

praising God and saying, ¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

^a 11 Or *Messiah*. “The Christ” (Greek) and “the Messiah” (Hebrew) both mean “the Anointed One”; also in verse 26.

Shepherding was among the lowliest of occupations. It was scorned because the work made it next to impossible to strictly observe the regulations of the law. We see then, from the beginning, God extends his mercy to social outcasts.

It should also be recognized that the shepherd is a symbol of those who care for God’s people. This symbolism extends from David, the shepherd boy, to Jesus the Great Shepherd, from the Elders of Israel to the Elders of the church (Ps 23:1; Isa 40:11; Jer 23:1-4; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25; 5:2).

These lowly shepherds may well have been keeping watch over the sacrificial lambs. In other words, when they get big enough, they will be shipped up to Jerusalem and slain for the sins of Israel. They are about to get a glimpse of the Lamb of God, who will die for the sins of the world (Jn 1:29). We have a double symbolism. The shepherds will meet the one true shepherd who is, paradoxically, also the one true lamb.

It does seem odd that the shepherds are out with the sheep at night rather than putting them up in pens. However, supposing that there was a sudden surge of visitors to Jerusalem for the census, this would be a dandy time to make a sacrifice. Perhaps all the pens are full. Even in December and January, the nights in Palestine don’t get cold enough to endanger the shepherds or the sheep in the fields. As Longenecker notes, however, this says little or nothing about the date of Jesus’ birth:

The traditional date for the Nativity was set, long after the event, to coincide with a pagan festival, thus demonstrating that the “Sol Invictus,” the “Unconquerable Sun,” had indeed been conquered. December 25 was widely celebrated as the date of Jesus’ birth by the end of the fourth century. January 6 was also an important date in the early church, held by many as the occasion of the arrival of the wise men and known as Epiphany. (p. 845)

The shepherds are frightened at the sight of the angels. Who wouldn’t be? So far, Zechariah, Mary and Joseph have seen an angel and all have been frightened. In addition to the angel, these shepherds saw the glory of the Lord shining around them. It is no small wonder they were struck with great fear.

They are instructed to look for a sign in the “City of David.” This phrase is used forty-three times in the NIV. Almost all references are to Jerusalem. However, it can also refer to Bethlehem since David was born there (1 Sam 17:12). The sign would be a newborn infant who had been wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in a manger. This “wrapping” was a normal part of postnatal care. The distinctive part of this sign, however, is the manger. It would not be normal to use a feeding trough as a crib.

We notice that with each of the three angelic announcements, God's people are given a sign to support their faith. Zechariah was deaf and dumb. Mary witnessed the miraculous conception in Elizabeth's barren old age. And now, these shepherds will find Jesus exactly as described by the angels. There is a lesson in this. God does not expect us to believe blindly. He gives us the necessary information and then backs it up with signs to validate his message. That, in fact, is the purpose of miracles. Faith means, "Taking God at his word."

About that time, a whole flock of angels appear (lit., "a heavenly army"), a multitude of angelic warriors, announcing peace, not war. A textual variant has led to a difference in readings in the KJV text and the modern translations. The KJV reads, "On earth peace, goodwill toward men." "Goodwill" [*eudokia*] is in the nominative case, which makes it part of the subject of the sentence along with "peace." However, in the most ancient manuscripts, which were found after the translation of the KJV, an "s" is added to *eudokia*, which makes it genitive, describing "men." Thus, it is rendered in the modern versions, "Men of goodwill" or NIV, "Men with whom he is pleased."

Furthermore, both Mueller and Dodd suggest that *eudokias* expresses will/choice rather than emotion.⁸ In other words, it is not that God is happy with men and therefore grants salvation in Jesus. Rather, he has chosen to bestow this wonderful gift of Jesus. The bottom line: The gift of Jesus is based on God's sovereign choice, not men's pleasant character.

Lk 2:15-20

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." ¹⁶So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

The shepherds make a beeline to Bethlehem. (They probably left the sheep in the care of one poor shepherd who drew the short straw.) Sure enough, they find exactly what the angels had announced. They spread the word around town and predictably, it amazes everyone. This is pretty big stuff for a sleepy little villa like Bethlehem.

Mary did not miss a lick! Consider all she now knows. She's heard from Gabriel, the dream of Joseph, the words of Elizabeth, the prophecy of Zechariah, the revelation of the shepherds and all the Messianic prophecies. Yet to come is the revelation of Simeon and Anna the Prophetess.⁹

⁸C.H. Dodd, "New Testament Translation Problems II," *BT* 28/1 (Jan 1977): 104-110; and T. Mueller, "Observations on Some New Testament Texts Based on Generative-Transformational Grammar," *BT* 29 (Jan 1978): 117-120.

⁹Consider all that Mary now knows about Jesus: (opposite)

Mary has a lot to “think about.” This word, “pondered,” etymologically, could be rendered, “to cast about within.” She is mulling over all these thoughts within her brain. You can just see them rolling around in there being churned over and over. Mary is still trying to put all this into perspective.

²¹On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.

§ 12
Circumcision
of Jesus
(Lk 2:21)

Luke continues to compare and contrast the birth of John and Jesus. As with John, Jesus was: (1) circumcised on the eighth day, (2) named at the time of his circumcision, and (3) given a name before conception from an angelic encounter.

Truly Jesus was born “under the law” (Gal 4:4). He was kosher from his sandals to his sideburns. This narrative traces that heritage.

When Jesus’ parents take him to the temple for purification (cf. 1 Sam 1:24, 28), they meet two significant people: Simeon and Anna. Both of them are old and both are influenced by the Holy Spirit. They have waited all their lives to see this child and now that they have, their lives are complete. Furthermore, Simeon’s prophetic utterance, “Nunc Dimittis,” is parallel to Zechariah’s “Benedictus.” Both proclamations explain the role of the newborn child.

§ 13
Jesus
Presented in
the Temple
(Lk 2:22-38)

²²When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”^a), ²⁴and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”^b

Lk 2:22-24

^a23Exodus 13:2,12 ^b24Lev. 12:8

- I. **From Gabriel** (Lk 1:31-35): (1) Great, (2) Son of the Most High, (3) he would sit on the throne of David (cf. Isa 9:6-7); (4) he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; (5) his kingdom will have no end; (6) the holy one; (7) Son of God.
- II. **From Elizabeth** (Lk 1:43): (8) “Mother of my Lord.”
- III. **Magnificat** (Lk 1:48-55): (9) “All generations will count me blessed”; (10) he will help Israel and Abraham’s offspring.
- IV. **From Joseph** (Mt 1:20-23): (11) Conceived of Holy Spirit; (12) he would save the people from their sins; (13) Immanuel (“God with us”) from Isa 7:14.
- V. **From the Shepherds** (Lk 2:11): (14) Savior.
- VI. **From Simeon** (Lk 2:26-35): (15) The Christ = Messiah; (16) Salvation, Light of revelation to the Gentiles (cf. Isa 42:6 & 49:6); (17) Rise and fall of many in Israel; (18) Sword will pierce even Mary’s own soul.
- VII. **From the Prophets** (Lk 2:38): (19) He is the redemption of Israel.

Leviticus 12:1-8 outlines the days of purification for the woman after child-birth. If it was a girl, the woman would be unclean for fourteen days, and remain in “blood of purification for sixty-six days.” After the birth of a boy, she was unclean for seven days, the eighth would be the day for his circumcision, and she would remain in her “blood of purification for thirty-three days.” After such a time (forty days for a son and eighty for a daughter), she would go to the temple and offer two sacrifices. The first sacrifice was a lamb for a burnt offering, the second was a pigeon or turtledove as a sin offering. If she were poor, instead of offering a lamb, she could offer a turtledove or a young pigeon. The price of both birds would be less than a quarter. By doing this, Mary and Joseph revealed they were of the poorer class. In the court of the women, there were thirteen trumpet-shaped chests into which offerings were dropped. The third “trumpet,” as they were called, was reserved for the offerings of the poor which paid for their sacrificial animals.

This purification ceremony had two purposes. First, it emphasized the corruption of humanity and the purity of God. We should not, however, read into this that sexual relations, becoming pregnant or giving birth is sinful. Second, it was just plain sanitary. The mother and child would have forty days of privacy, rest and quarantine.

Exodus 13:2-12 describes the consecration of the firstborn male. God demands the firstborn male to be given to him whether man or beast. They could then be redeemed from the Lord at a set price. The cost would be roughly equivalent to five or ten dollars. We must understand, this follows on the heels of the tenth plague of Egypt, the death of every firstborn. It was by this plague that the Israelites were freed. The consecration of the firstborn was intended as a sign. It was a reminder of how God freed Israel from Egypt.

Lk 2:25-32

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

^{29a}“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you now dismiss^a your servant in peace.

³⁰For my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹which you have prepared in the sight of all people,

³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

^a29 Or *promised, / now dismiss*

Simeon is apparently a priest. After all, he takes the child in his arms and blesses him at the time of “presentation.” That was the job of a priest. But he is more than a priest. Due to his purity and patient hope for Messiah, God allowed him to become a prophet. The Holy Spirit came upon him like the prophets of

old and revealed to him that Messiah would come in his own lifetime. The Holy Spirit even directed his steps into the temple to be at the right place at the right time so that when Mary and Joseph brought their baby boy in, he was the first priest they met.

Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God for the coming of the “consolation of Israel” (Isa 40:1; 49:13; 51:3; 52:9; 54:11; 61:2; 66:13; Jer 31:13). But more than a consolation to the Jews, Jesus was the light to the Gentiles. This was a foreign concept to the Jews of Simeon’s day. Although the Old Testament frequently speaks of salvation to the Gentiles (Gen 12:3; Ps 67:2; Isa 2:2; 42:6; 49:6; Joel 2:28; Amos 9:11-12; etc.), the Jews consistently rejected any idea of Gentile inclusion. Even the early church struggled with this. There was no greater fight in the book of Acts than over the Gentiles being part of the church (cf. chapters 10–11, 15; verse 28:28).

³³The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Lk 2:33-35

Although Simeon had some wonderful and encouraging things to say about Jesus, it was not all positive. He would cause many in Israel to rise. To others he would be a stumbling block — to those who rejected him (Isa 8:14; Mt 21:42, 44; Acts 4:11; Rom 9:33; 1 Cor 1:23). To those who accept him, he is the resurrection and the life (Jn 11:25; Rom 6:4,9; Eph 2:6).

He would also be a “pain” to Mary, as well as the whole nation. A sword would pierce her soul. This is not the short, quick Roman sword [*machaira*]. This is the long, broad sword, [*romphaia*], associated with great injury and pain. Jesus’ crucifixion comes immediately to mind. Not only would Mary lose her Son, she would also, temporarily, lose her hope in the redemption of Israel.

There is something else, however, at play here with the sword. This image in the OT refers to discriminating judgment (Ezek 14:17); in the NT it refers to the Word of God (Heb 4:12). Somehow, this sword makes a discriminating judgment with Mary. We can see how as she resurfaces in the text of Luke 8:19-21 (cf. Mk 3:31-35). She and her other boys come to see Jesus only to find that they have no special privileges as blood relatives. Instead Jesus’ new family consists of those who hear and obey God’s word. This theme is reiterated in Matthew 10:34-36 where Jesus claims to bring a sword to divide families. While Mary does become a disciple of Jesus, she feels this sword of discrimination which severs any special privileges she might otherwise have had as his mother. This insight also helps prepare us for the next scene we are to encounter in Luke 2:41-50.

³⁶There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband

Lk 2:36-38

seven years after her marriage,³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four.^a She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.³⁸ Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

^a37Or *widow for eighty-four years*

Simeon's counterpart comes onto the scene. Her name is Anna. She was one of several prophetesses mentioned in the Bible (Exod 15:20; Judg 4:4; 2 Kgs 22:14; Neh 6:14; Isa 8:3; Acts 2:17; 21:9; 1 Cor 11:5). She is also an elderly widow, now eighty-four years old.¹⁰ She was married for seven years. Assuming she was married at about seventeen years old, she has been a widow for some sixty years. She is a well-established figure around the temple.

She had watched God preparing the political times for the Messiah.¹¹ She has seen Julius Caesar rise to power and knew of his assassination. She watched the steady and sad decline of the illustrious Maccabean rule which gave freedom to her people for the first time since Ezra and Nehemiah two hundred years before. She was a young woman when Pompey, a Roman general, conquered the mid-East for Rome. She watched as the hated Idumeans (Edomites) of the Herod family were placed in power over Palestine. She witnessed the rise of two opposing religious parties (the Pharisees and Sadducees). She had lived under Rome's heavy taxation and under the Jewish heavy religious legalism. The times were ripe for Christ . . . She watched, and waited and hoped.

Anna had worshiped, or rather "served" in the temple for nearly sixty years. Praying and fasting are not verbs but nouns (dative). They indicate the means by which she served. Being a woman, not even from the tribe of Levi, she would never be able to offer sacrifices or do any other priestly duties. She serves in the only way she can, prayer and fasting.

These were times of great Messianic expectation. Jerusalem was occupied by Rome. Herod, a corrupt Idumean, was the king of the Jews. The Maccabean revolt of some one hundred fifty years earlier was now just a memory. Yet the Scriptures echo across the years that the Jews are God's chosen people. Through them would come the deliverer. Unfortunately, the materialistic culture of the Greeks, foisted upon them by the Hellenists, blinded them from spiritual hopes and left them searching for a military/political messiah.

¹⁰ The NIV's translation (in the main text) leads us to believe that Anna was 84 years old. But v. 37 could also be translated, "She was a widow for 84 years," as in the NIV footnote. Thus she would be well over 100 years old. M.P. John, "Luke 2:36-37: How Old Was Anna?" *BT* 26 (Apr 1975): 247, verifies that it would have been possible, but not likely for her to live that long (cf. Judith 16:22-23).

¹¹ Nolland (p. 125) suggests that Anna's age is symbolic, not literal. He says that "84" may represent 7×12 = the completion of waiting for the Messiah.

This is kind of an odd text. Whereas, Luke, the evangelist to the Gentiles, presents Jesus in the temple, Matthew, the evangelist to the Jews, presents the adoration of the Gentiles (Edersheim, I:202). On the heels of Simeon's prophecy, we get the first glimpse of its fulfillment: Jesus is a light to the Gentiles. Already we have seen the seeds of the gospel touch women, social outcasts (shepherds), and Gentiles (Magi) in a significant way.

§ 14
The Magi Visit Jesus
(Mt 2:1-12)

¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi^a from the east came to Jerusalem ²and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east^b and have come to worship him."

Mt 2:1-6

³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ^c was to be born. ^{5a}"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

^{6a}"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."^d



^a 1 Traditionally *Wise Men* ^b 2 Or *star when it rose* ^c 4 Or *Messiah* ^d 6 Micah 5:2

The Magi were a caste of the highest ranking political/religious advisors or officers of the Median, and later Persian, imperial courts. They were often instrumental in predicting and establishing new kingships (as is seen in the Story of Tiridates and Nero [Pliny *Natural History* 30.6.17]). No wonder this visit disturbed Herod and the rest of Jerusalem's elite. This is particularly keen in light of the fact that the area around Mesopotamia continued to foster some of the sharpest opposition to Rome's eastern expansion.¹²

Our word "magic" comes from this word "magi." Although the Magi were not untouched by superstition and cultic arts, they were primarily the scholars of the day. Not only were they involved in astrology, they also studied astronomy, medicine, math, and natural science. Likely they became interested in the sacred literature of the Jews and the wisdom it offered during the Babylonian Captivity.

These Magi saw some kind of astral phenomenon in Babylon which led them to believe that a new king of the Jews was coming. There have been a number of guesses as to what that phenomenon was.¹³ Astronomers, with the help of computers, have sought to determine the alignment of the natural celestial bodies which would have been visible from Mesopotamia about 6 B.C.

¹² R.A. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas* (New York: Continuum, 1993), pp. 53-60. See also R.E. Brown, *Birth*, pp. 167-170.

¹³ S. Begley, "The Christmas Star — Or Was it Planets?" *Newsweek* (Dec 30, 1991): 54-55. The primary options are a supernova, a comet, or planetary alignment (cf. R.E. Brown, *Birth*, pp. 170-173).

There did seem to be an alignment of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces about 6 B.C. This usually happens only once every eight hundred years, but took place three times (May, October and December) near the time of Jesus' birth. A year later the planet Mars joined them. However, none of the naturalistic theories adequately account for verse 9 when the star moved before them and rested over the place where Jesus was. The Magi gave much importance to astrological signs as portents of things to come. It would be natural for them to interpret this stellar alignment as a divine message (Edersheim, I:209-216).

They came to Jerusalem not to find Jesus, but to find direction. They were going to Herod, the King of the Jews. It was natural enough to go to the head of a nation with an event of this magnitude. Besides that, Jerusalem was the religious capital of the Jews. Their wise men should be able to answer a question like this.

This whole encounter troubled Herod. Throughout Herod's political career he had been plagued with seditions and trouble primarily from his own family. He killed several of his own sons, as well as his wife Mariamne (Josephus, *Ant.* 7. 61-145) and his mother-in-law, fearing that they would take over his kingdom (which was a strong possibility).

Furthermore, Herod was now near his deathbed. It was a period of his life in which he suffered mental disorder. His body was ulcerated and putrefied. He was a very sick, paranoid, and savage man at this point in his life. It is little wonder that Herod was troubled when he discovered this infant competition. All Jerusalem was troubled with Herod, not out of sympathy for him, but out of fear of how he would respond. They knew all too well his reputation.

Although Herod is deathly ill, he is still quite cunning. In verse four Herod calls together the chief priests and scribes. From these he learns *where* the Messiah is to be born. In verse seven he secretly called together the Magi. From these he learns *when* the child is born. Thus it appears that Herod alone had the "full scoop." He fakes a desire to worship the Christ-Child. Thus, he plans to glean all the information about the child that he can. Fortunately, God warned both the Magi (v. 12) and Joseph (v. 13) of Herod's plot and both escaped his schemes.

The temple administrators (chief priests) and the main teachers (scribes) conclude that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. That was the current interpretation of Micah 5:2 (cf. Jer. Ber. ii. 4). But verse six changes a number of words from the Micah 5:2 passage.¹⁴ In other words, it is not an exact quote but an "interpretive translation." Matthew's Jewish readers would understand that he was not "tampering" with the text, but expounding on its true meaning. This was a common Jewish mode of teaching, somewhat like paraphrasing a text in a sermon. Heater suggests that Matthew is really combining three verses

¹⁴For specifics see A.J. Petrotta, "A Closer Look at Matt 2:6 and Its Old Testament Sources," *JETS* 28/1 (Mar 1985): 47-52; and G. Archer & G. Chirichigno, *O.T. Quotations in the N.T.* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), p. 157.

(Gen 49:10; 2 Sam 5:2; Mic 5:2) and showing how they all fit together to predict the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem.¹⁵

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

Mt 2:7-12

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east^a went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

^a9 Or *seen when it rose*

Mary and Joseph have apparently taken up residence in Bethlehem, perhaps even in their own home. We are not told why they chose to stay in Bethlehem. But it would be much more comfortable than returning to Nazareth where they and their child would be scorned for the apparent fornication. Plus, Joseph is a carpenter; surely he could get as much business in Bethlehem as in Nazareth.

The Magi follow the star to the very house of Joseph and Mary. This obviously took place much later than the visit of the shepherds. After all, Herod wanted to kill the baby boys up to two years of age. (Our Christmas plays are somewhat condensed, apocryphal versions.) When they finally see the child, they are overjoyed. Bowing in worship, they present him with lavish offerings. These gifts represent the riches of their far-off country.¹⁶ It is their way of paying homage to a king. And it is God’s way of validating his Son. Although Jesus’ birth is shrouded with suspicion in Nazareth, the heavens themselves declare his divinity. Furthermore, the Magi represent Jesus’ first acceptance by Gentiles. This pictures things to come.

¹³When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

¹⁴So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”^a

§ 15
Jesus’ Passage
through Egypt
(Mt 2:13-18)

^a 75 Hosea 11:1



¹⁵ H. Heater, “Matthew 2:6 and Its O.T. Sources,” *JETS* 26 (Dec 1983): 395-397.

¹⁶ The fact that there were three gifts does not necessarily imply that there were three wise men. Nonetheless, they have traditionally been ascribed the names Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar.

Herod died a most gruesome death in 4 B.C. (Josephus, *Ant.* 17. 146-192) with an ulcerated and putrefied body. He knew that the Jews hated him and couldn't wait for him to die. So just prior to his death he rounded up all the nobles of Judea and had them held in the Hippodrome. He commanded that upon his death they all be killed so that his own death would not be without mourning. Fortunately, when he died his sister ordered the release of the Jewish noblemen. Paradoxically, Herod received an honorable burial by the people of Jerusalem.

This historical background sets the stage for what happens here. Herod, on his deathbed, was insane, brutal, and paranoid. This Christ-Child posed a significant threat to his rule, at least in Herod's twisted mind. He had to eliminate the child. When the angel warned Joseph through a dream, he escaped under the cover of darkness and led his little family down to Egypt.

The border of Egypt was only seventy-five miles away, although tradition has them travel to Motorea, the sight of the Egyptian Jewish temple built in 150 B.C. At this time there were nearly a million Jews in Egypt. Many of its communities, especially Alexandria, were favorable to Jews. They could easily have found a community of Jews to take them in.

Matthew says that this event fulfilled Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt I called my son." The only problem is that Hosea 11:1 is *clearly* about the nation of Israel, not the Messiah. In fact, Hosea 11:2 says, "But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images." Did Matthew rip this verse out of context and apply it to Jesus inappropriately? No! Matthew is not treating Hosea 11:1 as predictive prophecy. He is *not* saying that Hosea is predicting the Messiah. Rather, he is saying that Jesus represents the nation of Israel and there were certain similarities between the two that are certainly more than coincidence. As Matthew compared the life of Jesus to the life of Israel, he noticed that both of them were oppressed and both were called by God out of Egypt. In other words, Matthew is not looking forward from Hosea and seeing Jesus. He is starting with Jesus and looking back to parallel events in the life of Israel. Matthew never denies the literal, historic meaning of Hosea 11:1.¹⁷

Mt 2:16-18

¹⁶When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. ¹⁷Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ¹⁸"A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."



An angel warned Joseph in a dream to escape to Egypt. An angel also warned the Magi not to pass back through Jerusalem on their way back home. Herod was

¹⁷See the excellent explanation by T.L. Howard, "The Use of Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15: An Alternative Solution," *BibSac* 143 (Oct 1986): 314-328.

one of the most powerful men in the world at that time. And he was both insane and savage. When these magi never returned, Herod realized he had been outwitted. So he sends his soldiers to slay the little baby boys of Bethlehem and its surrounding area. It was a brutal and gruesome command these soldiers were called to carry out. But we probably should not think in terms of hundreds of children being massacred. In fact, considering the population of Bethlehem and its vicinity, Herod could have scarcely killed more than 20 children.

Josephus is silent about this whole incident. As strange as that may seem, this horrid deed was mild compared to some of the outrageous deeds of Herod, especially during his last days, in which he seemed to lose his sanity. For instance, he killed several of his own sons, fearing that they would take his kingdom. He even had his own wife, Mariamne, put to death. So many died at this man's hands that a few infants is only moderately noteworthy. Besides, Josephus tends to avoid information pertaining to Christianity unless it is critical to his storyline. He is writing to a Roman audience that is hardly interested in this new sect of the Jews. Accordingly, it's not so surprising that Josephus doesn't record this incident.

Again Matthew supports his text with prophecy. He sees the slaughter of the Bethlehem infants in Jeremiah 31:15, "A voice is heard in Ramah . . . Rachel weeping for her children." Ramah is a little village five miles to the north of Jerusalem. Rachel's children were Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin. These three tribes composed the geographic area of North Judah and Samaria.

Originally this referred to the Babylonian captivity (586 B.C.) after the destruction of Jerusalem. As the people of Judah were marched from Jerusalem, through Samaria and on into Babylon, there was weeping heard in Ramah, the first town they passed through. Symbolically then it refers to the weeping for the loss of children. Thus, it applies here. Bethlehem, in the same general vicinity, also experiences the loss of her children. Matthew is not saying that Jeremiah 31:15 prophesied this event in the life of Jesus but that it mirrored it.

Matthew is following common rabbinic rules of interpretation. Although these interpretations seem somewhat unnatural to us, they were common and acceptable among the Jews. Furthermore, one must not discount the influence of the Holy Spirit to guide Matthew in understanding OT prophecy. In addition, Jesus himself may have explained some of these passages to his disciples (cf. Lk 24:27). Finally, Jesus, as the antitype of Israel, indeed represents the deeper/fuller understanding of these texts.

Matthew describes Jesus' "sojourn" in Egypt. Luke, however, simply says that the holy family returned to Nazareth right after his presentation in the temple. It is not that he disagrees with Matthew, but that he merely compresses the narrative by leaving out this detail of Jesus' life.

§ 16
Return to
Nazareth
 (Mt 2:19-23;
 Lk 2:39)

Mt 2:19-23

¹⁹After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.” ²¹So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, ²³and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: “He will be called a Nazarene.”



Herod died in March–April of 4 B.C. Josephus describes the gruesome details of his death (*Ant.* 17. 168-192). It was a fitting end of a life so filled with violence. Herod’s will stated that Archelaus was to rule in Galilee and Perea (Josephus, *Ant.* 17. 146). But on his deathbed, in his deranged state (and probably under the providence of God), Herod changed his will. He gave Archelaus control of Judea, and Herod Antipas was switched over to Galilee and Perea (Josephus, *Ant.* 17. 188-189). This was a very significant move. You see, Archelaus was a vicious and power-hungry man. Even while his father was alive, he made several attempts to steal his throne. Right after he took office in Jerusalem, he slaughtered 3,000 men in the temple who contested his leadership (Josephus, *Ant.* 17. 213-218). It would be dangerous for Joseph to lead his family back into Archelaus’s territory. So God moved Archelaus out of Galilee, into Jerusalem. This “forced” Joseph to return to Nazareth, which Matthew sees as a fulfillment of the prophets.

Nazareth was a rustic place filled with people of the soil. They had frequent interaction with Gentiles from the commercial world. This little town is eighteen miles due west of the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee. It sits, unseen, in a basin surrounded by the fifteen hills of Galilee. From the crest around the perimeter one can see as far as thirty miles on a clear day.

There was much prejudice against the Galileans. Compared to Jerusalem, Nazareth is an insignificant place. Nathaniel expressed the customary disdain for Nazareth (Jn 1:46). They had a tendency to “swallow” their guttural vowels, thus their speech sounded hillbilly-ish. Galilee was also a hotbed of political activity, especially through the Zealots. This also contributed to the prejudice they felt from Jerusalem. In addition, because they were surrounded by Gentiles, their observance of the law, especially the oral law, was not as meticulous as the Jerusalem Jews. The point is, you would not expect the Jewish Messiah to come from such an insignificant and questionable place. In fact, the Jerusalem Jews said that no prophet came from Galilee (Jn 7:52). That simply was not true. Jonah and probably Nahum were born in Galilee and Elijah and Elisha both had considerable ministries there. Thus, the Messiah could potentially come from there.

Matthew takes all this a step further. He records this move to Nazareth as a fulfillment of prophecy: “He will be called a Nazarene.” Try as you will, you cannot find those exact words in the OT. Therefore, we conclude that Matthew is not quoting prophecy but alluding to “the prophets.” In fact, only here does

Matthew use the plural “prophets” to introduce a “citation.” The bottom line is this: Matthew is not giving a direct quote but referring to a common theme of the OT prophets.¹⁸ He is probably using a play on the word “Nazareth” to refer to the Messiah. The word Nazareth comes from the Hebrew word meaning “branch” [*nezer*]. It is one of the metaphors for the Messiah (Isa 11:1). Another word meaning branch is *zemach*. It carries even stronger Messianic implications (Jer 23:5; 33:15; Zech 3:8; 6:12). Through this wordplay, Matthew suggests that the Branch of David (i.e., the Messiah) grew up in Nazareth (“The Branch”). Matthew is suggesting that although Nazareth is a surprising place for the Messiah to be raised, it is not unwarranted for the prophets to have foreseen this event.

Except for this account, we have nothing describing the youth of Jesus. There are a few apocryphal myths, most of which portray Jesus as abusing his miraculous power (e.g., *Mary*, *Protevangelion*, *Infancy*). These fit neither the purpose of the gospel nor the character of our Lord. In this simple narrative we read of dignity and wisdom in the young life of Jesus. We also see clearly that by the time of his bar mitzvah¹⁹ he understood his divine heritage and messianic purpose.

§ 17-19
Growth of
Jesus
(Lk 2:40-52)

Verse 49 is the key verse for this passage. We should keep an eye on the three themes revolving around that verse. First, Jesus is the Son of God (cf. Lk 1:32, 35; 3:22; 4:3, 9, 41; 8:28; 9:35; 10:22; 20:13; 22:70). Mary calls Joseph his father (v. 48). But Jesus reminds her that God is his true Father (v. 49). Second, Mary and Joseph are amazed and confused by Jesus’ response (v. 50). Jesus will continue to amaze and confuse people (Lk 4:22, 32, 36; 5:26; 8:25, 56; 9:7, 43; 11:14; 24:22, 41). Third, Jesus is under divine directives. He says it was necessary (*dei*) that he be in his Father’s house. Throughout his ministry, Jesus will be directed by divine compulsion (Lk 4:43; 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 19:5; 22:37, 42; 24:7). At the same time, Jesus submitted to the parental authority of Joseph and Mary (v. 51).

⁴⁰And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.

Lk 2:40

The story of Jesus in the temple at age twelve does not stand alone. It is sandwiched between two statements about his physical, social, and spiritual growth (vv. 40 & 52). Through Luke alone we get a brief glimpse into Jesus’ otherwise silent thirty years. This incident is well chosen. It comes at a critical

¹⁸ W.B. Tatum, “Matthew 2:23: Wordplay and Misleading Translations,” *BT* 27/1 (Jan 1976): 135-138.

¹⁹ The bar mitzvah was, of course, developed much later than the first century. Yet even in Jesus’ day there was a sense that at this period in a boy’s life he transitioned into manhood and the privileges and responsibilities thereof.

time in Jesus' life.²⁰ He is making the transition from childhood to adulthood. There was never a time in Jesus' life where his identity was not clear. His parents were told at his birth. And he understood it as he entered his teenage years.

This event reflects many of the major themes of Luke's book. For example, the book both begins and ends in Jerusalem. It frequently includes major elements of this story: "passover," "three days," and "seeking" Jesus in the wrong place, which may point to Luke's larger context.²¹ In other words, Jesus' adult years were consistent with his childhood years. The message is the same; the person is the same.

Lk 2:41-45

⁴¹Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. ⁴²When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. ⁴³After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. ⁴⁴Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him.

This feast was likely a yearly trek for the poor family. It was the height of the religious calendar. Every year they would take the time and money to celebrate this feast in Jerusalem. There were three feasts that each Jew was expected to celebrate in Jerusalem annually (Exod 34:22-23): Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. For many this was practically impossible. Jesus' parents at least attended Passover.

On the way to Jerusalem, this line of worshipers sang the Psalms of ascent as they approached Jerusalem (Ps 120–134). As they arrived in Jerusalem, the local citizens would invite them into their homes. The residents were generous, the pilgrim's needs were simple, and the provisions of the feast were abundant.

When Jesus was twelve years old, his family took their annual trip to the Passover. That was a special one for Jesus because he was passing into "adulthood." At age twelve a Jewish boy became a man. Today, it is celebrated with the bar mitzvah (meaning "son of the covenant"). We notice that Luke changes words now referring to Jesus. He had been calling him a *paidion*, v. 40. He now refers to him as *pais*, v. 43, which means "servant" or "child." At this age a Jewish boy is expected to keep the law, learn a trade and attend the great Jewish feasts. This would be Jesus' first appearance in the temple. In a crowd of up to 210,000, Jesus would see for the first time the sacrifices, washings, mulling priests, animals and money changers. It was an awesome edifice, especially for a child from the little town in Galilee.

²⁰ Nolland and Johnson both note that age 12 was an important age for heroes in Greco-Roman literature. It was common to describe some great exploit or impression they made at that age when they made the transition from childhood to adulthood. For examples, see Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 1.2.8; Josephus, *Ant.* 5, 348; Philo, *Life of Moses*, 1:21. A more complete list is given by de Jong, "Sonship, Wisdom, Infancy: Luke 2:41-51a," *NTS* 24 (1977-78): 317-354.

²¹ J.F. Jansen, "Luke 2:41-52," *Int* 30 (Oct 1976): 400-404.

Verse 43 says that the family took off “after the feast was over.” But Luke literally says, “When the days had been completed.” The feast, in fact, might not have been over. It lasted a full seven days, but the people were only required to stay for the first three. They would have already eaten the Paschal supper, offered their offerings, and taken part in the major ceremonies of the feast. Edersheim (II:248-249) suggests that it was not yet over. He states that the teachers came out and taught in the courts during the feast but would not have been available afterward. Thus, Jesus would have had to meet them in the temple courts during the feast, apparently on the third through the fifth day. After the first three days of the feast, when the “good stuff” was already over, many folks would head back home. People from Galilee generally traveled in a large group of friends and family. It is not so surprising that a mature twelve-year-old would not need constant watch among a caravan of friends and family. At this intermediate age, it could be assumed that he would be with either the women or with the men and older boys. Both Mary and Joseph may have assumed Jesus to be with the other.

When the caravan stopped for the night, Mary and Joseph would look for their son (v. 44). This is a strong word. It indicates that they *kept looking all around*. Luke describes them searching for their boy intensely and continually.

⁴⁶After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.”

Lk 2:46-50

^{49a}“Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” ⁵⁰But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

It took them three days to find Jesus. The first day was their journey away from Jerusalem. The second day was on their way back. The third day they found Jesus in the temple. In the Jewish terms this would constitute, “after three days.”

Talk about a precocious child. Jesus was not only asking mature questions and listening to the answers. He was giving answers to their questions. Of course, question/answer was a normal Jewish form of education. But still, Jesus was clearly a brilliant child. At this time Annas was the high priest, the very man who would try Jesus some twenty-one years later. We can’t help but wonder if he also took part in this educational encounter with Christ. In addition, Hillel was supposedly born c. 112 B.C. and according to tradition, lived one hundred twenty years. This event probably took place in A.D. 8. Thus, there is a remote possibility that Hillel also was in the audience. Almost certainly his grandson, Gamaliel, would have been.

No doubt some of the questions revolved around the Passover and its true meaning as fulfilled in the Messiah. Perhaps they even discussed such passages as Isaiah 53, the lamb of God, or Psalm 22, the nature of the execution of the Messiah.

Can you think of a more human reaction than verse 48? What mother has not felt the same panic at a lost child? What mother has not then both embraced and scolded the child? We get a hint of that here with Mary. The word “anxiously” (v. 48) comes from a word often associated with acute pain. Joseph and Mary were hurting while they looked for Jesus. Thus Mary says, “We painfully searched . . . !”

Jesus said that they should have known that he was “in his Father’s house.” Other translations say, “About my Father’s business.” The word “house” is not actually used. The Greek phrase can be rendered either way. But since Mary was addressing Jesus’ location, it seems reasonable that Jesus’ reply would also.²²

This is really an incredible account. Through Luke, we hear the first recorded words of Jesus, and we get a glimpse of his first “messianic consciousness.” Even at the age of twelve he knew who his real “Dad” was. He also knew what his primary obligations were.

We do not know if Joseph ever understood. He was brave and humble to even step into this role. Mary, however, learns step by step through the life and ministry of Jesus. Yet even she did not fully comprehend until after the resurrection. We can’t be sure that anyone did.

Lk 2:51-52

⁵¹Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵²And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

After affirming Jesus’ divinity, his humanity is highlighted. Jesus, in perfect humility, submitted to imperfect parents. His human nature is clearly seen in his obedience. Jesus understood God-ordained authority. We cannot obey God if we do not obey his properly ordained authority.

Again we see Mary storing up all these things in her heart (cf. Lk 2:19). She is an incredibly perceptive and reflective young lady.

We see normal and positive growth in the young man, Jesus (cf. 1 Sam 2:26 and Prov 3:4). This concludes the childhood narratives of Jesus. It is clear that he was outwardly a very normal Jewish boy, under pious parents. Yet both he and Mary understood that he was the Messiah. As he grew, they waited for the call of God to bring him from the obscurity of Nazareth to his national ministry.

²²Also the preposition *en* generally refers to location.