



The Infancy Narratives of Jesus

The Infancy Narratives of Jesus

Stephen J. Binz

with Little Rock Scripture Study staff



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Welcome	7
What materials will you use?	8
How will you use these materials?	8
Preface	11
Lesson One (Introduction and Matthew 1–2)	13
Lesson Two (Luke 1)	35
Lesson Three (Luke 2)	55
Praying with Your Group	72
Reflecting on Scripture	74



Wrap-Up Lectures and Discussion Tips for Facilitators are available for each lesson at no charge. Find them online at

Welcome

The Bible is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It is the Spirit-inspired word of God for us. It reveals to us the God who created, redeemed, and guides us still. It speaks to us personally and as a church. It forms the basis of our public liturgical life and our private prayer lives. It urges us to live worthily and justly, to love tenderly and wholeheartedly, and to be a part of building God's kingdom here on earth.

Though it was written a long time ago, in the context of a very different culture, the Bible is no relic of the past. Catholic biblical scholarship is among the best in the world, and in our time and place, we have unprecedented access to it. By making use of solid scholarship, we can discover much about the ancient culture and religious practices that shaped those who wrote the various books of the Bible. With these insights, and by praying with the words of Scripture, we allow the words and images to shape us as disciples. By sharing our journey of faithful listening to God's word with others, we have the opportunity to be stretched in our understanding and to form communities of love and learning. Ultimately, studying and praying with God's word deepens our relationship with Christ.

The Infancy Narratives of Jesus

The resource you hold in your hands is divided into three lessons. Each lesson involves personal prayer and study using this book *and* the experience of group prayer, discussion, and wrap-up lecture.

If you are using this resource in the context of a small group, we suggest that you meet three times, discussing one lesson per meeting. Allow about 90 minutes for the small group gathering. Small groups function best with eight to twelve people to ensure good group dynamics and to allow all to participate as they wish.


Some groups choose to have an initial gathering before their regular sessions begin. This allows an opportunity to meet one another, pass out books, and, if desired, view the optional intro lecture for this study available on the "Resources" page of the Little Rock Scripture Study website (www.littlerockscripture.org).

Every Bible study group is a little bit different. Some of our groups like to break each lesson up into two weeks of study so they are reading less each week and have more time to discuss the questions together at their weekly gatherings. If your group wishes to do this, simply agree

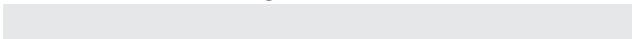
how much of each lesson will be read each week, and only answer the questions that correspond to the material you read. Wrap-up lectures can then be viewed at the end of every other meeting rather than at the end of every meeting. Of course, this will mean that your study will last longer, and your group will meet more times.

WHAT MATERIALS WILL YOU USE?

The materials in this book include:

- The text of Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2, using the New American Bible, Revised Edition as the translation.
- Commentary by Stephen J. Binz, which has also been published separately as *Advent of the Savior: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives of Jesus* (Liturgical Press).
- Occasional inserts  highlighting elements of the Scripture text being studied. Some of these appear also in the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible* while others are supplied by staff writers.
- Questions for study, reflection, and discussion at the end of each lesson.
- Opening and closing prayers for each lesson, as well as other prayer forms available in the closing pages of the book.

In addition, there are wrap-up lectures available for each lesson. Your group may choose to purchase a DVD containing these lectures or make use of the audio or video lectures online at no charge. The link to these free lectures is:

 Of course, if your group has access to qualified speakers, you may choose to have live presentations.

Each person will need a current translation of the Bible. We recommend the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*, which makes use of the New American Bible, Revised Edition. Other translations, such as the New Jerusalem Bible or the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, would also work well.

HOW WILL YOU USE THESE MATERIALS?

Prepare in advance

Using Lesson One as an example:

- Begin with a simple prayer like the one found on page 13.

- Read the assigned material in the printed book for Lesson One (pages 15–31) so that you are prepared for the weekly small group session. You may do this assignment by reading a portion over a period of several days (effective and manageable) or by preparing all at once (more challenging).
- Answer the questions, Exploring Lesson One, found at the end of the assigned reading, pages 32–34.
- Use the Closing Prayer on page 34 when you complete your study. This prayer may be used again when you meet with the group.

Meet with your small group

- After introductions and greetings, allow time for prayer (about 5 minutes) as you begin the group session. You may use the prayer found on page 13 (also used by individuals in their preparation) or use a prayer of your choosing.
- Spend about 45–50 minutes discussing the responses to the questions that were prepared in advance. You may also develop your discussion further by responding to questions and interests that arise during the discussion and faith-sharing itself.
- Close the discussion and faith-sharing with prayer, about 5–10 minutes. You may use the Closing Prayer at the end of each lesson or one of your choosing at the end of the book. It is important to allow people to pray for personal and community needs and to give thanks for how God is moving in your lives.
- Listen to or view the wrap-up lecture associated with each lesson (15–20 minutes). You may watch the lecture online, use a DVD, or provide a live lecture by a qualified local speaker. This lecture provides a common focus for the group and reinforces insights from each lesson. You may view the lecture together at the end of the session or, if your group runs out of time, you may invite group members to watch the lecture on their own time after the discussion.

Above all, be aware that the Holy Spirit is moving within and among you.

PREFACE

Advent is the season in which we reread and relive the experience of ancient Israel as it longed for the Messiah and the dawn of salvation. By attuning our lives to the Scriptures that anticipate and describe the first coming of the Savior, we personally enter into the expectancy of our ancestors in faith and deepen our longing for his coming again.

These infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke are an Advent preparation for the coming of Christ, the One “who was, and who is, and who is to come” (Rev 4:8). He who was born into our world through the maternity of Mary, also comes to us in countless ways, and will come to us again in the fullness of his glory.

Perhaps the best analogy for the Advent season is the feminine experience of pregnancy in preparation for birth. Advent is a time of expectant longing and joyful anticipation. We wait for movements and the stirrings of new life. In the midst of gloom and pain, we wait and hope.

Advent is also an opportunity to explore the darkness and gloominess of our world and our lives. The significance of Christ’s coming to us depends on our understanding of the darkness that he dispels. By reflecting on the shadows and pains within our experience and that of others, we open our lives to watch and stand ready for the working of God. By struggling with these realities, we open them to the possibility of redemption celebrated in the coming of the Savior.

The gradually increasing light of the season, represented by the Advent candles and the seasonal lights on our streets and in our homes, represents the emerging light of Christ. He is the One who will shine on those in darkness, the light for the nations, the bright star that shines in the night, the dawning light of salvation that guides our feet on the path of peace.

In this season of watchful longing, we must ask ourselves, “What are our deepest yearnings?” Advent is the time to explore this question. It is the time to move gradually from longing to hope. By coming to understand more deeply what God has already done for us in sending us our Savior, we are able to deepen our hope for the certain coming of Christ to us. The Advent prayer of the early church, “Come, Lord Jesus!” is still answered in new and surprising ways.

This commentary on the infancy narratives is intended especially for adult education and Bible study groups and for personal study and reflection on the Advent and

Christmas texts. Like all who study the infancy narratives, I am indebted to the work of many others, especially for the monumental work of Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*. In addition, I am grateful for and commend to you the works of Matthean commentators, Fred B. Craddock, Daniel J. Harrington, John P. Meiers, and Benedict T. Viviano, as well as the works of Lukan commentators, Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, Eugene LaVerdiere, Jerome Kodell, Luke Timothy Johnson, and R. J. Karris.

I am grateful for the staff of Little Rock Scripture Study, especially for the editorial suggestions of Cackie Upchurch and for the management and editorial staff of Liturgical Press.

I dedicate this work to the late Bishop Andrew J. McDonald, for his constant and supportive encouragement of Catholic Bible study over the many years of his episcopacy in the Diocese of Little Rock, and to Saint John Paul II, who promoted the New Advent of the universal church in preparing the church to enter the third millenium.

Stephen J. Binz

The Infancy Narratives of Jesus

LESSON ONE

Introduction and Matthew 1–2

Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

Prayer

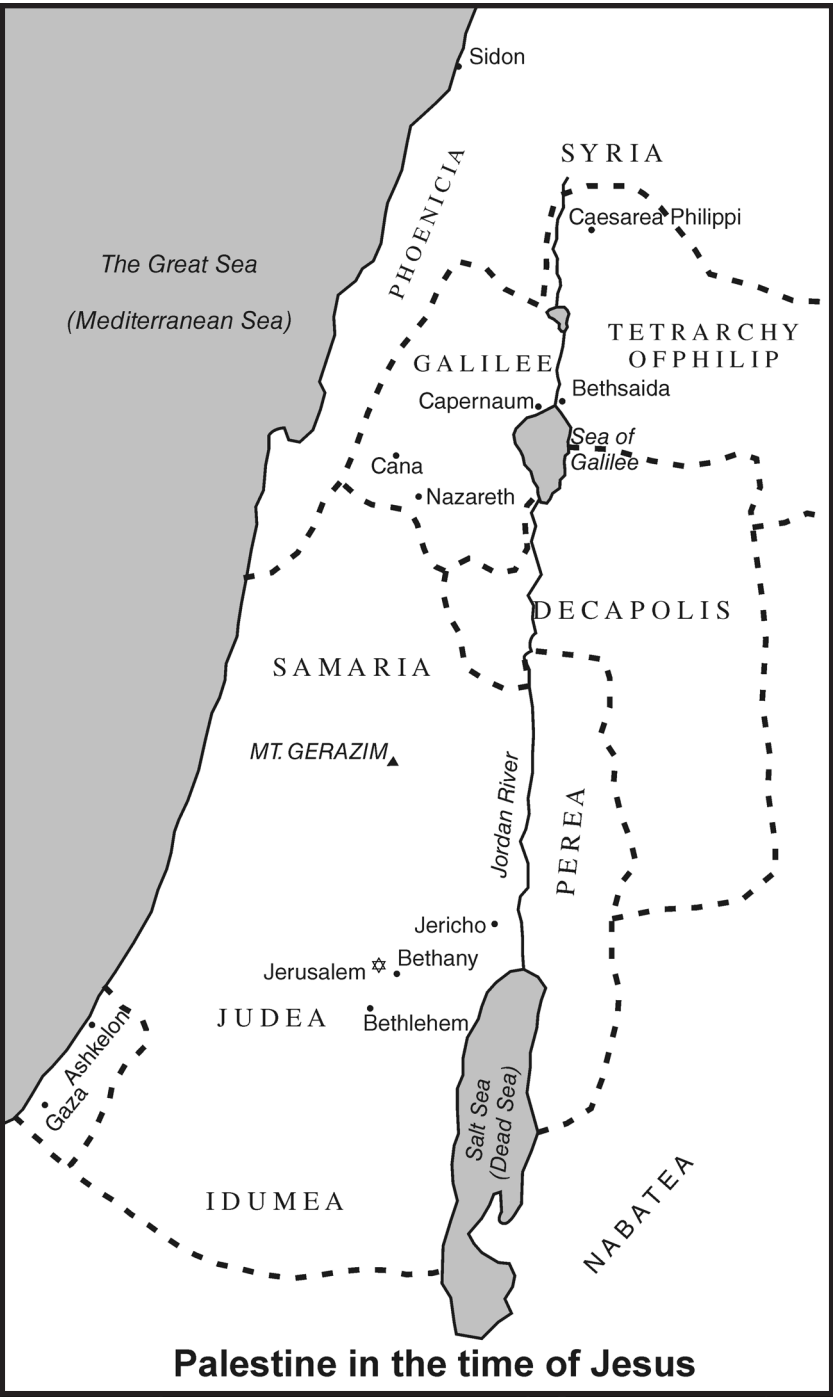
Lord Jesus, you came into the world to bring the light of salvation to all people. Illuminate our minds and hearts as we meditate on the great mystery of your incarnation, and fill us with abundant peace, gratitude, and joy.

Read the Introduction on pages 15–16 and the Bible text of Matthew 1–2 found in the outside columns of pages 18–29, highlighting what stands out to you.

Read the accompanying commentary to add to your understanding.

Respond to the questions on pages 32–34, Exploring Lesson One.

The Closing Prayer on page 34 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.



INTRODUCTION TO THE INFANCY NARRATIVES

In their infancy narratives, Matthew and Luke have given us two magnificent overtures to their accounts of the saving ministry of Jesus Christ. These simple yet profound narratives express the basic truths about the divine and human mystery of Jesus Christ. A faith-filled study of these two birth accounts strives for a deeper understanding of the stories in all their details, while at the same time deepening a sense of awe and wonder at the marvelous miracle of the advent of the Savior.

These four chapters have an importance for Christians far greater than their length may indicate. The art, poetry, prayer, hymnody, and doctrine arising from these infancy narratives have enriched the lives of believers through the centuries. A reflective study of each account will lead to a richer appreciation of the Christian faith and practice that have radiated from these writings of Matthew and Luke.

It is not the objective of this commentary to speculate about the process whereby these narratives were handed down and developed within the early church. Though we should assume that these accounts are rooted in history, their development into the gospel narratives is a subject far beyond the scope of this commentary. The principal objective of this commentary is to interpret the gospel texts as they have been given to us by the inspired authors. The commentary will attempt to illuminate what the evangelists teach us about the identity of Jesus and about the meaning of his coming.

The infancy narratives point backward to the whole history of Israel, and they point forward to the entire Gospel of Jesus Christ, culminating in his death and resurrection and the apostolic mission of the church. By directing us back to the people and events of the old covenant and by leading us forward to the main body of the Gospel, these narratives are truly a proclamation of the good news of salvation for all of humanity.

These opening chapters from Matthew and Luke form a bridge linking the Old and New Testaments. Through recounting the real people and actual places associated with the advent of Jesus, the evangelists situate his coming within the long history of salvation through which God had already been at work. Yet, the evangelists also demonstrate that Jesus embodied the whole history of Israel and brought that saving history to its climactic conclusion.

By showing echoes of Israel's history throughout their accounts, the evangelists demonstrate that the Old Testament finds its fulfillment in the person and the work of Jesus. Through offering insights into the Old Testament in light of the New, Matthew and Luke demonstrate that Jesus is the heir of all God's revelation given in the Hebrew Torah, prophets, and writings.

These infancy narratives also form prologues for each of the gospels. They anticipate the proclamation of the saving Gospel in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Indeed, they contain the Gospel message—proclaiming the identity of Jesus as the Christ and Son of God and inviting all to come to salvation in him.

The earliest preaching of the disciples centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In his glorification the church came to realize most fully his identity and the meaning of his life in God's saving plan. Because of God's revelation made known through the Holy Spirit, Paul was able to proclaim "the gospel about his Son, descended from David according to the flesh, but established as Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 1:3-4).

Yet, Jesus did not become the Christ and Son of God at his resurrection. The gospels demonstrate that the resurrection unveiled an identity that was already there. The Gospel of Mark proclaims the revelation of Jesus' identity through the Holy Spirit at his baptism. Matthew and Luke, however, declare that Jesus was Christ, Lord, and Son of God from the very beginning

of his earthly life, from his conception by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

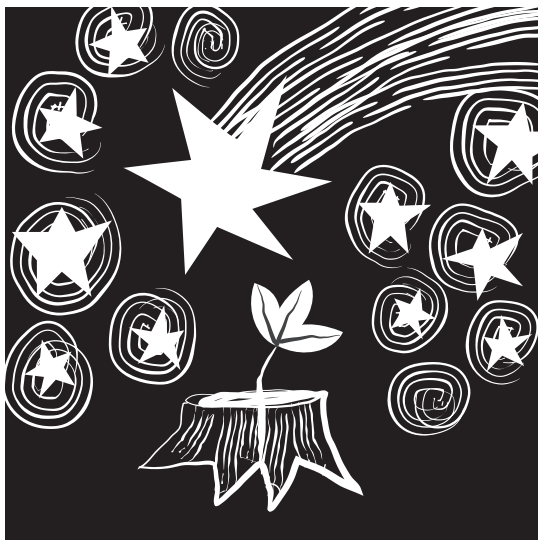
Through the newborn Christ in the crib and the crucified Christ on the cross, the good news of salvation is proclaimed. This “infancy Gospel” produces the same responses as the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection. Some believed it and came to worship—the magi and the shepherds; others rejected it. Herod, the chief priests, and the scribes, who seek the death of the newborn, anticipate the passion of Christ and the persecution of his disciples. Indeed this child will be, as Simeon says, “a sign that will be contradicted” (Luke 2:34).

It is best to study the infancy accounts of Matthew and Luke separately, not seeking to harmonize their different details. Each evangelist gives us a different portrait of Jesus, selecting and adapting details from the apostolic tradition in his own way. Each directs us back to the Old Testament and forward into his gospel in a way that makes each gospel a unique contribution to our fuller understanding of Jesus Christ.

Only Matthew records the dreams of Joseph, the coming of the magi, the star, the murder of the children by Herod, and the flight into Egypt. Only Luke gives us the annunciation to Mary, the visit to Elizabeth, the journey to Bethlehem for the census, the search for shelter and birth in the manger, the visit of the shepherds, and the presentation in the Temple.

Yet, while the details differ, both give a remarkably similar message about who Jesus is and the meaning of his coming. Both declare that Joseph is of the line of David and that Mary and Joseph are legally engaged but have not yet come to live together. In both, an angelic announcement reveals that the conception of the child is not through human intercourse, but through the Holy Spirit; that he is to be named Jesus; and that he is to be the Savior. In both accounts the birth of Jesus was in Bethlehem, during the days of Herod, and his early life was spent in Nazareth. It is generally agreed that Matthew and Luke wrote their accounts independently of each other, but drew from a common tradition remembered within the community of faith.

By knowing the Scriptures, we know Christ. Like all the inspired literature of the Bible, the infancy narratives are a call to deeper faith. Though these narratives may be legitimately excerpted from the Bible and studied individually, they call us to further reading and study. These prologues urge us to continue to study the gospels that they introduce as well as the other Christian writings that expand their message. Yet these narratives also convince us of the necessity to study the Old Testament. It is only in studying the writings of our ancestors in Israel that the richness of God’s plan of salvation can be understood.



THE INFANCY NARRATIVE ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

The infancy account of Matthew is the ideal beginning of the New Testament. It demonstrates, on the one hand, that the coming of Jesus is in continuity with the whole of the Old Testament, and on the other hand, that the coming of Jesus Christ is a strikingly new event, remarkably unlike anything that God has done before.

The evangelist was a Jewish Christian, writing to give instruction and encouragement for both Jews and Gentiles. The whole gospel stresses the connections between the story of Israel and the life of Jesus and the fulfillment of the Old Testament in Christ. Besides numerous citations from the Old Testament, the gospel depicts Jesus as the great Teacher, who like Moses, is tested in the desert and delivers his teaching on the mountain. In fact, after the infancy narrative that serves as a prologue, the gospel consists of five sections or “books” paralleling the five books of the Torah.

Matthew’s infancy narrative begins with a genealogy followed by five episodes, each centered around a citation from the Old Testament. The narrative is told in a way that shows the fulfillment of saving history and of God’s Word in the coming of Jesus. The Old Testa-

ment citations reinforce the understanding that the whole life of Jesus completed God’s plan.

The coming of Christ occurs against the background of Israel’s epic history. Each of the principal periods of salvation history is echoed in the infancy narrative. The period of the patriarchs is recalled as Jesus is described as son of Abraham and as Joseph is portrayed against the background of Joseph the dreamer in the book of Genesis. The period of the exodus is evoked in the parallels between the birth of Jesus and the birth of Moses, in the departure from Egypt by the family of Jesus, and in the magi and star account that is shaped on the story of Balaam in the book of Numbers. The era of the monarchy is remembered as the promises given to David and his descendants are shown to be fulfilled in Jesus, the Messiah. Finally, the age of the exile is evoked as the weeping of Rachel recalls the banishment of God’s people from the land.

The titles of Jesus given in Matthew’s infancy account—Messiah, Son of God, Savior, and Emmanuel—anticipate the understanding of Jesus developed throughout the gospel. The infant, born of the line of David and conceived by the Holy Spirit, will be acclaimed as Messiah and Son of God. The newborn Savior will save his people from their sins. The child called Emmanuel, “God is with us,” will indeed be with his people always.

Matthew’s infancy account presents Jesus as the true king. He is the messianic king, the king of the line of David, a humble shepherd king, and the royal Son of God. Through the kingship of Jesus, God’s reign is established among the people. The presentation of Jesus as king in the infancy narrative develops most fully in Matthew’s account of the passion and resurrection. From the manger to the cross Matthew develops the identity of Jesus as the royal Son of God.

The kingly rule of Jesus is strongly contrasted with the reign of King Herod. The kingship of Jesus is righteous, humble, committed to the salvation of God’s people, even to the point of his own sacrificial death. Herod’s kingship is egotistical, deceptive, committed

I: The Infancy Narrative

CHAPTER 1

The Genealogy of Jesus

¹The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

²Abraham became the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. ³Judah became the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, ⁴Ram the father of Amminadab. Amminadab became the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. Boaz became the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth. Obed became the father of Jesse, ⁶Jesse the father of David the king.

David became the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of Uriah. ⁷Solomon

continue

to maintaining his own power, even to the point of destroying others.

Matthew's narrative demonstrates two responses to the kingship of Jesus that will be developed throughout the gospel: the choice to obey the divine will and to worship Jesus (Joseph and the magi) and the choice to oppose God's will and try to destroy Jesus (Herod and the chief priests and scribes). The response of worship and obedience is developed in the Jewish and Gentile disciples of Jesus; the response of opposition continues in the religious leaders and their cruel persecution of Jesus. Yet, as Herod's opposition and attempts to kill Jesus ultimately fail to destroy Jesus, so the religious leaders will fail because of God's sovereign action on behalf of Jesus in the resurrection.

Matthew may well be describing his own role within the Christian community when he describes the role of a scribe: "Every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old" (13:52).

Indeed this is what Matthew does in his gospel; he shows the meaning of Jesus for the ancient Jews and for the Gentiles from all the nations. The "old" is the tradition and Scriptures of ancient Israel; the "new" is the tradition and emerging Scriptures of Christianity.

Through the angels and prophets of his infancy narrative, Matthew shows that the new events have happened according to God's plan and initiative. Indeed all Christian teachers and writers must understand and express the reality that the new events are all rooted in the old. The advent of the Savior is the fulfillment of God's plan made known through the history of Israel as well as the beginning of God's new design for the unity of Jews and Gentiles, for the salvation of all the nations.

THE GENEALOGY OF JESUS

Matthew 1:1-17

The opening phrases of the New Testament, "The book of the genesis/genealogy" (*biblos geneleos*), evokes associations with the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures, Genesis. The opening book of the Bible uses this same phrase in reference to God's original creation (Gen 2:4 in the Greek Septuagint). What God is doing in Jesus Christ is a new beginning, a new creative action for the world.

This phrase also introduces the account of the origins or the genealogy of Jesus that follows. Here the evangelist demonstrates that Jesus is connected to all of the individual names listed and that in him the highest hopes of Israel are achieved. The three titles of Jesus that introduce the genealogy highlight his identity that will be developed throughout the gospel.

"Christ" is the Greek word for the Messiah, the anointed king who was expected to fulfill the hopes of Israel. "Son of David" is a messianic title proclaiming Jesus' royal descent in the line of David. As the heir of David, Jesus completes the promises God made to David that his dynasty and his kingdom would endure forever (2 Sam 7:12, 16). "Son of Abraham" associates Jesus with the beginnings of

God's covenant with Israel and to the promise that in his descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing (Gen 22:18).

To understand biblical genealogies the reader must understand their purpose. They are rarely concerned with mere biological descent. The purpose of this genealogy is to introduce the gospel by showing how Jesus fits into and completes the plan of God's saving history that came before him. By tracing the lineage of Jesus back through the whole history of God's people, Matthew demonstrates that the coming of Jesus was designed by God and that Jesus was born at the climactic time in Israel's history.

For hearers of Matthew's gospel the genealogy stresses that the beginning of the story of Jesus is the Old Testament. For Jewish Christians the genealogy shows them that the whole history of their people has been planned by God to move toward the Messiah. For Gentile Christians it shows that they cannot fully know Jesus Christ unless they know his ancestors in the Scriptures of Judaism.

Salvation history is here divided into three great epochs. The first period begins with Abraham and ascends to the high point of Israel's history, the kingship of David. Within this period, Jesus is shown to be related to the great patriarchs of Israel, including not only Judah but "his brothers." The twelve sons of Jacob connect Jesus to the whole of Israel, the twelve tribes who will be called to the kingdom by the twelve apostles of Jesus. The monarchy of David first joined the tribes together and confirmed their united destiny in the kingdom of Israel.



God's promise to David of a dynasty and an everlasting kingdom is sometimes called a covenant with David. This "covenant" is the foundation of the **messianic hope**. A statement that the new king is a "son of God" is part of the coronation ritual (see 2 Sam 7:14; Pss 2:7; 89:27-28; 110:3).

became the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asaph. ⁸Asaph became the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, Joram the father of Uzziah. ⁹Uzziah became the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah. ¹⁰Hezekiah became the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amos, Amos the father of Josiah. ¹¹Josiah became the father of Jechoniah and his brothers at the time of the Babylonian exile.

¹²After the Babylonian exile, Jechoniah became the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, ¹³Zerubbabel the father of Abiud. Abiud became the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, ¹⁴Azor the father of Zadok. Zadok became the father of Achim, Achim the father of Eliud, ¹⁵Eliud the father of Eleazar. Eleazar became the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah.

¹⁷Thus the total number of generations from Abraham to David is fourteen generations; from David to the Babylonian exile, fourteen generations; from the Babylonian exile to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

continue

The second epoch begins with King David and descends to the low point of Israel's history, the exile in Babylon. Within this period is a list of corrupt Judean kings, described in the Scriptures as murderers, idolaters, and adulterers. Only Hezekiah and Josiah are described as faithful to God's law. By the time of the exile, the people of Jerusalem have almost given up hope for a king who would realize their dreams.

The third period begins after the Babylonian exile and ascends again to the goal of Israel's history, the coming of Christ. Except for the first two, Shealtiel and Zerubbabel, and the last two, Joseph and Mary, they are a collection of obscure people whose names never made it into the Jewish Scriptures. Yet through them

the hope of God’s people was restored as salvation dawned.

The three-times-fourteen pattern is the evangelist’s demonstration that Jesus came when the time was right in God’s providential plan. There were fourteen days from the new moon, the beginning of the Jewish month, to the full moon, the day of Israel’s greatest feasts, Passover and Tabernacles. Thus David and Jesus are preceded by fourteen waxing generations, beginning with the new moon of Abraham and the darkness of the exile. The moon in its full luminance represents the reign of David and the advent of Christ. It is also significant that the letters for David in Hebrew (d-w-d) have the numerical value of fourteen (4+6+4). Thus the pattern of the generations expresses the fact that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the long-awaited Son of David.

It was even more common for the Jews at the time of Jesus to divide time into periods of sevens. Considering this division of history, Jesus was preceded by six periods of seven gen-

erations (three-times-fourteen). The reign of the Messiah opened the seventh period of seven, the period of fullness and completion. The advent of Christ marked the end of God’s careful plan.

The inclusion of five women is unusual for biblical genealogies. Their mention indicates that each of them played a crucial role in the ongoing history of salvation. Yet, they seem unlikely choices to be included in the messianic lineage.

Tamar, a Canaanite, was left childless after the death of her husbands. She disguised herself as a prostitute and seduced her father-in-law Judah in order to bear a child. Rahab, another Canaanite, was a real prostitute who protected the spies of Israel when they came to Jericho. Ruth, a Moabite, traveled to Judah after the death of her Israelite husband and married Boaz in Bethlehem. Bathsheba, “the wife of Uriah,” a Hittite, became a wife of King David after he shamefully impregnated her and arranged her husband’s death.



Both Luke and Matthew include **genealogies of Jesus**. They vary in ways that likely reveal the theological interests of each evangelist, respectively.

Matthew’s Genealogy (1:1-17)	Luke’s Genealogy (3:23-38)
Placed at the beginning of the gospel; alludes to a new “beginning” of salvation history in Jesus out of Israel’s history.	Placed between Jesus’ baptism and temptation by the devil to emphasize Jesus as God’s Son.
Begins with Abraham, father of faith, and then structured in rough chronological order around three groups of fourteen kings each, with David as the central figure, emphasizing Jesus’ Davidic heritage and the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant of becoming “father of many nations.”	Structured in reverse chronological order around significant figures (not kings) in Israel’s history and concluding with Adam, “son of God,” emphasizing the universality of salvation achieved in Jesus, savior of all humankind.
Interjects four female figures in the list (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah the Hittite), perhaps emphasizing God’s ability to write salvation history in extraordinary ways (all bore sons in unusual circumstances), thus prefiguring Mary’s role as the bearer of Jesus, Emmanuel.	Absence of women.

Each of these women was considered an outsider, a foreigner. Their presence in the genealogy of Jesus foreshadowed the messianic mission that invited Gentiles as well as Jews into the kingdom of God. Each also had unusual marital histories that could be looked upon as scandalous and scornful. Their inclusion along with many corrupt and scandalous men in the genealogy prepared for the ministry of Jesus in which sinners and prostitutes entered the kingdom. Indeed, the universal Gospel of Jesus Christ breaks down the barriers between Jew and Gentile, male and female, saint and sinner.

The final woman in the genealogy is Mary. Like the other women, her marital situation is highly unusual and scandalous to outsiders. Despite their situations, all five of these women played an important role in God's providential plan to continue the lineage of the Messiah. Tamar continued the family line of Judah's sons. Rahab made it possible for Israel to possess the Promised Land. Ruth gave birth to the grandfather of King David. Bathsheba made certain that her son Solomon succeeded David. Mary's response to God's unexpected plan enables her to become God's greatest instrument and to bring the lineage of the Messiah to its fulfillment.

God works in unexpected ways. The genealogy gives us a preview of that peculiar collection of men and women who will follow Jesus and who will become the church in which Matthew ministered. The sinful, scandalous, unknown, and marginalized people who will come into the kingdom and experience salvation in Christ are powerful witnesses that the Holy Spirit is at work.

The final names in the lineage of Jesus break the steady rhythm of the genealogical pattern. The shift that occurs in verse 16 shows that Matthew wanted to indicate that Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus. The virginal conception and birth of Jesus introduces something radically new in human history as the messianic age dawns. Though Jesus was born of the royal line within Israel's history, as Messiah he concludes the final period of the

The Birth of Jesus

¹⁸Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the holy Spirit. ¹⁹Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. ²⁰Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. ²¹She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he

continue

old Israel and opens up the new era of God's saving plan.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

Matthew 1:18-25

Matthew's account leading to the birth of Jesus continues to tell us who Jesus is. He is Son of David, as the genealogy has shown; and he is, even more significantly, Son of God. Through Joseph's lineage Jesus is Son of David; through Mary he is begotten as Son of God. Through the legal paternity of Joseph the coming of Jesus is in continuity with Israel's history; through the virginal maternity of Mary his coming is totally new.

The narrative explains how Jesus is both Son of David and Son of God by describing the relationship of Mary and Joseph. The couple is between the two stages of Jewish marriage. The first stage is the formal exchange of consent, made at the home of the bride's father. The second stage, made some months or years later, is the solemn transfer of the bride to the house of the groom. The betrothal of Mary and Joseph is a legally contracted marriage, completed before they came to live together.

THE RETURN FROM EGYPT

Matthew 2:19-23

Though the principal actor in the Matthean infancy account is Joseph, the center of attention is the child Jesus and his mother Mary. The phrase “the child and his mother” is used repeatedly in all the events after the nativity (2:11, 13, 14, 20, 21). This focus on the messianic child along with his mother reflects the central role of the king’s mother in the birth, enthronement, and reign of the Davidic kings of Judah.

The importance of the queen-mother is demonstrated throughout the Old Testament. The book of Kings always mentions the name of the king’s mother in the introduction to each reign in Judah. She had an official position in the kingdom and often kept her position even

The Return from Egypt

¹⁹When Herod had died, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” ²¹He rose, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go back there. And because he had been warned in a dream, he departed for the region of Galilee. ²³He went and dwelt in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He shall be called a Nazorean.”



The return from Egypt

after her son's death. The queen-mother was enthroned with the king and enjoyed a position of great honor and dignity during his reign (Jer 13:18; 1 Kgs 2:19). Thus it is fitting that the mother of the Messiah should have a central role in the kingdom inaugurated by the coming of Christ.

The birth of Christ from Mary his mother, the attempt by Herod to destroy the child, and the intervention of God to save the child from death are also reflected in the images of Revelation 12. Here the woman who gives birth to the Messiah represents both the people of God in the Old Testament and the Christian church. The birth of the Messiah is both his historical coming and his resurrection into glory. The dragon who waits to devour the child when he is born is all the powers that seek to destroy the Messiah and his reign.

Like Revelation 12, the Matthean account of Christ's birth looks backward to the history of struggle between the ruling powers of the world and the saving plan of God. It is a battle envisioned in the garden between the offspring of the dragon and the offspring of the woman (Gen 3:15) and continued in Israel's history with the struggle between the murderous Pharaoh and God's desire to liberate Israel. Like Revelation 12, the infancy narrative also looks forward to the ongoing conflict between the ruling powers and the messianic reign—a struggle that began with Herod's slaughter of the children, culminated in the crucifixion of Christ, and continued with the persecution of the church.

The exile of Jesus and his family ends with the death of Herod. Like his ancestors exiled in Egypt and in Babylon and then freed to return to Israel, Jesus now returns with his family "to the land of Israel." The angel said, "those who sought the child's life are dead." This parallels God's word to Moses when God announced the death of Pharaoh and told Moses to return because all who sought his life were dead (Exod 4:19). That announcement freed Moses to begin his mission of freeing God's people and bringing them into the land of Israel. Likewise, the announcement of the angel freed the family of Jesus to go to the land

of Israel, the place where Jesus would begin his saving work.

Yet those who sought his life only anticipate other ruling powers who will seek to frustrate the designs of God and put the Savior to death. Already the cruel Archelaus, the son of Herod the Great, ruled over Judea. So the family of Jesus settled in Galilee, the northern region of ancient Israel, where the reign of Herod Antipas, another son of Herod, enabled them to be slightly more secure.

Nazareth was a small village in Galilee, a place so obscure that it was never mentioned in the Old Testament. John's gospel underlines its insignificance in the question of Nathanael, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46). Yet, the evangelist demonstrates that the same prophetic Scriptures that spoke about the Davidic Messiah from Bethlehem also spoke about a Nazorean.

There is no single text in the Old Testament that contains the words quoted by the evangelist, "He shall be called a Nazorean." Thus establishing its biblical source has been a challenge through the ages. Since the phrase is not found in any single prophet, the evangelist uses the plural "prophets" instead of the usual singular. St. Jerome points out that the phrase is a summary of the prophets' teachings.

There are several different reasons why Jesus was called a Nazorean by the early Christians and why his followers were called Nazoreans (Acts 24:5). The most obvious reason is that he came from Nazareth. Yet, there are two other messianic associations of the term in the literature of Israel, both of which have implications for Jesus' identity.

Jesus is called a Nazorean also because he completes a line of Nazarites, those who were consecrated to God's service from the womb. The biblical figures described in this way in their birth narratives are Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist. In addition, Jesus is called a Nazorean because he is the *netzer* (branch or shoot) prophesied in Isaiah 11:1. It was expected that the Messiah would be the budding shoot sprouting from the root of Jesse, the father of David.

Matthew shows us that clearly God is directing the history of the world's salvation. He shows how the advent of the Savior is in continuity with all that has come before him, yet also how his coming is a completely new act of God in human history. By looking backward into ancient Israel and looking forward into the ministry of Jesus, Matthew's infancy narrative shows how he "brings from his storeroom both the new and the old" (13:52). He shows us again

how the "new" grows out of the "old," and the "old" finds a fuller expression in the "new."

Having completed the narrative of Christ's infancy, the evangelist invites the reader to continue the gospel, to see how all the claims made for Jesus at his birth will be realized throughout his life. His words and deeds, death and resurrection will demonstrate that Jesus the Nazorean is indeed the Messiah and Son of God.

EXPLORING LESSON ONE

1. What do you hope to learn from your study of the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke? What especially interests you?

2. Who was the intended audience for Matthew's gospel, and how did this audience help shape the form the gospel took?

3. How is Matthew's infancy narrative structured?

4. a) What titles are given to Jesus in Matthew's infancy narrative?

- b) How do these titles anticipate what will later be revealed about Jesus in this gospel?

5. a) The genealogy of Jesus given by Matthew (1:1-17) can be divided into three segments of fourteen ancestors, corresponding to three epochs in the history of Israel. What are these three epochs, and what high/low points in the history of Israel do they represent?

- b) What significance can be found in Matthew's use of the numbers seven and fourteen?

6. There are five women named in Jesus' genealogy (1:3, 5, 6, 16). What does their inclusion tell us about the messianic mission that Jesus will undertake?

7. In what way does the magis' quest to find Jesus mirror your own search for Christ?

8. What passages from the Old Testament are alluded to in Matthew's account of the star that led the magi to Jesus? (See Num 24:17 and Isa 60:1-3.)

9. What Old Testament parallel does Herod's massacre of the innocents recall? (See Exod 1:22.)

10. Why is it appropriate that Jesus be called "a Nazorean"? (See Isa 11:1.)

CLOSING PRAYER

Prayer

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage." (Matt 2:1-2)

Heavenly Father, may we always seek your Son with zeal and true devotion, and when we find him, may we offer him the homage he most desires: humble and contrite hearts filled with love for others. We pray today in this spirit of true charity for . . .