

# PART ONE

# Beginnings

**§ 1**  
**Luke's**  
**Introduction to**  
**His Gospel**  
(Lk 1:1-4)

<sup>1</sup>Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled<sup>a</sup> among us, <sup>2</sup>just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. <sup>3</sup>Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup>so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

<sup>a</sup> *1* Or *been surely believed*

Of the four Gospels, Luke alone states his purpose in an introductory paragraph. So, we will begin with him. These first four verses make up one long, carefully constructed sentence in Greek. In fact, some think that it is the finest Greek sentence in all the NT. That is interesting since the rest of chapters 1–2 are filled with Aramaic-type phrases and are not “pure” Greek. What we have then is a formal introduction in verses one to four where Luke “struts his stuff.” However, he then uses idioms appropriate to his subject matter in the material that follows. He is a literary genius. We discover right away in Luke that our intellects are in for a treat!

While this is a fancy introduction, it was not out of the ordinary. It was customary among Greek and Hellenistic historians to use this kind of introduction.<sup>1</sup> They sought to assure the reader of their capability, thorough research and reliability. Luke will describe his motivation (vv. 1-2), his credentials (v. 3) and his specific purpose (v. 4).<sup>2</sup>

The word which begins Luke’s Gospel [*epeidepēr*] is translated as “therefore” in the NIV, and placed at verse three for the sake of English style. It is a classical word which sets the stage for Luke’s formal introduction.

Luke is motivated to write by the “many” who have gone before him. The fact that they have written about Jesus sets the precedent for Luke’s own rendi-

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<sup>1</sup>There are ample examples of this type of introduction in Herodotus, Dionysius, Polybius, Hippocrates, Josephus, etc. See T. Callan, “The Preface of Luke-Acts and Historiography,” *NTS* 31 (1985): 576-581; H.J. Cadbury, “Commentary on the Preface of Luke-Acts,” in *Beginnings*, ed. F.J. Foakes-Jackson and K. Lake, 2:489-510.

<sup>2</sup>See. D.J. Sneen, “An Exegesis of Luke 1:1-4 with Special Regard to Luke’s Purpose as a Historian,” *ExpT* 83 (1971): 40-43.

tion. Furthermore, Vincent (*Word Studies in the NT*, I:251) says that this word [*epicheireō*, lit., “set their hand to”] implies that their previous attempts were unsuccessful (see also Johnson, pp. 27-28). Although this is not a necessary implication, Luke obviously sees something lacking. This caused him to undertake this extensive project which resulted in his two-volume work, Luke and Acts. These books would begin with the birth of John the Baptist and follow the gospel clear to Rome. In other words, Luke begins farther back and continues far beyond the narrative of the other three evangelists.

Luke uses three sources for his research.<sup>3</sup> First, he uses events that he and/or his audience participated in — **things that have been fulfilled**. This translation doesn’t do full justice to the verb tense Luke uses. We might say, “Things that have come to fruition among us.” As a historian, Luke doesn’t just tell us what happened. Rather, there is a theological meaning and a sovereign design behind each of the events he records. Second, Luke uses the previously **written materials**. As verse one states, there were many who had already “drawn up an account” of Jesus’ life. This may even include the writings of Matthew and Mark.<sup>4</sup> Third, there was **oral testimony** of eyewitnesses. This should not be taken lightly. Luke stresses that their witness goes clear back to the beginning of the story. They are well-informed and highly credible. Any theory of gospel origins that does not take into account all three sources that Luke lists is destined to be seriously flawed. Furthermore, Luke’s veracity can be verified by the fact that he admits, up-front, that he, himself, was **not** an eyewitness.<sup>5</sup> This is not the work of a fanciful storyteller, but an honest, reliable researcher.

Luke uses a fascinating word for *investigate*. Etymologically, it means to follow alongside. It pictures the pesky reporter with his note pad and pen incessantly asking questions. Luke did careful and detailed research which he describes here with four words:

1) *Everything*. Luke is the longest and most complete of the four Gospels. And combined with Acts it makes up 27% of the NT. We read more from the pen of Luke than we do from Peter or John or even Paul. From Luke we get a full understanding of the beginnings of the Christian Church.

2) *From the beginning*. Luke is the only Gospel writer who gives us a fully detailed account of the birth of Jesus and John.

3) *Carefully*. Better, “accurately.” His investigation was careful, precise and accurate. There have been many who criticized Luke as a historian, but never with great success or the support of archaeology.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. R.H. Stein, “Luke 1:1-4 and *Traditionsgeschichte*,” *JETS* 26/4 (Dec 1983): 421-430.

<sup>4</sup>Although P. Felix argues that the “many” could *not* include Mt and Mk since (1) Lk apparently sees something deficient in them, and (2) they are distinguished from the apostolic witness of v. 2 (“Literary Dependence and Luke’s Prologue,” *MSJ* 8/1 [1997]: 61-82).

<sup>5</sup>John Wenham, “The Identification of Luke,” *EQ* 63/1 [1991]: 3-44, however, argues that Luke may, in fact, have been one of the 70 (ch. 10), Cleopas’s partner on the road to Emmaus, Lucius of Cyrene in Antioch (Acts 13), as well as Paul’s kinsman.

4) *Orderly Account*. It was not just that Luke's account was orderly, but it was in order. This word seems to indicate a chronological procession (cf. Lk 8:1; Acts 3:24; 11:4; and 18:23). This is not to say that Luke never deviates from a strict chronology for a thematic arrangement or theological purpose, but he is the only Gospel writer to claim to be chronological in his arrangement. We ought to keep this in mind when harmonizing the four Gospels.

Luke's book is addressed to the **most excellent Theophilus**. The title "Most excellent" was often given to those of the equestrian order, (i.e., the cavalry) or to governors (as referring to Felix, Acts 23:26; 24:3, and to Festus, Acts 26:25). The name "Theophilus" means "Friend of God." Some believe him to be a fictitious representation of all those who love God, yet this specific title of honor, "Most excellent," argues against that. It seems likely that he was an associate or acquaintance whom Luke wants to convert or strengthen in his faith. It is also possible that he is a Roman official whom Luke would like to convince that Christianity is a legal religion (perhaps even Paul's defense attorney in Rome, cf. Acts 28). Another strong possibility is that Theophilus is the patron or publisher of the book.<sup>6</sup> It was, after all, not uncommon for a writer to dedicate his book to the fellow footing the bill. This much is certain, however, Luke did not produce these two volumes for Theophilus alone. While it is addressed to this individual, it is meant for the broader Christian community.

Finally, we come to the theme of the book in verse 4: "To provide evidence so that you should know with certainty the things you were taught" (cf. Jn 20:31). Theophilus (and the broader Christian community) obviously had some instruction about Jesus. This dual treatise, Luke/Acts, intends to bring it to fruition. It will seek to "make certain" the facts about Jesus. This word [*asphaleian*], in both its verb and noun forms, most often refers to securing a person in prison (Mt 27:64-66; Acts 5:23; 16:24). It is a word which describes the surest of conviction. This book tells about Jesus. It is both convincing and compelling.

**§ 2**  
**John's**  
**Introduction to**  
**Jesus**  
(Jn 1:1-18)

Luke's introduction reflects the Greek Historical literature that he was so familiar with. John's introduction, on the other hand, reflects the Jewish wisdom literature<sup>7</sup> of his culture. For example, he uses Hebrew poetic parallelism<sup>8</sup> and recurring key words which are clues to the dominant theme(s) of the text.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Cf. E.T. Goodspeed, "Some Greek Notes: I. Was Theophilus Luke's Publisher?" *JBL* 73 (1954): 84.

<sup>7</sup>Thomas Tobin, "The Prologue of John and Hellenistic Jewish Speculation," *CBQ* 52 (Apr 1990): 252-269, compares John with Philo. He suggests that they both use an analogical hermeneutic, only John reflects Palestinian Midrash while Philo comes from the Hellenistic tradition of Alexandria. Kay Keng Khou, "The Tao and the Logos," *IRV* 87/344 [1998]: 77-84, also argues that John's view of Logos fits the Chinese view of Tao. Thus John's philosophy fits both with western Platonism and eastern thought of Tao.

<sup>9</sup>Mathias Rissi offers an in-depth analysis of the poetry of this section ("John 1:1-18," *Int* 31 [Oct 1977]: 394-401).

In fact, a number of scholars believe this prologue was not only a poem, but an early Christian hymn<sup>10</sup> which sets the tone or even the outline for the rest of the book. Staley says it this way: “Just as the first strophe of the prologue sets the tone for the symmetrical, rhythmic shape of the entire prologue, so also the symmetrical shape of the prologue sets the tone for the structure of the narrative to follow” (p. 242).<sup>11</sup>

This prologue is complex, not only rhetorically, but also theologically.<sup>12</sup> Some of John’s concepts are quite deep. But even the simplest reader can’t miss John’s main point: Jesus is affiliated with God.

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was with God in the beginning.

Jn 1:1-2



“In the beginning” ties together at least three books: Genesis, John and 1 John. All three open with this thought. Both Genesis and John speak specifically of creation. Both John and 1 John speak specifically of the incarnation (Jn 1:14; 1 Jn 1:1-2). Thus, Jesus, the incarnate Logos, was fully existent, fully operational from the beginning of creation.

In these first five verses, John makes four startling assertions about Jesus: He is the Logos; he is God; he is the creator of life; and he is the light.

## JESUS IS THE LOGOS

When we read that Jesus is “The Word,” we naturally think about the word of God — the Bible. We kind of spiritualize it to mean that Jesus was the incarnational message of God. That’s not bad, it’s just not complete. This word *logos* was thick with meaning for both Greek philosophers and Hebrew theologians.

<sup>9</sup>Jeff Staley, “The Structure of John’s Prologue: Its Implication for the Gospel’s Narrative Structure,” *CBQ* 48 (Apr 1986): 241-264, calls this rhetorical device *Leitwort*. He suggests that *phōs* and *ginōmai* are two such words. He observes that *ginōmai*, for example, “occurs at least once in each section of the prologue’s chiasmic structure, and so it becomes a major unifying component of the prologue” (p. 249).

<sup>10</sup>E.g., Barclay Newman, “Some Observations regarding a Poetic Restructuring of John 1:1-18,” *BT* 29 (Apr 1978): 206-212; Thomas Tobin, “The Prologue of John and Hellenistic Jewish Speculation,” *CBQ* 52 (Apr 1990): 252-269. However, most attempts at analyzing the structure of John’s prologue fall prey to two errors. First, they tend to assume radical redaction, viewing vv. 6-8, 13, 15 as later editorial comments and intrusions into the original hymn (cf. Charles Giblin, “Two Complementary Literary Structures in John 1:1-18,” *JBL* 104/1 (1985): 87-103. Second, they often suggest what seems to be a “forced” chiasm on the text. Indeed, John does use the typical Jewish device of repetition (e.g., v. 1; vv. 6-8 & 15), but it is not clearly identifiable chiasm (as can be seen by the variety of chiasmic structures suggested by scholars).

<sup>11</sup>Jeff Staley, “The Structure of John’s Prologue: Its Implications for the Gospel’s Narrative Structure,” *CBQ* 48 (Apr 1986): 241-264. He divides the book into five sections, each one larger than the last (1:1-18; 1:19-3:36; 4:1-6:71; 7:1-10:42; 11:1-21:25). Furthermore, in a chart on p. 264, he suggests that each element of the prologue is repeated in each of the five following sections.

<sup>12</sup>For example, Jn 1:1-18 reenacts both Creation and the Exodus — the two pivotal events of the OT — through the person of Jesus Christ. Cf. George Knight, “The Light of God in Action,” *Chr. Cent.* 115/35 [1998]: 1212-1214.

For example, Socrates and Plato used *logos* to refer to ideas which resided in the “Divine Mind.” In other words, *logos* was not merely a grammatical unit of human speech, but the very thoughts of the gods that somehow filtered down to man. The Stoics, under a guy named Zeno (300 B.C.), took it a step further. *Logos* was not just a divine idea, but a divine command. That is, what the gods think and say takes actual physical form in space and time. It’s like what we read in Genesis 1: God said . . . and it was so. Thus the *logos* of the gods had creative force (which was called *logos spermatikos*). The Mystery cults went one step further. They added to *logos* the idea of communication with the gods. *If a god spoke with man, logos = revelation. If man spoke with a god, logos = prayer.* Both, however, were considered mysterious and sacred. And Hermes was supposedly the messenger which delivered the *logos* for both parties. So much for Greek philosophy.

Along comes Philo. He was a Hebrew theologian who loved Greek philosophy. So he used the Greeks’ definition of *logos* and applied it to the OT. He talked about *logos* in terms of a bridge between the transcendent God and the physical world. It was a kind of semi-god force that moved back and forth between heaven and earth. Thus, in Jewish Theology, *logos* came to mean “an active force from God — that which caused a certain result”: (1) Creation, Genesis 1:3; (2) Healing, Psalms 107:20; 147:15,18; or (3) Revelation.

For the Greek, *logos* was the “filtered” ideas of a god in Human Philosophy. For the Hebrews it represented the spoken word of God which became concrete human reality. John adapts both ideas. For him, *logos* was the incarnation of both the wisdom of God and the active agent of God — Jesus Christ. The difference for John, however, is that nothing was lost when *logos* descended to earth. This *logos* doesn’t merely represent God’s thoughts, he is God incarnate. Thus, the mind of God invades human history.



## JESUS IS GOD

This concept of *logos* allows us to understand a bit more about Jesus. Prior to Jesus’ incarnation, he existed as God in this “*logos*” state. Not only do John and Paul claim preexistence for Jesus; Jesus himself makes that claim (Jn 6:38; 8:42; 16:27; 17:5) in the presence of both friend and foe. He was with God at the beginning of creation (Jn 1:1-3, 18; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16; 1 Jn 1:1) and shared in God’s ministry to the Israelites (1 Cor 10:3-4). Although he was equal with the Father in glory, power, and riches (Jn 17:5; 2 Cor 8:9; Phil 2:6), he was in submission to God and thus sent from God as his representative from heaven (Jn 6:38, 51; 8:42; 13:3; 16:27, 30; Rom 8:3; Gal 4:4; 1 Jn 4:9-10). In this obedient act of incarnation he stripped himself in order to accomplish his Father’s will. He was humbled by taking the form of a human being (Rom 8:3; Phil 2:7-8) and dying as the embodiment of sin (2 Cor 5:21).

Now, if the *logos* was equal to Jehovah, why do some say that he was merely “a god” or “god-like”? The Greek text of verse 1 has no definite article

(“the”) in the phrase “And the Word was God.” Therefore, some religious groups are tempted to add the indefinite article (“a”), which the Greek language does not have. Sometimes that is an appropriate translation, but not always. The definite article in Greek specifies a particular object (person, place or thing). It is as if one pointed his finger and said, “that one.” An anarthrous Greek noun (a noun without an article), on the other hand, signifies the quality or characteristic of the specified noun. Thus, the phrase, “And the Word was God” describes the Word as having “God-quality/character.” Instead of saying that Jesus was merely “a god” or “god-like,” this verse is an explicit claim to the deity of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> [Note: this same grammatical structure is found also in vv. 12 and 18 where it would be clearly inappropriate to add an indefinite article. See especially John 4:24, “God is spirit.”]<sup>14</sup>

Admittedly, it is difficult to swallow this claim that Jesus, the man, was God incarnate. If John was the only one to make such a claim, we might dismiss him as a lunatic or a poet. But he is accompanied by both Peter and Paul who equate Jesus with Jehovah in their letters (Rom 9:5; 2 Thess 1:12; Titus 2:13; 2 Pet 1:1; 1 Jn 5:20). Furthermore, both Jesus’ friends (Jn 1:18; Mt 14:33; 16:16-19; Lk 7:13-16; 23:39-43) and foes (Mk 3:11; 27:54; Mk 15:39; Lk 4:41; Jn 3:1-2) allude to his divine nature. More than that, Jesus claims it himself. He accepts worship as God (Mt 16:16-17; 26:6-13; Lk 5:8-9; 7:36-50; 19:35-40; Jn 20:27-29). He performs works unique to God (Mt 28:18; Mk 2:10; Jn 5:24-30; 14:6; Rom 3:21-26; 5:5-17; 1 Cor 15:16-19, 35-58; Phil 3:21; Col 1:16-17; 2:3; Heb 1:3). In addition, he makes specific claims to his deity (Mt 10:32-33; 16:13-18; 28:18; Mk 2:10; 9:41; 14:62; Jn 5:30-40; 8:23-24, 58; 9:37; 10:30, 36; 14:9; 17:1-3). This doesn’t even include all Jesus’ “I AM” statements in John (6:35, 41, 48, 51; 8:12, 58; 9:5; 10:7, 9, 11, 14, 36; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5; Rev. 1:8, 17; 22:16). The bottom line is that we have all four evangelists, Peter, Paul, and Jesus himself reaffirming John 1:1 — Jesus is *logos* — God incarnate.

<sup>3</sup>Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. <sup>4</sup>In him was life, and that life was the light of men.

Jn 1:3-5

<sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood<sup>a</sup> it.

<sup>a</sup>5Or *darkness, and the darkness has not overcome*

<sup>13</sup>E.L. Miller, “The Logos was God,” *EvQ* 53/2 (1981): 65-77, comes to several significant conclusions about this phrase: (1) “Divine” should be rejected as too weak a rendering for *theos*. (2) The general and immediate contexts of the phrase suggest a definite, not qualitative or adjectival, meaning for *theos*. (3) The absence of the article suggests that John avoids a full equation of the *logos* and *theos*, as does 1:1b. (4) But along with 1:2, it does suggest the concept of the Christian (Triune) God.

<sup>14</sup>For a more detailed discussion of Greek anarthrous nouns see C.H. Dodd, “New Testament Translation Problems II,” *BT* 28/1 (Jan 1977): 101-104, and P.B. Harner, “Qualitative Anarthrous Predicate Nouns: Mark 15:39 and John 1:1,” *JBL* 92 (1973): 75ff.

## JESUS IS THE CREATOR OF LIFE

Aside from this verse (Jn 1:3), there are two other clear claims in the NT that Jesus created the world — 1 Corinthians 8:6 and Colossians 1:16. From these three passages we learn (1) Jesus was under the authority of the Father and (2) Jesus was the active agent which carried out the will of the Father in creation. This idea of Jesus the *logos* can easily be read into the Genesis account. First, we remember that God created by the force of his Word — “God said . . . and it was so.” Second, we recall God’s words of Genesis 1:26, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness.” There was a plurality of God’s personality at creation. Christian theologians have inferred from this the idea of the Trinity. Indeed, John clearly implies that Jesus was the active agent carrying out God’s creative will.

Since Jesus, the *logos*, was responsible for creation, John can say that “In him was life.” There are actually three Greek words for life: *bios*, *psychē* and *zoē*. *Bios* (from which we get biology), indicates “here and now” kind of life — the duration of life. *Psychē* (lit., soul), indicates (1) the individual life — the personality of the person, and (2) the breath of the person. The third word (*zoē*), which John uses here, is the intensive life (as opposed to the *bios* — extensive life). It is what we might call “being alive.”

In fact, when John talks about “eternal life” he only uses this word *zoē* (Jn 3:15-16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:24, 39; 6:27, 40, 47, 54, 68; 10:28; 12:25, 50; 17:2-3; 1 Jn 1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13, 20). Therefore, the life Jesus gives us is not a quantity of life, but quality of life. One does not enter “eternal life” upon his death. One obtains eternal life through a relationship with the living Christ (Jn 5:40; 1 Jn 5:11-12). As we encounter Jesus through the word (Jn 5:24, 39; 6:63, 68) and place our faith in him (3:15-16, 36; 6:40, 47; 20:31; 1 Jn 5:13), we receive life because he gives it to us as a gift (Jn 10:28; 17:2-3).

Jesus himself is life (1 Jn 1:1-2)! When we have a relationship with him, we too become fully alive (cf. Rom 8:10-11). Surely there is a future aspect to this eternal life, that is, it lasts forever. More significantly, it begins in the present (Jn 10:10; 1 Jn 3:14-15; 5:11-13). The bottom line is this: Jesus saves me from my sins. That is eternal life (Jn 6:51). I have a personal relationship with the Son of God, beginning today, and lasting through eternity.

## JESUS IS THE LIGHT

Jesus is not only the life but also the light. This is a strong theme for John. Of the 72 times *phōs* is used in the NT, 33 belong to John’s writings. Except for the prophetic utterances of Matthew 4:16 and Luke 2:32, John is the only Gospel writer to use the term “light” to refer to Jesus. The other writers use it to refer to the people of the kingdom of God in our relationship with the world. John, however, pulls together the two great themes of light and life — both of which are personified in Jesus (1:9-14; 8:12; 9:5; 12:35-36, 46). John is also more marked in his portrayal of the battle between light and darkness (Jn 1:5;

3:19-20; 1 Jn 2:8; cf. 2 Cor 6:14). The ethical comparison of light and darkness was not original with Christian theology, however, but was previously used in Greek philosophy. The gods, in fact, were pictured as dwelling in a realm of light. The OT, as well as the Gnostics and Essenes, employed this same metaphor. Yet here, the fact that the Father is called the light (1 Jn 1:5) demonstrates again that John portrays Jesus as God.

The main function of light in John's writings is to expose the reality of that which surrounds us. Those who walk in the light, then, are innocent (Jn 3:19-21; 1 Jn 1:7; 2:9; cf. Rom 13:12) because they are able to see (ethically) and respond properly to their surroundings. On the other hand, those that walk in the darkness are prone to stumbling (Jn 11:10; 12:35; 1 Jn 2:11). There is also the freedom to choose exposure to the light or the secrecy of darkness. Eschatologically, the fate of the wicked is pictured as darkness while that of the righteous is pictured as light, especially God's own light, which is provided for the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:23; 22:5).

All this talk about the "light" raises a practical question: What does John mean, "The darkness has not understood it"? This Greek word, *katalambanō*, is a compound word from "down" and "to take/receive." Thus, etymologically it indicates a "holding down" in some way or another. There are two directions that this word can go. First, it can indicate an intellectual holding down (i.e., understanding, comprehending, apprehending; cf. Acts 25:25; Eph 3:18). We use the same idiom when we say, "I get it." Second, its primary meaning is physically holding something down (i.e., overcoming, subduing, extinguishing; cf. Jn 8:3; 12:35; 1 Cor 9:24; 1 Thess 5:4). These two thrusts are seen in the various translations: KJV & NASB = "comprehend"; RSV & Modern = "overcome"; Living = "extinguish"; ASV = "apprehend." It is important to understand that the Greek word can, at one and the same time, carry both connotations. However, since we do not have an equivalent English word, we have to settle for "either/or."

Therefore, this verse carries two primary connotations. First, the darkness has not overcome the light. That is to say, when you walk in a room and flip on a light, the darkness does not squelch it. When Jesus, the light, came into the dark world, he conquered, not vice versa. This may seem strange considering that the light was nailed to a cross, but then again, the story ends with a resurrection. The second emphasis states that the darkness did not apprehend the truth/reality of the light. Jesus was indeed the most misunderstood figure in human history.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>6</sup>There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all

Jn 1:6-9

<sup>15</sup> Plato's cave is a good illustration of how the darkness does not understand the light (*Republic*, VII).



men might believe. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. <sup>9</sup>The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>9Or *This was the true light that gives light to every man who comes into the world*

John the Baptist has an interesting biography. He was the prophesied forerunner of Jesus (Isa 40:3-4; Mal 3:1; 4:5). It was his job to clear the way for Jesus by preparing people's hearts through preaching. He entered the world through the priestly line. His father, Zechariah, was from the course of Abijah (1 Chr 24:10), and his mother descended from Aaron (Lk 1:5). Their barren state and miraculous pregnancy is described in Luke 1 and Matthew 1. Jesus and John were related in some way (probably cousins), and John was his elder by about six months (Lk 1:36). He was circumcised on the eighth day and set apart as a Nazirite (Lk 1:15). All else we know about John's early life is found in Luke 1:80.

John began his prophetic ministry in A.D. 25 — the 15th year of Tiberias Caesar (Lk 3:1). He attracted large crowds (Mt 3:5) as he preached and baptized in Bethany on the other side of the Jordan (Jn 1:28). His preaching is summarized in the phrase, "The kingdom of God is coming," and his ministry by immersion of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mk 1:4). So forceful was his preaching that many took him to be the reincarnation of Elijah, Jeremiah or another prophet (Mt 16:14). Jesus says that he was the greatest person ever born of a woman (Mt 11:11). An interesting fact, however, is that John never performed a miracle (Jn 10:41). His greatest act, perhaps, was his baptism of Jesus. With that act his ministry wound its way to a conclusion. Although he continued to baptize (Jn 3:23; 4:1), he recognized that he had accomplished that which was set before him to do (Jn 3:30).

Herod's antics and the vindictiveness of his evil wife, Herodias, caused the death of the last OT prophet. John was beheaded at the castle of Machaerus on the Dead Sea. Although he died through treachery, he successfully completed his God-given task. He prepared for and pointed out Jesus, the true light.

How is it true that Jesus gives light to every man (v. 9)? There are a number of passages that seem to make Jesus a universal savior (Jn 1:9, 29; 4:42; 12:32; Rom 5:18; 11:32; 1 Tim 2:6; 4:10; 1 Jn 2:2). Obviously not all men are Christians, so these passages can't mean that Jesus saved all men and made everything bright and cheery. In fact, John has just said the darkness rejects the light (v. 5). There are at least three valid explanations of these verses. First, Jesus did, in fact, impact human history more than any other single figure. The world is a better, wiser, more humane place because of his 33-year stint. Second, his influence continues to be felt through the church he left behind. If it were not for Jesus' followers, the world would be centuries behind where it is now in science, education, politics and medicine. Third, because he made light available, he opened the possibility for each person to be enlightened.

Jn 1:10-13

<sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. <sup>11</sup>He came to that which was his

own, but his own did not receive him. <sup>12</sup>Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—<sup>13</sup>children born not of natural descent,<sup>a</sup> nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

<sup>a</sup> 13 Greek *of bloods*

Several introductory comments are appropriate here: (1) We have the extraordinary right, through Jesus, to become children of God. The word (*exousia*) literally means “power” or “authority.” (2) By nature we must be adopted into his family; we are not natural children (Rom 8:14-17). (3) The transaction is made when we respond to Jesus and by faith receive his name (cf. Gal 3:26) and we are led by his Spirit (Rom 8:14). (4) Jesus, himself, promised this to the peacemakers (Mt 5:9).

Aside from the two enigmatic references in Genesis 6:2, 4, this is a NT concept. A brief survey of the NT reveals how we recognize the children of God and what kind of benefits they can expect. First, children of God are known by their actions: (1) They stop sinning (1 Jn 3:9-10; 5:18). (2) They love each other (1 Jn 4:7). (3) They believe in Jesus (1 Jn 5:1). (4) They love God and keep his commands (1 Jn 5:2). Second, children of God can expect certain blessings: (1) We have victory over the world (1 Jn 5:4). (2) We have an intimacy with the Father by which we can call him “Abba” (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). (3) We become fellow heirs with Christ (Rom 8:17). (4) We await future blessings when Jesus returns (Rom 8:19-21; 1 Jn 3:1-2).

These children of God are oddities. Verse 13 gives three peculiar descriptions of them. First, the NIV “natural descent” is simply the Greek word for “blood.” Second, “human decision” would probably be more accurately rendered “the will/passions of the flesh.” And third, the “husband’s decision” would indicate the desire of a man for offspring. All three of these underscore the physical, sensual, and biological relationship of reproduction. This is not what John means by children of God. Although current Greek mythology spoke frequently about sexual union between the gods and humans, John stresses that the children of God are associated at the spiritual rather than the physical level.

<sup>14</sup>The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only,<sup>a</sup> who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Jn 1:14

<sup>a</sup> 14, 18 Or *the Only Begotten*

The incarnation is perhaps the most wonderful truth of history. Its implications are deep and wide. It tells us that God desires to communicate himself to us and, because of our diminutive nature, was only able to do that by speaking at our level and becoming one of us. It tell us that God truly understands our nature and sufferings (Heb 2:17-18). It tells us of the seriousness of our sins, because Christ came to die for them. It tells us of God’s love for man — he is involved in human history. In fact, he is a major player. It tells us that the bridge between divinity and humanity is crossable. We therefore have the hope of future fellowship in God’s presence.

Isaiah 9:6-7 predicts the incarnation. Truly, God indwelling a human body is most difficult to imagine. So much so that the incarnation has become a trademark of Christian impiety in Jewish and Muslim circles. Yet this truth, which borders on the mythological, is the greatest hope and comfort for those who can accept it. Indeed we have the surest evidence of the incarnation: prophecy, character and miracles of Christ, and the logical necessity of God communicating with us on our level. Simply put, because we could not reach up to God, he came down to us.

If we are going to accept the incarnation, is it not fair to expect some evidence to back up such a wild claim? Is it not fair to ask, “Did Jesus act like God? Did he do the things God alone is able to do?” The answer to these questions is a resounding “YES!”

1. He was prophesied (Isa 9:6-7)
2. He performed miracles (Jn 10:25)
3. He taught with authority (Mt 7:28-29)
4. He had supernatural knowledge (Mt 21:1-3; 24:1-2; 26:17-35; Mk 2:6-8; Jn 1:47-49; 2:23-25; 4:16-19, 28-30; 11:4, 11-15; 14:29; 16:4; 18:4; 21:5-6, 18-19)
5. He was sinless (Jn 8:46; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 2:22)
6. He was one with the Father (Jn 1:1-5, 18; 3:35-36; 10:25-30; 14:1-11)
7. He accepted worship (Mt 16:16-17; 26:6-13; Lk 5:8-9; 7:36-50; 19:35-40; Jn 20:27-29)

Through the incarnation, the logos took the form of God’s “One and Only” (*monogenēs*) Son. The Greek word is a compound of “one” and “beget.” Thus some translations render it, “only begotten.” The problem is that this gives the impression Jesus was somehow conceived (aside from his incarnation). The word, indeed, can mean “only child” (Lk 7:12; 8:42; 9:38). It would be more accurate to render it as “unique.” In fact, every use in John (5 of its 9 uses) would be accurately rendered by “unique” (Jn 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 Jn 4:9). It is not so much the begetting that is stressed as the unique nature of the object or person. (Certainly, when the word is used of God in v. 18, it does not mean begotten.) It is as if to say, “This is the only one in its class” (cf. Heb 11:17).

Jn 1:15-18

<sup>15</sup>John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’” <sup>16</sup>From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. <sup>17</sup>For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup>No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only,<sup>a</sup> who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.

<sup>a</sup>14, 18 Or *the Only Begotten*

We are certainly glad to read that we all receive “one blessing after another” (v. 16). [Literally “grace upon grace” or “grace instead/in place of grace.”] But what in the world does that mean, exactly? Before we can decipher the meaning, we must first determine who is speaking here: John the Apostle or John the

Baptist. If it is John the Apostle, writing about A.D. 95, then he probably means something like this: “The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ superseded and replaced the gift of the Law given through Moses.”<sup>16</sup> The NIV ends John the Baptist’s words at v. 15. But we could just as easily place the end of the quotation at v. 16, 17 or even 18. Do these words contain “too mature a theology” for John the Baptist? (Cf. Jn 1:23, 29, 33). If, then, we view these words as the Baptist’s, they probably mean something like this: “God has blessed his people time and again. And now, in Jesus, we receive his greatest gift.”<sup>17</sup>

No matter which view we adopt, v. 17 serves as an explanation for v. 16. The blessing of Jesus is contrasted to the blessing of the law of Moses. Most likely Exodus 33–34 serves as a background for this idea, and perhaps more specifically Exodus 33:13 or 34:6.<sup>18</sup> What Israel longed for, what we all need so desperately, John announces as having come. “For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering” (Rom 8:3).

Along with salvation come many other blessings: the Holy Spirit, peace, victory, spiritual gifts, fellowship in the church, the promise of heaven, physical healing, purpose in life. Truly, in Jesus, we receive one blessing after another.

One of the greatest blessings Jesus gives us is a glimpse of God. Moses asked God for the privilege of seeing him (Exod 33:18). God allowed him to see only his back — the remnant of glory which was left after God had departed. God explained that no human was able to look on him without dying (Exod 33:20).

What, then, do we make of passages such as Genesis 3:8, God walking with Adam in the Garden, or Genesis 18:1, the Lord appearing to Abraham near the oaks of Mamre? We must conclude that these were theophanies — mere appearances of God in another bodily form. Cottrell (*God the Creator*, p. 230) suggests that these bodies were created *ex nihilo* for the duration of the appearance and then vanished again into nothingness. He goes on to say, “Just as God is naturally invisible to the material realm because he is spirit, so also is he naturally invisible to the spiritual realm because he is uncreated and transcendent” (p. 231).

But Jesus, in a way that we could understand, in a form that we could survive, showed us what God was like. When we look at him, we see the actions and the character of God, cloaked in the form of a man. Verse 18 not only describes one of our greatest blessings in Jesus; it makes one of the boldest claims for his deity.

<sup>16</sup>For this view see W.J. Dumbrell, “Law and Grace: The Nature of the Contrast in John 1:17,” *EvQ* 58 (Jan 1986): 25–37. He reads *anti* as contrast. Therefore he suggests that this marks the beginning of a new community (“Children of God,” v. 12), and a new law (i.e., Grace).

<sup>17</sup>For this view see Z.C. Hodges, “Grace after Grace — John 1:16,” *BibSac* 135 (Jan 1978): 34–45.

<sup>18</sup>For conflicting views see L.J. Kuyper, “Grace and Truth: An Old Testament Description of God, and Its Use in the Johannine Gospel,” *Int* 18 (1964): 3; and A. Hanson, “John 1:14–18 and Exodus 34,” *NTS* 23 (1976): 90–95.

**§ 3**  
**The Genealogy**  
**of Jesus**  
 (Mt 1:1-17;  
 Lk 3:23b-38)

Luke's introduction looks like good Greek history. John's reminds us of Jewish Wisdom Literature. Matthew's resembles a Jewish legal/religious document. Furthermore, the Hebrew OT begins and ends with a record of genealogies. The Hebrew OT ended with 1 & 2 Chronicles. Genesis uses the title "These are the generations of . . ." as a major divider of the book (Gen 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2). Matthew also starts with "A record of the genealogy" (*biblos geneaseōs*).<sup>19</sup> It also seems significant that the word "birth" (lit., genesis) is used in verse 18 just after the genealogical record. Thus, this word brackets Matthew's introduction.

Genealogies had three essential functions: (1) To show the character of a particular line. In other words, a man's descendants supposedly acted like him. Such is the case when Seth's line is contrasted to Cain's (Gen 4:25ff). (2) To demonstrate God's working in history with a particular people. This helped establish a corporate identity. And (3) to prove biological succession.

This third purpose was important for legal and political transactions:

- (1) Property was distributed based on family affiliation.
- (2) The Aaronic priesthood demanded biological affiliation. In fact, in Ezra's day, priests who could not prove their ancestry were considered unclean (Neh 7:61-64). This was of critical importance after the Babylonian captivity and the prevalence of intermarriage (Ezra 2:59-63; 10:9-44; Neh 13:23-28).
- (3) Genealogies were a way of keeping the lines "clean" (Deut 7:1-4; 23:1-8). This was especially important after the days of Hellenization.
- (4) Jewish military arrangement was by tribes (Num 1:2-4), even when they were camping in the wilderness (Num 2:2, 17; 10:1-28).
- (5) Taxes and offerings in the temple were made according to genealogical lines (Num 7:11-89).
- (6) The Davidic kingdom of Judah always relied on direct succession. This became even more important when it was connected to Messianic fulfillment (Isa 11:1-5).

Mt 1:1-17

<sup>1</sup>A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham: <sup>2</sup>Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, <sup>3</sup>Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, <sup>4</sup>Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, <sup>5</sup>Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, <sup>6</sup>and Jesse the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife, <sup>7</sup>Solomon the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asa, <sup>8</sup>Asa the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram, Jehoram the father of Uzziah, <sup>9</sup>Uzziah the father of Jotham, Jotham the

<sup>19</sup>J. Nolland, "What Kind of Genesis Do We Have in Mt 1:1?" *NTS* 42/3 [1996]: 463-471, cautions about seeing Matthew as a recapitulation of Genesis, however. Jesus is more like David than Adam.

father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, <sup>10</sup>Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amon, Amon the father of Josiah, <sup>11</sup>and Josiah the father of Jeconiah<sup>a</sup> and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon. <sup>12</sup>After the exile to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, <sup>13</sup>Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, Abiud the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, <sup>14</sup>Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim, Akim the father of Eliud, <sup>15</sup>Eliud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, <sup>16</sup>and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ. <sup>17</sup>Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ.<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> <sup>11</sup> That is, Jehoiachin; also in verse 12    <sup>b</sup> <sup>17</sup> Or *Messiah*. “*The Christ*” (Greek) and “*the Messiah*” (Hebrew) both mean “*the Anointed One*.”

Matthew arranges his genealogy into three sets of 14 names (v. 17), each representing a major period of Israel’s history: Abraham, David, Exile. He intends to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of all Jewish history. The problem is that the second set of names only includes 13 generations. Did Matthew miscount? The likelihood of a professional tax collector miscounting a genealogy is not great. What further confounds the issue is Matthew omits four names in v. 9 (Ahaziah, Joash, Amaziah, and Jehoiakim) which are found in the 1 Chronicles genealogy. In other words, Matthew could have listed 14/17/14 names but drops four of them, resulting in 14/13/14.

Now, one must realize that the Jews were not interested in “complete” lists (this is primarily a Western expectation). They were interested in establishing the fact of descent. Persons were often omitted from a genealogy who were seen as insignificant or unflattering to the family. Furthermore, the words “Father,” “Son,” and “Beget” can be used to establish a relationship between a man and his grandfather/grandson or even further down the biological line. These words simply connect two people within a family, they do not always state scientifically their biological relationship. Thus, even if a few names are left out of the genealogy, we can still speak accurately of a great-grandfather “begetting” a descendant.

Some have suggested these omissions were a result of scribal error. The first three names are from 1 Chronicles 3:11-12. It is possible that the scribe’s eye would pass from Ahaziah straight to Azariah, thereby leaving out three persons.<sup>20</sup> Also, the omission of Jehoiakim may be explained by its similarity to his son, Jehoiachin (1 Chron 3:16). The bottom line is that Matthew is accused of making a clerical error.

A more likely explanation, however, is that Matthew purposely arranges the genealogy into 3 divisions of fourteen generations each. In other words, he purposely leaves out four kings in order to retain his structural arrangement. The

<sup>20</sup> J. Nolland, “Jeconiah and His Brothers (Mt 1:11),” *BBR* 7 [1997]: 169-178, suggests that the first three of these are purposely omitted because they married into Ahab’s line and thus received his curse (1 Kgs 21:21-24).

question is, “Why would Matthew want fourteen names in each list and why would he only list 13 names in the central section?” The answer to both questions is: David.<sup>21</sup>

We notice in verse 1 that Matthew purposefully places David before Abraham, abandoning the chronological order of the rest of the genealogy. Why does he place David first? For emphasis. In fact, David’s prominence in verse one is a key to the whole book. Matthew’s unique emphasis is that Jesus is the king of the Jews, the promised progenitor of David. With this understanding we move now to verse 6 and give David a “double portion.” In other words, by counting David twice, our list suddenly becomes 14/14/14. What is more striking is that the letters of David’s name have a numeric value in Hebrew of 14. While this type of “numeric interpretation” (*gematria*) is quite foreign to us, it was a common rabbinic method of interpretation. The Hebrew language uses its alphabet as its numbering system as well. Therefore, children would learn arithmetic with the letters of their names, making this kind of “numerology” more common and more easily recognized. Matthew, like Luke and John, introduces his book with a style marvelously appropriate to his audience.<sup>22</sup>

Another striking feature of Matthew’s genealogy is his inclusion of women. It was pretty uncommon to include women in genealogies, but not unheard of (cf. 1 Chron 1:32; 2:17-21, 24, 26). However, you would expect them to be exemplary. The inclusion of these particular women is simply scandalous. Tamar was guilty of prostitution and incest (Gen 38:6-30). Rahab was apparently a foreign harlot (Josh 2:1,3; 6:17, 23, 25; Heb 11:31). Ruth was a foreigner. And Bathsheba was an adulteress (2 Sam 12:24) and perhaps considered a foreigner by her marriage to a Hittite.<sup>23</sup>

These gals did not belong in the lineage of the Messiah! Yet, there they are, as a neon reminder of the grace of God. When Mary was accused of being raped (or worse)<sup>24</sup> and ostracized by her family and friends, each of these women could have stood next to her and said, “Honey, I know how you feel.”

At the same time, Matthew describes Mary differently than the others. All five women give birth to a son in the lineage of David. The first four use an identical linguistic structure — “Out of” (*ek tēs*). With Mary, however, the structure changes to “Out of whom was begotten” (*ex hēs egennēthē*). It would appear that Matthew is making a subtle statement about the virgin birth of Jesus.

<sup>21</sup>Aside from making this genealogy easier to remember, the number 14 was used in Apocalyptic literature (e.g., 2 Baruch 53–74) to indicate the fullness of time and the ushering in of the Messianic era. See H.C. Waetjen, “The Genealogy as the Key to the Gospel According to Matthew.” *JBL* 95/2 (1976): 205-230.

<sup>22</sup>For a more detailed description of this “numerology” see B.M. Newman, “Matthew 1:1-18: Some Comments and a Suggested Restructuring,” *BT* 27/2 (Apr 1976): 209-212.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. T. H. Graves, “Matthew 1:1-17,” *Rev Exp* 86 (1989): 595-600.

<sup>24</sup>Ancient Jewish opinions of Mary were not flattering. Some considered her to be raped by Joseph or a Roman soldier. Others portrayed her simply as being a fornicator.

Before moving on to Luke's genealogy, there is a curious theological thorn we must deal with. In 2 Sam 7:12-17, God promises David that through Solomon's line there would always be a descendant to sit on his throne. However, Jeremiah 22:30 says, "Record this man as if childless, a man who will not prosper in his lifetime, for none of his offspring will prosper, none will sit on the throne of David or rule anymore in Judah." How is it that God can keep both promises?

Since Jesus was the adopted son of Joseph, he becomes legal heir to Joseph's lineage. At the same time Matthew makes it clear he was not Joseph's physical son, not only in 18-25, but even in v. 16. Thirty-nine times in vv. 2-16, Matthew uses the verb *egennēsen* = "He became the father of." Then suddenly in v. 16, he breaks the pattern when he comes to Joseph who is only said to be the husband of Mary. Also, the words "of whom," which are ambiguous in English, are feminine in Greek. Matthew subtly, but clearly states that Jesus was the adopted son of Joseph (and legal heir to the throne of David), and the natural son of Mary. Thus, both 2 Samuel 7:12-17 and Jeremiah 22:30 are fulfilled.

Lk 3:23-38

<sup>23</sup>Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli, <sup>24</sup>the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, the son of Melki, the son of Jannai, the son of Joseph, <sup>25</sup>the son of Mattathias, the son of Amos, the son of Nahum, the son of Esli, the son of Naggai, <sup>26</sup>the son of Maath, the son of Mattathias, the son of Semein, the son of Josech, the son of Joda, <sup>27</sup>the son of Joanan, the son of Rhesa, the son of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, the son of Neri, <sup>28</sup>the son of Melki, the son of Addi, the son of Cosam, the son of Elmadam, the son of Er, <sup>29</sup>the son of Joshua, the son of Eliezer, the son of Jorim, the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, <sup>30</sup>the son of Simeon, the son of Judah, the son of Joseph, the son of Jonam, the son of Eliakim, <sup>31</sup>the son of Melea, the son of Menna, the son of Mattatha, the son of Nathan, the son of David, <sup>32</sup>the son of Jesse, the son of Obed, the son of Boaz, the son of Salmon,<sup>a</sup> the son of Nahshon, <sup>33</sup>the son of Amminadab, the son of Ram,<sup>b</sup> the son of Hezron, the son of Perez, the son of Judah, <sup>34</sup>the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, the son of Terah, the son of Nahor, <sup>35</sup>the son of Serug, the son of Reu, the son of Peleg, the son of Eber, the son of Shelah, <sup>36</sup>the son of Cainan, the son of Arphaxad, the son of Shem, the son of Noah, the son of Lamech, <sup>37</sup>the son of Methuselah, the son of Enoch, the son of Jared, the son of Mahalalel, the son of Kenan, <sup>38</sup>the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.

<sup>a</sup>32 Some early manuscripts *Sala* <sup>b</sup>33 Some manuscripts *Amminadab, the son of Admin, the son of Ami*, other manuscripts vary widely.

There are three main differences between Matthew's genealogy and Luke's.

(A) Matthew begins with Abraham and moves forward toward Jesus whereas Luke begins with Jesus and moves backward all the way to Adam.

(B) If Luke's list is inverted and placed beside Matthew's list, the portion between Abraham and David is virtually identical. However, between David and Joseph, the two are obviously two distinct lists. The only names which appear in both lists in the same order are Shealtiel and Zerubbabel (Mt 1:12; Lk 3:27).



(C) Luke's list contains forty progenitors between David and Christ; Matthew's only has twenty-six.

How can we account for these differences? It appears that we have two distinct lists. So, who do they belong to? There have been a number of different theories suggested.<sup>25</sup> The first theory was proposed by Julius Africanus (d. A.D. 240). He suggested that Matthew gives the genealogy of Joseph's biological father whereas Luke gives the genealogy of Joseph's legal father. According to the laws of Levirate marriage, if a man died childless, it was his brother's responsibility to foster a child for him. In such a case, the dead man would still be the legal father for the purpose of inheritance, and the live man the biological father. This theory is based on the assumption that Joseph's legal father died childless. Although it is a distinct possibility, there is nothing in the text to suggest that this was the case.

A second theory, advocated first by J. Gresham Machen in *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, states that Matthew gives the *legal* descent of Joseph, whereas Luke gives the *physical* descent. The difference is, Matthew's account traces the legal heir to the Davidic throne, which would have come down to Joseph. In such an account, because the line failed at Jeconiah (Jer 22:30), it "skipped a beat" biologically and passed over to the next legal heir to the throne (e.g., Shealtiel, Mt 1:12; cf. Lk 3:27). Therefore, Matthew "changes tracks" from the biological line to the collateral line. If this is the case, Matthew asks the question, "Who is the heir of David?" whereas Luke asks, "Who is Joseph's father?" This view is based on the assumption that Matthew's account jumps to the collateral line. Again, this is certainly possible, but nothing in the text would necessitate or even suggest such.<sup>26</sup>

A third theory suggests that Luke's record does not belong to Joseph at all but, in fact, lists Mary's family. Assuming that there was no male heir and that she was the oldest child, she would become the heiress (Num 27:1-11; 36:1-12). If this were the case, when she married Joseph, he, in practicality, would become the heir to this line as well. Hence, Joseph is listed in place of Mary in Luke's account.

A fourth theory, like the third, suggests that Mary's line is given in Luke. Joseph, however, is not a part of the genealogy but merely a parenthetical comment of Luke 3:23, which should read, "Jesus . . . being the son (as was supposed of Joseph) of Heli . . ." The Greek would allow such a punctuation and even suggests it from the fact that of all the names in this list, Joseph alone lacks an article. In addition, "Son" could certainly apply to Heli as Jesus' grandfather. Furthermore, Luke likely omits Mary's name since women were seldom included in genealogical lists. Although Matthew included four women in his list, Luke has no women in his.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. R. Thomas & S. Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (Chicago: Moody), pp. 313-319.

<sup>26</sup> R.P. Nettelhorst offers an interesting twist on these first two theories. He proposes that both genealogies are Joseph's, but Matthew traces his mother's line while Luke traces his father's line. See "Genealogy of Jesus," *JETS* 31 (June 1988): 169-172.

This last theory would allow Matthew's genealogy to speak of biological, rather than legal or collateral descent. Thus, Matthew's use of the word "begat" would retain its normal usage rather than figurative. Besides, Matthew's interest in Jesus' relationship with the OT would be more strongly supported if his genealogy was Joseph's real descent (as well as legal descent), giving Jesus legal claim to the Davidic throne. Luke's genealogy of Jesus through a biological parent would fit his emphasis on the humanity of Jesus.

Beyond these sticky issues, there are a number of valuable lessons to be learned from the genealogical records. First, God is interested in people. He loves us, names us, accounts us, and expects us to live in obedience to him. Second, God can use unknown and fallen people to accomplish his purposes. God's plans and means are greater than our fallible efforts. Third, God is sovereign. His designs will be accomplished! He ordains and directs history through human participants. Fourth, these two genealogies give us a glimpse of Jesus' identity. Humanly, he was Mary's son; legally, he was Joseph's son; fundamentally, he was God's Son.

## PART TWO

# Two Divine Births

This particular section of Luke (chs. 1–2) weaves back and forth between the birth narratives comparing Jesus and John, giving somewhat of a “soap opera” effect. Birth narratives like these are common in Greco-Roman biographies of famous people. Their purpose is to answer this single question: How do we account for such a life as this? At the same time, Luke 1–2 is filled with Hebraic thoughts and phrases. It consistently echoes the themes and theology of the OT (esp. Judg 13:2-7; 1 Sam 1–3; Gen 18:11ff). Hence, we have a classic Greco-Roman form, immersed into a Hebrew setting. Luke has carefully and skillfully reflected the culture of the characters in this narrative.

Furthermore, there are many details which one would expect only from an eyewitness account (e.g., the angel standing at the *right* hand of the altar, v. 11). These colorful little tidbits remind us that Luke was, indeed, using the firsthand information he had gleaned from the eyewitnesses (cf. 1:1-4). And while Luke is a wonderfully careful historian, this stuff isn’t about the past. Luke is laying a foundation here for the life of Jesus. These events point prophetically to the future. They help us predict what we are about to encounter in the life and ministry of Jesus.

R.E. Brown (*The Birth of the Messiah*) calls attention to a number of parallels between this text and Daniel 9–10. For instance, (1) both are visions or “sightings” of an angel. (2) Gabriel appears only in these two texts in the Bible (1:10-11 and Dan 9:20-21). (3) Gabriel appears in response to a prayer of distress (1:13 and Dan 9:20). And (4) both Daniel and Zechariah wind up mute from the encounter (1:20-22 and Dan 10:15).

**§ 4**  
**John’s Birth**  
**Revealed to**  
**Zechariah**  
(Lk 1:5-25)

<sup>5</sup>In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. <sup>6</sup>Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly. <sup>7</sup>But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

Herod the Great was a shrewd politician, a failure with his family, a voracious builder, and a passionate lover. He was appointed by Rome as the king of

the Jews after they could not settle their own civil disputes. He reigned from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C.

During this time there were twenty-four divisions of priests with approximately 900 in each for a grand total of 21,600 (Josephus *Against Apion*, 2.108 — estimates the total at 20,000). Each division would serve one week every six months. On the Sabbath, all the men of the division, who were 24 years and older would serve. On the other six days, only 50 or so would serve, being chosen by lot. On the great feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, all 24 divisions served. The rest of the time they lived in their homes which were scattered about Judea. Not only was Zechariah a priest, but he was married to the daughter of the priest — this was a double honor. They were a sweet old couple, who lived model lives of purity and piety.

Sadly, they lived under the “curse” of barrenness. Children were viewed as a blessing from the Lord (Exod 23:26; Deut 7:14), the antithesis being that barrenness was a curse from the Lord (Job 15:34). When a woman’s barrenness was reversed, it was seen as an indication of God’s blessing and vice versa (1 Sam 2:5; Isa 54:1; Gal 4:27).

Barrenness was a curse because a woman without a child would have no one to support and protect her after her husband died (Job 24:21). Moreover, she became the object of scorn from other women (Gen 11:30, Sarai; Gen 25:21; 29:31, Rachel).

Due to their age, Zechariah and Elizabeth have no hope of God removing their “curse” of barrenness. Luke’s verbs here are colorful. He combines the imperfect verb “to be” with the perfect participle “to advance.” By this Luke indicates that they were in the present state of having grown old. Furthermore, day by day, they were growing older. We have here the sad picture of a barren Jewish couple. They had strong hopes for a child. As they grew older, and continued to do so, their dreams slipped away into the distance like a ship lost from port. These hopes were now but a vague memory.

As for their exact age, one guess is probably about as good as another, although a Jew was not considered old until 60. Hence, one might guess that they were about 80 years old.

<sup>8</sup>Once when Zechariah’s division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, <sup>9</sup>he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup>And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Lk 1:8-17

<sup>11</sup>Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup>When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. <sup>13</sup>But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. <sup>14</sup>He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup>for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.” <sup>16</sup>Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup>And he will go on before the Lord, in the

spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

<sup>a</sup> 15 Or *from his mother's womb*

A priest's day began by cleaning up the temple precincts before dawn. Early in the morning at least three lots would be cast to determine the following duties: (1) rekindling the fire on the altar and serving with the morning sacrifice; (2) the officiating priest of the day; (3) trimming the golden candlestick and preparing incense within the Holy Place. This third duty was the most sacred service of the day. The incense symbolized the ascending prayers of the saints (Ps 141:2; Rev 5:8; 8:3,4). It was prepared both morning and evening so that it burned perpetually before the Lord (Exod 30:8). This is likely the afternoon sacrifice, in conjunction with the hour of prayer (3 p.m.). Only once in a lifetime was a priest allowed to perform this duty. He was fortunate indeed if he got to do it at all.

Zechariah would choose two friends or relatives to help him in the sacred duty of burning the incense. One would clean the altar from the previous evening's offering. While worshiping he would move backwards out of the Holy Place. The second would then come forward and spread live coals from the altar of sacrifice to the outer edges of the altar of incense. He also worships and exits the Holy Place backwards, leaving Zechariah alone to perform his sacred duty. The inner sanctuary was dimly lit by the seven-branched candlestick on the south. To the north was the table of shewbread; to the west, nearest the Holy of Holies, was the altar of incense.

At just the right time, he would spread the incense on the altar. The priests and people outside, seeing the offering rise to God would bow in reverent worship and prayer. Many people from all over the city came to the temple at this hour for prayer. Most priests completed their duties rather quickly, fearing the wrath of God if they tarried. Thus, Zechariah's delay was unusual.

After Zechariah's helpers leave, he is there all alone . . . he thinks. An angel has slipped in on him. The way Luke phrases it, it looks like Gabriel had been standing there for awhile between the altar of incense and the golden lampstand, unnoticed by Zechariah who is absorbed in his duties. When he finally notices the angel, he is petrified. That is the normal reaction to angelic visitations. But compound that with his sacred solo duties in the Holy Place, and Zechariah has just cause for alarm. Gabriel, with a classic angelic line, tries to calm and comfort him: “Don't be afraid [lit. *stop being afraid*].” (Probably easier said than done).

Then Gabriel adds this: “Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son.” “Old man” Zechariah, in the Holy Place of God, performing a once-in-a-lifetime religious duty, was *not* praying about procreation. He was praying about the redemption of Israel. He had seen the Civil War under Hyrcanus and Aristobulus (67–63 B.C.) and the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in 63 B.C. He

witnessed the evil Edomite, Herod, being installed as king in 37 B.C. His prayer was for his nation. Surely it looked much like Daniel's (Dan 9:4-19).

But there is another surprise to come. This was no ordinary son. They were to name him John, meaning "the Lord is gracious." He was to have a special diet (v. 15). This appears to be a description of a lifetime Nazirite vow (e.g., Samson, Judg 13:4,5; Samuel, 1 Sam 1:11). He would be precious to his parents (v. 14). He would call many Israelites back to God (v. 16-17), and he would be God's man, with Elijah's power, preparing people for the coming of the Lord (Isa 40:3-5; Mal 3:1-5; 4:5-6). At long last, the 400 years of prophetic silence is broken.

<sup>18</sup>Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." <sup>19</sup>The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. <sup>20</sup>And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

Lk 1:18-20

This is all too much for Zechariah to take in. He just can't believe it. So he asks for proof. While that sounds reasonable to us, it must have seemed pretty shallow to Gabriel.<sup>1</sup> After all, he hung around the throne of God. He was in the know. And his sources were pretty reliable.

But since Zechariah wanted a sign, Gabriel gave him one! He would "live in silence" until John was born. Anderson suggests that this should be understood as being *deaf not dumb*.<sup>2</sup> He says that "this special punishment was inflicted on Zechariah because he had not believed what he had *heard* . . . that is, he would not henceforth *hear ANY words* until the angel's words were fulfilled" (pp. 23-24). In Luke 1:62, when John is born, the neighbors used sign language to communicate with Zechariah. He then answers their question by writing, not speaking. That would indicate that he was both deaf and dumb. Perhaps then, the conclusion should be that this word silent [*siōpaō*] can include both problems — deaf and dumb.

Although the text does not say that Zechariah's dumbness was punishment for seeking a sign, it appears to be both the rebuke and the sign itself. After all, Jesus criticizes those who sought signs after sufficient evidence has already been given (Mt 12:38-39; Lk 11:29; Jn 6:30).

However, both Gideon (Judg 6:38-39) and Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20:8) asked for a sign and were given one without any kind of criticism or punishment. Ahaz was told to ask for a sign but would not (Isa 7:11). Why the apparent contradic-

<sup>1</sup>Aside from Gabriel, meaning "God is Great," (Dan 8:16; 9:21; Lk 1:19, 26), Michael the Archangel is the only other angel mentioned by name (Jude 9; Rev 12:7; Dan 10:13, 21; 12:1). Furthermore, the last time Gabriel spoke (Dan 9-10), it was about the coming of the Messiah. It would be natural, then, for Zechariah (and us) to listen to his words with Messianic/prophetic expectation.

<sup>2</sup>J.G. Anderson, "A New Translation of Luke 1:20," *BT* 20 (Jan 1969): 21-24. He bases this on the following evidence: (1) the use of this phrase in the LXX, (2) etymology of *siōpaō*, (3) the periphrastic structure of *esē siōpōn* = "You will live in silence," and (4) context.

tion between the OT sign seeking and the NT criticism of such? Notice that Hezekiah and Ahaz were dealing with human messengers whereas the NT passages deal with divine messengers (i.e., Gabriel and Jesus). Furthermore, Jesus, through his miracles, and Gabriel, through his presence in the Holy Place, already offered sufficient evidence of their credibility. Hence, an additional sign should not have been necessary.

Lk 1:21-25

<sup>21</sup>Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. <sup>22</sup>When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. <sup>23</sup>When his time of service was completed, he returned home. <sup>24</sup>After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. <sup>25</sup>"The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

Just outside the temple, the worshipers watch the smoke ascend to heaven. They begin their prayers. But then they realize that Zechariah has not come out. The longer he takes, the more nervous they get. Perhaps he has been struck by God! Suddenly, out he comes with the strangest look. He can't say a word. But through certain charades he is finally able to tell them what happened.

When the week was over, he returned home to his wife, Elizabeth. And sure enough, she became pregnant. Now that must have been quite a spectacle. It sent her into five months of seclusion. In holy privacy, she kept to herself until God's blessing was evident. When she came out, glory to God!, she was FULL of joy. God had removed from her the curse of barrenness.

**§ 5**  
**Jesus' Birth**  
**Revealed to**  
**Mary**  
(Lk 1:26-38)

What we have here is a classic "birth announcement." It was a common literary device in ancient biographies of famous people (e.g., Suetonius, "Augustus," 94, in *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*). It was designed to answer this important question: "How do we explain such an extraordinary life?" Talbert says, "All of the canonical Gospels wrestle with the same issue. Mark explains Jesus' unique life as due to his being the bearer of the Spirit . . . at his baptism (Mk 1:9-11). John's explanation is that the preexistent Word became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14)."<sup>3</sup> Both Matthew and Luke explain Jesus' uniqueness through the virgin birth.

Lk 1:26-29

<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup>Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

<sup>3</sup>CH. Talbert, "Luke 1:26-31," *Int* 39 (July 1985): 288-291.

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant,<sup>4</sup> God sent Gabriel on another mission. This time to Nazareth, not Jerusalem. This time to a young girl, not an old man. Both messages were similar: You're going to have a baby. Both times Gabriel had to allay their fear through God's promise. And while both Mary and Zechariah wonder about the possibility of this announcement, Mary has complete faith and commitment to the angelic message.

Shortly after a girl hit her teens, she would be betrothed, that is, engaged. The parents of the prospective couple would make the arrangements and, in fact, choose the partner. Although this does not meet *our* cultural mores, it remains, to this day, an effective means of marriage. Once a young man saved enough money, he would choose a mediator. The mediator would go, with the young man's parents, to the house of the prospective bride. Her parents would meet them and offer a drink. The party would refuse the drink until the price of the dowry had been set and consent of the bride given. Her parents would then choose a mediator for their side, and the negotiations would begin. When the matter was settled, refreshments were brought out and everyone celebrated the agreement. Betrothal would probably last no longer than a year before the wedding. This contract was legally binding and could only be broken by death or divorce. In case of the former, the woman was considered a widow. Yet sexual relations were not permitted until after the wedding ceremony. According to Jewish custom, Mary was probably about fifteen years old.<sup>5</sup>

This must be a wonderful time in Mary's life. She is young, she is a virgin, she is engaged. All is normal, all is well. Gabriel enters the scene with this remarkable greeting: "Greetings, you who are highly favored." From this passage comes the famed "Ave Maria." Although these words frightened her, they got her attention and set a positive tone for the message to come.

<sup>30</sup>But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. <sup>32</sup>He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup>and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

Lk 1:30-33

Zechariah was afraid at the *sight* of Gabriel. Mary is troubled by his *message*. Fear is the normal reaction to an angelic visitation. In addition, the angels usually say, "Don't be afraid," (cf. Gen 15:1; 26:24; Dan 10:19; Mt 28:5; Lk 1:13, 30; 2:10; Acts 18:9; Rev 1:17). Angels are often harbingers of judgment and/or agents of destruction, but not this time. Mary shouldn't fear but rejoice. She will have a son and she is to name him Jesus.

<sup>4</sup>If Edersheim (I:135) is correct, that the course of Abijah served the 1st week of October, then we are now near the month of April. Hence, Jesus would be born in late December or early January.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. D. Robinson, "The Incredible Announcement," *His* 35 (Dec 1974): 2-4. He says, "Legends about Joseph being an old man have no shred of biblical basis," and suggests that Joseph was about 18 years old.



“Jesus” comes from the Hebrew name “Joshua” meaning “Jehovah saves.” Joshua was a type of Christ, in that he led God’s people into the promised land, conquering their enemies. It should also be noted that “Christ” is not Jesus’ last name but his official title. “Christ” is the Greek word equivalent to the Hebrew “Messiah.” They both mean, “The anointed one.” Other names and titles for Jesus are: Son of Man, Son of God, Son of David, God, Lord, Word, Servant, Savior, Lamb of God, High Priest, Mediator, Last Adam, Prophet, Priest, King.

Gabriel’s description of Jesus is astounding in light of OT prophecy. “The Most High” is an exalted title for God. Thus, Jesus is called the Son of the Very God. Interestingly, Jesus is only called “Son of the Most High” by the Gerasene Demoniac (Mk 5:7; Lk 8:28). Even more startling is the fact that Jesus said that we too could become sons of the Most High (Lk 6:35). We are adopted through the blood of Jesus (Jn 1:12; Rom 8:14-17; 1 Jn 3:1-2).

“Throne of David” designates the royal lineage of the kingdom of the Jews. David became the archetype of the king of God’s people. Second Samuel 7:16 (cf. 1 Chron 17:11-15) made this promise: “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; *your throne will be established forever.*” However, the bottom fell out of that kingdom in the days of Jehoiachin, of whom God said, “He will have no one to sit on the throne of David.” As was discussed before in relation to Jesus’ genealogy, both promises were fulfilled when Jesus, who was not of Jehoiachin’s line, but was of David’s line, became the king of the Jews.

Mary was familiar with the Scriptures. In her “Magnificat” she used at least thirty words or phrases from the OT. This talk about David’s throne would likely have brought Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6-7 to her mind — a child born of a virgin who would sit forever on David’s throne. These messianic prophecies would have added to her knowledge of her son’s identity.

“House of Jacob” symbolized all of Israel, since Jacob, the father of the twelve patriarchs, was seen as the father of the entire Jewish nation. It is often used this way in prophetic literature (Isa 2:5-6; 8:17; 10:20; 14:1; 29:22; 46:3; 48:1; 58:1; Jer 2:4; 5:20; Ezek 20:5; Amos 3:13; 9:8; Obad 1:17-18; Micah 2:7; 3:9).

Lk 1:34-38

<sup>34</sup>“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” <sup>35</sup>The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called<sup>a</sup> the Son of God. <sup>36</sup>Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup>For nothing is impossible with God.” <sup>38</sup>“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

<sup>a</sup>35Or *So the child to be born will be called holy,*

Many have struggled with the miracle of a virgin birth.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, both the Greek word *parthenos* and the Hebrew word *alma* can be translated “young

<sup>6</sup>Cf. R.E. Brown, “The Problem of Virginal Conception,” *TS* 33 (1972): 3-34. For a conservative defense of the virgin birth, see David MacLeod, “The Virginal Conception of Our Lord in Mt 1:18-25,” *EmJ* 8 (1999): 3-42; and S. Lewis Johnson, “The Genesis of Jesus,” *BS* 122 (1965): 331-332.

woman.”<sup>7</sup> However, in this context, it *must* mean “virgin” since Mary claims to have “never known a man.” The bottom line is: Do we choose to believe what Luke and Matthew claim? Or to put it another way: Is God able to perform a creative miracle such as this? It will do no good to say that Matthew and Luke’s audiences were pre-scientific, hence they could believe such stories. You don’t need to be “modern” to understand where babies come from.<sup>8</sup> And Luke, as a physician, would not have accepted this lightly. Nor should we suggest Matthew and Luke were merely imitating pagan mythology, for there are no true parallels to virginal conception in these myths.<sup>9</sup> Besides, there is no Jewish precedent for a virgin-born Messiah, and Luke would have known this ran the risk of turning Jesus into a pagan demigod. Furthermore, the tradition-history would have to run as follows: (1) Graduate Jesus from a human to a divine figure *within Judaism*. (2) Transform him from a Hebrew figure into a Greek demigod. (3) Matthew and Luke independently mistake this metaphor for history. All this takes place within fifty years. This theory asks us to believe the story of the virgin birth arose *ex nihilo*. This is the equivalent of intellectual parthenogenesis!<sup>10</sup> The bottom line is that if God was able to create life in Eden, he can create life in a womb.

One may have an irreverent and sensual curiosity about the mechanics of Mary’s conception. The fact is, we just do not know how it happened. Verse 35 says that the Holy Spirit “came upon” Mary. In the OT that phrase indicated Holy Spirit empowerment, not physical contact. Although pagan mythology speaks of cohabitation between the gods and humans, there is no grammatical, contextual or theological basis for reading into this passage any kind of a sexual encounter between Mary and the Holy Spirit.

All this would be difficult and frightening for Mary to believe. It would be difficult, because she knew she was a virgin. Hence, Gabriel gives her a sign. Her aged and barren relative Elizabeth was pregnant. If God can do for Elizabeth what he promised, then he will be faithful to Mary as well. Although we don’t know just how Mary and Elizabeth were related, we do know that Elizabeth was old enough to be Mary’s grandmother.

Not only was this difficult to believe; it was also frightening. First, an adulteress was to be stoned (Lev 20:10). Even if she was not killed, she would

<sup>7</sup>Cf. C.H. Dodd, “New Testament Translation Problems I,” *BT* 27/3 (July 1976): 301-305. However, cf. J. Carmignac, “The Meaning of *parthenos* in Lk 1:27 — A Reply to C.H. Dodd,” *BT* 28 (1977): 327-330.

<sup>8</sup>D.M. Smith, “Luke 1:26-38,” *Int* 29 (Oct 1975): 411-417, goes so far as to say, “We know, as people of antiquity did not, that virgins do not conceive and bear sons.” Such chronological snobbery is certainly misguided.

<sup>9</sup>J. Nolland, *Luke*, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol 35a (Dallas: Word, 1989), pp. 57-58, rightly notes, “The origin for this tradition of a virginal conception cannot be found in any of the pagan myths of divine paternity. They move in a totally different world of thought. . . . The best explanation is finally the historical one: Jesus was born without the intervention of a human father.” See also H.D. Buckwalter, “The Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ: A Union of Theology and History,” *EJ* 13 (1995): 3-14.

<sup>10</sup>N.T. Wright, “God’s Way of Acting,” *ChrCen* 115/35 (1998): 1215-1217.

almost certainly lose the man she loved (and, in fact, would have had Gabriel not intervened). Furthermore, who wants to marry a “used” woman. In addition, single women in that culture didn’t have a lot of job opportunities. And, of course, living in a small community, everyone would know what was going on. It would not take the grapevine long to label Mary with the scarlet letter. This precious and pure young thing would shock everyone with her “impropriety.”

Even understanding the consequences, Mary’s faith in God drove her to say, “May it be to me as you have said.” The Greek text uses an optative, an unusual verb form which expresses a wish or a desire. There are two extremes to be avoided here. One is the worship of Mary (i.e., Mariolatry, often observed in Catholicism). She is great but she is not God(ess). The other side of this same dingy coin is the Protestant neglect of this incredible young woman. Compared to Abraham, Sarah, and Zechariah, Mary’s faith shines above them all. She had more to lose. Yet, without wavering, she invites the will of God to prevail in her life.

**§ 6**  
**Mary’s Visit**  
**with Elizabeth**  
**(Lk 1:39-45)**

<sup>39</sup>At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, <sup>40</sup>where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup>In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! <sup>43</sup>But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup>As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup>Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!”

It would take Mary 3-4 days to travel from Nazareth to the hill country of Judea. Since no town is specified, we can only narrow the trip to 50–70 miles. She quickly packs a few necessities and takes off, probably within a day or two of Gabriel’s announcement. (We can’t help but wonder what her parents thought.) When Mary arrives at Elizabeth’s doorstep, she is less than a week pregnant.

It was a logical place for Mary to go for the necessary seclusion during the first months of her pregnancy. Elizabeth would offer her evidence of God’s mighty work. In fact, if anyone would be supportive and believing, it would be Elizabeth. Plus, Mary would be a help to Elizabeth cleaning and cooking during the last trimester of her pregnancy — especially during the hot summer months of Judea.

As soon as Mary greeted Elizabeth, John leaped in her womb. The word Luke uses could also be translated as “skipped.” It is normally associated with a leap of joy, sometimes in relation to the Messiah (e.g., Mal 4:2). The word “baby” [*brephe*s] specifies an unborn child. This is a rather odd bit of divine evidence. First, the baby leaped while Mary was greeting Elizabeth. It appears that John’s jump, not Mary’s words, told of the secret in her womb. Second, how would the fetus, John, know when to jump for joy except by the prompting of the Holy Spirit?

What would the neighbors think of this pregnant woman, over 60, shouting about her teenage relative? Elizabeth's response is as prophetic as her son's. Filled with the Spirit,<sup>11</sup> she identified both Mary and Jesus as God's blessed instruments. "Blessed are you among women" is the way the Hebrews said, "You are most blessed of all women." In other words, Mary is "Queen of the Hill" in terms of God's blessing. This budding life in Mary's womb, this mere blastula, why this was Elizabeth's Lord! Elizabeth recognized the Lordship of Christ *in utero*.

This poem is comparable in content and style to two others, the *Gloria in Excelsis* (2:13-14) and the *Nunc Dimittis* (2:18-32). They function in the text kind of like Luke's speeches in Acts. That is, they give an original voice to one of the key players in the text. All three of these poems are mosaics of OT texts.

**§ 7**  
**The Magnificat**  
(Lk 1:46-56)

<sup>46</sup>And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord and

<sup>47</sup>my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

<sup>48</sup>for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

<sup>49</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup>His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.

<sup>51</sup>He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

<sup>52</sup>He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.

<sup>53</sup>He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.

<sup>54</sup>He has helped his servant Israel,  
remembering to be merciful

<sup>55</sup>to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
even as he said to our fathers."

<sup>56</sup>Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Although Mary is a simple peasant girl, her poem is anything but simple.<sup>12</sup> It is as skillfully crafted as any Hebrew poem in the OT even though it is recorded in classy Greek. Its rich Hebrew theology is as fine as its form. It alludes to a great number of OT phrases and ideas.<sup>13</sup> But it is most similar to Hannah's

<sup>11</sup> The Spirit's two most important jobs are performed here: (1) testifying to the truth of Jesus (Jn 15:26), and (2) guiding our thinking and speaking out through us for Jesus (Mt 10:19-20).

<sup>12</sup> R.C. Tannenhill, "The Magnificat as Poem," *JBL* 93 (1974): 263-275, analyzes the complexity of Mary's poem.

<sup>13</sup> J. Koontz, "Mary's Magnificat," *BibSac* 116 (Oct 1959): 336-349, lists OT references alluded to by each phrase of the poem (p. 339), which include references from each of the three Hebrew divisions of the OT.

prayer (1 Sam 2:1-10), although Hannah's situation was actually much more similar to Elizabeth's than to Mary's.<sup>14</sup> The poem has been named "The Magnificat," which is the Latin word for "magnify."

We are not told, of course, how this poem was preserved. It seems unlikely that Elizabeth transcribed as Mary uttered these words. Also, it is not likely that either woman would remember verbatim what rolled off Mary's lips. Nor does it seem likely that a poem of this depth and clarity is the product of an instantaneous expression of praise. But this by no means indicates that Luke made it up or even edited it (although he likely translated it from Aramaic into Greek). There are better explanations. For instance, Mary may have composed this poem *en route* to Judea or even during her three month stay with Elizabeth. While the text doesn't say that Mary was inspired by the Holy Spirit to speak this poem, the Holy Spirit has just come upon her in a powerful way to generate new life in her womb. Hence, he may also have been involved in its composition.

The poem is divided into three parts: God's favor toward (1) Mary, 46-49; (2) the humble, 50-53; and (3) Israel, 54-55. Mary highlights the sovereignty of God both in the OT and in her own life. Her character shines through her words. She is a humble Hebrew girl, well versed in the OT, and filled with faith and devotion to God.

Her interest here is in the way God reverses the states of men. God takes a humble maid and exalts her among all women (vv. 48-50). (In v. 48, Mary apparently recognizes the importance of her impending birth.) God takes the exalted and humbles them (vv. 51-52). He feeds the hungry (v. 53), and he lifts up Israel as a nation (vv. 54-55). The whole theme of this song is reversal (cf. Mt 19:30–20:16; James 4:10; 1 Pet 5:6; Phil 2:5-11).

Verses 51-55 describe things God "did." However, this is probably a poetic way of describing what God "always does."<sup>15</sup> Now, how does God scatter the proud (v. 51)? The NIV translation renders this phrase, "in the thoughts of their hearts." However, this may be rendered, "with the thoughts of their hearts." In other words, God may scatter them through their own warped ideas.

We are not told that Mary stayed until John was born. But this three months (v. 56) would put her right at the normal time of delivery.<sup>16</sup> It seems most natural that Mary would stay until John was born and then return home. At this point, Mary returns to Nazareth. Joseph then learns of her condition (Mt 1:18-25).

<sup>14</sup> Some early MSS, in fact, do ascribe this poem to Elizabeth (see S. Benko, "The Magnificat: A History of the Controversy," *JBL* 86 (1967): 263-275).

<sup>15</sup> This literary device is called the "gnomic aorist."

<sup>16</sup> One should keep in mind that we are dealing with lunar months, not solar. Hence the Jewish woman was pregnant for ten months, not nine. Nevertheless, it still seems reasonable to assume that Mary would stay until the birth of John even though only nine months are accounted for in the text (Lk 1:26 & 56).

<sup>57</sup>When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. <sup>58</sup>Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. <sup>59</sup>On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, <sup>60</sup>but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John." <sup>61</sup>They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."

**§ 8a**  
**John's Birth**  
(Lk 1:57-66)

The birth of John became a community event. There was great curiosity because of the angelic announcement and Zechariah's dumb/mute condition. Of course, there would also be great concern for Elizabeth's safety. After all, a woman of her age ought not to be giving birth. But when child and mother were both healthy, all the neighbors celebrated with them.

Like other Jewish boys, on the eighth day, Elizabeth brings him out to have him circumcised according to the law. Circumcision was first commanded of Abraham (Gen 17:9-14) as a sign of his special covenant with God. Along with Sabbath keeping, this became the identifying mark of God's people.

After eight days, the neighbors get their first good gawk at the boy and start calling him by the wrong name. They assumed that he would be named Zechariah, after his father. That, after all, was the normal Jewish custom. Elizabeth puts an immediate halt to it. Gabriel's instructions were to name him John. So she has been calling him John for the full eight days now.

<sup>62</sup>Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. <sup>63</sup>He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." <sup>64</sup>Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. <sup>65</sup>The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. <sup>66</sup>Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

Lk 1:62-66

The neighbors refuse to listen to Elizabeth. They turn to her husband to settle the argument. Zechariah is apparently still deaf as well as dumb (this is a legitimate use of the word, cf. Lk 7:22), so they communicate through "sign language." He pulls out a writing tablet. This was probably a small wooden board covered with a reusable wax film which could be inscribed. He settles the argument by writing, "His name is John." This was shocking! The rumor mill started spinning through the hill country. It was obvious to all that God's hand was involved in this child of destiny. They wondered what would come of all this.

<sup>67</sup>His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

<sup>68</sup>"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,  
because he has come and has redeemed his people.  
<sup>69</sup>He has raised up a horn<sup>a</sup> of salvation for us  
in the house of his servant David

**§ 8b**  
**Zechariah's**  
**Song**  
(Lk 1:67-79)

<sup>70</sup>(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),  
<sup>71</sup>salvation from our enemies  
 and from the hand of all who hate us—  
<sup>72</sup>to show mercy to our fathers  
 and to remember his holy covenant,  
<sup>73</sup>the oath he swore to our father Abraham:  
<sup>74</sup>to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,  
 and to enable us to serve him without fear  
<sup>75</sup>in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.  
<sup>76</sup>And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;  
 for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,  
<sup>77</sup>to give his people the knowledge of salvation  
 through the forgiveness of their sins,  
<sup>78</sup>because of the tender mercy of our God,  
 by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven  
<sup>79</sup>to shine on those living in darkness  
 and in the shadow of death,  
 to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

<sup>a</sup>69 *Horn* here symbolizes strength

Zechariah’s tongue was untied. The Holy Spirit came upon him just like one of the prophets of old. This utterance, which has been called the “Benedictus,” is both poetic and prophetic. Like the Magnificat, it is pregnant with Hebraisms and OT allusions. It sketches several prophecies which were fulfilled by the coming of Jesus and John:

- a. Redemption of Israel, v. 68.
- b. Horn of Salvation from the house of David, v. 69.
- c. Salvation from our enemies, v. 71.
- d. Completion of the promises made to the fathers, vv. 72-74.
- e. We would be able to serve God without fear, vv. 74-75.
- f. The forerunner of the Messiah, v. 76.
- g. Bring forgiveness of sins, v. 77.
- h. The light of God will shine on those in darkness, v. 78-79.

The poem opens with a celebration of redemption. The word literally means “payment” or “ransom.” In the OT, it referred primarily to the Exodus. Presently, the Jews hoped for a similar “release” from the bondage of Rome (Lk 24:21). From our angle, we see that the redemption Jesus offered was not through a military campaign but through the cross. Jesus offered the only acceptable payment for our sins — his own blood. The cross *was* redemption.

In verse 69, this Messiah is described as our “horn of salvation.” Because of the great strength of the horned animals in the Near East, the horn became a symbol of power. Every other use of “horn” in the NT is confined to the book of Revelation. There, it refers to three entities: Jesus, as the Lamb; the altar of God; and alternately, the Dragon and the Beast. There is a mighty battle being fought for our salvation between great, but unequal, cosmic powers. Revelation

makes it clear that this is really not a great contest for God, even though the power of both sides is staggering to us.

This prophetic utterance breaks the 400-year silence since Malachi. The specific quote of v. 71 can be found in Psalm 106:10. The concept, however, can be found in nearly every prophetic book. It is clear that Zechariah has in mind here a physical deliverance as did his contemporaries. However, the rest of the Gospel will reveal the spiritual nature of its fulfillment.

Zechariah was acutely aware that his son, John, would announce the coming of the Messiah (v. 76). He even describes how John would announce the forgiveness of sins (v. 77). Surely he is familiar with the OT job description of this “forerunner” (cf. Mal 3:1; 4:5; Isa 40:3; Mt 3:3).

John would prepare the way and the Messiah would “rise” behind him. The term “rising” in the OT, especially in the context of “branch,” had a strong Messianic implication which must be kept in mind here. The coming of Jesus is being compared to a sunrise which dispels the dark of night (cf. Mt 4:16; Lk 2:32; Jn 1:4-9; 3:20-21; 8:12). There is a new day rising with hope of salvation for God’s people.

<sup>80</sup>And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.

This verse spans 30 years. The word “appeared” could be translated by “commissioned,” “pointed out,” “shown forth,” or even “inaugurated.” It was used of a public announcement of an official nomination. In other words, this describes John’s “inauguration.”

It is believed by some that John was a member of the Qumran community. If his parents, being old, died in his youth, he might have been adopted by that community. It was, after all, a good way for a celibate community to reproduce itself. We must keep in mind, however, that there is not a shred of historical data to support this view besides the fact that John, like the Qumranites, was an ascetic who lived in the desert.

**§ 8c**  
**Growth and**  
**Emergence of**  
**John**  
(Lk 1:80)



## PART THREE

# The Early Years of Jesus Christ

### § 9

#### Joseph Learns of Jesus (Mt 1:18-25)

The first chapter of Matthew is designed to answer a single question: Who is Jesus? There are two answers. The first is given in verses 1-17. He is the *Son of David* through his adopted father Joseph.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Joseph is the only person in the Gospels, other than Jesus, to be called “the Son of David” (v. 20). The second answer is this: Jesus is the *Son of God* by an immaculate conception (vv. 18-25) and is thus to be called *Immanuel* — *God with us* (cf. Isa 8:10). Both answers are tied together with the word *genesis* (v. 1, 18). They describe what we call the *incarnation*. God robed himself in human flesh and dwelt among men (cf. Mt 17:17; 18:20; 26:29; 28:20).

#### Mt 1:18-21

<sup>18</sup>This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup>Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. <sup>20</sup>But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup>She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,<sup>a</sup> because he will save his people from their sins.”

<sup>a</sup>21 *Jesus* is the Greek form of *Joshua*, which means *the Lord saves*.

This event apparently took place after Mary’s three-month visit with Elizabeth. Mary is now beginning to show, even under the loose Palestinian garb. Something has to be done. In order for Joseph to deny his own involvement he needs to make some kind of statement.

There are two options available to Joseph. He can make a public and humiliating trial of her which could potentially end in stoning. Or he can give her a certificate of divorce in the presence of two witnesses. In the eyes of the community she is defiled.

Joseph was about to take the second option and spare Mary public humili-

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<sup>1</sup>This is a key theme for Matthew. He uses it ten times as compared to Mark and Luke’s four, and John doesn’t have it at all.



tion. While both kind and reasonable, it is not God's will. An angel intervenes through a dream. While that sounds odd to us, it was common for Jews to view dreams as messages from God. In fact, there were twelve different men in the OT to whom God spoke through dreams (Gen 20:3; 28:12; 31:10; 31:24; 37:5; 40:9; 40:16; 41:1; Judg 7:13; 1 Kgs 3:5; Dan 2:3; 7:1). Furthermore, Joel 2:28 says that dreams will be one of the signs of the Messianic age. Moreover, there are five dreams recorded in the NT, all in Matthew, and three of the five are to Joseph (Mt 1:20; 2:12-13, 19, 22; 27:19).

The dream tells Joseph three things. First, Mary is not defiled. Her pregnancy is due to the Holy Spirit, not fornication. Therefore, take her as your wife. Second, she is going to have a baby boy. As his "adopted" father, you are to name him "Jesus" (i.e., "Jehovah saves"). The fact that he names Jesus, in Palestinian culture, would indicate his adoption of him. He was claiming Jesus as his son. Thus Jesus would *not* be viewed as illegitimate. Third, this is going to be a special child. He will "save his people from their sins."

This phrase carries a very "spiritual" implication to the Christian reader. To the Jew, however, it was more practical and political. The sins of Israel often led to national punishment through a foreign nation. This is exactly what the Jews were experiencing under the occupation of Rome. Joseph, no doubt, shared the current popular expectation of a political liberator Messiah who would free the Jews from the *result* or *punishment* for their sins. However, the true meaning of this prophecy is not found in a cavalry but in Calvary.

<sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: Mt 1:22-25  
<sup>23a</sup>"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"<sup>a</sup>—which means, "God with us." <sup>24</sup>When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. <sup>25</sup>But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

<sup>a</sup>23 Isaiah 7:14

This prophecy is from Isaiah 7:14. There a word is used [*alma*] which may mean either virgin or young maiden. When the prophecy was first fulfilled about 732 B.C., the word meant "maiden." God offered Ahaz a sign for the coming judgment upon Judah through Egypt and Assyria (Isa 7:11-19). A little boy would be born to a young woman. God said, "He will eat curds and honey at the time he knows enough to refuse evil and choose good. For before the boy will know enough to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken" (vv. 15-16). This has obvious meaning for Ahaz's day. Some propose that this son is Hezekiah or some other member of the royal line. Others suggest it to be Judean boys in general. But the best contextual suggestion seems to be Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (Isa 8:3). With all of these suggestions, however, none will suggest the necessity of a virgin birth.

This prophecy saw its greater fulfillment in the birth of Jesus, as is suggested from the context of the prophecy (Isa 8:17-18; 9:1-2, 6-7) as well as its



inspired interpretation (Mt 1:23). Here, as well as in Luke, we are obviously talking about a virgin. Gabriel told Joseph that the life in Mary's womb came from the Holy Spirit, not sexual union with a man.

This virgin-born child would be called "Immanuel," "God with us." The implication is that the transcendent God would dwell among men. The Israelites had seen a type of that in the Holy of Holies. But even then, only one man could speak with him and only once a year. There was also the picture of Adam walking with God in the cool of the day. Then there was this "human-looking" Son of Man in the clouds of heaven (Dan 7:13). However, God incarnate, in the person of Jesus, was beyond the wildest dreams of any Jew at that time.

When Joseph woke up, he knew that God had spoken to him in a dream. But how would Joseph have been able to distinguish this angelic message from a normal dream? The answer is quite simple — he could not and would not. The fact is that dreams were generally viewed by the Jews of the first century as divine communication, that is, as favorable omens from God. They were so common that the Talmud (*Ber 55 b*) says, "If any one sleeps seven days without dreaming (or rather, remembering his dream for interpretation), call him wicked" (as unremembered of God) (Edersheim, I:155). Consequently Joseph, in obedience to the dream, was willing to accept Mary as his wife.

Beyond the elaborate and legal betrothal, nothing was left but the wedding ceremony. After the ceremony, the woman would move in with her husband. We're not told what kind of a ceremony they had. But once Joseph brought Mary to live with him, they were considered husband and wife. Still, Joseph doesn't have sexual relations with her until after the birth of Jesus. This is not because sex is evil, but so that no one could deny the uniqueness and holiness of Jesus' birth.<sup>2</sup>

**§ 10**  
**The Birth of**  
**Jesus**  
(Lk 2:1-7)

<sup>1</sup>In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. <sup>2</sup>(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup>And everyone went to his own town to register.

The Caesar of the day was Gaius Octavius. He was born September 23, 63 B.C. He was adopted by his great uncle, Julius Caesar, who was assassinated on March 15, 44 B.C. He was only 19 at the time but was a shrewd politician. He became one of the three most powerful men of the empire. At the battle of Actium, September 2, 31 B.C., after defeating Mark Antony, he conquered all rivals. By refusing such titles as "king" and "dictator" he showed, ostensibly, that he did not want to be emperor. Practically, however, that is exactly what he became. It was Octavius who claimed the title of Caesar which would eventually claim divinity. He ruled until his death in A.D. 14.

<sup>2</sup>Verse 25, as well as Mary's children, seems to argue against any theory of her perpetual virginity. The idea originates from the apocryphal book, *Protevangelium of James* 14:15-19, which goes so far as to suggest that Mary's hymen was not broken even during delivery.

During the later part of his reign, he began to take a census of the entire Roman empire so that they could collect taxes more efficiently.<sup>3</sup> He could not, of course, do it all at once. Rather, he ordered different provinces to enroll at different times. Because the Roman empire was so vast and diverse, the method of enrolling people had to be suitable for each particular people group and geographical area.

When it came to the Jews, they would register by tribe, clan and family. In order to do that they would need to travel to their ancestral city. This was probably where the genealogical records were kept. Joseph, being a descendent of David, would obviously go to Bethlehem (cf. 1 Sam 16:1; 17:58).

The most famous census of Quirinius was in A.D. 6 while he was governor of Syria. It was remembered because of the riots it spawned (Acts 5:37; Josephus, *Ant.* 18. 26). Yet this is ten years too late for the birth of Christ. Is Luke off by a decade? There are two possible solutions. First, Quirinius was a military leader in Syria (8–4 B.C.) before he became the actual governor of Syria in A.D. 6–7. The word translated “governor” could be understood as “leader.” Hence, Luke would be saying that this was the first census taken during Quirinius’ military leadership, not the second census taken during his governorship. A second, and perhaps simpler, solution is to translate the word *protē* as “before” rather than “first.” Hence, Luke is saying that this was not the famous census during the reign of Quirinius, but the one before that.<sup>4</sup>

Luke was well aware of the census taken in A.D. 6 for he mentions it in Acts 5:37. Furthermore, the mention of Quirinius is not essential to the narrative. Therefore, we might want to give Luke the benefit of the doubt since he is careful not to include doubtful and superficial information. It would seem, then, that the mention of Quirinius was intended to distinguish between the earlier and later census. In light of Luke’s reliable research, it seems prudent to accept the accuracy of his account, admitting he probably knew the historical details of which we are ignorant.

<sup>4</sup>So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. <sup>5</sup>He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, <sup>7</sup>and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Lk 2:4-7

Joseph took Mary and traveled nearly 70 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. This “House of Bread” lay five miles south of Jerusalem. It was here that the “Bread of Life” was born (around December 5 B.C. or January 4 B.C.). This fulfilled Micah’s prophecy (5:2). In this humble village, the Messiah made his grand appearance on earth.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Tacitus, *Ann.* 1.11; Dio Cassius 53.30.2.

<sup>4</sup>See B. Pearson, “The Lucan Census Revisited,” *CBQ* 61/1 (1999): 262-282; W. Brindle, “The Census and Quirinius: Luke 2:2,” *JETS* 27/1 (Mar 1984): 43-52; and J. Nolland, *Luke*, p. 101.

Luke correctly says that Joseph and Mary “had been” pledged to be married. They are actually husband and wife (cf. Mt 1:24), except, of course, they are abstaining from coitus. They arrive at the village and look for a place to stay. Our traditional nativity scenes picture Mary and Joseph put out in a barn by an insensitive or at least overbooked innkeeper. Bailey argues, however, that this is hardly possible.<sup>5</sup> First, Palestinian hospitality is great. Certainly someone would have made room for the couple, especially since she is about to burst and this was his ancestral city! Second, inns were more of a Roman conception than Jewish. Since Bethlehem is not a major city nor on any trade routes, it is not likely that they would have had much more than a “flophouse.” The fact is, this word is better translated “guest room” (cf. Lk 22:11). The normal word for “inn” is *pandocheion* (cf. Lk 10:34) not *katalyma*. Hence, we suggest that Jesus was born in a private home, not in a barn.<sup>6</sup>

Why then would there be a manger (i.e., an animal feed trough) inside a home? Bailey explains that Palestinian homes often have an entry way below the family living area (cf. Lk 13:15). The animals are brought in at night to keep them from being stolen, to “guard” the house and to heat the house during winter. There would, of course, be feed troughs either attached to the wall or between the entryway and the raised family living area. The bottom line is that it is common to find mangers in Palestinian homes. Therefore, we suggest this reading of verses 6-7: “Some time after<sup>7</sup> Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem Mary gave birth. Since the guest room was already filled, she delivered in the main living area of the house and used the manger as a crib.” In typical Hebrew fashion, she binds the baby’s legs for warmth and protection.

Jesus is called the “firstborn.” Primarily this indicates his legal status under the Mosaic law (Exod 13:2; Deut 21:15-17), but it also shows that Mary apparently had other children. At least six are mentioned: James, Joses, Judas and Simon (Matt 13:55), and at least two sisters. The simplest reading of the text is that Jesus had several younger half-brothers and half-sisters.

**§ 11**  
**The Worship of**  
**the Shepherds**  
 (Lk 2:8-20)

<sup>8</sup>And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup>An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. <sup>11</sup>Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ<sup>a</sup> the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup>Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel,

<sup>5</sup>K.E. Bailey, “The Manger and the Inn,” *Bible & Spade* 10 (Sum–Aut 1981): 74-85.

<sup>6</sup>Ancient tradition pictures Jesus as born in a cave (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 79; *Protevangelion of James*, 7.14). However, a number of Palestinian homes were built out of caves.

<sup>7</sup>Verse 6 seems to presuppose some time between their arrival in Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus.