in the events that follow these births. Here are the highlights of the two structures.

**JBap**

**Jesus**

Birth	Birth
	Proclamation of Destiny (Angels)
Circumcision and Naming	Circumcision and Naming
Proclamation of Destiny (Zechariah)	Proclamation of Destiny (Simeon)
Conclusion	Conclusion

Several questions are raised when analyzing the purification and presentation scene:

- Why is there a second proclamation about the greatness and future destiny of Jesus, after the one from the angel to the shepherds?
- Why are the parents astonished about the child's future, when they have been informed by the shepherds of the angel's message?
- How can Mary, who received a revelation in 1:32-35, be astonished?
- Why in 2:27 are Joseph and Mary called the parents of Jesus, and why in 2:33 is Joseph called the father of Jesus, if Jesus was indeed conceived virginally?
- All this leads to a final question: would not the account of Simeon have taken shape in a pre-Lucan context that presupposes neither Gabriel's annunciation to Mary nor the angel's annunciation to the shepherds? Wouldn't we have three independent narratives: the annunciation to Mary, the angelic annunciation to the shepherds, and Simeon's oracle to the parents, each narrative containing a divine revelation about the identity and future of the child?

Despite the appearance of a collection of scattered scenes for the whole of 2:1-40, there are close theological and Christological links between them. For the angelic annunciation to the shepherds concerns the identity of Jesus in the context of Israel's expectation (2:10-11), while Simeon's *Nunc Dimittis* concerns the destiny of the child "before all peoples," including the Gentiles; there is no duplication between the two proclamations, but a development.

We have already indicated that the story of the shepherds has the same function as the story of the magi, since both represent the displacement of the Christological moment to the conception and birth of Jesus. But the shepherds' story lacked 1) the faith and adoration of the Gentiles found in the magi, and this is exactly what is found here in the *Nunc Dimittis*; the shepherds' story also lacked 2) the rejection of the newborn king by the powerful of Israel (Herod, the chief priests), and this is what is found in Simeon's oracle in vv. 34-35, which speaks of the fall of many in Israel and the contested sign. Thus, theologically, 2:1-40 is very similar to the account of the magi in Mt 2:1-13. Despite the different narratives, the same theological message is found, and thus 2:1-40 is not a juxtaposition of scattered material.

One of the leitmotifs of 2:22-40 is that Scripture, summarized by the Law and the prophets, is fulfilled in Jesus. What passage of Scripture serves as the background for this section? It would be the prophets Malachi and Daniel. We have already seen that Mal 3:1 was used to introduce John the Baptist in Lk 1 as the one to whom the phrase, "Behold, I send my messenger. He will make straight the way before me". The rest of the verse says: "Suddenly he will enter his temple, the master you seek... Who will stand the day of his coming? Who will stand when he appears?" Also, in Lk 2, it is not by chance that after being greeted as Lord (2:11), the child Jesus comes to the Temple to be recognized by Simeon who was waiting for the consolation of Israel. And Simeon points out that his coming to the Temple signals the beginning of his role as a contested sign, so that many will fall, or to use Malachi's words, they will not be able to stand the day of his coming.

Daniel 9:21-24 also influenced Luke to include some scenes of Jesus in the Temple. We have already mentioned the scene in the Temple at evening prayer with the angel Gabriel, which was the background to the scene of Zechariah in the Temple. In Dan 9:24, Gabriel's appearance marks the end of the 70 weeks of years, and the moment when the Holy of Holies will be anointed. It is possible that for Luke this Holy of Holies is a person, that is, the one whom Gabriel in his appearance to Mary called "holy", the child who is now brought to the Temple to be consecrated (holy) to the Lord (2:23).

## 2. The Internal Structure

This section can be divided into four parts.

- v. 22-24      The setting where Joseph and Mary bring the baby Jesus to the Temple at Jerusalem
- v. 25-35      he greeting of the child by Simeon and his two oracles about the child's destiny
- v. 36-38      The greeting of the child by the prophetess Anne
- v. 39-40      The conclusion involving a return to Galilee and Nazareth, and a refrain on the growth of the child

- i. The setting refers to the purification and presentation spoken of in Deuteronomy, but these two elements will not play a prominent role later on.
  - ii. In the section on Simeon, the canticle of *Nunc Dimittis* (v. 29-32) would have been added in a second stage of the gospel edition, as we have already suggested, so that originally v. 27 ("When the parents brought in Jesus...") was followed by v. 34 ("Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, the mother...").
  - iii. the greeting by Anna seems to be a duplication of Simeon's greeting. Why would Luke add this scene where the prophetess does not speak a word? The reason probably stems from the evangelist's desire to balance the temple scene with a man and a woman, just as he did at the beginning of the infancy narrative with Zechariah and Elizabeth.
  - iv. The conclusion brings together two verses that do not seem to be related, no doubt a sign of material of different origin.
- B. The Setting Supplied by the Law (2:22-24)

Two Israelite customs provide the background for the Temple scene. Just as the census brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, the cleansing and presentation brought them to Jerusalem and the Temple. Let us examine these two customs separately, for Luke seems to confuse them.

1. The consecration or presentation of the child to the Lord.

Ex 13:1 and 13:11f require the dedication of all firstborn males to the Lord. This practice is traditionally related to the fact that the Lord spared the Israelite firstborn when he struck down the Egyptian firstborn. Normally, these firstborns consecrated to the Lord would have remained in the temple to ensure its service, but eventually the practice was that this firstborn could be redeemed for a sum of 5 shekels, thus 20 denarii (20 days' wages), while the tribe of Levi would devote itself entirely to the service of the Temple. This practice will be confirmed by Num 8:15-16. The sum was to be paid to the Temple, but there was no obligation to go to the Temple for this presentation or redemption.

2. The purification of the mother after the birth of a child.

The book of Leviticus 12:1s specifies that a woman must be considered ritually unclean for seven days before the circumcision of the male child, and 33 days afterwards, for a total of 40 days (for a girl, the total is 80 days) during which she may not go to the sanctuary. And at the end, she must bring to the gate of the Temple (Nicanor's gate, see Temple map) the offering of a lamb, and a young pigeon or a dove. If she could not afford a lamb, she could offer two pigeons or doves.

In vv. 22-24 Luke is thinking mainly of the purification of the mother: the mention of the period leading to purification (v. 22) and the gift of the two birds (v. 24), allusions to Lev. 12:6-8. However, he combines all this with the reference to the consecration of the firstborn in vv. 22b-23 and v. 27. All this results in inaccuracies.

- Luke seems to think that Joseph also needs purification ("their" purification in v. 22) by slightly modifying Lev 12:6
- He seems to think that the reason for going to the temple is the consecration or presentation of Jesus (v. 27), whereas only the law of the purification of the mother required it, and even there the custom seems to have fallen into disuse in the NT era
- He does not mention anything about the five shekels required for the redemption of the firstborn, and seems to confuse this requirement with the two birds required for the purification of the mother.

What does this mean? Either Luke has misinterpreted a tradition that was bequeathed to him, or he has created a setting based on an incorrect reading of the laws of the OT. We opt for the latter case, because

- i. there is little connection between this setting and the verses that follow;
- ii. it is a similar situation as we have encountered with the census where the setting was meant to explain the geographical displacement of Joseph and Mary;
- iii. Luke goes to the trouble of quoting the laws of Leviticus

In short, Luke has only a general knowledge of Judaism, ignoring a number of details, a sign that he is not from Palestine or a Jewish background.

It is possible that these inaccuracies are introduced for theological reasons. First, since Luke wants to set the scene in the Temple, the law of purification then provides the reason he needs to force Joseph and Mary to go to Jerusalem. Second, the presentation of Jesus allows him to create this encounter with Simeon and the prophetess Anna. What is Luke looking for in all this? To take up the motives he finds in the story of Samuel. For the young Samuel was

presented at the sanctuary in Shiloh, but then left the sanctuary without the required redemption. Inaccurate knowledge and the influence of Samuel's story would explain the confusion in our account. Let us take a closer look at the parallels between Luke's scenes and those around young Samuel in 1 Sam 1 - 2.

After Samuel's presentation, the parents Hannah and Elkanah meet Eli, an elderly priest (1:25)	Mary and Joseph meet Simeon, an elderly person
Eli blesses Hannah and Elkanah (2:20)	Simeon blesses Mary and Joseph (34)
Women officiate at the door of the sanctuary (2, 22)	The prophetess Hannah never left the Temple courts; day and night she worshipped God, fasting and praying (37)
"The little Samuel grew before the Lord" (2: 21); "As for the little Samuel, he grew in stature and favor before the Lord and also before men" (2: 26)	"And the child grew and became strong, full of wisdom and blessed by God.

It is clear that the story of young Samuel and his parents Hannah and Elkanah was a source of inspiration for his entire infancy narrative. For example, the Magnificat is modeled on Hannah's hymn, just as the account of John the Baptist's conception was modeled on Samuel's conception, and the figures of Elizabeth and Zechariah, as well as those of Mary and Joseph, bear the influence of the figures of Hannah and Elkanah. Without going so far as to make a simple identification between these figures, Luke rather uses certain pigments to color his own scenes. In addition to the influence of 1 Samuel, we also mentioned earlier that of the prophet Daniel.

### C. Simeon Greets the Child and Prophecies (2:25-35)

#### 1. The Characterization and Symbolism of Simeon

Luke speaks of the Law three times in vv. 22-24, and continues this theme in vv. 27 and 39, when the scene is focused on Jesus' future greatness. For him, this future greatness was made possible by obedience to the Law of Moses, which is in fact the Law of the Lord. Similarly, the (Holy) Spirit is present throughout the infancy narrative, and it is this Spirit that makes prophecy possible: under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Elizabeth greets Mary, the mother of her Lord, Zechariah proclaims the Benedictus, Simeon proclaims the Nunc Dimittis; without explicit mention of the Spirit, however, Anna is called a prophetess. For Luke, the Law and the Prophets refer to the whole heritage of Israel, and it is in this context that he wants to situate the career of Jesus.

We have proposed that the various hymns found in the infancy narrative were composed in the circle of the Anawim, those pious Jewish Christians totally dependent on God who recognized in Jesus the fulfillment of God's promises to sustain them. Now, Simeon and Anna embody the figure of these Anawim who await the consolation of Israel and the redemption of Jerusalem. And like the Anawim, they are inhabited by the piety of the Temple, and so it is in the Temple that Simeon will see the consolation of Israel, and Anna did not leave the Temple, fasting and praying there day and night; they are the forerunners of the first Christian community in Jerusalem.

Now, with the Law and the Prophets, and then the Temple, the whole setting is complete to celebrate the greatness of the child Jesus. The one who was called "holy" is now in the holy place of Israel, which the Temple theologians considered to be the residence of the glory of God. The light has come to him, and the revelation that Simeon receives now allows him to bless the child's parents, whereas Zechariah had been unable, at the beginning of the infancy narrative, to offer his blessing in the temple. He also announces the revelation to the Gentiles, which will be the glory of the people of Israel, and thus the realization of what the prophet Isaiah had predicted (2:2-3).

The prophet Isaiah is part of the background of the figure of Simeon (especially chs. 40-55 and 56-66), e.g., that line by which "he looked forward to the consolation (*paraklēsis*) of Israel." Just before the passage associated with John the Baptist in Is 40:3 ("voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord"), we read in 40:1: LXX "Console, console (*parakalein*) my people, says the Lord; Priests, speak to the heart of Jerusalem; console her, for her humiliation has been filled out." Similarly, Is 66:12-13 speaks of the glory of the Gentiles: LXX "Like a mother console (*parakalein*) her child, and I will console you, and in Jerusalem you will be consoled". The same is true of the figure of Hannah "who waited for the redemption (*lytrōsis*) of Jerusalem", an echo of Is 52:9: "for the Lord consoles his people, he redeems Jerusalem".

#### 2. The Problem of the Two Oracles

There are two oracles pronounced by Simeon about Jesus, the Nunc Dimittis (29-32) and the oracle addressed to Mary (34c-35). We encountered the same situation earlier with Elizabeth's song of praise (1:42b-45) coupled with the Magnificat (1:46-55), the Gospel proclamation to the shepherds (2:10-12) coupled with the Gloria (2:13). In all these cases, we have proposed that the first hymn was the work of Luke, and the second was the addition of a source in a later stage of the edition of the gospel. Here it would be the other way around: the Nunc Dimittis is a later addition, and the second oracle of Simeon is a composition of Luke.

The fact that the two oracles have a similar introduction (in each case Simeon makes a blessing before beginning to speak) suggests their composite character. Here are the arguments supporting the idea that the Nunc Dimittis (28-33) is an addition to Luke's original account.

- a. If we remove section 28-33 (Nunc Dimittis), we obtain a smooth transition from v. 27 to v. 28: "When the parents brought in Jesus to perform for him what was customary according to the Law... Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, the mother.
- b. The Nunc Dimittis has affinities with the preceding hymns, characterized as added in a second stage of composition, both for its vocabulary and for its themes: God is praised not in relation to the conception or birth of Jesus, but to the general work of salvation that has already taken place. It is a hymn that a devout member of the Anawim might have uttered after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus: "My eyes have seen this salvation that you made ready in the sight of all peoples".
- c. On the other hand, the second oracle of Simeon (34c-35) does not resemble the other canticles. Its poetry is much rougher, and rather than referring to salvation in general, it focuses on the future of the one who has not yet begun his ministry, and thus constitutes a prophecy in a birth context. This is a composition by Luke. In fact, on the level of vocabulary, we find here Lucanisms similar to those belonging to the first phase of Luke's composition.

But why did Luke not add the Nunc Dimittis at the end of his narrative, as he did for the Magnificat and the Benedictus? The answer stems from his vision of salvation history: it is first a question of praising God for his work in the history of Israel, which is what the Nunc Dimittis does, before turning one's attention to the child whose birth is being celebrated, which is what the second oracle does; moreover, it is necessary to proclaim this salvation offered to all peoples, to the Gentiles and to Israel, as the Nunc Dimittis does, before emphasizing that not all Israel will welcome it, as the second oracle does.

### 3. Simeon's Nunc Dimittis (29-32)

#### a. The Structure

It is a very short hymn that can be divided into three strophes of two lines each:

29a "Mighty Master, now you may let your servant depart  
29b in peace, since you have kept your word.

30 For my eyes have seen this salvation  
31 that you made ready in the sight of all the peoples:

32a a light to be a revelation to the Gentiles  
32b and to be a glory for your people Israel."

Note the parallelism of the third stanza with the second.

#### b. The theme of the watchman

The theme of the watchman who expresses his joy at being relieved of his task at the arrival of the one for whom he was watching has something universal about it (see Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, 1-30). This theme in Simeon is combined with that of the elderly person at the end of life, as in Gen 15:15, where God promises Abraham: "You shall join your fathers in peace and be buried after a happy old age". This combined theme of the watchman and the elderly is found in Jacob/Israel's affirmation after finding his lost son Joseph: "This time, after seeing your face again, I am willing to die because you are still alive" (Gen 46:30).

#### c. A messianic context

This context is understandable in the Judaism of Jesus' time. It is described in Psalms of Solomon 17:44: "Blessed are those who live in those days, for they shall see the good fortune of Israel in the assembly of the tribes which God shall call together". And the reference to leaving in peace is an echo of Ps 72:7 when God will restore the Davidic king: LXX "In his days justice will arise with the fullness of peace" (see also Zech 8:12 and Is 9:5-6). If Simeon can leave in peace, it is not because he has completed his tasks, but rather because God has fulfilled his word.

#### d. The influence of Isaiah and the OT

The following is a list of passages from Isaiah that form the background to the Nunc Dimittis (the translation is based on the Hebrew text, except for the lines with an asterisk where the Septuagint seems to better reflect the Nunc Dimittis).

Isa 52: 9-10:  
The Lord has comforted His people;  
He has redeemed Jerusalem.  
The Lord has revealed His holy arm  
in the sight of all the Gentiles,  
and all the ends of the earth will see  
the salvation that come from our God.

Isa 49: 6:  
It is insufficient for you to be my servant,  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob,  
and to recover the diaspora of Israel;  
I shall give you as a light to the Gentiles  
\*That you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

Isa 46: 13:  
I shall put salvation within Zion,  
and give to Israel my glory.

Isa 42: 6:  
I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
a light to the Gentiles.

Isa 40: 5:  
Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed,  
\*and all flesh will see the salvation of God.

The themes of seeing salvation in the sight of all peoples, a light for the Gentiles, and glory for Israel in the Nunc Dimittis is almost a pastiche of passages from Isaiah. At the same time, these are themes that are also found elsewhere in the OT: Ps 98:3 ("He has remembered his faithfulness, his loyalty, to the house of Israel. To the ends of the earth they have seen the victory of our God"), Bar 4:24 ("The neighbors... of Zion will soon see the salvation that will come from your God: it will come to you with the bright glory and splendor of the Lord").

e. The Universalism of Salvation

In the Isaiah passages, salvation has a universal perspective, but this universality is subordinated to Jerusalem, for Israel remains the people of God. But in Nunc Dimittis, the expression "the peoples" covers Israelites and Gentiles, so that the latter are also part of God's people. In his hymn, Zechariah (1:68) said that God "has visited and accomplished the redemption of his people". The perspective of Nunc Dimittis is much broader about God's redemption, for now is fulfilled what the prophet Zechariah had said about the Temple and Jerusalem: "For here I am, I am coming to dwell among you - the Lord's oracle. Many peoples (*ethnē*) shall cleave to the Lord in that day. They will become my own people" (2:14-15). Thus, with Simeon, Luke introduces a theme that Matthew had introduced with the magi. His understanding of salvation will later be expressed through the figures of Peter and Paul. Indeed, in Acts 15:14, we read, "Simeon has just reminded us how God, from the beginning, was careful to choose from among the Gentile nations (*ethnē*) a people for his name." What is affirmed by Peter will reach its conclusion at the end of Acts, "Know this, then: to the Gentiles this salvation of God has been sent" (28:28).

4. Simeon's Second Oracle (34c-35)

- i. "Behold" (34c). This beginning signals a change in tone and thought. The Nunc Dimittis had spoken of messianic peace, but Luke reports this about peace: "Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on, if there are five people in a house, they will be divided: three against two and two against three. They will be divided father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." (Lk 12:51-53). The second oracle will be marked by division.
- ii. "he is set for the fall and rise of many in Israel" (34c). Jesus' discrimination is not a casual role, but one that he has been assigned ("set for") to play. The terms "fall" and "rise" are intended to refer to two distinct groups among the Jews. There are those for whom the Christian message is a stumbling block and they fall (Isa 8:14), and there are those for whom it becomes a foundation stone on which to build a house (Ps 118:22; Isa 28:16). The negative aspect of the stone has been used as an arsenal in Christian circles to explain why Israel rejected Jesus, while the Gentiles welcomed him (Rom 9:30-32; 1 Pet 2:8). The order "fall" and then "rise" is based on this very chronology.
- iii. "and for a sign to be contradicted" (34d). This is an echo of the Davidic oracles of Isaiah. In 7:14, the prophet announces that the young girl will conceive and bear a son, who will be called Emmanuel, a sign given by God to the house of David, but a little further on (Isa 8:14) he tells us that this child will be "a stone to be struck

and a rock to be stumbled over". Thus, in v. 34d Luke goes further than the expression "fall and rise", he is a source of contradiction or quarrel, an echo of the place where Israel rebelled against its God, and which will be called "the water of contradiction" (Num 20:13; Deut 32:51). Simeon anticipates the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish authorities during his ministry and passion, and the rejection of the Christian mission by Israel in Acts.

- iv. "a sword will pass through your own soul" (35a). This obscure phrase has been the subject of much debate among church fathers and biblical scholars, and many of these proposals are based on faulty methodology using non-Lukan material. Here is a list of implausible propositions.
- According to Origen ([Homilies on Luke](#) 17), the sword would designate Mary's doubts, scandalized during the passion of Jesus. One would look in vain for a biblical clue in this sense, because on the contrary for Luke Mary is a model disciple (8:21) and she will be a member of the believing community after the ascension (Acts 1:14).
  - According to Epiphanius ([Heresies](#) lxxviii 11), the sword would designate Mary's violent death. There is no evidence that Mary died violently.
  - According to popular Marian piety, the sword would denote suffering (as in Ps 22:21), and this sword would have passed through Mary's soul at Calvary, when the *mater dolorosa* stood at the foot of the cross and saw her son die. Unfortunately, only John mentions Mary at the foot of the cross in a highly symbolic scene where she is precisely not the *mater dolorosa*. There is no indication that Luke or his community thought that Mary was at the foot of the cross.
  - A variation on the previous proposal is that Mary as the mother of the Messiah would have suffered the same fate as her son, including rejection and contestation. But there is no evidence in Luke for this, especially since his gospel makes no reference to a sword that pierced Jesus' soul.
  - The sword through the soul would be the equivalent of the contested sign of v. 34d, and thus would have been ranted against Mary because of questions of legitimacy related to Jesus' conception. This proposal introduces a motif from Mt 1:18-19 that is completely foreign to Luke's account.
  - Ambrose ([In Lucam](#) II 61) suggests that the sword represents the word of God. Even if this symbolism has biblical support, it is totally absent from Lucan usage. And at what point would this word of God have pierced Mary's soul?
  - The "protevangeliem" on Gen 3:15 refers to the hostility between the serpent and the woman, and between their two seeds. This proposal assumes that Gen 3:15 was interpreted in a messianic context, which is not found in either the Lucanian or non-Lucan tradition. Moreover, this interpretation does not do justice to the idea of v. 35a where Mary does not appear as a positive figure in opposition to a negative one, but where division seems to have been brought into her soul.

To properly interpret this verse, it is best to begin by examining the image of the sword that will pass through. The best OT parallel for vocabulary is Ezek 14:17 where the Lord exercises judgment and says, "Let the sword pass through this land, that I may cut off man and beast." This is an oracle that had been remembered, for it is found in Greek with some adaptation in the [Sibylline Oracles](#), III 316) to describe Antiochus Epiphanes' invasion of Egypt (circa 170 BC): 'For a sword shall pass through the midst of you'. The image is that of a sword of selective judgment that is able to discriminate, destroying some and sparing others. This image is in harmony with v. 34c where the child "is set for the fall or rise of many in Israel", and in harmony with Lk 12:51-53 ("Do you think that this is peace... but rather division"); it is worth remembering that the source of Lk 12:51-53 is Document Q which Matthew also knows and quotes thus: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace but the sword" (Mt 10:34-36).

Thus, in Lk 12:51-53 Luke did not retain the word "sword" which may have been in Document Q, preferring to use it here in 2:35a, but with the same idea of a division between father and son, mother and daughter. This gives us the key to understanding how the sword passed through Mary. For there is a common tradition in the gospels of contrasting the natural family of Jesus with the family of the disciples created by the proclamation of the reign of God. In Mark (3:31-35), the mother and brothers of Jesus are replaced by a new family of mothers and brothers and sisters who do the will of God. Luke modifies this tradition received from Mark to include the natural family in this new family of disciples because they have passed the test of listening to God's will. All this means that having natural ties to him does not guarantee that one will be judged favorably in this discrimination brought by Jesus. Among those who are included in the fall and rise of many in Israel, Mary stands with the few who are part of the rise, but only because she passed the test and knew how to recognize the sign. Her test, when the sword passed through her soul, was to recognize that the demands of Jesus' heavenly Father are more important than any human attachment between him and his mother, a lesson she will begin to learn in the next verse.

- v. This is the reason why the "sword" of Mary is so important: "so that the inmost thoughts of many may be revealed" (35b). What is the connection of this sentence with what precedes it, i.e. the sword that goes through Mary's soul? Indeed in order to be a connection, i.e., for 35b to be a continuation of 35a, a positive interpretation would have to be given to "inmost thoughts" (*dialogismoi kardiōn*), as Mary positively passed the test of discrimination. Unfortunately, all the data we have associate "inmost thoughts" with thoughts hostile to Jesus, thoughts of unbelievers, thoughts that doubt (see the [note to v. 35](#)). We must conclude, then, that there is no direct connection between 35b and 35a, and that the phrase about Mary is a parenthesis; rather, 35b is a continuation of 34d: the child will be a contested sign, since for the majority of people, as they encounter him, the hostility of their innermost thoughts toward him will be revealed. This is similar to what Jesus said to the Pharisees: "Nothing is hidden that will not be revealed, nothing is secret that will not be known" (Lk 12:2).

D. Anna Greets the Child (2:36-38)

After the revelation of the hostile thoughts mentioned by Simeon, the story around the prophetess Anna allows Luke to end this section on a positive note with the revelation of the child to all those who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. The style is thoroughly Lucan and the atmosphere is similar to that of the first chapters of the Acts of the Apostles: by her piety, her prayer, her fasting, Anne resembles the figure of the Anawims of the Jerusalem community, she is a prophetess, anticipating the atmosphere of Pentecost ("Then in the last days, says God, I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, your sons and daughters will be prophets", Acts 2:17), she is with Simeon a clone of Elizabeth and Zechariah.

To what extent do the details Luke gives us about Anna have a symbolic value? He may have wanted to create a type of Anawim piety, or to present a memorable figure among the Jewish Christian Anawim of Jerusalem. But what is particularly interesting is Luke's insistence on her widowhood of 84 years. For it is possible that Luke had in mind the place of Christian widows in the Pauline communities (Acts 6:1; 9:39.41). Compare the description given in 1 Tim 5 with Anna.

**1 Tim 5**

**Anna**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| v. 9 "A woman shall not be enrolled in the widows' group unless she is at least sixty years old. | She is about 103 years old (married for 7 years to 12 years, then widowed for 84 years)              |
| v. 5 "who remained completely alone", without remarrying   | "then alone as a widow for 84 years"   |
| v. 5 "persevere night and day in supplications and prayers"                                      | "day and night she worshiped God, fasting and praying"   |
| v. 9 "had only one husband".   | "she had married as a young girl and lived with her husband for seven years, then alone as a widow". |

But it is possible that the tradition about widows came to the Christian community through the tradition of the Jewish Anawim, as reflected in the book of Judith (2nd century BC). For the heroine, Judith, whose name means Jewess, personifies Judaism. She is a widow from the tribe of Simeon who did not remarry when her husband died, observing the Law and fasting (8: 1-8). After delivering Israel, she gave thanks to God with a song of praise (15:14-16:17), just as Anna gave thanks to God before all those who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. Judith continued her widowhood until she was 105 years old (16:23), which is almost the age of Anna.

E. The Conclusion (2:39-40)

V. 39 ends the preceding scene, and v. 40 ends the original infancy narrative (what follows would have been added in a second edition). V. 39 has two aspects: first, an inclusion with 2:22-24 about keeping the Law, and second, a shift to Nazareth. The same aspects are found in the conclusion of the story of Elkanah and Hannah in 1 Sam 2:20. And Luke's conclusion has the same characteristics as Matthew's: both are to provide a transition to the beginning of the ministry in Galilee.

V. 40 is part of the diptych of John the Baptist and Jesus.

**JBap**

**Jesus**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1: 80 "And the child grew up and became strong in Spirit." | 2: 40 "And the child grow up and became strong, filled with wisdom and favored by God." |
|--|---|

On John the Baptist, as we have noted, the background is Gen 21:8 concerning Isaac ("the child grew...") and Judg 13:24 concerning Samson (LXX "the child grew strong"). For Jesus, the background is 1 Sam 2:21 ("little Samuel grew before the Lord") and 1 Sam 2:26 ("little Samuel grew in stature and favor before the Lord and also before men").

It is remarkable that Luke does not copy for Jesus the mention that John the Baptist became stronger in the Spirit. It is possible that he could not conceive of the Spirit growing in someone conceived by the Holy Spirit. Instead, he opted for the idea of wisdom. In fact, the concept of wisdom is not far from the concept of the Spirit (see Isa 11:2 concerning the Messiah: "On him will rest the Spirit of the Lord, the spirit of wisdom and discernment". And Luke is the evangelist who has most closely linked the figure of Jesus with those of God's wisdom ("Therefore the Wisdom of God himself said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, and they will kill and persecute them,' " Lk 11:49).

Mentioning that Jesus was "favored by God" is a way of bridging the gap with Jesus' ministry where people "marveled at the message of grace that came from his mouth" (Lk 4:22).

## VIII. The Boy Jesus in the Temple Speaks

### Translation of Luke 2: 41-52

41 Now every year Jesus' parents used to go to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, 42 And when he was twelve years old and they had gone up to the feast as usual, 43 and when they had completed the festival days and were returning home, the boy Jesus remained in Jerusalem, unknown to his parents. 44 Thinking he was in the traveling party, they had gone a day's journey before they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances. 45 When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him.

46 Finally, after three days, they found him in the Temple precincts, seated in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. 47 All who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw Jesus, they were amazed. "Child," his mother said to him, "why have you done this to us? Behold, your father and I have been so worried looking for you." 49 "Why were you looking for me?" he said to them. "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" 50 But they did not understand the event of which Jesus spoke to them.

51 Then he went back down with them to Nazareth and was obedient to them. His mother kept with concern all these events in her heart. 52 And Jesus made progress in wisdom, and favour before God and men.

### Notes

v. 41

- "every year (*kat'etos*)". This is the only occurrence of *kat'etos* in the entire NT, even though half of the 49 occurrences of *etos* (year) in the NT are found in Lk / Acts.
- "Jesus' parents". Literally: his parents. Although the narrative may have been independent of the rest of the infancy narrative, in its present form it assumes that Jesus' parents are known.
- "used to go (*poreuesthai*)". The verb *poreuesthai* is here in the imperfect tense; it is a favorite verb of Luke who uses it more often (49 times in his gospel) than all the other evangelists together.
- "to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover". Here and in 2:45 the spelling is *Ierousalēm* (see the [note on 2:22](#)). The phrase "the feast of the Passover" does not appear in the Septuagint, and in the NT the usual expression is simply "the Passover," without mention of the feast. It is possible that the expression we have here, also present in Jn 13:1, is a clarification for non-Jewish readers. For a long time this feast was joined to that of unleavened bread, so that together with the Feast of Weeks and Tents it was one of the three feasts which were the object of a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem (Ex 23:17; 34:23). It was an obligatory feast for men who had to bring an offering. As for the women and children, it is not clear whether they were subject to the same obligations. And it is not known to what extent the law of the three feasts was observed at the time of Jesus: Jews outside Palestine could come on pilgrimage only once in their lives, just as Palestinian Jews could come only once a year.

v. 42

- "he was (*ginesthai*) twelve years old". Literally, "when he had become twelve years old". According to the [Talmud](#), the child became a man on his thirteenth birthday. At the same time, it was recognized that a child could understand the meaning of the commandments and be subject to them before that age, i.e., the age for taking vows was sometimes set at twelve ([Talmud of Babylon, Nazir 29b](#)). The age for being capable of discrimination was between twelve and thirteen ([Talmud of Babylon, Kethuboth 50a](#)). But it is not known whether in Jesus' day these later Talmudic ideas were applicable, let alone the even later practice of Bar Mitzvah. Finally, it is not known whether Jesus at the age of twelve was obliged to go to Jerusalem. In any case, there is no indication that Luke was thinking of an obligation; rather, for him Jesus was the example of Temple piety.
- "and they had gone up (*anabainein*)". On *anabainein*, see [note on 2: 4](#). In Greek, the verb is a present participle in the genitive, and it is paired in a awkward way with the verb "completed" which is an aorist (past) participle in the genitive, and both are subordinate to the verb of the main proposition: to remain. In any case, the idea of

subordination to the main proposition must be kept: the emphasis is not on the pilgrimage or on the departure of the parents, but on Jesus' action of staying in Jerusalem.

- "to the feast". Literally: "according to the custom of the feast".
- "as usual". The expression *kata to ethos* is peculiar to Luke in the NT (1:9; 22:39).

v. 43

- "completed (*teleioun*)". Here is another verb in the participle. To speak of completion of a specified time in 1:23 and 2:6,21,22 ("the time came") Luke uses the verb *pimplanai*. Here the verb is *teleioun* which only reappears in 13:32: "Behold, I cast out demons and perform healings today and tomorrow, and on the third day it is completed."
- "the festival days". Literally: "the days". The Passover was celebrated on the evening that ended the 14th day of Nisan, and the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread began on the 15th day, for a total of eight days of feasting (Lev 23:5-6). The law did not specify how long the pilgrims were to stay in Jerusalem, other than that they were to sleep one night and could not leave until the morning of the second day. If Luke knew precisely how long the feast lasted, he would seem to suggest that the parents stayed in Jerusalem for the eight days of the feast.
- "the boy Jesus (*pais*)". Jesus is now a *pais*, whereas until now he has been referred to by the diminutive *paidion* (2, 17.27.40).
- "remained". It is pointless to speculate whether Jesus' staying in Jerusalem was the result of an accident (he was forgotten, or he got lost) or a deliberate action. Luke does not mean to imply that the parents left earlier and that Jesus stayed behind in a pious effort to complete the feast days. Jesus' action and that of the parents are intended by Luke to achieve the purpose of his narrative.

v. 44

- "Thinking (*nomizein*)". Luke likes the verb *nomizein* (to think, believe, estimate); nine times in Lk/Acts, compared to six times elsewhere in the NT).
- "traveling party (*synodia*)". This *synodia* consists at least of relatives and friends from Nazareth. Acts 9:7 uses the verb form of the word (the only other use in the NT) to describe the group accompanying Paul on the road to Damascus.
- "a day's (*hēmeras*) journey (*hodon*)". The same expression (but rather with the order: *hodon hēmeras*) appears in the Septuagint in Num 11:31 and 1 Kings 19:4. A day's march is estimated to be 32 kilometers, based on the distance between the relays from Jerusalem according to *Mishna Maaser Sheni* 5:2. From the plateau of Galilee, the distance between Nazareth and Jerusalem was around 130 kilometers, thus a journey of three to four days, even taking the direct route through Samaria.
- "before they began to search". Literally, "and they were searching"; Luke does not mean that the parents spent a whole day looking for him in the long caravan, but rather their search began after a day's walk.
- "relatives and acquaintances". As in 2, 34c.37 ("fall" and "rise", "night and day", "fasting and prayer") the structure of the double expression is a lucanism.

v. 46

- "Finally... they found". Literally, "It happened (*egeneto*)...they found him; here is another construction with *egeneto* as we explained in the [note to 1: 9](#). It marks the beginning of the main part of the story.
- "after three days". Luke probably meant that the discovery of the child took place at the end of the third day after their departure from Jerusalem, calculated as follows: one day's walk from Jerusalem, one day's return, one day's search for him in Jerusalem.
- "the Temple precincts (*hieron*)". On *hieron*, see [note on 2: 27](#).
- "seated in the midst of the teachers (*didaskalos*)". Although in the gospel Jesus is often called "master" (*didaskalos*), that is not how he is presented here. It is true that Luke writes that he is seated, a typical position for a teacher (Mt 23:2; 26:55), and Lk 5:3 describes Jesus thus: "Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. But the sitting position is also appropriate for the disciple and the pupil, for example Paul at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). It is remarkable that Luke describes these Jewish leaders as "teachers," while elsewhere in

his gospel he considers them "legists" (*nomikos*) or "scribes" (*grammateus*). It is possible that by the time Luke wrote his gospel the Jewish legists and scribes had become hostile to Jesus and the Christians, but that for the time of the young Jesus Luke saw fit to use a more neutral term. The scene has a certain plausibility according to Jewish customs where the young people learned their duties and the commandments of the elders.

v. 47

- "All who heard". This includes, but does not focus on, teachers.
- "were astounded (*existanai*)". This is the first occurrence of *existanai*, a verb that Lk/Acts uses 11 times (more than double its usage in the rest of the NT). In the classical Greek, the word is very strong ("out of one's mind"), but in the NT the meaning has been toned down to a form of amazement in the face of what is miraculous or extraordinary. Luke has already remarked on the astonishment (*thaumazein*) at the things said about the child (2:18.33).
- "his understanding (*synesis*)". The attribute of *synesis* includes insight and intelligence, but not necessarily religious in nature; for example, Act 13:7 ("an intelligent man") it is used to describe Sergius Paulus. The emphasis is on insight rather than knowledge. Luke sees this *synesis* as an example of *sophia* (wisdom), which he emphasizes in 2:40.52. David prays that the Lord would deign to give Solomon *sophia* and *synesis* in 1 Chr 22:12, both of which are desired gifts for the king in Isa 11:2.
- "his answers". In v. 46 we are told that Jesus was asking questions. The word "answers" does not necessarily imply that Jesus was teaching the teachers. The expression "his understanding and his answers" could be another example in Luke of double expressions.

v. 48

- "his parents". Literally: "they"; grammatically, "they" should refer to what immediately precedes, i.e., "all who heard him" in v. 47. But here Luke is careless, for it is clear that he is referring to the parents of Jesus last mentioned in v. 46.
- "were amazed (*ekplēssein*)". The verb *ekplēssein* appears four times in Lk/Acts, out of a total of thirteen occurrences in the NT. It is doubtful that it carries a greater intensity than "they were astonished".
- "Child (*tecknon*)". See [note on "boy" in v. 43](#).
- "Behold (*idou*)". Luke has already used *idou* nine times in the infancy narrative; the formula *kai idou* (see [note on 1:20](#)) and *idou gar* (see [note on 1:44](#)) have a certain importance. Here the use is more trivial.
- "worried (*odynasthai*)". The verb *odynasthai* appears four times in Lk/Acts and nowhere else in the NT. It involves both mental and spiritual pain and sorrow, and in Lk 16:24-25 and Acts 20:38 the anguish concerns life itself.

v. 49

- "Why were". Literally: "How (is it) that".
- "for me". The personal pronoun "me" in the question and the personal pronoun "I" in the next question occupy an emphatic position in Greek, appearing only at the end of each question.
- "he said to them... you". The plural "you" tells us that Jesus is not only answering his mother's question, but the astonishment and concern of both parents.
- "in my Father's house". The Greek text *en tois tou patros mou* literally translates: "in the ...of my father," with the plural definite article "the" playing the role of a noun. What does "the" mean and what should it be translated as? Here is a list of proposals in decreasing order of probability.
  1. "In the dwelling-place (house) of my (heavenly) Father". The context of the parents seeking the whereabouts of the child makes it appropriate that the answer will include a [place name](#). Moreover the plural neuter definite article (the) coupled with the preposition *en* (in) is well attested to mean: "the dwelling place of", e.g., the Septuagint in Job 18:19: "Strangers shall dwell in his place (*en tois autou*)"; Esther 7:9: "A gallows was set up in Haman's house (*en tois Aman*)". An important parallel can be found in Josephus ([Contra Apion](#) I 18: #118): 'which is in the place (temple) of Zeus (*en tois tou Dios*)'. Thus the Greek expression *en tois* has the meaning of the French expression: "chez". The identification of "place" with "house" is encouraged by the fact that the scene takes place in the temple, a place often referred to as "house (*oikos*) of God" (see Lk 19:46; Jn 2:16).

2. "In or about the things (business, affairs) of my (heavenly) Father". Since the context is Jesus in the Temple precincts and sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions, it makes sense that "the" refers to the name of an activity, and that Jesus would be answering the question, "Why were you seeking me?". Thus, being the son of God, the parents should have known that he would be involved in his Father's business, such as discussing the Law and asking religious questions, and so they should not have been concerned. Unfortunately, such logic is a bit forced, and it is grammatically weak: the phrase *einai en* (to be in) can hardly mean "to be concerned about, to be about". Moreover, one would look in vain for a biblical parallel where "*en tois*" would mean "the business of". It is true that the neuter plural article "*tois*" can mean "things, affairs" (Mk 8:33; 1 Cor 7:32-34), but never coupled with the preposition *en* (in).
3. "In or among the household (relatives) of my (heavenly) Father". The fact that the parents looked for Jesus among relatives and acquaintances (*en tois syngeneusin*), and thus among the household of Jesus' earthly father, makes it plausible that "the" refers to a noun designating persons. So in his response Jesus would tell his parents that they should have looked among the parents or household of his heavenly Father (*en tois tou patros mou*). In Luke (8:19-21; 11:27-28), there are other scenes where Jesus contrasts the earthly family with the eschatological family composed of disciples in relationship with God. The use of the definite article as a noun is attested in this sense in Rom 16:10-11: "Greet those of (*tous ek*) the household (*tōn*) of Aristobulus (Aristoboulou)... Greet those of (*tous ek*) the household (*tōn*) of Narcissus (*Narkissou*)". Unfortunately, the insurmountable obstacle to this interpretation is the impossibility that Jesus could have considered the teachers of the Law in the Temple as "the household (family) of my Father."

v. 50

- "they did not understand (*synienai*)". Here we have the verb form of the noun *synesis* encountered in v. 47. Thus, Luke creates a sharp contrast between the parents' lack of intelligence and the child's amazing intelligence. To avoid implicating Mary in the lack of intelligence, who had received a revelation from the angel, biblical scholars have put forward various hypotheses: 1) the lack of intelligence would concern only Joseph; 2) the lack of intelligence would concern only the audience; 3) the lack of intelligence would concern another word of Jesus absent from the narrative; 4) the lack of intelligence would concern a word of Jesus spoken before their departure, explaining that he was staying in Jerusalem. All these hypotheses are not serious, because the text is very clear: it is the parents who do not understand, and the object of their lack of understanding is what Jesus said in v. 49.
- "the event of which Jesus spoke to them". Again, Luke uses *rēma* with the double meaning of "word, event," as in 2:15 (see the [note](#)); 2:17.19). This time, more directly than in the previous occurrences, the word means: word; however, to translate *rēma* in this way would hide from the reader the connection with its previous use. Moreover, the parents' lack of intelligence does not only refer to the words of Jesus' question, but to his entire action that led to this situation.

v. 51

- "he went back down ...to Nazareth". Literally, "he went down... and came to Nazareth". The action of going down is the opposite of that of going up in 2:42; the phrase "he came to Nazareth" is opposed to "they used to go to Jerusalem" in v. 41. On Luke's use of departure verbs to end a scene in the infancy narrative, see [note on 1: 23](#).
- "was obedient (*hypotassein*) to them". Literally: "he was being obedient". The construction with the verb "to be" followed by the present participle of *hypotassein* emphasizes a situation of continuity. This last verb is common in the Pauline corpus to express subordination to the family. But Luke does not intend here to describe the psychology of Jesus, but to show the contrast between the fact that, being the son of God, he nevertheless submitted to his human parents; moreover, he wants to explain how, although he had already revealed his divine messiahship, he did not publicly begin his mission until he was baptized.
- "kept with concern all these events". See [note to 2: 19](#).
- "in her heart". This is omitted by the old version of Sinaiticus.

v. 52

- "made progress (*prokoptein*)". This is the only use of this verb in the Gospels.
- "in wisdom... and favor". Wisdom and favor were mentioned in the description of Jesus' growth in 2:40; the word "maturity," inserted between the two, is quite new. The three words are well coordinated and one is not more emphasized than the other.
- "maturity (*hēlikia*)". The noun *hēlikia* can have two meanings: lifespan (age) and size (stature). The first meaning is more common in the Septuagint and Philo of Alexandria, and is attested in the Latin Vulgate. Luke uses the word

twice more, first in 12:25 ("And who among you can by his anxiety prolong his life span to add an hour?"), then 19:3 ("He sought to see who Jesus was, and he could not because of the crowd, for he was of small size"). Luke probably intends to express a general maturation of his being a man that would involve both number of years and stature.

- "before (*para*) God and men". The preposition *para* with the genitive can mean "with, alongside," and "before." Both ideas are attested by the Septuagint: the preposition *meta* (with, alongside) refers to "the Lord and men" in 1 Sam 2:26 ("he (Samuel) was good with the Lord and with men"), while *enōpion* (before, in front of) refers to the same expression in Prov 3:4 ("And think of the good before the Lord and men").

### Comment

What is the relationship of this scene of Jesus being twelve years old to what has gone before? Matthew ends his infancy narrative when the parents bring their child to Nazareth; why did Luke create this interlude that depicts Jesus as a young boy?

#### A. Structure, Christology, and Outline

Biblical scholars have proposed various structures to link 2:41-52 to the infancy narrative, without much success. The best solution is to admit that 2:41-52 was not part of the original diptych structure of the infancy narrative, which ended with 2:40. We are therefore faced with an independent section, added by Luke in a second stage of composition of his gospel. Nevertheless, he sought to match the beginning and end of 2:41-52 with the beginning and end of 2:22-40.

All this can be supported by a number of observations.

1. Chronologically, located twelve years after the birth of Jesus and before the beginning of his ministry, this section is no longer part of the infancy narrative
2. The content and tone are more a part of the hidden life of Jesus which was the fertile ground of the apocryphal writings
3. The section does not presuppose anything of the above: the narrative considers Joseph as the natural father of Jesus, unaware of the virginal conception; the parents do not understand what their child tells them, ignoring the announcements to Mary and the shepherds, as well as the predictions of Simeon

Thus, we have an independent account. Luke may have had a source of some sort, but he has rewritten it completely.

What is the function of such a story? First of all, it provides a chronological transition between the childhood and the ministry of Jesus. But more profoundly, it offers us a transition from the revelation made about Jesus by others (angels, Simeon), to a revelation proclaimed by Jesus himself. We argued earlier that the key to understanding the infancy narrative is Christology: the understanding of Jesus as Christ and Lord obtained at Easter has been displaced to the moment of his conception. The scene of Jesus' hidden life is another illustration of this shift: the Christological moment is placed at a time when Jesus is a young boy, at a time when he is conscious enough to express who he is in word and action. The insight that this movement expresses is that Jesus did not become the son of God at his baptism, but that this event was merely the revelation of what he already was. This is what the apocryphal writings on the birth of Jesus try to express, albeit in a fanciful way.

Here we have a universal motif about all the great figures in history: Buddha in India, Osiris in Egypt, Cyrus in Persia, Alexander the Great in Greece, Augustus in Rome. At the time of the New Testament, there were Jewish legends about Moses that attributed to him an extraordinary knowledge as a young boy, and explained how God had given him a gift of intelligence and superior size and maturity. The Jewish historian Josephus relates that the young boy Samuel began to act as a prophet at the end of his twelfth year (*Antiquities*, V x 4: #348). According to the Septuagint of Susanna (v. 45), the young Daniel ("at twelve years of age" according to the *Syrohexaplar*) received the spirit of understanding that made him wiser than the ancients.

In this universal motif, both wisdom and the work of the adult person are anticipated. Both aspects are present in Luke, even if wisdom is less important. For the heart is not the boy's intelligence but his reference to God as his Father in v. 49. This is a Christological affirmation: Jesus says of himself what the voice from heaven will affirm at his baptism. The story could be characterized as an apophthegm, i.e. a short narrative centered on a memorable word.

But we cannot use v. 49 ("Do you not know that I must be in my father's house?") to say that the young Jesus knew that he was a son of God. Of course, it is safe to say that Jesus had a childhood and an adolescence. But Luke places in this framework an understanding that comes from faith after Easter. And to resort to reminiscences that would come from Mary has no biblical basis and biases Luke's intention. The same is true of v. 52 ("Jesus grew in wisdom, maturity and favor"), a standard description of growth. The point is that Luke's Christology did not prevent him from asserting that Jesus grew in wisdom and in God's favor, or that he was already a son of God as a young boy. Nor can v. 50 ("they did not understand the event") be used to make a historical claim: for it is an account that may have circulated independently and was ignorant of the virginal conception, but Luke saw no problem in inserting it into

his gospel, no doubt seeing it as another standard case of misunderstanding in the face of a parabolic revelation or prophetic statement; it is a stylized reaction in the gospel literature that tells us nothing about Mary's history or psychology.

Here is one possible way to structure this story.

General Statement about the growth of Jesus, his wisdom and God's favor (40)  
Geographical introduction: Jesus and parents had gone up to Jerusalem (41-42)

Setting: The parents have lost Jesus and searching for him (43-45)  
Core of the Story: The parents found the child and were amazed; Jesus answered them by stressing his Father's claim (45-50)

Geographic conclusion: Jesus went down with his parents to Nazareth (51)  
General Statement about Jesus' progress in wisdom, maturity and favor (52)

We have included v. 40 in this structure, even though it served as a conclusion to the original infancy narrative, because it also serves to introduce section 2:41-52, which then becomes an illustration of how Jesus "grew up and became strong, full of wisdom and favored by God. And v. 52, a clone of v. 40, becomes the verse that transitions to Jesus' ministry at age thirty.

B. The Introduction and the Setting (2:41-45)

Within the general setting of vv. 40-52, Luke presents the setting of a geographical introduction (41-42) and a conclusion (51a), i.e., the ascent to Jerusalem, and at the end the descent back to Nazareth. We have here a typical example of Luke's geographical theology that structures his gospel and Acts. This geographical theology was present in the infancy narrative that begins in the Temple of Jerusalem and ends in the same place, a form of inclusion to "wrap up" the infancy narrative. By adding the interlude of the twelve-year-old boy at the Temple in Jerusalem, Luke preserves some of this inclusion. This theological geography will also continue with the gospel that also ends at the Temple in Jerusalem (24:53), so that the whole gospel is wrapped up in the Temple.

Another element of geographical theology is highlighted when he writes that the family left Nazareth in Galilee to go up to Jerusalem for the Passover. This anticipates the main plot of Luke's gospel, the long journey that begins in 9:51 and ends in Jerusalem at Passover in 19:28.

Why this insistence on the Temple? In the infancy narrative and here, Jesus' parents are the figure of Jewish piety and Judaism: they fulfill their legal and religious obligations; they belong to this transitional phase towards the new era that Jesus will open. At the end of the gospel the Temple will play another role: that of a transition to the Acts of the Apostles and the starting point of the Christian community.

Vs. 43-45 provide the setting. Although the Christian midrashic tradition has seized on the details of this setting (the discovery of the child's absence after a day's walk, his search among the relatives and the return to Jerusalem), Luke shows no interest in these details: for him, they are merely a literary device to create drama and heighten the anxiety of the parents.

C. The Core of the Story (2:46-50)

The story itself does not begin until his parents find Jesus. For the drama arises from the circumstances (illustration of his wisdom) in which the child is found and what he tells them (Christological claim).

1. Jesus Is Found in the Midst of the Teachers (46-48a)

This section begins with a time indication: "after three days". Some biblical scholars have seen this as an allusion to the resurrection of Jesus. However, while Luke uses the phrase "the third day" six times in reference to the resurrection, this is not the case here. The other two times he uses the expression "after three days" (Acts 25:1; 28:17), it is simply to demarcate the time. But if the story existed in pre-Lukan tradition, it is possible that at that time the symbolism of the three days had an Easter significance.

This leads us to mention a curious parallel with the story of the wedding at Cana (Jn 2:1-12), which may have begun as a pre-Johannine story about the hidden life of Jesus. Indeed, it is a story about the young Jesus before he begins his ministry and still living in the family home. The scene takes place in the vicinity of Nazareth, when Jesus has not yet made Capernaum his headquarters. His mother and brothers are still present. There is a certain similarity with the apocryphal writings on the hidden life of Jesus where the extraordinary miracles he performed are told. At Cana Jesus produces the equivalent of 400 liters of wine to save a family friend from embarrassment. Within this setting of a pre-Johannine account of Jesus' hidden life, the mention of "the third day" (2:1) would be a reminder that the understanding of Jesus' identity would have come after Easter. The same might be true if the account of Jesus with the Temple teachers had first belonged to a pre-Lukan tradition.

With the Temple teachers (v. 46), Jesus listens and asks questions, showing himself to be curious about religious matters, anticipating his later involvement in the debates around the Law. In v. 47, the mention of Jesus' intelligence is intended to illustrate his wisdom which punctuated the two summaries (v. 40 and 52). And the astonishment of the audience at this intelligence anticipates the astonishment that will greet his teaching when he begins his ministry (Lk 4:32) and the astonishment of the scribes at his answers (20:26).

Jesus' parents also experience amazement, not only at his intelligence and his answers, but also at finding him in the Temple doing what he was doing. If this story existed independently as a pre-Lukan tradition, then it would express how Jesus' parents discovered his identity and vocation as a son of God.

2. The Mother's Question Leads Jesus to Speak about His Father (48b-50)

The question of Jesus' mother ("Why have you done this to us?") conveys a form of reproach, and might appear to contradict Luke's earlier statements about Mary. Of course, if the original story was a pre-Lukan tradition without all the annunciation and revelation stories about Jesus, we can understand Mary's reaction. But how can Luke dare to present Mary reproaching the son of the Most High, who was conceived virginally? The answer may be found in v. 51a, where Mary keeps all this in her heart, thus preserving her image as the servant of the Lord.

Jesus answers with a question, "Why were you looking for me?". The tone is one of sorrow that his parents knew him so little, and hints at the statement in v. 50 where "they did not understand". The climax of the story and the heart of this apophthegm is reached at the end of Jesus' second question: "Do you not know that I must be in my father's house?" The emphasis of this answer is that his presence in the Temple and his listening to the teachers is an indicator of his vocation, i.e. to be at the service of God who is his Father, and not to be at the disposal and mercy of his natural family. The verb "I must" (Greek *dei*) expresses a sense of obligation and necessity that recurs elsewhere in Luke's gospel, especially when Jesus speaks of the role the Father has given him to fulfill: "But I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the next day, for it is not possible for a prophet to perish outside Jerusalem" (13:33; see also 4:43; 9:22; 17:25; 22:37; 24:7, 26).

A close parallel to Jesus' response to Mary is found in John's account of Cana when he says, "Woman, what does your concern have to do with me? My hour has not yet come". For John, Jesus' hour is determined by his relationship to the Father. If the story of Cana was originally a tradition about the hidden life of Jesus, John has turned it into a statement that indicates Jesus' vocation, a vocation over which his natural family has no control. It is the same kind of statement that we find in Mk 3:31-35, where Jesus distances himself from his natural family and says: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

In the pre-Lukan narrative, independent of all the annunciations, the parents' lack of understanding when Jesus reveals his divine filiation is quite logical, for this understanding will only come after Easter. But placed in the context of the whole infancy narrative, and thus after the annunciation narratives, the parents' incomprehension takes on a new color: it is no longer a question of the incomprehension of his divine filiation, but what this implies, i.e., the distancing of family ties, because the Father must have priority. The same type of incomprehension will appear throughout Jesus' ministry, for example: "But they did not understand this word; it remained veiled from them so that they did not grasp its meaning; and they were afraid to ask him about it" (Lk 9:45; see also 18:34).

D. The Conclusion (2:51-52)

"and was obedient to them" (51b). Placing this statement in the context of parents not understanding and Jesus prioritizing his mission to the Father creates a dramatic effect. But this obedience is required to explain why his divine filiation was not known until several years later at his baptism and why the Galilean villagers did not suspect that he was anything other than Joseph's son. The motive of piety also runs through the scene: Jesus goes to Jerusalem with his parents out of respect for the obligations of the festivals, and by his obedience to his parents he observes the commandment to honor his father and mother.

"His mother kept with concern all these events in her heart" (51c). This statement softens the portrait of Mary following her astonishment and reproach for her son as well as her misunderstanding: she remains open to the mystery that surrounds her. And her misunderstanding is not permanent, for the fact that she keeps these events in her heart prepares the moment of her understanding as a member of the first community of believers (Acts 1:14). With this presentation, Luke reflects history: it is only after Easter that the Christological dimension of his person as son of God will be understood. Moreover, he shows the continuity between the Jesus of history and the risen one: already during his earthly life people like Mary had the intuition to be in front of a reality that was beyond them, and this intuition will know its full expression only at the resurrection.

V. 52 repeats in part v. 40, which in turn repeats in part 1:80 about John the Baptist.

<b>1: 80 (JBap)</b>	<b>2: 40 (Jesus)</b>	<b>2: 52 (Jesus)</b>
And as the child grew up, he became strong in Spirit	And the child grew up and became strong, filled with wisdom and favored by God.	And Jesus made progress in wisdom, and favour before God and men.

Verse 2:40 takes 1:80 and expands it, just as verse 2:52 takes 2:40 and expands it. We have already pointed out that the stories about Isaac, Samson and Samuel form the background to these summaries, and in particular the story of Samuel, which presents two summaries: "the little Samuel grew up before the Lord" (1 Sam 2:21), and "As for the little Samuel, he grew in size and favor before the Lord and also before men". Now, we have already pointed out that the first version of the infancy narrative ended with 2:40, which was not only a conclusion, but also a transition to the ministry of Jesus. When he added the account of the young Jesus in the Temple, Luke preferred to leave as is the conclusion of 2:40 and add a second conclusion in 2:52, possibly feeling justified by the precedent of Samuel. And the two conclusions mentioning the wisdom of Jesus form an inclusion around a narrative emphasizing Jesus' Christological understanding.

V. 52 repeats the terms "wisdom" and "favor" from v. 40. What is new is the term "maturity" (*hēlikia*: age, stature), an appropriate term to describe the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Another new aspect is to no longer simply speak of being filled with wisdom and favor, but of making progress in these qualities. Again, this description is very appropriate: Jesus at twelve had already shown wisdom, now it is a matter of making further progress before his ministry as an adult; as for progress in favor, this is probably related to his obedience to his parents, if we rely on Prov 3:1-14: "You will find favor and be well advised in the eyes of God and men." The word *charis* (favor, grace) refers to the basic goodness manifested in a life in harmony with God's commandments.

## IX. Epilogue

The accounts of Matthew and Luke are very different. The two evangelists did not know each other and were unaware of each other's work. Therefore, it is impossible to harmonize the two accounts to create a continuous narrative. But behind all these differences and irreconcilable points, a common understanding of the birth of the Messiah emerges.

1. There is a common effort to link the birth to what came before in the history of Israel
2. One tried to develop the Christological meaning of the birth, and thus to show the beginning of what will be manifested in the gospels.

In short, the infancy narrative is the place where the OT and the gospel meet.

It is Matthew who has created this link in the most obvious way with methodical pedagogy. His genealogy runs through the entire history of Israel, from Abraham to Jesus, but its conclusion opens with the novelty of the conception of the Messiah, without the intervention of a man. His infancy narrative is based on a source that takes up the story of the patriarch Joseph and the young Moses, to which he adds citations from Scripture, emphasizing the great events and places in the history of Israel that Jesus finds himself reliving. Matthew's composition wants to assure his reader that everything was part of God's plan: the name of the Messiah, his conception of a virgin, and the fact that he was born in Bethlehem but came from Nazareth.

This is less clear in Luke. His genealogy does not appear at the beginning of his gospel, but at the time of the baptism of the adult Jesus. His allusions to Scripture are less direct and more subtle. His pedagogy is primarily that of well-balanced scenes (the diptychs) with messages conveyed by key characters. Luke seems to have composed the infancy narrative himself from beginning to end, using here and there pieces of information or popular tradition, with the exception of the hymns and the scene of the young Jesus in the temple, which would have been external compositions that he would have added in a second stage. His sources of inspiration in the OT are not the same as Matthew's, while he is more interested in certain patriarchal couples like Abraham and Sarah, or in heroes like Samson and Samuel, or in the postexilic piety of the Anawim. While Matthew preferred to dramatize the figure of Joseph, who does not appear in the gospel except as the name of Jesus' father, Luke chose Mary and John the Baptist. And since he uses many more characters than Matthew, he can distribute the roles of the people open to the revelation about the son of God more widely; one gets the impression that all the pious Jews immediately welcomed Jesus.

The attitude to Jesus is much more contrasted in Matthew. Rejection is more clearly seen in the figures of Herod, the chief priests and the scribes. This is undoubtedly an echo of Matthew's own time and milieu where there was conflict with Pharisaic Judaism, and so he intends to say that this conflict began in the early days of the Messiah. In Luke, even though Simeon predicted that the child would be there for "the fall and rise of many in Israel", he does not present any scene of rejection, except in the Acts of the Apostles. In the triangle of Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem, the whole atmosphere is favorable to the Messiah (in Matthew, Jerusalem is negatively affected by the birth of the Messiah). Thus, for Luke, all the Jews recognize in Jesus the fulfillment of the Law, the prophets and the cult. On them the Holy Spirit was poured out (Mary, Zechariah, Simeon), anticipating the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In short, Luke wanted to establish the continuity of the Christian movement with Israel, and so he chose Mary to embody this continuity, she a representative of the Anawim, totally obedient to the word of God, the model of the disciple, and who would be a member of the first Christian community.

## I. Levirate Marriage

### Did Jesus Have Too Many Grandfathers?

This question is raised when we compare the genealogy of Jesus provided by Matthew and that provided by Luke and examine who Jesus' grandfather was (see [table 4](#)). Indeed, both Matthew and Luke agree in presenting Joseph as the father of Jesus. But who was Joseph's father, and therefore Jesus' grandfather? According to Matthew, his name is Jacob, but according to Luke his name is Eli. How to explain this fact?

One solution was proposed by Julius Africanus (ca. 225) and is based on the law of levirate mentioned in Deut 25:5-10. According to this law, if a man dies without having given a child to his wife, his (usually younger) brother must marry him and give him a posterity. However, the child born of this is legally the child of the deceased man, not of his natural father. Thus Julius Africanus proposes that Luke gives us the legal genealogy of Jesus, while Matthew gives us the natural genealogy: thus, in Luke Eli is the legal father of Joseph, while in Matthew Jacob is the natural father of Joseph. Today, biblical scholars have taken up this proposal but inverting it: Luke proposes the natural genealogy, and Matthew the legal genealogy.

As ingenious as this solution is, it is fraught with serious difficulties.

- a. For Eli and Jacob to be brothers or half-brothers, they would have to have the same father, i.e. Matthan in Matthew's genealogy is identical to Matthat in Luke's genealogy. But the father of Matthan/Matthat is Eleazar in Matthew, and Levi in Luke. Does this mean that the law of the levirate must be used once again to explain this situation? To solve this problem, some biblical scholars have proposed that Matthat and Matthan were two different people, and therefore that Elijah and Jacob were only half-brothers. But then we are faced with the dubious hypothesis that the mother would have successively married two men with practically the same name.
- b. It is not known to what extent levirate marriage was actually practiced at the time of Jesus, although Mk 12:18-27 suggests that this custom was known.
- c. The purpose of the levirate was to give a legal son to the deceased. It would therefore be strange to go to the trouble of producing a natural genealogy, when only the legal filiation was important.
- d. The levirate hypothesis would at most explain only the differences at the end of the genealogy, without illuminating the other differences in the middle of the genealogy. For example, it does not explain why Matthew traces Jesus' descent to Abiud son of Zerubbabel and Luke to Rhesa son of Zerubbabel. And why does Matthew trace Jesus' descent to David through his son Solomon, and Luke through his son Nathan?

The hypothesis of the levirate solves so few things and involves so many difficulties that it must be abandoned to explain the existence of two different genealogies.

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## II. Davidic Descent

### Historically, Was Jesus of the House of David?

While a majority of biblical scholars recognize the historical value of the claim that Jesus was of Davidic lineage, a number see it as a theologoumenon, i.e. the historicization of a theological claim. Thus, according to these biblical scholars, the young Christian community saw in Jesus someone who fulfilled the hopes of Israel, and among these hopes was that of a Messiah, and this is how Jesus received the title of Messiah; but in Jewish thought the Messiah was perceived as being of Davidic descent, and so Jesus became the son of David, and eventually a Davidic genealogy was fabricated.

1. The expectation of a Davidic Messiah in the first century

What was the importance of a messiah of Davidic lineage at the time of Jesus? Recall that the royal house of David had not exercised any power since the 6th c. BC, at the time of Zerubbabel, a man of Davidic lineage who had become a governor in Persia (see the [note to Mt 1:12](#)). But in the 2nd c., under the Maccabees and Hasmoneans the Jews regained some independence, which resurrected hopes for a return of the monarchy, mainly among the Pharisees and Essenes who began to hope for the restoration of the true royal lineage, the house of David. The phrase "son of David" to refer to the expected king first appears in the Psalms of Solomon 17:21 (late 1st c. BC or early 1st c. CE). The psalm laments that, although the Lord chose David to be king of Israel, it is sinners who are currently on the throne (the Hasmoneans), and so hopes that soon the true king, son of David, will come who will purify Jerusalem and gather a holy people. The same type of hope developed among the Essenes of Qumran. For example, in [4Q Florilegium](#) i 10-13), a commentary on 1 Sam 7:11-14 concerning the Davidic dynasty, one reads, "He is the branch (*šemaḥ*) of David who will rise with the Interpreter of the Law... at the end of time."

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD and the rebuilding of Judaism around the Pharisees, the phrase "son of David" became the standard way of referring to the Messiah. In the [Shemoneh Esreh](#), the common prayer of the

Jews in effect before the end of the first century of the modern era, the fourteenth blessing asks that David's throne be promptly restored in Jerusalem, and the fifteenth asks that David's descendants be exalted and flourish.

Thus, there was an association of the Messiah with a Davidic lineage. However, there are a number of exceptions that prevent this association from being seen as automatic. For example, in the early second century CE Rabbi Aquiba hailed Bar Kochba as a messianic figure even though he was not of Davidic lineage. In Qumran, in addition to a Davidic Messiah, there was an aspiration for an Aaronic messiah, i.e., a high priest of Levitical lineage who would have been anointed. It is a similar perspective that the epistle to the Hebrews presents where Jesus appears as a high priest, and therefore it would have been simpler for the author if Jesus had been of Levitical lineage, not Davidic.

2. The weakness of the theologoumenon

The theory of a theologoumenon meets two major objections.

- a. Jesus' parentage was well known in the early church circles. If the family really was not of Davidic lineage, how could he have accepted the theological claim of a Davidic ancestor? Especially James, the brother of the Lord, a leader of the Jerusalem community until about 60 AD, how could he not have heard of this Davidic claim? Moreover, a false claim to be of Davidic lineage would have offered a great deal of controversy to his enemies; thus, one would expect to find traces of controversy on the part of the Pharisees. But while there were Jewish attacks on his legitimate birth, there was never any controversy about his descent from David. And Hegesippus (2nd c.) informs us that Jude, the brother of Jesus, was put on trial before the emperor Domitian on the grounds that he was of David's descent, and therefore politically dangerous. Julius Africanus, on the other hand, who was born in Palestine and lived there part of his life, reports that there were relatives of Jesus who still lived in Nazareth and were familiar with family genealogies.
- b. The New Testament evidence for Jesus' Davidic ancestry is widespread and early. The epistle to the Romans (c. 58) states: "(the gospel) is about his Son, who according to the flesh came from the seed of David" (1:3). Yet, Paul was familiar with the Palestinian situation, and had been trained as a Pharisee, so the question of the Davidic lineage was of extreme importance to him, especially during the period when he was persecuting the Christians. So Paul would not have put forward this Davidic ancestry if it had no basis.

3. The text of Mark 12: 35-37a

Some biblical scholars have used this text from Mark to argue that Jesus rejected this Davidic origin. Indeed, while teaching in the Temple, Jesus asked the question: "How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, said, 'The Lord (God) said to my Lord (Messiah)... David himself calls him Lord...'" According to these biblical scholars, Jesus would deny that the Messiah was of Davidic descent. For in admitting the hypothesis that Jesus would have claimed to be the Messiah, he would have wanted to show here that the Messiah did not need to be the son of David, since he himself was not. Such an interpretation meets with serious objections, beginning with the three evangelists who assert elsewhere that Jesus is of Davidic lineage.

Recall that Jesus proclaimed the reign of God, a reign that had already begun to be realized. This proclamation is related to God's promises to Israel, and for many, these promises include a Davidic Messiah who would restore an independent and prosperous kingdom like David's of old. Among those who followed him as disciples, some hailed him as the expected Messiah, although it does not appear that Jesus approved of this title; he would have objected primarily to the way this Messiah was perceived and the implications drawn from it. The distance he took from his family (Mk 3:31-35) was a way of moving away from physical descent to emphasize God's sovereignty in implementing his plans.

Let us return to Mk 12:35-37a. This is a word for the most part that probably goes back to Jesus himself. The question Jesus asks might be an example of a *haggada* type question that we know from rabbinic writings: the question is aimed at apparent contradictions in different verses of Scripture. In our case, we have on the one hand several passages which in the eyes of the scribes clearly demonstrate that the Messiah will be of David's descent, and on the other hand a passage where the Messiah is called Lord of David. The usual solution in a *haggada* is that all the passages are right in different contexts, or that they constitute different aspects of the truth. But what is certain is that this passage cannot be used to assert that Jesus would have denied being of Davidic descent and/or being the Messiah.

Let us end with a citation from the [Epistle to Barnabas](#) (2nd c.) commenting on Ex 17:14:

Now there is Jesus once more, not as the son of man but as the Son of God... Because they were going to claim that Christ was the son of David, David himself, foreseeing and fearing this error of sinners, prophesied: "The Lord said to my Lord". (17, 14)

The author of this letter does not deny Davidic descent, but simply states that Davidic descent should not distract us from the fact that Jesus is the son of God.

What to conclude? The evidence for Jesus' Davidic descent outweighs any doubts one might have. But it would not be a direct royal line or that his family would be of ancestral nobility, but rather one of the non-aristocratic side branches of the house of David (see our [analysis of genealogical lists](#)).

This being said, it must be agreed that if Jesus had not been of Davidic descent this would have no negative consequences for Christian faith and theology. On the contrary, Davidic messiahship had too much of a nationalistic flavor to occupy the forefront of Christian thought. And in the gospels, there is a warning against perceiving this Davidic lineage too physically or giving it priority. This is what Mk 12:35-37a does.

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### III. Birth at Bethlehem

#### Historically, Was Jesus Born at Bethlehem?

There is some consensus among biblical scholars that Bethlehem is not the birthplace of Jesus. The infancy narratives that place this birth in Bethlehem would be a historicization of a theological statement: the narrative would have been intended to illustrate the faith that Jesus was the messiah, son of David. But when we examine closely this theory of a historicization of a theological statement, we come up against a number of difficulties.

- a. This theory presupposes that there was an expectation among the Jews at the time of Jesus that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. But the data we have on the subject comes from Christians, not Jews: there is Mt 2:4-5 (the scene of Herod with the chief priests and scribes) and Jn 7:41-42 (it is said that the Messiah must be of David's descent and come from Bethlehem). Among the Jews, the data is much later.
- b. Even if such an expectation could be proven among the Jews, it would not be sufficient to create a birth in Bethlehem out of thin air. For there was also the expectation of a hidden Messiah who would suddenly appear, as echoed in Jn 7:27. So if Jesus was not in Bethlehem, he could have been presented as the hidden messiah who suddenly appeared at the Jordan to be baptized.
- c. While Luke insists that Bethlehem is the city of David, Matthew does not make such an insistence, and thus eliminates the need for him to be born there in order to affirm that he is the Messiah.
- d. Biblical scholars have argued that the Bethlehem birth narrative served as an apologetic argument for Christians against the Jews who ridiculed the fact that a Messiah could come from Nazareth. But the account of a birth in Bethlehem came late in the formation of the gospels, so that Christians could preach and accept Jesus as the Messiah for fifty years without knowing that he was born in Bethlehem.
- e. Later, in the Jewish polemic against the Christians, the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem was never questioned.

Thus, one must be careful in asserting that the birth in Bethlehem is a historicization of a theological conviction. But having said that, it must be recognized that there are serious objections to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem being a historical fact.

- a. The two main accounts (Luke and Matthew) of a birth in Jerusalem do not agree. In Matthew, we learn only indirectly that Jesus' parents lived in Bethlehem (Mt 2:11) and that Judea was his homeland (Mt 2:22), and therefore that this birth in Bethlehem was normal. In Luke, on the other hand, Jesus' parents live in Nazareth of Galilee, and the reason why they would have traveled briefly to Bethlehem, where Jesus would have been born, is not historically supportable, i.e., the census of Quirinius; this census did take place, but on a different date and it did not involve Galilee (see the detail at Appendix VII).
- b. Apart from the infancy narratives of Luke and Matthew, the rest of the gospels completely ignore such a birth in Bethlehem. The data there present Nazareth and Galilee as Jesus' hometown or region, his *patris* (Mk 6:1, 4; Mt 13:54, 57; Lk 4:23-24). This term *patris* (homeland, country of origin) is introduced by Mark who ignores this birth in Bethlehem. When Luke and Matthew use this term again in their account of Jesus' ministry, they seem to assume the same meaning of a birth in Galilee. Among Jesus' listeners in Mk 6:2-3, no one seems to know of any birth of Jesus in the city of David in Bethlehem, and all are astonished that he has become an important religious figure; his family situation did not suggest anything extraordinary. And Jn 7:41-42.52 includes a small indication of an origin in Galilee, and a complete absence of knowledge of a birth elsewhere. Finally, in the small village of Nazareth, how could this birth in Bethlehem have been overlooked if the parents had arrived as strangers, according to Matthew, or as returning with a newborn child after a brief stay in Judea, according to Luke?

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### IV. Virginal Conception

#### Historically, Was Jesus Conceived without a Human Father?

It is likely that Matthew and Luke considered the virginal conception to be historical, but the question did not have the same intensity as it does for us today; their interest was primarily theological, and more specifically Christological. But it is worth revisiting this question, knowing that the evidence of the Bible is unlikely to provide a definitive answer for the simple reason that the Bible was not written to answer this question.

Let us begin with the term "virginal conception" which is different from "virginal birth". For the question we ask is not how he came out of the womb, but how he was conceived: was he conceived without the intervention of a human father, i.e. without the male seed impregnating the mother? In the post-biblical Christian world, the belief in a virginal birth developed in parallel with a virginal conception, and thus it was believed that Jesus' delivery was painless and without the hymen being broken. The apocryphal writing Evangelium of James 19-20 alludes to this. But our discussion will be restricted to the virginal conception, avoiding at the same time the implications for the creed of the virginal birth. Indeed, the expression "born of the virgin Mary" contains a certain ambiguity: for if it is clear that the authors of the creed intended to designate the virginal conception, it is less clear that they intended to propose to the Christian faith the way in which Jesus was conceived on the biological level. Let us recall that this creed was proposed to combat the heresy of those who doubted the humanity of Jesus. And so by specifying that Jesus was born like everyone else, that he suffered under Pontius Pilate and that he did die, it was intended to emphasize that Jesus is indeed a historical being. Thus, the emphasis is not on the conception or the virginal birth.

#### A. The Silence of the Rest of the New Testament

No one disagrees that there is no explicit mention of virginal conception in the NT other than the infancy narratives. The point of disagreement is the implicit references. Let us examine the texts mentioned.

##### 1. The Pauline Letters

Gal 4:4: "But when the time was fulfilled, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman and subject to the law". Some biblical scholars see this as an indication of a virginal conception, since only the mother is mentioned. Unfortunately, Paul is simply talking about the reality of the birth, not about how Jesus was conceived. And the phrase "born of a woman" is meant to emphasize what Jesus shares with all those he came to save.

Paul's use of the verb *ginesthai* (to come into existence) to speak of Jesus "being born" (see Gal 4:4; Rom 1:3; Phil 2:7), rather than using a verb like *gennan* (to beget), as in Gal 4:23,24,29 would imply that he was speaking of virginal conception. Unfortunately, both verbs in the middle or passive form both mean: to be born, to beget, and tell us nothing specific about how to be conceived. For example, Matthew who nevertheless believes in the virginal conception uses the verb *gennan* at least once with the clear meaning that Jesus was begotten.

##### 2. Gospel of Mark

Mark never mentions the name of Joseph, Jesus' father, and in the passages in Matthew and Luke where the residents of Nazareth refer to Jesus as "the carpenter's son" or "Joseph's son," Mark uses "Mary's son" instead (Mk 6:3; Mt 13:55; Lk 4:22). For some biblical scholars, this would be a clue that Mark knew that Jesus had no human father. Unfortunately, there is a simpler solution to the absence of Joseph in all the gospels: he would have already died when Jesus was baptized. And the phrase "son of Mary" only accounts for the only living relative at the time Mark portrays Jesus' family. Moreover, it is unlikely that Mark would refer to a virginal conception in the context of Jesus' complaint that he is not welcome in his own country.

A text from Mark clearly rules out the possibility that he knew of the virginal conception. In Mk 3:21-35, "his own" think Jesus has lost his mind and want to seize him, and then Mark tells us that his mother and brothers stand outside, while inside the house stand those who listen to him, a family made up of those who do God's will. This unflattering portrait of Mary's relationship to Jesus is irreconcilable with Mark's knowledge of the virginal conception. So unflattering is this portrayal that Matthew and Luke, who know about the virginal conception, have eliminated the beginning of the scene where Jesus is believed to be insane, and Luke goes so far as to include Jesus' family among those who believe and do the will of God at the end of the scene.

##### 3. Johannine Writings

Some biblical scholars have seen an allusion to the virginal conception in a variant of Jn 1:13 which reads: "He who was (instead of 'those who were') begotten, not blood, nor by carnal desire, nor by man's desire, but by God". Unfortunately, no Greek manuscript supports this variant, which seems to be the result of a change made in the Patristic period to enhance the Christological value of the text.

Jn 7:42 has also been invoked ("Doesn't the Scripture say that he will be of the lineage of David and that he will come from Bethlehem, the little town from which David came?"), where the evangelist would have been aware of a birth in Bethlehem, and thus of a virginal conception. Unfortunately, this reference to Bethlehem does not prove that the evangelist thought Jesus was born in Bethlehem, let alone that he was born of a virginal conception.

It has also been put forward 1 Jn 5:18 ("We know that whoever is born of God does not sin any more, but being born of God, He protects him") where the second part of the sentence is translated as: but the Begotten of God protects him. Unfortunately, this translation is dubious, and even if we accept it, we do not see how it could be an

allusion to the virginal conception, since the same expression "begotten (or born) of God" is applied to Christians in 1 Jn 2:29 39:9; 5:1.4.

In short, none of the implied references are convincing, and there is a real silence on the virginal conception throughout the rest of the New Testament. On the other hand, this does not mean that none of the authors, except Matthew and Luke, knew about the virginal conception. We can only say that its Christological value was not yet perceived to be part of the writings. But this silence makes one thing clear: the theory that the memory of the virginal conception was transmitted by the family of Jesus to the apostolic preachers and that it was universally accepted among Christians as a fundamental element of their faith must be questioned.

## B. The Origin of the Idea of a Virginal Conception

Only in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke is the virginal conception mentioned. And even in these infancy narratives, there are in fact only two passages: Mt 1:18-25 and Lk 1:26-39, which mention it. In our commentary, we have presented the hypothesis that these accounts represent a combination of different pre-gospel accounts and traditions. There is no clear evidence that the idea of the virginal conception in this pre-gospel material was present anywhere other than in the gospel birth announcement. But the fact that Matthew and Luke agree on the birth announcement as a vehicle for the idea of a virginal conception firmly establishes that a set of three items predate the two gospels:

- i. the literary form of an evangelical birth announcement
- ii. the theological message in the annunciation which places in parallel the Davidic descent of the Messiah and the begetting of the son of God by the power of the Holy Spirit
- iii. the setting of the annunciation which features a young girl who has been betrothed but is still a virgin.

How to explain these three items of the pre-Gospel tradition. The first item is well known as a literary structure of the OT (see the [table of the stages of a birth announcement narrative](#)) and was therefore a natural way for a Christian of Jewish origin to reflect on the birth of Jesus. The second item comes from the Christological understanding of Jesus after Easter where God made him Christ and Lord, and which over time was displaced to the moment of his conception, since it was the same person. It is the third item that poses a problem: why place this affirmation of faith that Jesus is the son of God by the power of the Holy Spirit in the context of a virgin conception of the Messiah? What were the catalysts?

### 1. Non-historical Catalysts

#### a. Virginal Conception in Pagan or World Religions

According to some biblical scholars, the virginal conception was a well-known symbol to explain the divine origin of some beings, as shown by the stories from the world religions. For example, the conception of a number of figures such as Buddha, Krishna, the son of Zoroaster, Perseus, Romulus, the Pharaohs, Alexander the Great, Augustus, Plato, Apollonius of Tyana. But the validity of such a comparison depends on three factors:

- i. Were such legends known to Christians at the time of the New Testament to the point of influencing them in the idea of a virginal conception of Jesus? First of all, there is the problem of dating these legends, so that it is difficult to prove that they existed, or even that they were known in the first century among Christians. Moreover, the virginal conception of Jesus is structured on the model of an OT annunciation story, so one must at least presuppose that one is in the world of Greek-speaking Judaism, which would act as a bridge to the culture of other religions.
- ii. To what extent would such legends be attractive or acceptable to Greek-speaking Jewish Christians? Many of these legends involve vulgar and amoral sexual conduct. Wis 14:26 ("confusion of values, forgetfulness of blessings, defilement of souls, sexual inversion, lawlessness of marriages, adultery and debauchery") and Rom 1:24 ("Therefore God has given them over to impurity through the lusts of their hearts, in which they themselves debase their own bodies") give us an idea of the natural reaction of Greek-speaking Jews.
- iii. Can we say that these legends constitute a real parallel with the non-sexual virginal conception of Jesus described by Matthew and Luke, where Mary is not impregnated by a male deity with whom she had a sexual relationship, but this conception is done by the creative power of the Holy Spirit? In short, there is no real parallel.

#### b. Virginal Conception in Judaism

Three parallels were proposed.

- i. First, there is the Septuagint text of Is 7:14 to which Mt 1:22-23 refers: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and thou shalt call his name Emmanuel". In our commentary we have shown that the Septuagint's choice to translate the Hebrew word for "young girl" as "virgin" does not mean that the translator intended to speak of the virginal conception of the Messiah, for this conception is clearly placed

in the future. All he means is that a woman, who is a virgin at present, will conceive a child naturally on the day she is united to a man. At the most, he means that it will be a firstborn child. It is Christian exegesis that has given a new interpretation to this passage from Isaiah in the light of an existing tradition on the virginal conception. And Matthew simply sought to color his account with this interpretation.

- ii. To describe the generation of virtues in the human soul, Philo of Alexandria uses the allegorical accounts of the patriarchs who were begotten by God: "Rebekah, who is perseverance, became pregnant with God". Unfortunately, we are in the world of allegory.
- iii. To try to follow up this idea of patriarchs begotten by God without the intervention of a male, some biblical scholars have turned to Paul who distinguishes the two sons of Abraham, one born according to the flesh, the other according to the promise or spirit (Gal 4:23, 29). But elsewhere (Rom 9:8-10) clearly states that the children of the patriarchs according to the promise were conceived by sexual relations between parents.

Thus, even in the Jewish world one remains without parallels.

## 2. Historical Catalysts

The question that must be asked is: How did the knowledge of the extraordinary way Jesus was conceived come to Christians, and why did it come so late and only in two NT writings? Here are two answers that have been proposed.

### a. Family Tradition

Let us eliminate at the outset the simplistic thesis that Matthew's infancy narrative came from Joseph and Luke's came from Mary, as well as the thesis that Mary had an annunciation early in her pregnancy and Joseph several months later, which would presuppose that Mary and Joseph never spoke to each other. As we have seen in our commentary, the annunciation narratives are variations developed from a pre-Gospel tradition following the structure of the OT annunciation narratives, and there is no basis for asserting that such a narrative would come from the parents. A more sensible question would be this: did the experiential knowledge that the child would have been conceived without a human father come to the Christian community through Mary, with the corollary that it was all due to God's action?

Some biblical scholars propose a positive answer to this question based on the phrase: "Mary kept with concern all these events, interpreting them in her heart". Unfortunately, Luke's phrase merely repeats Gen 37:11 and Dan 4:28 (LXX), which refer to dreams, and has nothing to do with the preservation of an ocular tradition. The greatest difficulty with Mary's preservation of a family tradition is the fact that this tradition did not appear until the latter part of the first century (about 80 or 85). In addition, there is a strong tradition that Jesus' brothers did not believe in him during his ministry (Jn 7:5; Mk 3:21, followed by 3:31). So how did Mary not communicate her divine origin to them? Didn't the virginal conception have implications for Jesus' identity? In the few scenes in which she appears in the gospels during Jesus' ministry, one would look in vain for clues to a Christological understanding on her part. And when after Passover the proclamation is made that Jesus became Christ, Lord, or son of God by his resurrection, there is never a mention of the virginal conception.

### b. Public Knowledge of the Early Birth

According to Luke's and Matthew's scenario, Mary became pregnant quite a long time before her cohabitation with her husband. According to this scenario, Jesus would have been born long before the usual time after the cohabitation, and this could not have escaped the public eye. Can we say that this is a historical fact? That this situation is found in Matthew and Luke, with only Matthew making a slightly apologetic use of it, suggests that we are dealing with a tradition that predates these two evangelists. If all this was pure fiction, why create a situation that could only be embarrassing? Moreover, it was one of the accusations coming from the Jewish world that Jesus was an illegitimate child (see Appendix V), an accusation that circulated in the first century.

If it is quite likely, then, that the chronology of Mary's pregnancy is historical, the question becomes: how did the idea of a virginal conception creep into this situation? Opponents of Jesus saw this as evidence of illegitimacy and infidelity on the part of Mary. But Christians could not accept such an explanation, because of their belief that Jesus was totally without sin (2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:22; Heb 4:15; 1 Jn 3:5) and because Matthew and Luke present his parents as holy and upright (Matt 1:19; Lk 1:42). A positive explanation would then have been sought for this irregular conception. Thus, the idea of the virginal conception would have arisen from the interaction of several factors:

- i. the affirmation of faith from the first preaching that Jesus was designated or begotten as the son of God by the Holy Spirit
- ii. the theology of a sinless being seeking to clarify the historical fact of Jesus' conception by his mother before the moment of cohabitation with her husband
- iii. and the ingredient of a family tradition may have given substance to the whole mixture

The fact remains that all these arguments remain so tenuous that we must conclude that, in terms of the biblical data that can be scientifically controlled, the question of the historicity of the virginal conception cannot be resolved.

### C. Other Influential Factors

Because the NT data are inconclusive, several other factors guided the discussion. These are listed below.

- a. The data that comes to us from the second century, after the New Testament period, does not help us much. First of all, there are the apocryphal writings where the virginal conception is well attested, an indication of its popularity. But on the other hand, there were groups that denied the virginal conception. First, there were the Gnostic Christians, often influenced by their doctrinal prejudices of the docetism or anti-world heresy: the idea of taking flesh in a womb was repugnant to them. But more importantly for us, there is the rejection of the virginal conception by Jewish Christians who accepted Jesus as the Messiah of strictly human origin; thus there would have been a tradition of a natural conception in Palestine among people of Jewish origin who believed in Jesus.
- b. The theory of inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture has also been invoked to assert that if Matthew and Luke spoke of a virginal conception for Jesus, it must be a historical fact. This is to forget that the evangelists are making a Christological statement about Jesus as the son of God and the son of David. Of course, they assume a biological virginity, but that is not the main point of their statement. Thus, a Christian could not accept biological virginity, but accept the Christological affirmation, and thereby preserve the truth of the Gospel teaching.
- c. Similarly, the continuity of the Church's teaching on the historicity of the virginal conception has been mentioned, and indeed there is virtual unanimity from 200 to 1800. But it is necessary to recall what we said earlier about the Creed with its expression "virginal birth" not being primarily a biological affirmation, and it is necessary to determine the extent to which the affirmation of the Creed is inextricably bound up with a biological presupposition. It should also be noted that this period of unanimity in the Church corresponds to the period when opponents of the virginal conception of Jesus also denied his divinity. This is no longer the case today. But we must remember two points:
  - i. In the orthodox Christian faith, Jesus would remain the son of God regardless of how he was conceived, since his sonship is eternal and not dependent on the incarnation
  - ii. For the ordinary Christian, the virginal conception seems to have been an effective sign of Jesus' divine and eternal filiation.
- d. For some, the virginal conception would deny the humanity of Jesus, since he was not conceived like any of us. However, if the virginal conception in Matthew and Luke was linked to the affirmation of the divine filiation of Jesus, it did not, for them, vitiate his full humanity. In fact, Matthew associates this conception with a genealogy of his ancestors. Paradoxically, those who denied the virginal conception of Jesus in the history of the Church were those who also denied his humanity.
- e. In the history of Christian dogma, the virginal conception has been put at the service of theories on concupiscence concerning the transmission of original sin (sin would be transmitted through sexual relations and the sensual appetites aroused by procreation). According to this perspective, Jesus was born without original sin, because he was not conceived through sexual relations. Such a theory has few followers today, and above all it is totally foreign to the evangelists.
- f. The virginal conception was quickly interwoven into the larger picture of Mary's perpetual virginity. Churches with a strong Marian tradition have seen all questions about the virginal conception as a threat to Mary's position as "mother of God" since the Council of Ephesus (431); it is feared that a natural conception will rob Jesus of his nobility and Mary of her sanctity. Yet the virginal conception originally showed no trace of anti-sexual bias; for the evangelists it was the visible sign of God's gracious intervention, and in no way does this intervention make the natural conception in marriage any less holy.
- g. In history, the alternative to the virginal conception has unfortunately not been the normal birth in marriage, but an illegitimate birth because of Mary's infidelity (see Appendix V). The only ones to deny the virginal conception while maintaining that Jesus was the natural and legitimate son of Joseph were Jewish Christians of the 2nd century. Unfortunately, Matthew's account excludes this possibility. Nevertheless, some Christians accept the idea that Jesus is an illegitimate son, seeing it as the final phase of the process described in Phil 2:7 where the son has stripped himself of his identity to become a slave, while insisting that an illegitimate birth is not a fault on Jesus' part. Nevertheless, illegitimacy would destroy the atmosphere of holiness and purity that surrounded Jesus' origins in the eyes of Matthew and Luke and would negate the theology that Jesus came from the pious milieu of the Anawim of Israel.
- h. The virginal conception remains a miracle, even if the gospels do not emphasize its marvelous character. There have been many efforts in history to make it a natural phenomenon: a case of parthenogenesis, or the result of cloning or experimental embryology. All this represents a misunderstanding of what the Christian tradition

sought to express by the virginal conception, i.e. an extraordinary action of God's creative power, as unique as the initial creation.

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## V. The Charge of Illegitimacy

Was Jesus considered an illegitimate child during his lifetime by the Jews?

We have seen that one of the possible catalysts for the idea of Jesus' virginal conception was the memory that Jesus was born too soon after his parents began their cohabitation. Christians explained this as a miraculous act of God, while Jesus' opponents saw it as evidence of an illegitimate birth. Let's take a closer look at the charge of illegitimacy, starting with the facts and then examining the various hypotheses.

### A. The Evidence from the Second Century and Later

The challenge is to find traces of illegitimacy that do not depend on the infancy narratives. The Gospel of Thomas, discovered at Nag Hammadi, seems to depend in large part on the gospels, but also contains authentic passages from Jesus' ministry. One such passage reads, "Whoever knows father and mother will be called 'son of a harlot'" (#105). But the meaning of this passage is too obscure to be of any use. The following passage is also found in the Acts of Pilate (2nd c.):

The elders of the Jews answered and said to Jesus, "What should we see? First, that you were born of fornication; second, that your birth meant the death of the children in Bethlehem; third, that your father Joseph and your mother Mary fled into Egypt because they counted for nothing among the people". (2, 3)

Unfortunately, this text clearly seems to depend on Matthew.

The Roman philosopher Celsus, whom we know only from Origen, is said to have written a work (True Word), about the year 178, in which he says this:

It was Jesus himself who fabricated the story that he had been born of a virgin. In fact, however, his mother was a poor country woman who earned her living by spinning. She had been driven out by her carpenter-husband when she was convicted of adultery with a soldier named Panthera. She then wandered about and secretly gave birth to Jesus. Later, because he was poor, Jesus hired himself out in Egypt where he became adept in magical pwoeers. Puffed up by these, he claimed for himself the title of God. (Origen, Contra Celsus I, 28.32.69).

Such an attack on Jesus' origins was widespread. In North Africa, Tertullian, writing around the year 197, mentions among the accusations against Jesus that he was the son of a prostitute (De spectaculis xxx 3). But all these testimonies come to us from Christian writings that are set in a polemical context, and therefore are not always reliable. But it remains that the expression "son of Panthera" is also found in the mouths of rabbis of the Tannaic period (the first two centuries of our era), without it being known whether it refers to the illegitimacy of the birth of Jesus. On the other hand, Simeon ben Azzai (early 2nd c.) is said to have found a genealogy in Jerusalem that states, "So-and-so is illegitimate, because born of a married woman" (Mishna, Jebamoth 4:13). Some claim that this phrase would refer to Jesus, unnamed for fear of Christian reprisals. Unfortunately, there is no way to validate that this is a reference to Jesus.

During the Amoraic period of Jewish literature (200-500 AD), the belief in the illegitimacy of Jesus is well established in Jewish circles, while Ben Panthera is identified with Ben Stada, whose mother was Miriam, a hairdresser who was allegedly unfaithful to her husband. Ben Stada is said to have learned the formulas of black magic in Egypt, and was hanged (crucified) on the eve of Passover (Talmud of Babylon, Sabbath 104b; Sanhedrin 67a).

The real question about all these accusations of illegitimacy, attested in the second century by both Christian and Jewish sources, is to what extent they represent a tradition independent of the gospels. When one sees the mention of a stay in Egypt, it is difficult not to see it as a dependence on the Gospel of Matthew. There is the mention of Panthera which cannot be explained by the gospels, but this could simply be an embellishment of an account developed from Matthew's. In short, there is no way to know for sure that the accusations of illegitimacy represent accusations that would have circulated before Matthew composed his account.

### B. The Evidence from the New Testament

Two passages could refer to the charge of illegitimacy in Jewish circles.

#### 1. The Appellation "Son of Mary" in Mark 6: 3

For the text of Mark, there are two manuscript traditions. We have underlined the important words.

Mark 6: 3 (major codices)	Mark 6: 3 (P <sup>45</sup> , family 13, OL, Bohairic, Armenian)	Matthew 13: 55	Luke 4: 22	John 6: 42
Is not this <u>the carpenter, the son of Mary</u> , and the brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? Are not his sisters here among us?	Is not this <u>the son of the carpenter and of Mary</u> , etc.	Is not this <u>the son of the carpenter</u> ? Is not <u>his mother called Mary</u> , and are not his brothers James and Joseph, Simon and Judas? Are not all his sisters here among us?	Is not this <u>the son of Joseph</u> ?	Is not this Jesus, <u>the son of Joseph</u> ? Do we not know <u>his father and mother</u> ?

The three synoptics put this question in the mouths of the people of Nazareth on the occasion of Jesus' only visit to the town during his ministry to emphasize the contrast between his humble origins and his growing reputation for wonder and preaching. In John the question is put on the lips of "the Jews" on the shore of Lake Tiberias, but it has the same meaning. It is likely that we are dealing with variations on the same ancient tradition.

The weight of the best manuscripts of Mark favors the first reading (column 1), despite the age of Papyrus 45 (early third century). Some biblical scholars consider the second reading to be the original version, arguing that scribes would have seen the expression "son of the carpenter" as a denial of the virginal conception, and would therefore have attributed the trade of carpenter to Jesus and eliminated the mention of the father. To this we must reply that it is doubtful that scribes would have made a change that would have put Mark at odds with Matthew and Luke. Also, it is more likely that the first reading is the original version, and the second reading comes from a copyist who would have modified the text of Mark to synchronize it with that of Matthew and Luke.

So how do we explain the differences between the evangelists? There seem to be two traditions behind these texts, a long tradition (Mark and Matthew) and a short tradition (Luke, John). In the long tradition there are references to the carpenter, Mary, brothers and sisters; in the short tradition Jesus is simply called "son of Joseph." Mark represents the long tradition, which Matthew would have modified slightly to avoid Jesus being called "carpenter" out of reverence for him.

This being said, it is impossible to trace the tradition behind the long and short traditions, and thus it is impossible to know whether according to the earliest tradition Jesus was called "son of Mary" or "son of Joseph" or "son of Joseph and Mary." Nevertheless, let us consider the implications of Jesus being called "carpenter, son of Mary." First, being called a "carpenter" is not negative; it simply places Jesus with the other comparable occupations of the citizens of Nazareth, and thus defines him as an "ordinary man." As for the phrase "son of Mary," there has been much discussion among biblical scholars, some of whom see it as an assertion of the illegitimacy of Jesus' birth according to a principle of late Judaism: A man is illegitimate when he is called by reference to his mother's name, because a bastard has no father. The flaw in this argument is that it is impossible to know if this principle existed at the time of Jesus. Also, the easiest way to explain the expression "son of Mary" is the context where Joseph was dead and Mary, the only surviving relative, was well known to all the villagers. Moreover, the fact that Mark also mentions Jesus' brothers and sisters eliminates the possibility that the phrase "son of Mary" would have a connotation of illegitimacy; rather, the emphasis is that we are dealing with ordinary people.

Thus, Mark 6:3 gives us no real support for the idea that the Jews considered Jesus an illegitimate child during his ministry.

## 2. The Debate over Illegitimacy in John 8:11

"'You do the works of your father'. They said to him, 'We were not born illegitimate; we have one father, God.'" Let us recall the context. There is a debate between Jesus and "the Jews" about the descent from Abraham (8:31f), whom they call their father. Jesus questions this descent, since they do not do the works of Abraham (v. 39). And in v. 41 he sarcastically refers to their real father, the devil, which leads to the protest of the Jews: "We were not born illegitimate". Some biblical scholars have interpreted this phrase with which begins with an emphatic "we (*egō*)" as "We (unlike you) were not born illegitimate". Since the context is one of illegitimacy and paternity, a hint of an accusation of illegitimacy has more plausibility than Mark 6:3. But it remains that this accusation is far from certain.

In conclusion of this entire study, we must accept that we do not know whether the Jewish accusation of illegitimacy, which appeared clearly in the second century, comes from a source independent of the infancy narrative tradition, which could have helped us to confirm as historical the chronology of an early birth assumed by Matthew and (implicitly) by Luke.

## VI. Other Jewish Background for Matthew's Narrative

Besides the account of the patriarch Joseph and the young Moses, and the oracle of Balaam, are there any other sources?

In our commentary, we have presented two pre-Gospel sources for Matthew's infancy narrative, first the story of the patriarch Joseph and the young Moses that shaped the angelic appearances, and then the story of Balaam, a magus from the east who saw the star of David rise, a story that shaped the narrative of the magi from the east. But biblical scholars have seen other sources that would have influenced Matthew's account.

### 1. The legend around Abraham

There was a legend in the Jewish world about Abraham. According to this legend, astrologers warned the evil king Nimrod that Terah (Abraham's father) would have a son at the same time as they saw a star rising and devouring all other stars, a sign that the newborn would gain possession of the whole world, so the king had to make sure to kill all male children. Unfortunately, this legend is not attested until quite late in the Christian era and there is no record that it was known in Matthew's time. Moreover, it seems to have been modeled on the story of the birth of Moses.

### 2. The story of the Queen of Sheba

The Queen of Sheba is mentioned in Mt 12:42 ("for she [the southern queen] came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon"), which is taken from Document Q. Some biblical scholars have wondered whether the story of the visit of the Queen of Sheba, as told in 1 Kings 10:2, might not be the origin of the story of the Magi, who came from Arabia "with camels laden with spices, much gold and precious stones". Unfortunately, another account, that of Is 60:6 ("A flood of camels will cover you... all the people of Sheba will come, bringing gold and incense") offers us a better parallel with the gift of the Magi. Moreover, the figure of Solomon in the story of the Queen of Sheba cannot be compared to that of the wicked Herod in the story of the magi.

### 3. The stay of Jacob/Israel in Egypt

In chapter 2, Matthew takes Jesus through the great moments of Israel's history. Also, some biblical scholars have proposed as background Jacob/Israel's stay in Egypt while being persecuted by Laban. Unfortunately, this background does not have the same force to illuminate Matthew chapter 2 as the story of Joseph who actually lived in Egypt and was associated with Pharaoh and his dreams. Nevertheless, minor influences from the Jacob/Israel story cannot be ruled out, especially the reference to Rachel, Jacob's wife, in Mt 2:17-18.

Linked to this background of the Jacob/Israel story is its development in the form of a midrash as attested by a Passover Haggada, i.e. a popular story of Israel's deliverance told as part of the Passover celebration. In this story, the ancient creed of Deut 25:5-8 ("My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt...") is repeated. But by changing a single vowel in the verb "to wander", the sentence was reinterpreted as follows: "An Aramean sought to destroy my father". A comparison was made with Laban, an Aramean, who sought to destroy Jacob and his family, and with Pharaoh, who sought to destroy the Hebrew male children. The midrash brings together a series of biblical events: the attacks on Jacob and his family by Laban the Aramean, the flight into Egypt as God requested in a dream, and the return to the land under the leadership of Moses. In short, the story of Jacob/Israel cannot be the main background of the pre-Matthean tradition, but it is very possible that some elements of this story were interwoven with the narrative around the patriarch Joseph and the young Moses.

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## VII. The Census under Quirinius

Historically, was there a universal census at the time of Jesus' birth?

At that time an edict went out from Caesar Augustus that a census should be taken of the whole world (This was the first census under Quirinius as governor of Syria.) And so all went to be inscribed in the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, into Judea to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to have himself inscribed in the census with Mary, his betrothed, who was pregnant. (Lk 2: 1-5)

Taken by itself and in isolation, this decree is not chronologically problematic: Augustus reigned from 44/42 BC until 14 AD; Publius Sulcius Quirinius became governor or legate of Syria in 6 AD and conducted a census in Judea (not Galilee) that year. Based on this information, Jesus would have been born in 6 CE. The problem comes from what Luke writes elsewhere, for example in 1:5 ("in the time of Herod, king of Judea") and 3:23 ("Jesus in his early years was about thirty years old"), which creates an irreconcilable conflict.

Let us begin with Lk 1:5 and the mention of King Herod of Judea for the time of the annunciations to Zechariah and Mary. According to the best information we have, Herod the Great died in the year 4 BC. (see [note on Mt 2:1](#)). Now, according to Lk 1:36, Mary's pregnancy began six months after Elizabeth's, so Jesus would have been born about 15 or 16 months after the annunciation of John the Baptist's birth. Since this annunciation was during the time of Herod and Herod died in 4 BC, the birth of Jesus must have taken place at the latest in 3 BC (which brings us closer to the date proposed by Matthew

which is around 6 BC, i.e. two years before Herod's death). Even then we are at least ten years before the time when Quirinius became governor of Syria (6 CE) and undertook his census. Three solutions have been proposed to solve this problem: 1) Reinterpreting the chronology of Herod to match the census of Quirinius of A.D. 6; 2) Reinterpreting the chronology of Quirinius' census to match the date of Herod (4 BC) in the first chapter of Luke; 3) Recognizing that either or both chronological indications are inaccurate and confusing, and that there is no need or possibility for reconciliation. Basically, it is to this third solution that the analysis in this appendix will lead us.

#### 1. Reinterpreting Herod's chronology

A first suggestion is that Luke intended to designate as king not Herod the Great, but his son Archelaus, who ruled in Judea from 4 BC to 6 CE until he was deposed and exiled. Thus, one could imagine that the annunciation of John the Baptist took place around 5 or 6 CE, and that Jesus would have been born after the deposition of Archelaus, when Quirinius became legate of Syria in 6 CE. A variant of this suggestion is to separate the annunciation to Zechariah from the annunciation to Mary (which Luke would have put together for theological reasons): the annunciation to Zechariah did take place under Herod the Great (thus before his death in 4 BC), and the annunciation to Mary took place when Quirinius was about to take his census in 6 BC.

Unfortunately, these suggestions conflict with Matthew's data, which clearly place Jesus' birth before the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC, specifically two years before his death. They also conflict with Luke's own data in 3:1.23 when he places the beginning of Jesus' ministry in the 15th year of the emperor Tiberius (i.e. in 27-28) and adds that Jesus was about 30 years old at that time, implying a birth at the latest around 3 or 4 BC. This has led biblical scholars to look for another solution.

#### 2. Reinterpreting the chronology of the census of Quirinius

Could Augustus have issued an edict requiring that the entire Roman Empire be subjected to a census? There is no data to confirm such a fact. Moreover, given the different status of the client provinces and kingdoms, a universal census is implausible. But Luke may have meant not a single census, but Augustus' policy of having regular censuses for statistical purposes, which would include Judea. Indeed, Augustus was interested in censuses for a variety of reasons: during his reign, Roman citizens were counted three times (in 28 and 8 BC, and in 13-14 AD) for statistical purposes, and censuses were also taken for tax and military service purposes for non-Roman citizens.

But could a Roman census have required people to return to the place of their tribe or ancestors as Luke describes for Joseph? We have no clear parallel on the subject. Nevertheless, this possibility cannot be ruled out a priori, since the Romans were accustomed to adapting their administration to local circumstances, and so a census conducted in Galilee would respect the deep attachment of the Jews to their tribe or ancestral relationships. But Luke's account tells us that Quirinius' census affected Galilee, which does not fit the facts about the census of 6 AD, because Galilee was not under the authority of Quirinius, but of the tetrarch Herod Antipas who ruled there. This begs the question: was there a census by Quirinius before Galilee and Judea were governed separately?

Let's start with the question: Could Quirinius have been governor of Syria for the first time during or shortly after the reign of Herod the Great, i.e. around or before 4 BC? The Jewish historian Josephus gives us this list and chronology of the governors of Syria:

23 - 13 BC	M. Agrippa
Circa 10 BC	M. Titius
9 - 6 BC	S. Sentius Saturninus
6 - 4 BC ou plus tard	Quintilius (ou Quinctilius) Varus
1 BC to circa 4 AD	Gaius Caesar
4 - 5 AD	L. Volusius Saturninus
6 to after 7	P. Sulpicius Quirinius

For Quirinius to have been governor of Syria twice, i.e. once in year 6 and at another time before, only two possibilities exist according to Josephus' list: either before Titius (i.e. before 10 BC), or between Varus and Gaius Caesar (i.e. year 4 BC to 1 BC). Unfortunately, even if this solution is compatible with Luke's data, it is incompatible with Quirinius' well-documented career; in 12 BC he was consul (Tacitus, *Annals* III 48) and between 12 and 6 BC he was in Asia Minor leading legions at war against the Homonades, before ending up in Syria as an advisor to Gaius Caesar and then replacing him.

Even assuming that Quirinius would have been governor of Syria for the first time during the period of Herod the Great, how can we explain a census of the governor of Syria on the territory which is under Herod's jurisdiction? Indeed, as a client king Herod, who paid tribute to Rome, levied his own taxes and there is no evidence that Romans levied taxes based on a census in his kingdom. And if there was a census in the year 6 CE, it is precisely because Herod's son Archelaus had just been deposed and the Romans were taking over his territory. Moreover, it is implausible that a Roman census could have taken place either under Herod the Great or under Archelaus, without

triggering a revolt among the population. And in fact, this is exactly what happened in the year 6 with the census of Quirinius.

Let us consider for a moment Josephus' description of this census. After the departure of Archelaus, Judea became a Roman province annexed to Syria in the year 6 CE. Quirinius, appointed by Augustus to be governor of Syria, undertook to visit Judea "to make an assessment of the property of the Jews and to liquidate the estate of Archelaus. At first, the Jews were shocked to hear about having to bring back their property, but they agreed to this request at the urging of the high priest. On the other hand, Judas of Galilee led a rebellion, founding the nationalist movement of the Zealots. All this is a sign of an unusual event. When Luke speaks of "the first census under Quirinius" he is certainly referring to this memorable event.

In an almost desperate effort to salvage the accuracy of Luke, biblical scholars have proposed other solutions. It has been suggested that there has been a corruption of the text of Luke and that instead of reading Quirinius, it should read Saturninus (governor 9-6 BC), even though there is no manuscript to support this reading; this would place the census during the time of Herod. What led to this suggestion was a passage from Tertullian: "In those days there were censuses in Judea under Augustus by Sentius Saturninus, by which the ancestors of Jesus could be inquired into" (*Adversus Marcion* IV xix 10). Unfortunately, there is no indication that Tertullian is referring here to Lk 2:1-5. Moreover, the context of this sentence is a commentary on Lk 8:19-21 ("My mother and my brother are those who hear the word of God and put it into practice") where he confronts the Docetists who deny the humanity of Jesus and finds himself saying to them: you can verify in the census documents that Jesus did indeed have ancestors. Tertullian assumes that such documents must exist in Palestine.

Another desperate attempt to salvage Luke's accuracy has been to propose a two-stage census, i.e., one that would have begun under Saturninus or Varus (thus in Herod's time), and been completed under Quirinius. Unfortunately, Luke does not tell us that the census was completed with Quirinius, but that it took place (*egeneto*) under Quirinius. A variant of this proposal has been to place in the time of Saturninus a stage of the census called *apographē* (the enrollment of taxable goods and persons), and in the time of Quirinius the stage called *apotimēsis* (the assessment or evaluation of the current tax based on the enrollment). Unfortunately, Luke speaks of an *apographē* (enrollment) in the time of Quirinius, not an *apotimēsis*.

### 3. Recognizing the irreconcilable nature of Luc's information

After all this analysis, the weight of evidence prevents us from reconciling chapters 1 and 2 of Luke: there is no serious reason to believe that there was a Roman census in Palestine under Quirinius at the time of Herod the Great. The information in chapter 1 may be accurate: Jesus may have been born during the reign of Herod the Great or at the end. But it is inaccurate to associate this birth with the census conducted in the year 6 under Quirinius. Luke is equally inaccurate in Acts 5:36 about this census, when he puts in the mouth of Gamaliel, shortly after Jesus' death in 30 AD, an allusion to the revolt of Theudas, which in fact did not occur until 10 years later, and to which is added the error of implicitly dating the revolt of Judas the Galilean (around 6 AD) after that of Theudas.

It is worth quoting R. Syme here:

Two striking events in Palestinian history would leave their marks in the minds of men. First, the end of Herod in 4 B.C., second the annexation of Judaea in A.D. 6. Either might serve for approximate dating in a society not given to exact documentation. Each event, so it happened, led to disturbances. More serious were those in 4 B.C., according to Josephus. Varus the legate of Syria had to intervene with the whole of his army. But the crisis of A.D. 6 was the more sharply remembered because Roman rule and taxation were imposed. Thus, in Acts 5:37, the speech of the Pharisee Gamaliel: "In the days of the census." (*The Titulus Tiburtinus*, in *Vestigia : Akten des VI Internationalen Kongresses für Griechische und Lateinische Epigraphik*, p. 600)

What to conclude? Even if Luke is inaccurate in dating the census of Quirinius and has mistakenly associated it with the birth of Jesus, it must be recognized that this association allowed him to explain why Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus. And it served his theological interests admirably by giving the nativity a global backdrop and a history of Israel.

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## VIII. Midrash as a Literary Genre

### Are infancy narratives midrashim?

This is important because some biblical scholars refer to infancy narratives as midrash (plural: midrashim). And in some Roman Catholic circles, to call a writing a midrash is to say that it is a fictional writing, a fable, and that the events told never happened.

In biblical Hebrew, the verb *dāraš* means: to seek, to examine, to investigate, to study, while the noun *midraš* expresses the product of that research or study. The noun first appears in 2 Chr 13:22 ("The rest of Abiya's deeds, his deeds and actions, are written in the commentary (*midraš*) of the prophet Iddo"; see also 2 Chr 24:27); unfortunately, this *midraš* has not been preserved. We have a better idea with Sir 51:23: "Come near to me, you ignorant ones, and establish your dwelling in

the house of **instruction** (*paideia*).” The reality of the “house of instruction” anticipates the post-biblical use of *bêt-ham-midraš* or “school.” In the Dead Sea Scrolls, 4Qflor i 14 uses *midraš* as the title to a passage that interprets Ps 1:1 using various biblical citations braided together as an interpretation.

In post-Christian Judaism, the *midraš* refers to works that gather legal statements, stories, and homilies of rabbis around biblical texts. From the 2nd c. modern era onward, rabbinic midrashim were preserved containing line-by-line commentaries on books such as Exodus or Numbers in the style, “Rabbi X said, ‘...’; and Rabbi Y said, ‘...’” Midrash of the halakic (*halākā*: rule, law) type refers to interpretation in the form of a legal statement, whereas non-legal interpretation is called *haggada* (*haggādā*: story) or haggadic type. Also, when we speak of midrash, we must distinguish between the collection of these various interpretations, and the midrashic process that led to these interpretations. Finally, it should be noted that the link between the Scripture that is commented on and the collection of interpretations that are supposed to illuminate it is sometimes loose, so that midrash has come to designate any free homiletic exposition, with a connotation of fable or folklore to illustrate the Bible in the case of haggadic midrash.

Consider two definitions that have been proposed, the first by Renée Bloch (cited in Wright, *Literary Genre*, 19).

Rabbinic midrash is a homiletic reflection or meditation on the Bible which seeks to reinterpret or actualize a given text of the past for present circumstances.

R. Wright provides a more detailed definition:

Rabbinic midrash is a literature concerned with the Bible; it is a literature about a literature. A midrash is a work that attempts to make a text of Scripture understandable, useful, and relevant for a later generation. It is the text of Scripture which is the point of departure, and it is for the sake of the text that the midrah exists. The treatment of any given text may be creative or non-creative, but the literature as a whole is predominantly creative in its handling of biblical material. The interpretation is accomplished sometimes by rewriting the biblical material...

Both of these definitions are somewhat anachronistic, in that they are derived from later rabbinic material. Nevertheless, they allow us to identify as midrash certain passages such as Wis 11-19 which is a homily on the plagues of Egypt in Ex 7-12. It is therefore not impossible that the term midrash applies to infancy narratives. Let us make some comments.

1. Based on the infancy narratives, midrashim in the strict sense were composed in the Christianity that followed the early Christian communities. A fine example is the *Protevangelium of James*, which creatively rewrote the biblical material in the 2nd c. This tended to merge the narratives of Matthew and Luke and to add details that they do not mention, such as the magi and camels who meet the shepherds with their ox and donkey in front of the child's cave. The purpose of this imaginative interpretation was to make the Scripture understandable for the next generation. Haggadic midrashim also used these stories to identify the Magi, to describe their subsequent fate, and to recount the adventures of the holy family in Egypt.
2. In our commentary, we proposed that Matthew drew on a pre-gospel tradition to compose his infancy narrative. The background of this pre-gospel tradition was inspired by midrashim interpreting the birth of Moses in Ex 1-2. Such midrashim are attested to by Flavius Josephus (*Antiquities*) and by Philo of Alexandria (*Life of Moses*). Less clearly, a midrash on Mic 4-5 and Gen 35:19-21 may have exerted influence on Matthew and Luke regarding the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem. However, we are not asserting that the infancy narratives are midrashim of the OT, but rather that Matthew and Luke, in addition to using the OT, also used midrashim to interpret the OT with additional detail.
3. Can infancy narratives be called midrashim? Taking Wright's definition, they would be midrashim if they were literature about literature, i.e. if they were commentaries on OT texts. This is not the case. For example, Matthew used a tradition influenced by midrashim of the birth of Moses, but he did not write his account to make the story of Moses' birth more intelligible. Similarly, Luke portrays several figures (Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna) from OT models (Abraham, Sarah, Samuel's parents, Eli), but his purpose is not to make his OT models more intelligible. In short, Matthew and Luke did not seek to make Scripture more intelligible, but to make Jesus more intelligible.
4. Having said that the infancy narratives are not midrashim in the strict sense, it can nevertheless be said that the style of exegesis used in midrashim was also used in the infancy narratives. For although the central subject was Jesus and the Christological understanding of the son of God, an attempt was made to make this Christological understanding intelligible, just as the midrash sought to make OT texts intelligible by adding what was thought to be a historical detail or by exercising its creative imagination. Thus the infancy narratives are a mixture of history and verisimilitude, images from the OT or Jewish tradition, or images that anticipate what will happen in the ministry of Jesus, all woven together to dramatize the conception and birth of the Messiah who was the son of God. In itself, this is also a theological process, using the background of the OT to interpret a Christological understanding, and to demonstrate the continuity between the old and the new. Into which category then should the infancy narratives be placed? Perhaps that of “infancy narratives of famous men”. Such a broad classification would allow us to accommodate narratives which, despite the similarity of their Christology in Matthew and Luke and the same tendency to fill in the gaps by resorting to the OT, reveal a very different style and emphasis.
5. All this discussion implies that infancy narratives do not belong to the literary genre of fact-based history. This does not mean that we do not recognize the probable presence of elements of historical value. But one cannot support the

idea that the two infancy narratives, as we know them today, are completely historical. And even large parts of them are not historical. But none of this undermines the fundamental message of the narratives (that Jesus is the son of God from his conception) and the insight that God guided the composition of Scripture for the education of his people. For it is not only with history that a people can be educated and formed.

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#### IX. The Fourth Eclogue of Virgil

What influence could Virgil's fourth Eclogue have had?

##### Translation of the fourth Eclogue<sup>a</sup>

1 O Muses of Sicily, let me sing on a somewhat loftier note. 2 The theme of orchards and lowly tamarisk shrubs does not please everyone. 3 If we sing of woodlands, let them be worthy of a consul.<sup>b</sup>

4 Now there has come the last age of which the Cumaean Sybil sang; 5 a great orderly line of centuries begins anew; 6 now too the Virgin returns; the reign of Saturn<sup>c</sup> returns; 7 a new human generation descends from the high heavens. 8 Upon the Child now to be born, under whom the race of iron 9 will cease and a golden race will spring up over the whole world, 10 do you, O chaste Lucina<sup>d</sup>, smile favourably, for your own Apollo is now king.

11 This glorious age will begin in your consulship, 12 O Pollio, as the mighty months<sup>e</sup> commence their course. 13 Under your leadership whatever traces of our guilt remain<sup>f</sup> 14 will disappear, freeing the earth from its perpetual fear. 15 He [the Child] will receive divine life and will see 16 heroes mingling with gods, and will himself be seen by them. 17 And he will rule over a world made peaceful by the virtues of his father.

[The Future Springtime of the Child's Infancy] 18 But first for you, O Child, without cultivation the earth will give as her little gifts 19 vines of ivy everywhere climbing wild and intermingling with rustic nard, 20 and the Egyptian bean-lily mixed together with the smiling acanthus. 21 Without being called, the goats will come home, their udders swollen with milk; 22 and the herds will not be afraid of the mighty lions. 23 For your pleasure your cradle will produce a cornucopia of flowers. 24 the serpent will perish, as will the deceptive poison herb, 25 while the aromatic Assyrian shrub will spring up in every field.

[The Future Summer of the child's Education] 26 As soon as you can read about the praises heaped on heroes and the accomplishments of your parents, 27 and can know what valor consists in, 28 the plain will slowly become golden with waving grain, 29 and the ripening grape will hang from the wild briers, 30 and the stern oaks will yield dewy drops of honey. 31 However, some traces of the sin of old will perdure, 32 causing men to attempt the sea in ships, to build walls around 33 cities, and to plow the earth with furrows. 34 There will then be a second Argo with a second Tiphys to pilot it, 35 carrying chosen heroes; there will be a second series of wars, 36 and once more a great Achilles will be sent to Troy.<sup>g</sup>

[The Future Manhood of the Child] 37 Next, when the years have made you a strong man, 38 even the merchant will leave the sea, and the ship built with pine 39 will cease its merchant journeys<sup>h</sup>. Every land will be fruitful; 40 yet the earth will not feel the rake, nor the vine feel the pruning hook. 41 Indeed the sturdy plowman will set his oxen loose from the yoke. 42 No longer will one learn to dye wool various colors; 43 for by himself the ram in the meadows will change his fleece, 44 at time a sweetly blushing shade of purple, at time saffron yellow; 45 and spontaneously the grazing lambs will be clothed in vermilion.

46 The Fates cried to the spinning wheels of destiny: "Let such times come soon," 47 voicing in unison the fixed divine will.

[The Triumph of the Child] 48 Enter into your high honors - the time is virtually at hand - 49 O dear Descendant of the gods, O mighty Ally of Jove! 50 Behold the world trembles in homage with its massive dome; 51 the expanse of earth and sea and the reaches of the sky! 52 Behold how all things rejoice at this age to come! 53 Now I wish that in a long enough life the last part 54 and sufficient inspiration allow me to tell of your deeds. 55 Then will I not be outdone in song either by Thracian Orpheus, 56 even if his mother Calliope assists him, 57 nor by Linus, even if fair Apollo, his father, helps him. 58 Indeed were Pan himself to vie with me in the presence of a judge from his native Arcadia, 59 he would judge himself defeated.

60 Come forth, O Baby Boy, and recognize your mother with a smile<sup>i</sup>, 61 whom ten long months have brought to the weariness of labor. 62 Come forth, O Baby Boy, on whom parents have not yet smiled, 63 whom no god has honored at his table, and no goddess in her bed.

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<sup>a</sup> The first three lines are a transition from the bucolic theme of the previous Eclogue, which was inspired by the Greek pastoral poet of Sicily, Theocritus. The lines are numbered in the translation, the overall pattern being three lines at the beginning and four at the end (a total of seven), and 56 lines in between, sometimes in patterns seven. ▲

<sup>b</sup> It is a reference to Asinius Pollio (see line 12) who was consul in 40 BC. ▲

<sup>c</sup> The subsequent lines refer to the theory of ages designated by four metals, in the sequence gold, silver, bronze, iron. The warlike iron age is almost over, and the first age of gold is returning. Virgil associates the golden age with Saturn; for others, it was the age of Cronos. ▲

<sup>d</sup> Lucina is the goddess of childbirth; she is often identified with Diana or Artemis, the sister of Apollo mentioned in the next line. Apollo will be king because the prophecy he uttered through the Sibyl will be fulfilled. ▲

<sup>e</sup> The months are the ten months of pregnancy that will give birth to the Child (line 61). ▲

<sup>f</sup> The "traces of guilt" and "traces of of the sin of old" in line 31 are the remaining effects of the Roman civil wars. ▲

<sup>g</sup> Lines 31 to 36 admit that there will be an intervening period in which war will still occur, but now this will be a foreign war, as that of Achilles against Troy, and no longer a war of Roman against Roman. ▲

<sup>h</sup> Since the earth of every country will be fruitful, there will be no need to buy products from other countries. ▲

<sup>i</sup> It is not clear whether the Child is to smile on the mother, or vice versa. ▲

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Virgil (70 to 19 BC) composed this poem in the year 40 BC. The poem speaks of a virgin (line 6) and of a child of divine descent (49) before whom all the earth will tremble in homage (50) in a golden age of peace (9, 17) when "the traces of guilt" will have disappeared (13, 14). It is easy to imagine that Christians saw in this fourth Eclogue the pagan prediction of the virgin birth of Jesus the Messiah who took away original sin, so that Virgil was put in the ranks of the prophets. Unfortunately, Virgil does not say that the Child was conceived by the virgin, and the divine parentage of the child is purely an image.

Nevertheless, this Eclogue is worth considering for two reasons: first, it gives us the setting within which Christians from pagan backgrounds might have heard the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, and second, it has often been thought that this Eclogue might reflect some indirect knowledge of Isa 7-11 in the pagan world.

#### A. The context of the Eclogue

In 40 BC, through the mediation of the consul Asinius Pollion, Octavian (Augustus) and Mark Antony, heirs to Julius Caesar who was assassinated in 44 BC, established the Peace of Brundisium, ending more than a hundred years of savage civil war that had ravaged Italy. Virgil refers to this as the "iron race" (8), traces of "guilt" and "sin". Virgil is relieved not only by the end of the war, but by the return of his domain, which had been confiscated like those of all the others to pay the victorious soldiers at the battle of Philippi in the year 42 BC, thanks to the clemency of Octavian through the intercession of Asinius Pollion. He has the impression that the so much awaited golden age is about to arrive. Let us remember that according to the Etruscan calendar, there was a cycle of ten periods in the history, beginning with Saturn and ending with Saturn; now one returned precisely to the reign of Saturn.

To express his hope for the future in an enthusiastic way, Virgil uses the symbolism of a Child whose life corresponds to the coming of peace in the world. Note that it is not the Child who brings peace, but he will reign in a peaceful world where perfect harmony will exist in nature, symbolized by the fertility of fields and flocks. The symbolism of the Child may have been suggested to him by an actual birth at the time he wrote his poem, that of a child of Mark Antony or Octavian. Either way, this Child could fulfill Virgil's hopes and personify the new spirit of peace that has come into the world.

All this helps us to imagine the reaction of a reader of Virgil when he heard the stories of Jesus' birth. Would he not have drawn a parallel between the child placed in a manger, honored by the shepherds, and the dream Child whose cradle is "a cornucopia of flowers" and whose coming frees the flocks from fear?

#### B. The influence of the images of Isaiah 7 - 11

Is it possible that Virgil's images come, at least indirectly, from the images found in Isaiah 7-11? Let us first draw a parallel.

Virgil	Isaiah
(27) prosperity will come when the child knows "what valor consists in"	(7: 16) the victory will take place just before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good
(60) the child learns to recognize his mother	(8: 4) the child knows to call out "my father" or "my mother"
(22) "the herds will not be afraid of the mighty lions"	(11: 6) "The leopard will lie down next to the kid. The calf and the young lion will be fed together, a little boy will lead them.
(24) "the serpent will perish"	(11: 8) "The infant will have fun on the cobra's nest"

(30) "the stern oaks will yield dewy drops of honey"

(7: 22) "yes, it is cream and honey that will feed those who remain in the country".

Of course, the resemblance is indirect. But the possible influence of Near Eastern imagery on Virgil is supported by the mention of flora that is from that region: rustic nard or *baccar* (19), the Egyptian bean-lily or *colocasia* (20), the aromatic shrub from Assyria or *Assyrium amomum* (25). The image of lions threatening the flock of sheep (22) is more appropriate to the Near East than to Italy. It has also been proposed that the sequence of the happy arrival of the Child (18-30), followed by the return of war with the other nations (31-36) and the final triumph (37-45) parallels the usual sequence in Jewish apocalypse: the coming of the Messiah, the eschatological war and the reign of peace.

But how could Jewish ideas have reached Virgil? It seems that the answer lies in the Sibylline Oracles, since the poet refers to the Sibyl of Cumae. A copy of the book was in the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome, but was destroyed by fire in 83-82 BC. In order to replace this book, a search was made for all the private copies throughout the Roman world, so that a collection of prophecies of Semitic origin was gathered. Among these is Book III of the Sibylline Oracles which is dated to the 2nd century BC. Lines 367f speak of an era of peace coming over Europe and Asia, lines 652f speak of God sending a king who will free each country from the scourge of war, but then follow the sequence of a war that returns before the final victory. In this final victory succulent honey will come from heaven, the trees will bear abundant fruit, fountains of milk will flow and the fields will be fruitful. Lines 788-795 are clearly influenced by passages in Isaiah 7-11 that speak of lambs and goats that are not intimidated by wild animals, lions that eat hay like oxen, snakes and cobras that sleep with babies and do not harm them.

What to conclude? As we have pointed out, the resemblance to Virgil's Fourth Eclogue is only indirect. But it still supports the idea that the Sibylline Oracles may have been the vehicle by which the expectation in the Jewish prophecies reached the world of non-Jewish Christians. From then on, in such a setting, the infancy narratives could only be acceptable.