

THE
FIRST
CHRISTMAS

What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth

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THE STORIES OF THE FIRST CHRISTMAS

In this chapter, we introduce the stories of the first Christmas. Note the plural: we do not have *a* story of the first Christmas, but two. They are found in Matthew and Luke, two of the four gospels of the New Testament. Each begins with two chapters about the birth of Jesus.

We begin with the texts of Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2. We do so for more than one reason. Though general features of the stories are well known, the more specific details are not. Moreover, people seldom encounter them as “whole narratives”; most often they hear and know them in parts.

A third reason: Matthew’s and Luke’s stories are quite different from each other. Many Christians as well as non-Christians are not familiar with how different they are. Seeing these differences is utterly crucial to understanding why we

(and contemporary biblical scholars generally) see them as we do. It is the foundation for what follows in this book. And so we present the stories by imagining a Christmas pageant based on each.

MATTHEW'S PAGEANT

Matthew's birth story is significantly shorter than Luke's. His gospel starts with a genealogy of Jesus, which takes up about two-thirds of his first chapter. Without the genealogy, the whole of Matthew's birth story takes only 31 verses. Luke's story, with 132, is about four times as long.

Suppose we imagine a Christmas pageant based on Matthew alone. What would it be like? It would begin with a whole lot of begetting, presumably read by a narrator. Matthew mentions forty-two generations of Jesus's genealogy, although only forty are actually reported. We do not print Matthew's genealogy here, but in Appendix 1. Then, in the last part of his chapter 1, his narrative of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus commences.

Scene One: Conception of Jesus and Joseph's Dilemma

The first scene that could be dramatized in our imaginary pageant occurs at the end of Matthew 1:

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had re-

solved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

*"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"*

which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (1:18–25)

In this first scene, Joseph is the main character. Mary neither speaks nor receives any revelation (and does not throughout Matthew's story as a whole). Jesus's birth is mentioned only in a passing phrase in the last verse of the chapter. Even here, Joseph is the subject of the sentence: "He had no marital relations with her [Mary] *until she had borne a son*; and he named him Jesus" (1:25). There is no story of the birth itself, no swaddling clothes, no stable, no manger, no angels singing to shepherds on the night of Jesus's birth. All of these are from Luke.

Our dramatization moves to the second chapter of Matthew. In this chapter, the main character is King Herod, known to history as Herod the Great, with a major supporting role played by the wise men. Of course, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are also in this chapter—but what they do is in response to Herod's actions. Herod drives the plot, which unfolds in five scenes.

Scene Two: Star, Wise Men, and Herod

King Herod's court in Jerusalem is the setting:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.' "*

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." (2:1–8)

We begin to see Herod's plot. Alarmed at the prospect of a rival king, Herod tells the wise men to bring him word of the child's whereabouts, so that he can also pay him homage. Of course, that is not what he has in mind; he plans to kill the child.

Scene Three: Adoration of the Magi

The wise men—the Magi—follow the star to "the house" (not a stable), where they find Mary and Jesus. What has been known for centuries as the "Adoration of the Magi" then occurs:

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. (2:9–12)

At the end of the scene, the wise men are told in a dream not to return to Herod to tell him where the child is. They follow the instructions in the dream and return home by a different route.

Scene Four: Flight into Egypt to Escape Herod's Plot

Though Joseph is the main character in this scene, Herod's murderous intent continues to drive the plot:

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to

destroy him.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” (2:13–15)

The family lives in Egypt until the death of Herod.

Scene Five: Herod’s Slaughter of the Infants

We are back in Herod’s court. Realizing that the wise men are not coming back, he orders the killing of children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under. The slaughter is followed by much “wailing and loud lamentation”:

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

*“A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”
(2:16–18)*

Scene Six: Return from Egypt and Move to Nazareth

Herod’s death triggers this scene. We are back in Egypt, where Joseph again has a dream in which an angel comes to him:

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.” (2:19–23)

Note that Joseph intends to bring his family back to Bethlehem, their home in Matthew. But because of the deadly reputation of the new king, Herod’s son Archelaus, the family moves to Galilee instead, to the village of Nazareth.

This is the last scene in Matthew’s story of Jesus’s birth and the final scene in our imaginary pageant based on Matthew. From here, Matthew jumps forward in time thirty years. At the beginning of chapter 3, John the Baptizer is preaching in the wilderness and Jesus is a mature adult who goes to be with him. There is no mention of Jesus’s youth, except that he grew up in Nazareth.

Indeed, it is surprising how little of Matthew’s birth story is about Jesus; Jesus is almost “off stage.” Of course, in one sense, *all* of it is about Jesus—but so many familiar elements are missing. There is no story of a journey to Bethlehem, no story of his birth, no story of angels singing in the night sky, no story of shepherds coming to adore him. In addition, there is no story of his circumcision, no story of him being blessed in

the temple as an infant by Simeon and Anna, no story of him later at age twelve in the temple amazing the teachers with his wisdom. All of these are in Luke. Instead, the narrative dynamic of Matthew's story focuses on Joseph and his dilemma and on Herod and his unsuccessful attempt to destroy Jesus.

LUKE'S PAGEANT

We turn now to imagining a Christmas pageant based on the first two chapters of Luke. Unlike Matthew's birth story, Luke's does not include a genealogy. Instead, Luke attaches a genealogy to the story of the baptism of Jesus at the end of Luke 3. And as we did with Matthew's, we print it in Appendix 1. The two genealogies, as we will see in Chapter 4, are quite different from each other.

Because of the length of Luke's story (recall that it is four times as long as Matthew's), it would be tedious to do this scene by scene as we did with Matthew. Instead, we print Luke's story with concise section headings and then comment about the features that a pageant based on Luke would have. After a four-verse dedication of his gospel, Luke's story of the events of the first Christmas begins in 1:5.

Conception of John the Baptizer

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no

children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did

come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people." (1:5–25)

Conception of Jesus (the Annunciation)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old

age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. (1:26–38)

Mary's Visit to Elizabeth and Hymn (the Magnificat)

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said,

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me
blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.*

*He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their
hearts.*

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;*

*he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.*

*He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home. (1:39–56)

Birth of John the Baptizer and Hymn (the Benedictus)

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea.

All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

*"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed
them.*

*He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of
old,*

*that we would be saved from our enemies and from the
hand of all who hate us.*

*Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our
enemies,*

*might serve him without fear, in holiness and
righteousness
before him all our days.*

*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.*

*By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow
of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel. (1:57–80)

Journey to Bethlehem and Birth of Jesus in a Stable

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (2:1–7)

Announcement of Jesus's Birth by Angels

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a

manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (2:8–20)

Circumcision of Jesus

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. (2:21)

Presentation of Jesus in the Temple and Hymn (the Nunc Dimittis)

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy

to the Lord”), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

*“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”*

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and

began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. (2:22–39)

Jesus at Age Twelve in the Temple

The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day’s journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor. (2:40–52)

FEATURES OF A PAGEANT BASED ON LUKE

First, much of the pageant would be about the parents of John the Baptizer, Zechariah and Elizabeth. They appear in forty-three verses, more than half of Luke's first chapter (in Matthew's birth story, there is no mention of John or his parents).

Elizabeth and Zechariah are childless, and both are very old. In this, they are like Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament, the ancestors of Israel. But then, as with Abraham and Sarah, Elizabeth conceives in her old age. The child, known to history as John the Baptizer, will be like Elijah, one of the greatest prophets of ancient Israel and one who, many Jews believed, would return as the predecessor, the forerunner, of the kingdom of God. Elizabeth appears in the story again when Mary (now pregnant with Jesus) visits her.

A second feature of a pageant based on Luke is that women play much more prominent roles. We have just mentioned Elizabeth. And Mary's role is much greater than in Matthew, where she is a completely passive figure, neither speaking nor receiving any revelation. For much of Luke's birth story, Mary is the central character. Indeed, Joseph is almost invisible in Luke, in sharp contrast to Matthew. Luke's pageant also has a third woman, the eighty-four-year-old prophet Anna, who "began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:38).

Music would constitute a third feature of Luke's pageant—lots of it. His story has three hymns, or canticles. Though Luke does not call them "hymns," they have been sung by Christians for centuries and may well have originated as hymns. The first

two (the Benedictus, sung by Zechariah, and the Magnificat, sung by Mary) are longer, and the third (the Nunc Dimittis, sung by Simeon) is shorter. Because each is sung by an individual, we might imagine them as three arias. In addition to these three arias, a brief song is sung by a chorus of angels in the night sky to stunned shepherds below: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" (2:14).

A fourth feature of Luke's pageant is that it would include the most familiar part of the Christmas story (2:1–20). Its opening words are fixed in the memories of many: "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." Joseph and Mary make the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where Jesus is born in a stable and placed in a manger. Then to shepherds "keeping watch over their flock by night" an angel of the Lord appears and proclaims, "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord."

And, as a final feature, Luke's pageant would go on considerably longer than one based on Matthew. We refer not simply to the greater number of verses in Luke, but the extension of his story into Jesus's infancy and youth. Luke narrates the circumcision of Jesus when he was eight days old and his presentation in the temple when he was about forty days old, where he was acclaimed by Simeon and Anna. Luke's pageant would conclude with Jesus at age twelve in Jerusalem amazing the teachers in the temple with his wisdom.

THE RICHNESS OF TWO STORIES

As we complete our description of the Christmas pageant that would result from each gospel, we underline our primary

purpose for doing so. Our major point is very simple: these are very different stories. Of course, they share some things in common: the names of Jesus's parents, his birth in Bethlehem near the end of the reign of Herod the Great, and his conception by the Spirit of God. Yet these points of commonality are embedded in two very different narratives.

Most often, as we noted at the beginning of this chapter, we do not hear the stories of the first Christmas as whole and distinct narratives. Rather, we hear them through filters. One common filter is "harmonizing" them, either by combining them into one story or preferring one version and ignoring contradictions from the other. Another common filter is hearing them through later tradition. We provide an example of each.

What was the home of Mary and Joseph before Jesus was born? Where did they live? Most people would answer: Nazareth. In Luke's story, Mary and Joseph live in Nazareth in Galilee, where Mary has become pregnant by the Spirit. When it is almost time for her to give birth, she and Joseph journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem in Judea, where there is no room in the inn, and so Jesus is born in a stable and placed in a manger. But in Matthew, Mary and Joseph live not in Nazareth, but in Bethlehem, where Jesus is born at home. Nazareth becomes their home only after they return from Egypt after Herod's death. They move to Nazareth because the new ruler of Judea, Herod's son Archelaus, is as dangerous as his father was.

These two living and travel patterns are very different and do not lend themselves to combination. Because Luke's nativity story is the longer one replete with colorful details, most people are familiar with the Nazareth to Bethlehem to Naza-

reth pattern. The Bethlehem to Egypt to Nazareth pattern in Matthew is largely ignored.

As an example of a filter of tradition, who brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the infant Jesus? Many would answer: three kings from the East, as in the well-known Christmas carol "We Three Kings of Orient Are." But Matthew's story does not refer to kings. Instead, Matthew speaks of wise men, *magi*, from the East. And how many wise men were there? Matthew does not tell us how many—only that they brought three gifts. The notion that there were *three* and that they were *kings* is a much later tradition.

These examples are not meant as a condescending comment about how little people really know about these stories. Rather, they suggest the need to read and hear these stories anew, seeking to see them in their rich distinctiveness.

It is not impossible to harmonize them. Indeed, they have been harmonized for most of Christian history, their stories combined or their differences set aside or not seen. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with harmonizing, no point in condemning Christmas pageants or artistic or musical renditions that do so. But there is great value in recognizing their differences and reading them as separate stories. Reading each as a separate narrative and paying attention to the details of the texts enriches these stories and adds greatly to their power. Meaning grows larger, not smaller.

To avoid a possible misunderstanding, recognizing the differences is not about pointing out "contradictions," as debunkers of the stories often do. In their minds, the differences mean that the stories are fabrications, made-up tales unworthy of serious attention. That is not our point at all. Rather, paying attention to the distinctiveness and details of the nativity stories

is how we enter into the possibility of understanding what they meant in the first century and might still mean for communities of faith today.

Though this approach leads to results that are surprising to some, it is hardly radical. To put it simply, our approach to these stories is: “Read the texts—and pay attention.” Doing so should be the basis for all serious reading of the Bible.

PARABLES AS OVERTURES

In this chapter, we begin by reporting how the stories of the first Christmas are seen within contemporary biblical scholarship. We then turn to important questions. What kind of stories are these? What is their purpose, their function? And how is each connected to the gospel that it introduces?

THE NATIVITY STORIES IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

A consensus of mainstream biblical scholarship sees the stories as relatively late in the development of early Christianity. Matthew and Luke were most likely written in the last two

decades of the first century, in the 80s or 90s CE. They are not the earliest Christian writings. That honor belongs to the genuine letters of Paul, written in the decade of the 50s, and to the gospel of Mark, written around the year 70.

In Mark and Paul, there is no mention of an extraordinary birth of Jesus. Mark begins his gospel with Jesus as an adult; his birth is not mentioned at all. Though Paul refers to his birth twice, he does not mention that it was exceptional. In Romans 1:3, Jesus was “descended from David according to the flesh.” In Galatians 4:4, Jesus was “born of a woman, born under the law.” But there is no hint that his birth was unusual. Finally, we note that the gospel of John, though later than both Mark and Paul and probably later than Matthew and Luke, does not have a birth story either.

From this scholarly consensus about the dating of Matthew and Luke in relation to earlier Christian writings flows an obvious inference: stories of Jesus’s birth were not of major importance to earliest Christianity. Mark wrote a gospel without referring to Jesus’s birth, as John later did. Though the end of Jesus’s life—his crucifixion and resurrection—are utterly central to Paul, he says nothing about how his life began.

From this inference flows a second highly probable inference: the reason that references to a special birth do not appear in the earliest Christian writings is either because the stories did not yet exist or because they were still in the process of formation. In either case, these stories are relatively late, not part of the earliest Christian tradition about Jesus.

FACT, FABLE, OR PARABLE?

We turn now to crucial questions for hearing and interpreting the stories of the first Christmas. What kind of stories are

these? What is their purpose? What did their authors intend them to be? What is their literary genre?

A recent television special on the birth of Jesus posed the question this way: are these stories fact or fable? For many people, Christians and non-Christians alike, these are the two choices. Either these stories report events that happened, or they are no better than fables. For most people today, fables do not matter much. They might be entertaining for children, but need not be taken seriously.

Thus it is important to realize that there is a third option that moves beyond the choices of fact or fable. This book is based on the third option. We see the nativity stories as neither fact nor fable, but as parables and overtures. Later in this chapter we describe what it means to see them this way. But first we explain how the options of fact or fable arose.

The issue of the factuality of the birth stories is recent, the product of the last few hundred years. In earlier centuries, their factuality was not a concern for Christians. Rather, the truth of these stories (including their factual truth) was taken for granted. Their truth, and the truth of the Bible as whole, was part of conventional wisdom in Christian areas of the world. It was part of “what everybody knew.” Believing them to be true (including factually true) was effortless. Nobody worried about whether they were factually true. All of the interpretive focus was on their meaning.

The same was true of the early chapters of Genesis with the stories of creation, the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, Noah and the great flood, and the tower of Babel. Premodern Christians saw them as stories of the way things happened. There was no reason for them to think otherwise. It didn’t take faith to believe in them, just as it didn’t take faith to believe in the factuality of the nativity stories.

Many of us have a childhood memory of hearing the birth stories this way. Most of us who grew up Christian took their factuality for granted when we were young children, just as people in the premodern Christian world did. We heard them in an early childhood state of mind known as “precritical naïveté.” In this stage, we take it for granted that whatever the significant authority figures in our life regard as true is indeed true. So it was for both of us. Whether these stories were factual was not an issue. Indeed, Marcus can remember as a child looking for the star of Bethlehem on Christmas Eve, thinking that perhaps it appeared every year on the night of Jesus’s birth.

THE IMPACT OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

But this precritical way of seeing the birth stories has become impossible in the modern world, for Christians and non-Christians alike. The reason is the impact of the Enlightenment, which began in the seventeenth century with the emergence of modern science and scientific ways of knowing. It generated a new period of Western cultural history commonly called “modernity.” Modernity’s effect on the world has been enormous; its technological achievements are the most obvious result.

Of greatest importance for our purposes, modernity has pervasively affected how modern people think. It produced what has been called the “modern mind,” a mind-set that shapes all of our thinking. The Enlightenment generated an understanding of truth and reality very different from that in the premodern world. In philosophical terms, it generated a new *epistemology* and a new *ontology*. The former focuses on “How do we know?” and “What is true?” The latter focuses on “What is real?” and “What is possible?”

To begin with the first, the Enlightenment led many people to think that truth and factuality are the same. Its mind-set was (and is) concerned with the distinction between truth and superstition, truth and fable, truth and traditional authority, truth and belief. The primary basis for the distinction is the modern scientific way of knowing, with its emphasis on experimentation and verification.

In the minds of many people, this has led to the notion that truth is what can be verified—and what can be verified, of course, are “facts.” The contemporary scholar of religion Huston Smith calls this notion “fact fundamentalism,” even as he rejects it. According to this way of thinking, if something isn’t factual, it isn’t true.

Fact fundamentalism has impacted Christians as well as those who are skeptical of religion in general and Christianity in particular. Many in both groups agree that a statement or story is true only if it is factual. Among American Christians, this is a major reason why at least half affirm a literal-factual understanding of the Genesis stories of creation and of the Bible as a whole, including the birth stories. In their minds, if these stories aren’t factual, then they are not true, and the Bible itself is not true. Christian biblical literalism is about biblical factuality, and it is rooted in fact fundamentalism. As such, it is not ancient, but a product of the recent past.

The Enlightenment had an additional effect. The modern mind is shaped not only by fact fundamentalism, but by a worldview—an image of reality, of what is real and what is possible, a big picture of “the way things are.” With the Enlightenment came a worldview very different from premodern worldviews, a new ontology. Within the modern worldview, what is indubitably real is the space-time universe of matter and energy, operating in accord with natural laws of cause and effect.

This worldview, this vision of what is real and what is possible, has shaped everybody who lives in the modern world, even those who reject it. We internalize it simply by growing up in the modern world; it is what we are socialized into. It affects believers and nonbelievers alike.

Its view of what is real and what is possible makes the central claims of religion questionable. Within this framework, what happens to claims about a nonmaterial reality, about spiritual reality, about God? Prior to the Enlightenment, the reality of God was taken for granted; it didn't require "belief." Indeed, God was seen as "more real" than the world. But the Enlightenment worldview reverses this. This world—the space-time universe of matter and energy—is what seems unmistakably real, and the reality of God has become questionable.

Thus the modern worldview engenders skepticism about stories of spectacular events such as those narrated in the nativity stories. Do things like this ever happen—supernatural interventions, virgin births, special stars, angelic visitations? At the same time that truth became identified with factuality, the factuality of the birth stories was called into question by the modern worldview.

In this cultural context, the choice of seeing the birth stories as fact or fable emerged. Many find their factuality difficult and even impossible to believe. Things like those reported in the stories don't happen. Some may also be aware that stories of divine conceptions are, if not a dime a dozen, relatively common in the ancient world. This is the way ancient people spoke about figures of great importance. And some may also point to the differences in the birth stories as yet another reason to see them as not factual, and thus not true.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSES

Christians have responded in more than one way to the impact of the Enlightenment on the stories of the first Christmas. The most publicly visible form of Christianity insists on their factuality, in spite of the doubts generated by the modern worldview. This response, which we call "conscious literalism" or "insistent literalism," is very different from the taken-for-granted literalism of our premodern ancestors and from the precritical naïveté of childhood. Conscious literalists are aware that the events in these stories are hard to believe and yet insist, with varying degrees of intensity, that they are factual. Conscious literalism is modern, grounded in the fact fundamentalism of the Enlightenment.

These Christians counter the notion that spectacular events like those in the stories don't happen by affirming that they are supernatural interventions by God. Often they claim that because God is all-powerful, God can do anything, and that doubting the factuality of these stories is to doubt the power of God. In their judgment, skepticism flows from lack of faith.

In conservative Christian circles, a fairly common theological orientation reinforces a literal-factual interpretation of the virgin birth: if Jesus wasn't conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin, then he isn't really the Son of God. If he had a human father, he's just like us, not really special. For them, Jesus's status as divine is at stake. "Do you believe that Jesus was born of a virgin?" becomes a test of faith, a test of Christian orthodoxy.

For some, there is a second theological factor, the notion of "original sin." One understanding of "original sin" sees it as transmitted from generation to generation through sexual intercourse. Christians who see it this way think that if Jesus

was conceived in the normal human way, he would have inherited original sin and thus could not be the sinless sacrifice that atones for the sins of humankind. For them, what is at stake in the virgin birth is nothing less than the saving significance of Jesus's death.

For these Christians, the factuality of the virgin birth and the nativity stories matters a great deal. Defending them against the thought that they might be fables is imperative. But note that both biblical literalists and modern skeptics agree: if these stories aren't factual, they aren't true. And if they aren't factual, then the Bible and Christianity aren't true.

But there are also many Christians who reject the notion that the truth of Christianity is dependent upon a factual understanding of these stories. Like the skeptics, they wonder whether virginal conceptions ever happen. Some are aware of other problems with understanding the nativity stories factually. But uncertainty about the stories does not lead to a skeptical rejection of the Bible and Christianity. For them, that is not at stake.

Yet many of these Christians are unsure about what to make of the birth stories. If they're not factual, what are they? What is the alternative? Are they simply the imaginative product of early Christians, with no more significance than other ancient fables? Or is there an alternative way of seeing them?

THE BIRTH STORIES AS PARABLE

To say the obvious, deciding how to read these stories involves an interpretive decision. This is true even when they are read literally and factually; the stories do not come with a footnote that says, "These are factually true stories." There is no non-

interpretive way of reading them. Every way of reading them involves an interpretive decision about the kind of stories they are. Making an interpretive decision means asking: what has each way of interpreting them got going for it? How adequately does it account for what we see when we pay attention to what is in the text?

To state our interpretive decision, we best understand the nativity stories and their meanings by treating them as neither fact nor fable, but as parable. Parable is a form of speech, just as poetry is a form of speech. It is a way of using language.

The model for our understanding of the nativity stories as parable is the parables of Jesus. They were his most distinctive style of teaching. More parables are attributed to Jesus than to any other figure in the Jewish tradition. The most famous of them—the prodigal son and the good Samaritan—are as well known among Christians as the nativity stories. Almost as well known are parables like the workers in the vineyard, the unmerciful servant, the wicked tenants, the shepherd and the lost sheep, and the woman and the lost coin.

Parabolic Truth

By definition, a parable is a narrative, a story. As in all stories, something happens. This is true even in the shortest of Jesus's parables: a man discovers buried treasure in a field, a merchant searches for fine pearls, a woman puts leaven in flour, a woman searches for a lost coin. People do things in parables; something happens. But no one worries about whether the events in parabolic narratives are factual. Parable as a form of language is about meaning, not factuality. The meaning of a parable—its parabolic truth—does not depend upon its factuality.

Parables are thus a form of metaphorical language. The metaphorical meaning of language is its “more-than-literal” meaning, the capacity of language to carry a surplus of meaning. A parable is a narrative metaphor, a metaphorical narrative, whose truth lies in its meaning.

All Christians agree about this. They see Jesus’s parables as meaning-filled and truth-filled, as meaningful and truthful stories. Yet no Christian we know of worries about whether the parables are factual. Everybody agrees that Jesus made them up. To think that they are reports of factual events or that their truth depends on their factuality is to misunderstand them and their purpose.

Imagine somebody wanting to argue that the parables of Jesus *do* report factual history and that their truth depends upon that. That person says there really had to have been a Samaritan who compassionately came to the aid of a victim of violent robbery on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, or else the story isn’t true and shouldn’t be taken seriously. If it’s not fact, it’s fable. Everybody would say, “No, that’s not the point.” Suppose our hypothetical factualist were to continue by saying, “But he’s just making this stuff up!” Everybody would say, “You’re just not getting it—you are debating historicity and avoiding the question of meaning,” or, much less politely, in language we would never use, “It’s a parable, dummy.”

Our point is obvious: the parables of Jesus matter and they are truthful even though they’re not factual, even though they’re “made-up” stories. For those who have ears to hear, they are full of truth. The application to the birth stories is equally obvious. To see these stories as parables means that their meaning and truth do not depend on their factuality. Indeed, being concerned with their factuality risks missing their

meaning and truth, just as arguing for a real good Samaritan would miss the point. The truth of parabolic language does not depend on its factuality.

Jesus told parables about God and the advent of God, the coming of God’s kingdom. His followers told parables about Jesus and his advent, the coming of the bearer of God’s kingdom. In this sense, we see the birth stories as parables about Jesus. We focus on their more-than-literal, more-than-factual meanings. To see these stories as parabolic or metaphorical narratives does not require denying their factuality. It simply sets that question aside. A parabolic approach means, “Believe whatever you want about whether the stories are factual—now, let’s talk about what these stories *mean*.” Meaning, not factuality, is emphasized.

A Historical and Parabolic Approach

The parabolic approach needs to be combined with a historical approach, and so we add a second adjective to our way of seeing the birth stories. By “historical,” we do not mean factual, even as we recognize that that is one of the meanings people associate with the word in our time. When people ask about a story, “Is that historical?” they mean, “Did that happen? Is that factual?”

But this is not what we mean. Rather, a historical approach to these stories means setting these ancient parables in their first-century context. Just as the parables of Jesus become powerfully meaningful in their first-century context, so also do early Christian stories about Jesus. A historical approach means “ancient text in ancient context.” What did these stories mean for the Christian communities that told them near the end of the first century?

This historical-parabolic or historical-metaphorical approach to the birth stories is shared by the vast majority of contemporary mainstream scholars. Moreover, it has a broader application to biblical narratives generally: it is always the more-than-literal, the more-than-factual meaning of biblical stories that matters most. That is why they were told again and again, because of their surplus of meaning.

Seeing the birth stories as parabolic narratives provides a way of moving beyond the fractious and fruitless “fact or fable” conflict, marked by endless assertion and counterassertion: “They’re factually true.” “No, they aren’t.” “Yes, they are.” “No, they’re not.” When their factuality is emphasized, the issue becomes, “Do I believe them or not?” Did these events, including especially the spectacular ones, actually happen? The debate is not only fruitless, but a distraction, for it shifts attention away from the truly important question: what do these stories mean? Quite apart from whether they happened, what did they and do they *mean*?

Parables as Subversive Stories

A second feature of the parables of Jesus adds to our model for interpreting the birth stories. In addition to providing a way of seeing that parabolic language can be true independently of factuality, his parables were subversive stories.

They subverted conventional ways of seeing life and God. They undermined a “world,” meaning a taken-for-granted way of seeing “the way things are.” Jesus’s parables invited his hearers into a different way of seeing how things are and how we might live. As invitations to see differently they were subversive. Indeed, perhaps seeing differently is the foundation of subversion.

Like his parables, the birth stories are subversive. They subverted the “world” in which Jesus and early Christianity lived. As stories told by his followers late in the first century, they are part of their testimony, their witness, to the significance that Jesus had come to have for them. That significance had at its center a different vision of life, a vision they got from Jesus—from his teaching, his public activity, and his life, death, and vindication by God. The vision was embodied in Jesus, incarnate in Jesus.

And just as Jesus told subversive stories about God, his followers told subversive stories about Jesus. The gospels are full of them. The birth stories are among them. To illustrate, we here simply name, without detailed exposition, some of the themes we develop at greater length in the rest of this book:

- Who is the “King of the Jews”? That was Herod the Great’s title, but Matthew’s story tells us Herod was more like Pharaoh, the lord of Egypt, the lord of bondage and oppression, violence and brutality. And his son was no better. Rather, Jesus is the true King of the Jews. And the rulers of his world sought to destroy him.
- Who is the Son of God, Lord, savior of the world, and the one who brings peace on earth? Within Roman imperial theology, the emperor, Caesar, was all of these. No, Luke’s story says, that status and those titles belong to Jesus. He—not the emperor—is the embodiment of God’s will for the earth.
- Who is the light of the world? The emperor, son of Apollo, the god of light and reason and imperial order? Or is Jesus, who was executed by empire, the light in

the darkness, the true light to whom the wise of this world are drawn?

- Juste
Duke
- Where do we find the fulfillment of God's dream for Israel and humanity? In the way things are now? Or only beyond death? Or in a very different world this side of death?

The birth stories subvert the dominant consciousness of the first-century world as well as our own. Jesus's followers learned well how to tell subversive stories, and presumably they learned the gift from him.

Thus, in our considered judgment, Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2 contain, and were intended to contain, minimal historical information—probably just the three items that Jesus was a historical figure whose parents were Mary and Joseph and whose home was at Nazareth in Galilee. But, in this book, we are not interested in a long string of negatives or a dreary list of what did not happen. Rather, the realization of how little is historical in these stories points to parabolic meaning. It is never, ever enough to say that some event did not happen without asking, why, then, did Matthew or Luke create it? And that is always a question of meaning.

PARABOLIC OVERTURES

We turn next to a second major and equally important facet of those two Christmas stories. They are not just parables, but overtures, parabolic overtures—each to its respective gospel. In other words, Matthew 1–2 is a miniature version of the succeeding Matthew 3–28, and Luke 1–2 is a miniature version of Luke 3–24. Each is its own gospel in miniature and micro-

cosm. But, since Matthew and Luke have quite different gospels, they must also have quite different overtures.

What exactly is an overture? It is the opening part (French *ouverture*) of a work that serves as summary, synthesis, metaphor, or symbol of the whole. We all recognize overtures quite easily when we are dealing with classical operas or popular musicals. But it may be harder to grasp an overture in a literary text. But here is a good example even in a historical study.

Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August* is a magnificent history of the outbreak of World War I. Her 1962 Pulitzer Prize winner has three major parts entitled "Plans," "Outbreak," and "Battle." But her first chapter precedes those three sections and is entitled "A Funeral." She describes how the crowned heads of Europe gathered in London for the burial of Edward VII. She is both starting her story by describing what actually happened that May morning in 1910 and symbolizing the burial of the old European order that would follow it between 1914 and 1918 as millions died, dynasties fell, and thrones were emptied forever. A European funeral is the most appropriate overture for that "brutal, mud-filled, murderous insanity known as the Western Front that was to last for four more years."¹ A European burial is the most appropriate overture for a war in which "the known dead per capita of population were 1 to 28 in France, 1 to 32 in Germany, 1 to 57 for England and 1 to 107 for Russia."² Her section entitled "A Funeral" is not just a first chapter; it is a profoundly appropriate overture. It is all that follows in miniature and microcosm.

Furthermore, once each birth story is understood properly as a parabolic overture, the problem of Jesus's "missing years" disappears completely. It is not that we have detailed historical information about the genealogy, conception, birth, and

infancy of Jesus, and then a yawning gap opens up until his public life begins around the age of thirty. It is rather that all the years are missing until the story begins—as it does in all four gospels—with John’s baptism of Jesus.

THE BIBLE AS “OLD” AND “NEW” TESTAMENT

Before we get into the separate overtures in Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2, we look at one common impulse behind them both. And this concerns the New Testament as the climactic consummation—and never the simple replacement—of the Old Testament in the Christian Bible.

First, two powerful streams of interpretation flowed out from the common Jewish biblical tradition during that terrible first century CE. Each would eventually claim exclusive rights to its own understanding of the past as the only authentic vision for the future. We now name those two streams as Judaism and Christianity, and in this book, to change the metaphor, we think of them as twin daughters born in a hard and difficult delivery for their mother. Judaism and Christianity are, for us, a double covenant and, no matter how each has disputed the other’s dignity and integrity throughout the centuries, we hold them as fully and equally valid before God.

Second, our Christian Bible is divided into an Old Testament and a New Testament, terms that are in no way derogatory to that common biblical matrix. For us moderns the “old” is often considered useless and the “new” is what is important and significant. For the ancients, it was, rather, the opposite. The “old” was the tried and true, while the “new” was often mistrusted and suspected. Greeks and Romans, for example, may have mocked Judaism, but at least they respected its antiquity.

When we speak about the New Testament in this book, then, we do not think of it as having superceded the Old Testament, but having brought it to one of its two fulfillments. The other fulfillment, of course, is in the Mishnah and Talmuds of Judaism. In Jeremiah 31:31, for example, God promised “a new covenant,” or testament, which is no more and no less than the old covenant *re-new*-ed—and renewed differently for Jews and Christians.

Third, there is one fundamental constitutive element common to the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke. Both Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2 insist that the birth of Jesus is the glorious completion and perfection of the tradition into which he was born. He is, for them, the magnificent and climactic completion of the hope and fears of his people, his tradition, and his homeland.

Fourth, based on that common faith in Jesus as the fulfillment and consummation rather than replacement and abandonment of Israel, each overture goes its own very individual way. In the rest of this chapter, we show how Matthew and Luke create overtures that depict their gospels in miniature. And, as we shall see, that overture-as-microcosm represents the gospel-as-macrocosm with regard to both content and format.

MATTHEW’S CHRISTMAS STORY AS OVERTURE

We begin with Matthew 1–2 as an overture to Matthew 3–28. The major theme is a very basic parallel between Jesus and Moses, an interpretation of Jesus as the new—that is, *renewed*—Moses.

First of all, what is the most obvious parallel between the birth of Jesus in Matthew 1–2 in the New Testament and

the birth of Moses in Exodus 1–2 of the Old Testament? It is surely that, in both cases, an evil ruler—Herod in Matthew 1–2, Pharaoh in Exodus 1–2—plots to kill all the newly born Jewish males and thereby endangers the life of the predestined child, who is only saved by divine intervention and heavenly protection.

Even if we do not catch that parallel immediately, anyone in the first century CE who knew the biblical tradition and the importance of Moses in it would see it as the most striking parallel between the birth story of Jesus in Matthew 1–2 and that of Moses in Exodus 1–2. It would scream to those Jews as it should to us Christians as loudly as a giant newspaper headline:

EVIL RULER SLAUGHTERS MALE INFANTS
PREDESTINED CHILD ESCAPES

From the very beginning of his life, therefore, Jesus was already the new Moses and Herod was the new Pharaoh. And that is our major clue to Matthew's intention in his Christmas story as overture to his gospel.

Next, focus on these twin items in that overture. Matthew moves the plot of his Christmas story as gospel overture by *five* divine dreams and *five* scriptural fulfillments. The plot and action of Matthew's birth story proceed by a series of divine interventions and instructions communicated in dreams:

1. *To Joseph*: "An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.'" (1:20)
2. *To the Magi*: "Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road." (2:12)

3. *To Joseph*: "An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt.'" (2:13)
4. *To Joseph*: "An angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.'" (2:19–20)
5. *To Joseph*: "But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee." (2:22)

There are five such dreams, and after each one the directive is immediately obeyed. In other words, the entire progression of the plot is under fivefold divine control. And, except for once for the Magi, all the dreams are for Joseph.

There are also a series of prophetic fulfillments and, once again, there are five such explicit references:

1. *On Mary's virginal conception*: "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.'" (1:22–23, citing Isa. 7:14)
2. *On the birthplace of the Messiah*: "Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" (2:5–6, citing Mic. 5:2; 2 Sam. 5:2)

3. *The departure of the Holy Family from Egypt*: "This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'" (2:15, citing Hos. 11:1)
4. *After Herod's infanticide at Bethlehem*: "Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'" (2:17–18, citing Jer. 31:15)
5. *On Nazareth*: "There he [Joseph] made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He [Jesus] will be called a Nazorean.'" (2:23, citation unknown)

In our world those prophetic fulfillments seem to be more and more of a stretch, to put it gently, and we treat this more fully in Chapter 8. But Matthew probably first decided that he needed precisely *five* prophetic fulfillments, went seeking them, and, lo and behold, found them. But why exactly did Matthew need *five* dreams and fulfillments and not any other number as the skeletal structure of his Christmas story? For the answer, we turn to Matthew's gospel, where Jesus is the new Moses.

First, that Jesus is Matthew's new Moses is immediately evident in what we—rather inappropriately—call the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7. It is actually, for Matthew, the *new* Moses giving a *new* Law from a *new* Mt. Sinai. It would be better to call it the "New Law from the New Mountain" rather than the Sermon on the Mount. There Matthew has Jesus as the new Moses proclaim: "Do not think that I have come to abolish

the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (5:17). That principle is then applied to six moral cases, and note the repeated introduction to each one:

1. *On murder*: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder.' . . . But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment . . ." (5:21–26)
2. *On adultery*: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' . . . But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery . . ." (5:27–30)
3. *On divorce*: "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife . . . causes her to commit adultery . . ." (5:31–32)
4. *On oaths*: "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely.' . . . But I say to you, Do not swear at all . . ." (5:33–37)
5. *On nonviolence*: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye.' . . . But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer . . ." (5:38–42)
6. *On love for enemies*: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall . . . hate your enemy.' . . . But I say to you, Love your enemies . . ." (5:43–48)

You will notice that, in all those cases, the Law is fulfilled by being made harder rather than easier; it is being radicalized rather than liberalized. But that repeated refrain of "I say" over against "was said" at the start of this, Jesus's inaugural

address, is the clearest indication that, for Matthew, Jesus is the new Moses and that the new law fulfills the old law by being even more ideally difficult than the earlier one was. But how does that parallelism create a need for *five* in the overture?

The Torah, or Law of Moses, was contained most fully in the Pentateuch—(a term from the Greek for “Five Scrolls”). Those are the first five books of the Bible, the books of Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. Therefore, Matthew structures his gospel so that Jesus gives *five* long addresses, as follows:

Book 1	Matthew 5–7	The Law Discourse (Sermon on the Mount)
Book 2	Matthew 10–11	The Missionary Discourse
Book 3	Matthew 13	The Parables Discourse
Book 4	Matthew 18–19	The Community Discourse
Book 5	Matthew 24–25	The Eschatological Discourse

Matthew 5–25 is a new five-book Pentateuch. Jesus as the new Moses is indicated throughout the entire text.

In summary, then, in both content and format, Matthew 1–2 is structured as an overture to Matthew 3–28; it is the gospel in miniature. And the theme in both is that Jesus is the new Moses.

LUKE’S CHRISTMAS STORY AS OVERTURE

Three important themes surface in Luke’s overture as microcosm to his gospel as macrocosm: his emphasis on women, the marginalized, and the Holy Spirit.

Emphasis on Women. Luke sometimes emphasizes women themselves and sometimes balances a reference to a man with one to a woman. In his overture, the major focus is on Mary—

unlike in Matthew, where, as we saw in Chapter 1 and will see again in Chapter 5, it is very much on Joseph. Matthew accords righteousness only to Joseph (1:19), but in Luke John’s parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, are both “righteous before God” (1:6). The angel Gabriel informs Mary not only of her own, but also of Elizabeth’s miraculous pregnancy (1:36). Mary visits Elizabeth and both speak prophetically (Elizabeth in 1:42–45, Mary in 1:46–55), just as Zechariah does (1:67–79). Elizabeth gives John his name, and Zechariah only confirms it (1:60–63). When Jesus is presented in the temple, he is greeted there by both a saintly man, the “righteous and devout” Simeon, and a saintly woman, the prophet Anna (2:25, 36). Finally, in the story about Jesus’s coming-of-age, it is both parents—and not just the father—who are mentioned throughout the narrative (2:41–52; see Appendix 3).

After that emphasis on women and balance of female and male, we expect and find that Luke’s gospel proper makes mention of women and balances female with male more than any of the other gospels. Here are some examples *found only in Luke*: the mother’s only son at Nain, who is raised from death (7:11–16); the woman whose sins were forgiven (7:36–50); Martha and Mary, who host Jesus (10:38–42); the woman who addresses Jesus from the crowd (11:27–28); the crippled woman in the synagogue (13:10–16); the man with the lost sheep and the woman with the lost coin (15:4–7, 8–10); and the insistent widow (18:1–8). Finally, only Luke has all these named women who accompany Jesus:

Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary,

called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources. (8:1-3)

Emphasis on the Marginalized. In Matthew, it is wise men from the East who come to Jesus, but in Luke the angelic announcement of his birth is made to "shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night" (2:8). As a class, shepherds are even lower in the social order than peasants and would qualify quite well as the "lowly" and the "hungry" of Mary's hymn, the Magnificat (1:52-53).

This is another overture preparation for a theme very much emphasized in Luke's gospel. He insists, again more than the other gospels, on the obligations of the rich to the poor, the outcasts, and the marginalized. Here are a few examples, again found only in Luke. John the Baptizer urges that "whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise" (3:11). Jesus says in Matthew, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (5:3), but in Luke he says, "Blessed are you who are poor" and "Woe to you who are rich" (6:20, 24). Rich men are fools (12:16-21) or end up in Hades (16:19-26). At the home of a Pharisee, Jesus advises: "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (14:13). Finally, only Luke has the story about Zacchaeus, the repentant tax collector and model Lukan Christian, who announces: "Half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much" (19:8).

Emphasis on the Holy Spirit. This third emphasis may be the most important one from Luke's overture into not only his gospel, but his Acts of the Apostles as well. Recall, of course,

that, for Luke, those books represented the first and second volumes of what was once his single, unified gospel.

In both the Matthean and Lukan overtures, angelic messengers announce that the child is from the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18-20; Luke 1:35). But Luke alone mentions the Holy Spirit coming on several other individuals in his overture:

On John: "He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit." (1:15)

On Mary: "The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.'" (1:35)

On Elizabeth: "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." (1:41)

On Zechariah: "Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit." (1:67)

On Simeon: "Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple." (2:25-27)

Notice, by the way, that triple and therefore climactic repetition of the "Holy Spirit" in the case of Simeon in Luke 2:25-27 above.

That emphasis on the Holy Spirit in Luke's overture prepares us for the repeated emphasis on the Holy Spirit at the start of Jesus's public life in his gospel. That begins with the baptism of Jesus at the Jordan. In telling that story, Luke makes a double mention of the Holy Spirit—first in promise and then in advent—which is then picked up several times in the immediately following context:

The promise of the Holy Spirit: "John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'" (3:16)

The advent of the Holy Spirit: "The Holy Spirit descended upon him [Jesus] in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" (3:22)

Jesus in the wilderness: "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness." (4:1)

The beginning of Jesus's ministry in Galilee: "Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee." (4:14)

Jesus's first address: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." (4:18)

After that initial emphasis to indicate that Jesus's life is directed by the Holy Spirit, Luke does not pound on that point,

but he ends the earthly life of Jesus with these words in 23:46: "Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my *spirit*.' Having said this, he breathed his last."

Furthermore, that emphasis on the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit is continued and even intensified in Luke's Acts of the Apostles. Watch, for example, how this second volume begins, like his first one, with the promise and advent of the Holy Spirit. In the gospel it was for the baptism of Jesus, but in Acts it is for the baptism of the church (our Feast of Pentecost):

Promise of the Holy Spirit: "John baptized with water, but you [the Twelve] will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. . . . You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. . . . And I [Peter] remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'" (1:5, 8; 11:16)

Advent of the Holy Spirit: "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." (2:1–4)

And after that advent, the Holy Spirit is mentioned again and again as the guiding spirit of the early church. Watch, for

example, how it guides Paul on his first (13:2–4), second (16:6–7), and final mission (19:21; 20:22–23).

THE POWER OF PARABOLIC OVERTURE

We began this section on the Christmas stories as overtures by giving one example of a literary overture, in that case a historical overture to a historical study. But one could also say that Barbara Tuchman's chapter entitled "A Funeral" is a parabolic overture to her entire book. The crowned heads of Europe gathered together around a casket was both a historical event and a parabolic prophecy. Here, to conclude this chapter, is another example—also in a historical study but also raising a historical event to prophetic overture.

In 1996 Stephen Ambrose published *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West*. Here is its opening paragraph:

From the west-facing window of the room in which Meriwether was born on August 18, 1774, one could look out at Rockfish Gap, in the Blue Ridge Mountains, an opening to the West that invited exploration.³

We presume that statement to be historically correct and, maybe, that was the only window in the room that was available for mention. But a prophetic promise is surely intended by that first sentence. The words "opening" and "West" reverberate from the book's subtitle about the adult Lewis to that first perspective of the infant Lewis.

We propose that the Christmas stories, like those two usages, are primarily also parabolic overtures, but based on biblical tradition rather than on historical fact. Each is its gospel

in miniature. When, therefore Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2 are combined into a single Christmas story—for instance, in standard Christian imagination or the traditional Christian crèche—that story is the entire Christian gospel in miniature. Get it, and you get everything; miss it, and you miss all.

random. That bas-relief at Aphrodisias in Turkey, for example, has a fourth figure in the background. Venus's arms are outstretched protectively around her fleeing family. Indeed—and remember this when you think about another westward-leading star with Matthew's Magi—it was her guiding light as evening or morning star that showed them their path of destiny ever westward from Troy to Italy.

One note on the ancient—or modern—difficulties of questioning the historicity of divinely ordered genealogy. When he came to tell that “Flight from Troy” story in his 142-volume Roman history, *From the Founding of the City*, in the early 20s BCE, the historian Livy stayed wisely careful about the man whom the Julian house claimed, under the name of Julius, as the founder of their name: “I will not discuss the question—for who could speak decisively about a matter of such extreme antiquity?” Who indeed could “speak decisively” when writing under Augustus?

Still, if you wanted to oppose and replace one Son of God born with a millennium-plus descent from the divinely born Aeneas, you would have to introduce an alternative Son of God with a better than millennium-plus descent from, say, the divinely born Isaac, as in Matthew, or, better, the divinely created Adam, as in Luke. But what is always clear is that ancient genealogy was not about history and poetry, but about prophecy and destiny, not about accuracy, but about advertising.

AN ANGEL COMES TO MARY

This chapter is about the conception of Jesus, and our title is quite obviously appropriate for that subject. But to Mary—where? Most Christians would probably answer at Nazareth without much hesitation. But you will recall from Chapter 1 that, as their Christmas stories open, Joseph and Mary were living at Bethlehem for Matthew, but they were living at Nazareth for Luke. Afterward they moved from Bethlehem to Nazareth permanently for fear of future persecution in Matthew, but they had moved only temporarily from Nazareth to Bethlehem in Luke.

First of all, then, the angel's annunciation took place at Bethlehem for Matthew, but at Nazareth for Luke. That, however, is not the more striking difference in their two conception

stories. It is that, for Matthew, the annunciation happened to Joseph, but for Luke, it happened to Mary.

Think about that for a moment. You probably have no trouble imagining an annunciation scene to Mary from its consistent portrayal in Christian art. Can you recall one painting of an annunciation to Joseph? Why was the golden luminosity of those angelic daytime annunciations to Mary never matched by the mysterious darkness of an angelic nighttime annunciation to Joseph? Luke's annunciation to Mary has wiped out completely Matthew's to Joseph in Christian imagination.

Put more broadly and bluntly, why is Matthew's entire Christmas story told from Joseph's viewpoint, while Luke's is told—as is surely more obviously intuitive—from Mary's? In simple indication of that divergence, leave aside the genealogies and look at the usage of their names in each overture:

	<i>Name of Joseph</i>	<i>Name of Mary</i>
In Matthew 1–2	8 times	3 times
In Luke 1–2	3 times	11 times

Is that emphasis on Joseph over Mary simply patriarchal presumption or male bias on the part of Matthew? And yet, as seen in our previous chapter, although Luke's genealogy is all about males as sons of males without any females mentioned, Matthew's version also mentions five females. Matthew's conception story, therefore, is a first entrance into this question about the emphasis on Joseph over Mary in Matthew.

Here is our sequence for this chapter. First, we begin—naturally after that question—with the conception story in Matthew 1:18–25. Next, we turn to the parallel version in Luke 1:26–38. Then, we consider the context within which

those stories were written and heard in their first-century world. Finally, we widen that preceding section to consider how the ancients understood divine conceptions and whether the ancients took those stories literally or metaphorically.

“TO EXPOSE HER TO PUBLIC DISGRACE”

In giving the complete text of Matthew's conception story, we divide it into a sequence of three successive elements: *divorce*, *revelation*, and *remarriage*. Just notice them for the moment, and we will explain their importance as we proceed.

Divorce: Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

Revelation: But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

Remarriage: When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (1:18–25)

One minor note before we turn to our main point. We saw in Chapter 4 that Matthew framed his genealogy of Jesus by calling him the “Messiah” once in 1:1 and twice in 1:16–17. Matthew begins his conception story of Jesus above by repeating that title for the fourth time. Matthew will use the title “Messiah” again in 2:4, and that is five times in his infancy narrative. You will recall from Chapter 2 that Matthew used *five* dreams and *five* fulfillments in his overture to prepare for the gospel as the *five* books of the New Pentateuch. You will also recall from Chapter 4 that—whether deliberately or accidentally—Matthew has *five* women in his genealogy. So also here—and, again, whether deliberately or accidentally—Matthew’s overture has *five* mentions of Jesus as the Messiah.

We raise immediately one major problem in that Matthean narrative. It is the question of Joseph’s presumption that Mary has committed adultery against his exclusive marital rights as already established by their formal “engagement” (1:18), which makes him “her husband Joseph” (1:19).

Why does Matthew even raise the issue of adultery? Did Mary not tell Joseph what had happened? Did Joseph not believe her? Why did Joseph presume adultery? How did he expect to solve it quietly within the publicity of an arranged small-village marriage? And, since intercourse was at least tolerated for an “engaged” couple, why did he expect anyone to believe his accusation? We ask those questions, by the way, not to investigate Joseph’s intention as history, but Matthew’s intention as parable. They are not about Joseph, but about Matthew. Notice, by the way, that Matthew cauterizes Joseph’s presumption of adultery even before he records it. He mentions “from the Holy Spirit” twice—once in 1:18 and again in 1:20, so that those verses frame Joseph’s doubt in 1:19.

As a counterexample, the problem of possible adultery is never raised in Luke’s account of Jesus’s conception. Luke 1:26—like Matthew 1:18 above—starts with “a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary” (1:26). But when this engaged virgin conceives, Luke never tells us how Joseph finds out or reacts to the fact. When we next meet the couple after the angel Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary, Joseph is going to Bethlehem “to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child” (2:5). There is no hint anywhere in Luke that Joseph had a problem with Mary’s pregnancy, and thoughtful hearers or readers would simply presume that, as soon as Mary met Joseph after Gabriel’s annunciation, she told him the truth and he believed her.

That is what happened, for example, with the conception of Samson in Judges 13:1–24. His mother was barren and, after a manlike angel announced her miraculous conception, “the woman came and told her husband” (13:6); he immediately believed her and wanted to ask the angel about the child’s upbringing (13:8).

Even if Matthew wanted to tell the story totally from Joseph’s point of view—unlike Luke from Mary’s—he could have had that angel reveal everything to him *before* Mary’s conception. And if he wanted to stay patriarchal, Matthew could then have had Joseph tell Mary what would happen to her. The question therefore presses. Within the contextual matrix of Greek, Roman, and Jewish tradition of women who are virginal, sterile, or aged, why does Matthew alone raise the specter of an adulterous rather than a divine conception?

We are not simply inventing this problem in this book. That accusation of Mary’s adultery was first written down toward

the end of the second century CE by the anti-Christian polemicist Celsus in his book *On the True Doctrine*. (Although that text is no longer extant, we know its contents from the third-century rebuttal by the Christian apologist Origen.) Celsus, and his anti-Christian Jewish source, had read Matthew—specifically Matthew—because he speaks of Mary’s “husband—the carpenter,” a designation for Jesus’s father created by Matthew in 13:55 to avoid accepting it for Jesus himself from his source in Mark 6:3. Here is the prosecuting attorney Celsus grilling Jesus on the witness stand:

Is it not true, good sir, that you fabricated the story of your birth from a virgin to quiet rumors about the true and unsavory circumstances of your origins? Is it not the case that far from being born in royal David’s city of Bethlehem, you were born in a poor country town, and of a woman who earned her living by spinning? Is it not the case that when her deceit was discovered, to wit, that she was pregnant by a Roman soldier named Panthera she was driven away by her husband—the carpenter—and convicted of adultery?

The specification of the alleged adulterer as a Roman soldier named Panthera probably derived from, first, the memory of Syrian legionary soldiers suppressing a revolt at Sepphoris near Nazareth around the time Jesus was born and, second, the use of the common legionary name *Panthera* (“the Panther”) as a derisive play on *parthenos*, the Greek word for “virgin.”

In other words, the accusation is that Mary’s conception by the Holy Spirit was created as a Christian cover-up for Mary’s adultery (or rape) by a pagan soldier. To the contrary, we argue in this book that the earlier Christian claim of divine conception led to an anti-Christian accusation of adultery rather than

an earlier fact of adultery leading to a Christian claim of divine conception.

In any case, it was Matthew himself who raised the issue of Mary’s possible adultery. It was Matthew himself who facilitated the anti-Christian response that a divine conception was simply a cover-up for adultery. So, once again, why did Matthew ever raise that specter of adultery (or rape) that has haunted Mary’s integrity and Jesus’s identity for the last two thousand years? This is where the Moses/Jesus parallelism is important for our understanding of Matthew’s composition. This is the first of two major places where that parallelism is constitutive for Matthew—here concerning the *conception* of Jesus-as-Moses and later concerning the *birth* of Jesus-as-Moses (which we cover in Chapter 6).

But here is our major point. For that parallelism, Matthew does not depend on Exodus 1–2 directly, but on popular expansions of that text current in contemporary first-century Jewish tradition. In that tradition a biblical text could be retold with expansions and contractions, interpretations and explanations, in works known as *targumim*, or translations, and *midrashim*, or commentaries. Those texts, for example, often filled in answers to questions that intelligent hearers or readers might ask about an ancient text. Why this, why that, or why something else? Those expansions were the Bible retold as sermon. It is to those popular traditions that we turn next.

FROM MOSAIC *MIDRASH* TO MATTHEAN PARABLE

What problems and questions did those popular expansions see concerning the infancy of Moses in Exodus 1–2? There were two main ones. We look at the first one concerning the

conception of Moses in this chapter and hold the second, concerning the *birth* of Moses, until the next chapter.

According to Exodus 1–2, Pharaoh decided that the Jews resident in Egypt had become too numerous, and he tried to exterminate them first by slave labor and then by killing all newborn males. “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live” (1:22). But the very next verses report that “a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months” (2:1–2).

Here is the obvious first question. Why did those Jewish parents continue having marital intercourse if newborn male babies were doomed to certain deaths? The answer in those popular expansions is this: Amram and Jochebed, the parents of Moses-to-be, decided to *divorce* rather than bear children doomed, if male, to death. But they were instructed by a divine *revelation* to come back together in *remarriage*, since the predestined child would be their son. We look now at the extant versions of that answer.

Our basic example is a book once incorrectly attributed to the Jewish philosopher Philo and therefore known in scholarship as Pseudo-Philo’s *Book of Biblical Antiquities*, or *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*. It consists of an imaginative retelling of the biblical story from Adam to David, and it dates from the land of Israel around the time of Jesus. We focus here on its expansion of the infancy story of Moses as it relates to that first question about his conception.

It tells how, after Pharaoh’s infanticide decree, married Jewish couples decide to *divorce* or at least abstain from marital intercourse, lest their newborn sons be killed. But one father, Amram, refuses to join that general decision and advises

remarriage for all. Then, in a *revelation*, God rewards him for his trust by promising that Moses would be his son. Later, his and Jochebed’s daughter, Miriam, gives them a similar *revelation* from a dream:

Divorce: Then the elders of the people gathered the people together in mourning [and said] . . . “Let us set up rules for ourselves that a man should not approach his wife . . . until we know what God may do.” And Amram answered and said . . . “I will go and take my wife, and I will not consent to the command of the king; and if it is right in your eyes, let us all act in this way.”

Revelation 1: And the strategy that Amram thought out was pleasing before God. And God said . . . “He who will be born from him will serve me forever.”

Remarriage: And Amram of the tribe of Levi went out and took a wife from his own tribe. When he had taken her, others followed him and took their own wives. . . .

Revelation 2: And this man had one son and one daughter; their names were Aaron and Miriam. And the spirit of God came upon Miriam one night, and she saw a dream and told it to her parents in the morning, saying: I have seen this night, and behold a man in a linen garment stood and said to me, “Go and say to your parents, ‘Behold he who will be born from you will be cast forth into the water; likewise through him the water will be dried up. And I will work signs through him and save my people, and he will exercise leadership always.’” And when Miriam told of her dream, her parents did not believe her. (9:1–10)

We have emphasized those three italicized elements, of course, because Matthew used them, as we noted above, in his

parallel story of Jesus's conception in 1:18–25. That story has all three elements, but our next two examples show how some of them can be given or omitted in other versions of this story.

First, in Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* from the end of the first century CE, there is no mention of *divorce* and *remarriage*, but a "perplexed" Amram prays to God for guidance and the *revelation* ensues:

Amaram(es), a Hebrew of noble birth, fearing that the whole race would be extinguished through lack of the succeeding generation, and seriously anxious on his own account because his wife was with child, was in grievous perplexity. He accordingly had recourse to prayer to God. . . .

Revelation: And God had compassion on him and, moved by his supplication, appeared to him in his sleep, exhorted him not to despair of the future, and told him that . . .

"This child, whose birth has filled the Egyptians with such dread that they have condemned to destruction all the offspring of the Israelites, shall indeed be yours; he shall escape those who are watching to destroy him, and, reared in a marvelous way, he shall deliver the Hebrew race from their bondage in Egypt, and be remembered, so long as the universe shall endure, not by Hebrews alone but even by alien nations." (2.210–11)

Notice that the *revelation* now comes in a dream—as in Matthew. But notice especially that in this midrashic tradition the focus is on the father, Amram, as it is on Joseph in Matthew's parallel version.

Second, the alternative omission takes place in the *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, or *Targum of Jerusalem I*. That text has a very explicit mention of *divorce* and *remarriage*, but no *revelation*:

Divorce and Remarriage: And Amram, a man of the tribe of Levi, went and returned to live in marriage with Jochebed his wife, whom he had put away on account of the decree of Pharaoh. And she was the daughter of a hundred and thirty years when he returned to her; but a miracle was wrought in her, and she returned unto youth as she was, when in her minority she was called the daughter of Levi. And the woman conceived and bore a son at the end of six months.

We conclude with a final example, which is also as an indication of the endurance of these midrashic developments of Exodus 1–2. This is a very full version in a medieval collection known as the *Sefer ha-Zikhronot*, or *Book of Memoirs*. We have, once again, those same three classical structural elements of the story:

Divorce: When the Israelites heard this command of Pharaoh to cast their males into the river, some of the people separated from their wives, while others remained with them. . . . When, however, the word of the king and his decree became known respecting the casting of their males into the river, many of God's people separated from their wives, as did Amram from his wife.

Prophecy: After the lapse of three years the Spirit of God came upon Miriam, so that she went forth and prophesied in the house, saying, "Behold, a son shall be born to my mother and father, and he shall rescue the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptians."

Remarriage: When Amram heard his young daughter's prophecy he took back his wife, from whom he had separated in consequence of Pharaoh's decree to destroy all the

male line of the house of Jacob. After three years of separation he went to her and she conceived.

In this version, even Amram follows the general *divorce*, then the *revelation* comes to Miriam, and the *remarriage* ensues. Furthermore, at the birth of Moses, “The whole house was at that moment filled with a great light, as the light of the sun and the moon in their splendour.”

Our conclusion is that Matthew very, very deliberately based Jesus’s conception closely on those midrashic versions of Moses’s conception already current in the first century. That explains his emphasis on divine control through dreams and prophecies, which, as you will recall, extends from the conception story in a fivefold repetition throughout Matthew 1–2. It also explains his exclusive focus on the male and paternal viewpoint, with Joseph as the new Amram even though, after those five women in the genealogy, you might have expected more mention of Mary. It explains his sequence of *divorce* in 1:18–19, *revelation* in 1:20–23, and *remarriage* in 1:24.

Finally, it explains the byproduct of that creative parallelism, namely, Joseph’s mistaken presumption of Mary’s adultery, with its unfortunate legacy in ancient polemics as well as modern commentaries. Matthew needed to create the suspicion of adultery in order to provide a reason for Joseph to seek a divorce, thus setting in motion that midrashic pattern of *divorce*, *revelation*, and *remarriage*. And all of this is part of Matthew’s “Jesus is the new Moses” motif.

“THE VIRGIN’S NAME WAS MARY”

Both Matthew and Luke agree that Mary was an engaged virgin when she conceived Jesus. And both agree that her

pregnancy was not from Joseph but from “Holy Spirit,” that is, the Spirit of God. Since they agree on those two aspects of Jesus’s conception and since there is a general scholarly consensus that Matthew and Luke are independent of one another, those two details must come from earlier tradition.

(That virginal *conception* of Jesus should not be confused with the Roman Catholic doctrine of his virginal *birth*—with Jesus coming from Mary’s womb like sunlight through the glass of a medieval cathedral window. That is not found in either Christmas story. Neither should it be confused—and it is regularly confused in the media—with the “immaculate conception.” That is another Roman Catholic doctrine meaning that Mary herself was conceived without the stain [Latin *macula*] of original sin—as was Jesus also. That is also not found in either Christmas story.)

Mary as a Virgin. Matthew 1:18 starts with this verse: “When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.” Luke also starts with “a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary” (1:26). And then Luke continues: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God” (1:35). Here is the full text of Luke 1:26–38 to compare with the one from Matthew 1:18–25 given above:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Why does that common pre-Matthean and pre-Lukan tradition mention that Mary was a virgin? If you respond, "Because she was," I rephrase my question. Why was that important enough to mention? What is at stake in the claim of virginity even or especially within the protocols of a divine conception? For either Jewish or Greco-Roman tradition would a divine conception be any less divine if it involved a woman with prior children?

The answer seems quite obvious, and many Christians could probably give it immediately. Mary had to be a virgin as a fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. That is clear and explicit in

Matthew's assertion that, "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet [Isaiah]: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us'" (1:25). But here are some questions that need to be asked before accepting that reply. Was that claim that Mary's virginal conception came from Isaiah 7:14 already present in the common tradition used independently by Matthew and Luke? It is certainly in Matthew, as just seen, but is it also in Luke? If not, was it Matthew himself who created that prophetic fulfillment by connecting Mary's virginity to Isaiah 7:14?

First, there is no evidence that Luke knows any connection between Mary's virginity and that text in Isaiah 7:14. But, you object, what about when Gabriel says to the "virgin" (*parthenos*) Mary in Luke 1:31 that she "will conceive . . . and bear a son, and . . . name him Jesus"? Is that not at least an implicit reference to Isaiah 7:14, where the prophet tells King Ahaz of Judah that "the young woman (*parthenos*) is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel"?

No, not at all, because that phrase is intended by Luke as one more in a long series of very deliberate parallels between the conception stories of Jesus and John the Baptizer in Luke 1–2 (as you can see in Appendix 2).

One comment on that general parallelism before continuing with the question of Mary's virginity in Luke 1–2. As just seen, Matthew draws parallels between Jesus and Moses in order to exalt Jesus over Moses in Matthew 1–2. Similar parallels are drawn to exalt Jesus over John the Baptizer in Luke 1–2. But Jesus is not simply the new John for Luke as Jesus is the new Moses for Matthew. The point is that—for Luke—John is the symbol, synthesis, conclusion, and consummation

of the Old Testament. John was conceived—to conclude the Old Testament—in an aged and barren mother, but Jesus was born—to start the New Testament—of a virginal mother.

We return now to Mary’s virginity in Luke. Against the general background of his Jesus/John parallelism—with fuller detail available in Appendix 2—look at this specific parallelism between the conception annunciations of Jesus and John over these five points:

<i>John</i>	<i>Jesus</i>
1. But the angel said to him,	The angel said to her,
2. “Do not be afraid, Zechariah,	“Do not be afraid, Mary,
3. for your prayer has been heard.	for you have found favor with God.
4. Elizabeth will bear you a son,	And now, you will . . . bear a son,
5. and you will name him John.”	and you will name him Jesus.”
(1:13)	(1:31)

In other words, Luke in 1:31 is not referring back to the birthing and naming in Isaiah 7:14, but to the birthing and naming of John from his own 1:13. And, beyond that parallelism, of course, Luke looks back before Elizabeth and John to Sarah and Isaac: “Your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac” (Gen. 17:19).

In conclusion, that reference to Isaiah 7:14 is present in Matthew, but *not* in Luke and, therefore, *not* in the tradition about Mary’s virginal conception they inherited independently of one another. It is best seen as Matthew’s own creation, a creation necessitated by his need for exactly *five* prophetic fulfillments (and *five* angelic dream messages) in Matthew 1–2 as overture to the five great discourses of Jesus in Matthew 3–28. We will see much more about those prophecies in Chapter 8.

Mary as a Model. We turn now to another striking element in that annunciation story in Luke 1:26–38, an emphasis on—in this order—Jesus *and* Mary. This appears clearly in the overall structure of the *conversation*—we use that term deliberately—between the angelic Gabriel and the virginal Mary:

<i>Address by Gabriel to Mary</i>	1:30–33	1:35–37
<i>Response from Mary to Gabriel</i>	1:34	1:38

In the *address* section of that dialogue, therefore, the identity of Jesus is built up over the three parallel passages:

“The Lord is with you.” (1:28)	“You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” (1:31–33)	“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.” (1:35)
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Jesus is “Son of God,” but that God is identified twice as the “Most High,” that is, as the God of the Jewish and biblical tradition. That would hardly have been necessary to emphasize unless there was another Son of God not so related within the general context. He is, of course, the emperor Caesar Augustus at the time of Jesus’s conception, and also the contemporary Roman emperor at the time of Luke’s Christmas story.

That triadic structure also allows Luke a secondary emphasis on Mary as the perfect Christian. She is “the favored

human being divinely conceived. In other words, Pythagoras's greatness was foretold by Apollo, but Pythagoras's conception by Apollo "is by no means to be admitted." Still, Iamblichus continues, "no one can doubt that the soul of Pythagoras was sent to humanity from the empire of Apollo, either being an attendant on the God, or co-arranged with him in some other more familiar way" (2).

For Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Christians in that ancient and pre-Enlightenment world, interaction of the human and divine—however imagined, described, or micromanaged—could produce a child who would bring transcendental benefits to the human race. And, of course, that logic also worked in reverse—a transcendental benefactor must have had a divine conception. If male, that child could be termed "Son of God"—a relational metaphor just like Word of God, Lamb of God, or Image of God. In fact, as we just saw, Luke's genealogy could describe not only Jesus as "Son of God" (1:35), but Adam as "Son of God" (3:38).

Finally, then, it is unwise to imagine that those pre-Enlightenment ancients told incredible histories, which we post-Enlightenment moderns have learned to deride. It is wiser to realize that they used powerful metaphors and told profound parables, which we have taken literally and misunderstood badly. And that is a warning against *either* accepting *or* rejecting metaphor literally and parable factually in texts from a pre-Enlightenment world. Whether taken literally or metaphorically, a divine conception was their way of asserting an individual's transcendental character and extraordinary gifts to the human world. We may, of course, deny that ancient explanation for extraordinary individuality, but we must also admit that we moderns have no better one to take its place.

It would be wiser, therefore, to presume that the ancients were as wise as we moderns are—when we are both wise—and as dumb as we moderns are—when we are both dumb. But, whether taken literally or metaphorically, historically or parabolically, any claim of a divine conception—whether from virginal, barren, or aged parents—claims that this child has brought or will bring extraordinary or transcendental benefits to the human race. And, therefore, the proper question is not about the biology of the mother, but the destiny of the child. What is that destiny and, once you know it, are you willing to commit your life to it? To Caesar the Augustus, for example, *or* to Jesus the Christ?

[*literally*, graced] one” who has found “favor [*literally*, grace] with God.” And her obedient response to God’s favor/grace is this: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Luke’s vision of Mary receiving Christ as the first and perfect Christian may be seen most clearly in the way he rephrases his Markan source concerning her in this example:

Mark 3:31–35

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

In Mark Jesus’s physical family is rejected in favor of a spiritual one of all those who do “the will of God.” But in Luke that physical family—and especially Mary from 1:38—is the model for all “who hear the word of God and do it.”

Finally, it is obvious why Luke insists that Jesus’s conception was not just from God, but from a *virginal* mother. That was necessitated by his parallelism and exaltation of Jesus’s concep-

Luke 8:19–21

Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.” But he said to them, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”

tion over that of John the Baptizer, as detailed in Appendix 2. But, since a *virginal* conception of Jesus is both pre-Matthean and pre-Lukan, the wider question still presses. If that earlier Christian tradition did not take Mary’s virginity from Isaiah 7:14, why did it emphasize the *virginity* of Mary—emphasize not just a divine conception but a virginal divine conception?

As with so many of our questions about the content of the Christmas stories, we go for answers into that general context of their first-century Jewish and Roman world. And here we look specifically at what we might have expected about divine conceptions from that contemporary matrix.

DIVINE CONCEPTION IN JEWISH TRADITION

What about divine conception in Judaism? And since we have just seen in great detail the Old Testament model behind Matthew 1–2, what about the Old Testament model behind Luke 1–2?

In biblical tradition a transcendentally predestined child is conceived and born to barren and/or aged parents. Actually, such an event is far more manifestly miraculous and clearly divine than any sort of virginal conception outside of marriage or prior to it. The claim of virginal conception could be a simple mistake or even a lie. But clearly postmenopausal conception and birth are open—at least in theory and even in story—to overt verification.

Luke 1:6–7 says of Zechariah and Elizabeth, “Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.” Luke’s major models for that situation are the classically Jewish stories about Isaac’s conception by Sarah

and Abraham in Genesis 17–18 and Samuel's conception by Hannah and Elkanah in 1 Samuel 1–2.

Sarah. The birth of Isaac is the archetypal story of a divinely created conception in the biblical and Jewish tradition—from a barren wife *and* aged parents. Abraham says, “I continue childless” in Genesis (15:2). His wife, Sarah, “bore him no children” since, as she says, “the Lord has prevented me from bearing children” (16:1–2). Then follow twin accounts of the conception of Isaac in Genesis. The earlier one is the Jahwist tradition (or J) from around 900 BCE, now in Genesis 18; the later one is the Priestly (or P) tradition of around 500 BCE, now in Genesis 17. But they both agree on these four sequential elements as the core of the story.

First, the *apparition*: “The Lord appeared to Abraham” is present in both accounts. But in 17:1 Abraham heard a voice saying, “I am God Almighty,” while in 18:2 he “looked up and saw three men standing near him.”

Next, the *promise*, and even though it is made to the father, the mother at least gets mentioned: “As for Sarah your wife . . . I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her” (17:15–16); and “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son” (18:10).

Then, comes the *objection*—the laughter. In the Priestly version: “Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, ‘Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’” (17:17). But the Jahwist version gives that laughter—more against Abraham than God?—to Sarah:

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.

So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” The Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ . . . But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.” (18:11–13, 15)

The point of the *objection* and of all that laughter is, of course, to underline the miraculously divine intervention involved in this conception by extraordinarily aged parents.

Finally, there is the *repetition*, as God repeats the divine covenantal promise: “No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac” (17:19); and again: “At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son” (18:14). That promise is fulfilled when “Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age” (21:2).

All of that is to emphasize that aged and barren parents could only conceive by a miraculous divine intervention. And, had you been there, it would all have been empirically verifiable at least with regard to age and sterility.

Hannah. The birth of Samuel is another such story in the biblical and Jewish tradition. In 1 Samuel 1–2, Hannah and Elkanah are a barren couple who are not explicitly aged, although it is repeated twice that, “year by year” (1:3, 7), “the Lord had closed her womb” (1:5–6). So Hannah vows to God: “If only you . . . will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head” (1:11). The priest Eli promises that God will answer her prayer for a child and, after discreetly noted marital intercourse (1:18–19), “Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel” (1:20).

Then, as she had vowed, Hannah dedicates the infant Samuel to God as an ascetic or nazirite (from the Hebrew for “a separated one”) according to the protocols of Numbers 6:1–21. She then breaks into a long canticle that begins: “My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God” (2:1). Once again, you can see that story model behind Luke’s account of John the Baptizer as one who, by divine command, “must never drink wine or strong drink” (1:15) and Mary’s triumphant canticle, the Magnificat, which begins, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (1:46–47). But more later on those parallels.

Why, then, to repeat our question, did that earlier tradition behind both those Christmas stories insist not just on a divine conception, but on a virginal divine conception? Why not follow Jewish tradition of at least sterile if not aged parents?

The only reason we can suggest is part of a deliberate exaltation of the New Testament over the Old Testament. That is certainly how Luke takes it. John the Baptizer, as the end of the Old Testament, is born of barren and aged Elizabeth (1:7), but Jesus, as the start of the New Testament, is born of a virginal Mary (1:27, 34). And, as we see next, exaltation over its contemporary matrix applies likewise to one very specific contemporary Roman tradition.

DIVINE CONCEPTION IN ROMAN TRADITION

In Greco-Roman tradition a transcendently predestined child is conceived by divine intercourse with a human being—either female goddess with human male or male god with human female. The most important one from that matrix is the con-

ception of Octavian, whose parents were Atia and Octavius and who would one day be the emperor of Rome and the god Augustus.

Around 120 CE, Suetonius, imperial secretary and palace gossip, wrote *The Lives of the Caesars*, and in the section *The Deified Augustus* he recorded this omen:

A few months before Augustus was born a portent was generally observed at Rome, which gave warning that nature was pregnant with a king for the Roman people; thereupon the senate in consternation decreed that no male child born that year should be reared; but those whose wives were with child saw to it that the decree was not filed in the treasury, since each one appropriated the prediction to his own family. (94.3)

That attempt to destroy the boy born to be king by killing all contemporary male children is, of course, a standard folkloric tradition, which we saw already in the story of Pharaoh in Exodus 1–2, which was carried over into Jesus’s story in Matthew 1–2.

Suetonius then records the divine conception of Octavian, later to be Augustus. He cites it from the *Theologoumena* (*Discourses on the Gods*) by Asclepias of Mendes in Egypt, which probably means that it originated when Octavian was there after the battle of Actium, between 31 and 29 BCE, in mopping-up operations against Antony and Cleopatra:

When Atia had come in the middle of the night to the solemn service of Apollo, she had her litter set down in the temple and fell asleep, while the rest of the matrons also slept. On a sudden a serpent glided up to her and shortly went away. When she awoke, she purified herself,

as if after the embraces of her husband, and at once there appeared on her body a mark in colors like a serpent, and she could never get rid of it; so that presently she ceased ever to go to the public baths. In the tenth month after that Augustus was born and was therefore regarded as the son of Apollo. (94.4)

But Suetonius only furnishes that information after he had fully detailed Augustus's life and accomplishments up to and including the portents that warned of his death. By then, as it were, readers might be ready to believe a divine conception!

The story of Octavian's divine conception is modeled on the earlier and similar conceptions for the Greek general Alexander, imperial conqueror of the Persians, and for the Roman general Scipio Africanus, imperial conqueror of the Carthaginians. Augustus was destined to out-conquer them both. We already saw a similar modeling of Jesus's conception story on that of Moses by Matthew

Whether we look for elucidation on divine conceptions to the general Jewish tradition of barren and aged parents or to that specific story about Octavian, the reason for an emphasis on virginity in the pre-Matthean and pre-Lukan Christmas story is in order to exalt the divine conception of Jesus over all others—especially over that of Augustus himself.

In Jewish and biblical tradition, ordinary marital intercourse takes place between aged and barren parents—even if conception is thereafter divinely miraculous. In Greco-Roman tradition, and notable in that Augustan story above, divine intercourse takes place in a physical manner, so that it was necessary for Atia to purify herself “as if after the embraces of her husband.” Even with Greco-Roman divine conceptions,

the male god engages in intercourse, so that the human mother is no longer a virgin after conception.

What pre-Matthean and pre-Lukan Christianity claimed was that Mary remained a virgin before, during, and after *conception* (not *birth*)—and that made her divine conception different from and greater than all others.

Anti-Christian polemicists often argue that Christianity simply copied its story from those of other contemporary divine conceptions, and so it is irrelevant. Pro-Christian apologists often insist that nothing *exactly* like Luke 1:26–38 occurred in ancient tradition, and so is unique. Both extremes are incorrect, because Christianity described the divine *and virginal* conception of Jesus precisely to exalt it over all those other ones—and especially over that of Caesar Augustus. Is it, by the way, ungracious to note that the Holy Spirit requested Mary's agreement to her divine pregnancy, but Apollo accorded Atia no such courtesy?

In any case, virginity, sterility, longevity, or anything else one can imagine are simply ways of emphasizing, underlining, and “proving” that the conception was divine. It is that divine conception that counts. It is the theology of the child and not the biology of the mother that is at stake.

IN A PRE-ENLIGHTENMENT WORLD

Among the ancients, did all or most or many or only some individuals take stories of divine conceptions literally and historically, or metaphorically and parabolically? Did they even press that distinction as relentlessly as we so often do? Or were they quite capable of understanding the meaning of those stories without even asking about their mode?

We begin with two preliminary warnings. First, in an ancient world, where understanding of the microscopic interaction between ovum and sperm was almost two millennia in the future, “conception” was a rather mysterious affair. The ancients knew, of course, that human intercourse was normally necessary and that both female and male fluids existed, but the dominant metaphors for conception as “sowing the seed” and for birthing as “opening the womb” leave much room for puzzle, miracle, and mystery.

Second, it is neither helpful nor accurate to exalt Jewish or Christian divine conceptions over their pagan equivalents. Conception by human-divine interaction was a cultural given in that pre-Enlightenment world, so that, although any specific example might be denied, the general possibility was presumed. The exact mechanics depended on how literal the writer’s imagination or the hearers’ understanding was. Pro-Christian apologists could argue that pagan divine conceptions *did* not happen, and anti-Christian polemicists could argue back that Christian ones *did* not happen, but both sides presumed they *could* happen. Even to argue that *ours* are divine while *yours* are demonic simply derides actuality without denying possibility.

Granted those warnings, how can we tell when people in a pre-Enlightenment world—where divine interventions were generally accepted as possible—took those stories of divine conception as literal or as metaphorical? Here are a few examples of how at least some writers thought about that problem.

In the first century CE, the Roman historian Livy commented on two very famous divine conceptions in his history of Rome, *From the Founding of the City*. You will recall him from Chapter 4 prudently refusing to judge for or against Augustus’s alleged descent from Aeneas. Speaking of those

divine conceptions of Alexander and Scipio, he declared them “equally empty and absurd,” but he also notes that “Scipio himself never said a word to diminish belief in those marvels; on the contrary, he tended to strengthen it by skillfully and deliberately refusing either to deny or openly to affirm their truth” (26.19).

In the second century CE, the historian and biographer Plutarch wrote *Parallel Lives* about famous Greeks and Romans and, among them, a *Life of Numa*, the legendary second king of Rome after Romulus in the 600s BCE. He tells how “the goddess Egeria loved him and bestowed herself upon him, and it was his communion with her that gave him a life of blessedness and a wisdom more than human.” Plutarch notes similar stories from other traditions about mortals “who were thought to have achieved a life of blessedness in the love of the gods.” But this is his concluding judgment: “There is some reason in supposing that Deity . . . should be willing to consort with men of superlative goodness, and should not dislike or disdain the company of a wise and holy man. But that an immortal god should take carnal pleasure in a mortal body and its beauty, this, surely, is hard to believe” (4.1–3).

In the third century CE, the philosopher Iamblichus wrote *Life of Pythagoras* about that earlier philosopher from the sixth century BCE. Iamblichus quotes a claim that “Pythagoras was the son of Apollo” and a human mother, but he then denies it and explains how the rumor started. Pythagoras’s father, Mnesarchus, impregnated his wife, Pythais, and then went away on business before he learned of her condition. At Delphi, Apollo told him that “his wife was now pregnant, and would bring forth a son surpassing in beauty and wisdom all that ever lived, and who would be of the greatest advantage to the human race”—that, by the way, is a perfect job description for a