

Matthew 2, Luke 2

Ep 185: CFM

Matthew 2

1. King Herod and the Magi (Matthew 2.1-12)
 - a. Τοῦ δὲ Ἰησοῦ γεννηθέντος ἐν Βηθλέεμ τῆς Ἰουδαίας ἐν ἡμέραις Ἡρώδου τοῦ βασιλέως ἰδοῦ, μάγοι ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν παρεγένοντο εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα “And when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, see, the Magi came from the East into Jerusalem” (Matthew 2.1)¹
 - b. Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him (Matthew 2.2).²
 - c. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him (Matthew 2.3).³
 - d. Inquiry is made into the birth of the Messiah, Micah is quoted, and Herod sends the Magi to find the child (Matthew 2.4-8).⁴
 - e. The Magi come to Jesus, fall down, and worship him, bringing him gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matthew 2.9-11).⁵
 - i. Matthew’s use of this image of the Magi bringing gifts to Jesus have many layers from the Hebrew Bible.⁶

¹ Matthew emphasizes the title to contrast Herod’s rule with that of Jesus, the son of David. Herod ruled from 37 – 4 B.C.E. Bethlehem was five miles south of Jerusalem. The wise men, Greek “Magi” ... Philo calls Balaam a “magos” (*Life of Moses* 1.264); see also Dan 2.2 LXX. Like the genealogy’s Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, they foreshadow the Gentile mission (28.19). Amy-Jill Levine, Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 5.

² *King of the Jews*, see also Matthew 27.11, 29, 37. *Star*, perhaps here suggesting an angel (Num 24.17, related to Balaam’s prophecy; CD 7.18–26; T. Levi 18.3); no ancient sources confirm this astronomical phenomenon.

³ *All Jerusalem*, Matthew has a negative view of Jerusalem (see Matthew 21.10; 23.37). Levine and Brettler, p. 5.

⁴ *He inquired*, Herod, although viewed as a Jew, does not know the tradition. *Messiah*, Matthew paraphrases Micah 5.2: “But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” Matthew 2.8: *Search diligently*, Herod seeks to deceive the Magi. Ibid, p. 5.

⁵ Matthew 2.11: Gold, frankincense, and myrrh, perhaps alluding to Isa 60.6 (see also Ps 72.10,15), underlying the tradition that the Magi are kings. Ibid, p. 5.

⁶ Most obviously, the visit of foreign dignitaries to Jerusalem to see the son of David recalls the story of the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10:1-10), and *Matthew’s specific mention of the presentation of gold, frankincense, and myrrh echoes her royal gift to Solomon of “gold and a great quantity of spices”* (1 Kgs 10:10), as well as other OT passages which take her visit and gifts as a model for the future glory of the Messiah (Ps 72:10-11,15: “tribute,” “gifts,” “gold of Sheba”; Isa. 60:5-6: “the wealth of the nations,” “gold and frankincense,” also with specific mention of Sheba). The “kings” who are the donors in Ps. 72:10-11; Isa. 60:3 are the source of the later Christian tradition which by the early third century had turned Matthew’s “magi” into kings. Matthew thus prepares the way for Jesus’ later declaration that “something greater than Solomon is here” (12:42). *Secondly, the star which plays such a prominent role in the story invites reflection on Balaam’s prophecy* in Num. 24:17-19 of the rise (LXX *anatelei*, echoed in Matthew’s *anotolē*, vv. 2, 9) of a “*star out of Jacob and a scepter out of Israel*,” which is then interpreted as a ruler who will destroy Israel’s enemies and take possession of the lands of Moab and Edom, a prophecy which was understood to point forward to the conquests of King David, and which thus also foreshadows the victory of the “son of David.” *Thirdly, the likely influence of Balaam’s prophecy suggests that perhaps*

- ii. Uses of gold, frankincense, and myrrh – some see these as symbols of divinity, death, and burial.⁷
 - f. The Magi are warned in a dream to not return to Herod (Matthew 2.12).
2. The Flight into Egypt (Matthew 2.13-23)
- a. “Out of Egypt I have called by Son” (Matthew 2.15).⁸
 - b. Herod’s anger and killing of innocent children (Matthew 2.16-18).
 - c. Herod dies, Jesus returns to the land and lives in Nazareth⁹ (Matthew 2.19-23).

Balaam himself, the man who “saw” the messianic star rise (Num. 24:15-17), may also be in mind as a model for the magi. He, like them, was a non-Israelite “holy man” and visionary from the East: Num 22:5 locates his home on the Euphrates, while LXX Num. 23:7 speaks of his being summoned from Mesopotamia and uses the same phrase *ap’ anatolōn* (“from the East”) which Matthew uses in 2:1. **He, like the magi, was pressurized by a king (Balak) intent on destroying the true people of God, but refused to cooperate and instead took the side of God’s people. Fourthly, the prominent role of Herod in the story prepares the way for his infanticide** in v. 16. The story of Herod’s fear for his throne and his ruthless political massacre could hardly fail to remind a Jewish reader of the Pharaoh at the time of Moses’ birth whose infanticide threatened to destroy Israel’s future deliverer, while Jesus’ providential escape to Egypt and subsequent return will echo the story of Moses’ escape from slaughter and of his subsequent exile and return when “those who were seeking your life are dead” (Exod 4:19, echoed here in 2:20). Herod’s place in the story thus ensures not only a reflection on who is the true “king of the Jews” and on the contrast between Herod’s ruthlessly protected political power and Jesus’ different way of being “king,” but also **sets up the typological model for the newborn Messiah to play the role of the new Moses**, who will also deliver his people (cf. 1:21) and through whose ministry a new people of God will be constituted just as Israel became God’s chosen people through the exodus and the covenant at Sinai under the leadership of Moses. R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Eerdmans, 2007, p. 121-122 electronic version, emphasis added.

⁷ Their gifts are those of the affluent: gold, then as now the symbol of ultimate value, and exotic spices, which would not normally come within the budget of an ordinary Jewish family. Frankincense (which came from Southern Arabia and Somalia) was an expensive perfume, and was burned not only in worship but at important social occasions; for its nonreligious use (with myrrh) see Song 3:6; 4:6, 14; cf. Sir 24:15. Despite the symbolism traditionally discerned in the gifts of the magi since the time of Irenaeus (gold for royalty, frankincense for divinity, and myrrh for death and burial—the latter based on John 19:39), myrrh, too, was primarily used as a luxurious cosmetic fragrance (Esth 2:12; Ps 45:8; Prov 7:17; Song 1:13; 5:1, 5). These are luxury gifts, fit for a king. The reader who knows the OT stories cannot fail to be reminded of the visit of the Queen of Sheba with her gifts of “gold and a great quantity of spices” to the son of David in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 10:1-10), and of the imagery which that visit provided for subsequent depictions of the homage of the nations to the Jewish Messiah (Ps 72:10-11, 15; Isa 60:5-6). France, p. 131-132, electronic version.

⁸ Matthew here recasts the story of Israel coming out of Egypt as Jesus. Jesus is now “the son” mentioned in Hosea 11.1: לִבְנֵי קְרַאתִי לְבָנִי וּמִמִּצְרַיִם וּנְאֻהָבָהּ כִּי נָעַר יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנָהֲבֵהוּ “When Israel was a lad, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called out to my son” (Hosea 11.1). The literary context of Hosea’s quote does not support Matthew’s use of the verse, but such decontextualizing is typical of biblical interpretation in the time period of Matthew’s composition of this work.

⁹ Nazareth: Natz’rat or Na’tzeret (נָצְרֶת). Although the historian Flavius Josephus (AD 37 – c. 100) mentions 45 towns in Galilee, he never mentions the tiny village of Nazareth. It must be remembered that Josephus relates that Galilee had 219 villages in all, so it is clear that most village names have gone unrecorded in surviving literature. The first non-biblical references to Nazareth are relatively late. In 200 C.E., Julius Africanus, cited by Eusebius, speaks of “Nazara” as a village in “Judea” and locates it near an as-yet unidentified “Cochaba.” This curious description does not fit the traditional location of Nazareth in Lower Galilee and is likely due simply to the author’s ignorance of Palestinian geography. However, several possible Cochabas have been identified: one 9.3 miles north of Nazareth (on the other side of Sepphoris); one in the region of Bashan (to the East of the Jordan River); and two near Damascus. See: Eusebius, *Church History*, 1.7.14. See also: *Nazareth, New World Encyclopedia*, accessed 11.30.22. For an answer to the critics who try and discredit Jesus because “Nazareth did not exist” in Jesus’ lifetime, see the rebuttals to this argument [here](#).

- i. The phrase “Jesus of Nazareth” occurs 12 times in the gospels and 6 times in Acts. Bible scholars Kelly Ogden and Andrew Skinner make the following observation: “We have no specific reference in extant biblical literature to prophets declaring that the Messiah would be a Nazarene, unless it is an allusion to Isaiah 11.1. Isaiah prophesied that a “Branch” (נֹצֵר- *netzer*) would grow out of the root of Jesse- that is, from the Davidic line- and thus Jesus would be a Nazarene (נוֹצְרִי- *notzri*). Both Hebrew words come from the same root... An early church father, Jerome, wrote in his commentary on Isaiah, “What all churchmen seek and do not find in the Prophets, that is, where it stands written: He will be called a Nazarene (Matthew 2.23), scholars of the Hebrews are of the opinion that it is taken from this passage (Isaiah 11.1).”¹⁰

Luke 2

1. The birth of Jesus (Luke 2.1-7).
 - a. Historical setting: the census.¹¹
 - b. Caesar Augustus¹² taxes “the whole world”¹³ (Luke 2.1).

¹⁰ D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew Skinner, [Verse by Verse: The Gospels](#), Deseret Book, 2006, p. 66.

¹¹ Bock explains, “In calling the census one of the “whole world” πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην, Luke uses the standard description of any event that covered much of the Roman Empire.” ***Nonbiblical history knows of Augustan censuses in Gaul, Cyrene, and Egypt*** (Fitzmyer 1981: 400; Tacitus, Annals 1.11, 31, 33; Dio Cassius 53.30.2). [Octavian](#) became known for his administrative organizing of the empire after an interesting rise to power (Fitzmyer 1981: 394, 399; Schürmann 1969: 99; R. Brown 1977: 394). He was born in September 63 B.C. and was the great nephew of Julius Caesar. After the murder of Julius Caesar, he was named chief heir and ruled in a triumvirate with Mark Antony and Lepidus. Lepidus fell from power in 36 B.C. and Antony’s involvement with Cleopatra of Egypt brought him into conflict with Octavian. In 31 B.C. Octavian won a decisive victory over Antony at Actium and was finally acknowledged as Augustus Caesar by the Senate in 27 B.C. when they gave him the honored Greek name *Sebastos* (= Latin *Augustus*). His reign was known for its peaceful character, as his accession ended a long period of civil strife. He died in A.D. 14 and was succeeded by Tiberius, the ruler of Rome during Jesus’ ministry. Luke portrays Augustus as the unknowing agent of God, whose decree leads to the fulfillment of the promised rise of a special ruler from Bethlehem (Mic. 5:1–2 [4:14–5:1 MT]). In the period of the emperor known for his reign of peace, God raises up the child of peace. ***For many interpreters, Luke is not only placing Jesus’ birth in the context of world history, but he also is making a play on the theme of the peaceful emperor*** (Schürmann 1969:102; Fitzmyer 1981: 393–94; R. Brown 1977: 415–16). ***The real emperor of peace is Jesus, not Octavian.*** But in the absence of Lucan comment about Augustus, the point, if present, is subtle. In addition to the historical connection, the mention of the census explains how a couple from Nazareth gave birth to a child in Bethlehem. The accidental events of history have become acts of destiny. Little actions have great significance, for the ruler was to come out of Bethlehem and only a governmental decree puts the parents in the right place. Darrell Bock, [Luke 1:1-9:50 \(Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament\)](#), Baker Academic, 1994, p. 255 electronic version, emphasis added.

¹² Augustus, who ruled from 27 B.C.E. to 14 C.E., was called “god,” “son of god,” “savior,” and “father.”

¹³ Greek: πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην = “the entire world.” This is an example of how the writers gave their accounts of history according to their worldview. To them, the Roman Empire was the known world. Clearly the Romans did not tax the Eskimos or the people of Mesoamerica.

- c. Joseph comes to Bethlehem for the census (Luke 2.4).
- d. Jesus is laid in a manger,¹⁴ as there is no room for them in the inn (Luke 2.7).
 - i. The humble birth of Jesus. Was Jesus born in a cave?¹⁵
 - 1. There is no account of a search for a location.
 - 2. The text does not suggest that Joseph and Mary are too poor.
 - 3. There is no speculation about a harsh innkeeper.¹⁶
 - ii. Swaddling clothes (Luke 2.7). The custom had to do with keeping the limbs straight.¹⁷
- 2. The Announcement to the shepherds (Luke 2.8-20).
- 3. The circumcision of Jesus and his presentation at the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2.21-24).¹⁸
- 4. Simeon and Anna (Luke 2.25-38).

¹⁴ There may be something happening here in the text. The text says that Jesus was “laid in a manger” (Greek: ἀνέκλινεν αὐτὸν ἐν τῇ φάτνῃ). Margaret Barker explains, “Then the child is set in a manger. The Hebrew word for manger ‘ebus (אָבוּס), is almost the same as the ancient name of Jerusalem, יְרוּשָׁלַיִם (אִבּוּס), and so the scene Luke describes is almost, but not quite, the Virgin who clothes the first-born and sets him in ancient Jerusalem. This manger/Jerusalem wordplay appears in the opening verses of Isaiah. In its original context it was part of a complex oracle about the rebellious sons of God, the fallen angels. They are corrupted sons... the whole passage is political, a condemnation of the princes and priests of Jerusalem, woven throughout with wordplay. The ox, שׂוֹר (שׁוֹר), knows its owner, קַנְהוּס (קַנְהוּ), and the ass, חֲמֹר (חֲמֹר), is very much like the word for priest kōmer (כֹּמֵר). The humble animals recognize their master but the rulers of Jerusalem have not understood. In the Christmas story, this was a comment on the current rulers and the priests.” Margaret Barker, *Christmas: The Original Story*, SPCK, 2008, p. 76.

¹⁵ The animal room that Joseph and Mary found may have been either a stable next to the place of lodging or a cave, since the use of caves for stables was common (Godet 1875: 1.130; Marshall 1978: 107). **Ancient tradition associates Jesus’ birth with a cave** (Protevangelium of James 18; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 78.4; [Origen, Against Celsus 1.51](#)). Origen (185-253 A.D.) said, “In Bethlehem the cave is pointed out where He was born, and the manger in the cave where He was wrapped in swaddling clothes. And the rumor is in those places, and among foreigners of the Faith, that indeed Jesus was born in this cave who is worshiped and revered by the Christians.” A basilica was erected over a cave site in Bethlehem in the time of Constantine (fourth century), at the site of the present [Church of the Nativity](#). The Lucan text does not specify that the animal room used for the birth was a cave, but it is possible that the traditional cave site is correct and that the traditional association between Jesus’ birth and a cave is accurate. **The Lucan text and first-century customs do not prevent the association, but it cannot be regarded as established.** Bock, p. 263 electronic version, emphasis added.

¹⁶ The birth of Jesus is told with simplicity (Schweizer 1984: 48–49). The days of her pregnancy were fulfilled (ἐπλήσθησαν, eplēsthēsan) on her arrival. Jesus’ birth clearly occurs in Bethlehem and not along the way, as the apocryphal Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew 13 and the Protevangelium of James 17.3–18.1 suggest. In the Protevangelium of James, Mary is in birth pangs in the middle of the journey, and the child is delivered in a cave in the Bethlehem region (Fitzmyer 1981: 407). The birth itself is told briefly without any details as to why the couple stays in the stable (Schürmann 1969: 103; R. Brown 1977: 418–19). There is no account of a search for a place, an idea that erroneously leaves an impression that the couple find the last place in town. There is no speculation about a harsh innkeeper who cannot provide a room. Neither is there a suggestion that the parents are too poor. Rather, Mary’s time comes; so she bears the child in a stable, wraps him up, and places him in what probably is an empty feed trough (Luke 2.7). Bock, p. 257, electronic version.

¹⁷ The newly born child is wrapped in swaddling clothes. The custom was to take strips of clothes and bind them around the child to keep the limbs straight (Marshall 1978: 106; Safrai 1976a: 766; Ezek. 16:4). Swaddling prepares us for the shepherds’ recognition of the child (2:12), as does the mention of φάτνῃ (phatnē, manger). Bock, p. 260, electronic version.

¹⁸ In the Hebrew Bible, it was instructed that any son of Abraham should be circumcised on the eighth day (Genesis 17.11–12; Leviticus 12.3).

5. The childhood of Jesus (Luke 2.39-40).
 - a. Jesus walked the same road from infancy to manhood that has been trod by every adult mortal, from first to last, whoever breathed the breath of life. There is only one way for a mortal to be born, to grow to maturity, to pass into the great beyond; and we are left to suppose that every law of mortal life applied to the mortal Son of the mortal Mary. Our Lord's physical body, conceived in Mary's womb, partook of Mary's nature; mortal genes, if you will, passed from mother to Son. His features, stature, and general appearance were passed on as much by his mortal mother as by his immortal Father. **He was as much the product of the mother who bare him as were her other children.** As a babe he began to grow, normally and naturally, and there was nothing supernatural about it. He learned to crawl, to walk, to run. He spoke his first word, cut his first tooth, took his first step—the same as other children do. He learned to speak; he played with toys like those of his brothers and sisters; and he played with them and with the neighbor children. He went to sleep at night and he awoke with the morning light... He learned to speak, to read, to write; he memorized passages of scripture, and he pondered their deep and hidden meanings. He was taught in the home by Mary, then by Joseph, as was the custom of the day. Jewish traditions and the provisions of the Torah were discussed daily in his presence. He learned the Shema, revered the Mezuzah, and participated in prayers, morning, noon, and night. Beginning at five or six he went to school, and certainly continued to do so until he came a son of the law at twelve years of age.¹⁹
 - b. Lorenzo Snow taught that "Jesus was a god before he came into the world and yet his knowledge was taken from him. He did not know his former greatness, neither do we know what greatness we had attained to before we came here."²⁰ But President Snow also taught that during the Savior's life "*it was revealed unto Him who He was, and for what purpose He was in the world.* The glory and power He possessed before He came into the world was made known unto Him."²¹ Just as the Savior came to understand exactly who He was, so may we.
6. Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2.41-52).
 - a. "His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover" (Luke 2.41).²²
 - b. "When he was twelve years old" (Luke 2.42).²³

¹⁹ Bruce R. McConkie, *Mortal Messiah*, 1:368-369, emphasis added.

²⁰ Office Journal of Lorenzo Snow, 8 October 1900, 181-82.

²¹ *Conference Report*, April 1901, 3; emphasis added.

²² The piety of Jesus' parents comes to the fore again in this account, just as it did in the temple presentation of Jesus (Luke 2:21–40). The Hebrew Bible Jewish men are commanded to come to Jerusalem for three festivals: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (Exod. 23:14–17; 34:22–23; Deut. 16:16). ***But in light of the nation's scattering, the custom of first-century Judaism was that the pious who lived some distance away from the city journeyed to the temple only once a year.*** Bock, p. 324, emphasis added.

²³ The journey occurred in Jesus' twelfth year, ***which was before the normal age (i.e., thirteen) for Jewish boys to be responsible before God.*** Instruction toward this goal would be intensive for twelve-year-olds... The custom of Bar Mitzvah, common today for Jewish boys, began at a period after the time of Jesus (Fitzmyer 1981: 440). Bock, p. 324, emphasis added. Kent Jackson and Robert Millet note that Jesus, at age twelve, could possibly be experiencing a mar mitzvah. See: Kent P. Jackson and Robert L. Millet, eds., *Studies in Scripture, Vol. 5: The Gospels*, Deseret Book, 1986, p. 154-155.

- c. "Hearing them and asking them questions" (Luke 2.46).²⁴
- d. "My father's business" (Luke 2.49).²⁵
- e. "He went down with them... and was subject unto them" (Luke 2.51).²⁶
- f. Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man (Luke 2.52).²⁷

How Each Group Receives Jesus and His Birth – Ways to Read Matthew 2 and Luke 2

In this podcast, Bryce shared the idea that how each individual or group reacted to the birth of Christ can tell us something about ourselves. How do we respond to Jesus and his invitation to come to know him?

The following individuals or groups were discussed:

1. Simeon's counsel was that through Jesus, "the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2.35).
2. John (as an unborn child) leapt for joy (Luke 1.44).
3. The Shepherds (Luke 1.15-17).
4. The angels (Luke 2.17).
5. Simeon (Luke 2.25-30).
6. Anna (Luke 2.48).
7. Herod (Matthew 2.3).

²⁴ "In the Joseph Smith translation of these verses, we learn that the learned doctors 'were hearing [Jesus], and asking him questions.' (JST Luke 2:46-47.) Still later in His ministry, it is no wonder that those who sought to interrogate Him finally reached the point where no man 'durst ask him any question.' (Mark 12:34.) Had He been merely a brilliant mortal-taught solely by mere mortals, however bright-such contemporaries could have expected to engage Him and to interrogate Him successfully. However, Jesus received special tutoring. He told some, 'The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.' (John 5:19.)" Neal A. Maxwell, [Plain and Precious Things](#), Deseret Book, 1983, p. 41.

²⁵ As a young boy of twelve years, Jesus, after having been found in the temple by Joseph and Mary, in response to their inquiry asked a significant question: 'Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?' (Luke 2:49.) ***What did he mean by His Father's business?*** In another revelation the Lord gave meaning to that young boy's question... ***"When one becomes a holder of the priesthood, he becomes an agent of the Lord. He should think of his calling as though he were on the Lord's errand.*** (see D&C 64.29. That is what it means to magnify the priesthood. Think of the Master asking each of you, as this young boy did of Joseph and Mary, Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business? Whatever you do according to the will of the Lord is the Lord's business." Harold B. Lee, [Stand Ye in Holy Places](#), Deseret Book, 1974, p. 255.

²⁶ "Might this be a good lesson and example for those of us who have perhaps exceeded our own parents in terms of educational opportunities and other worldly advantages but still owe them so much for so much that is most precious? At the time Jesus was baptized He knew who He was, and yet He willingly submitted to proper priesthood authority and discipline (see Matt. 3:13-15)." Henry B. Eyring, [On Becoming a Disciple Scholar](#), Bookcraft, 1995, p. 57.

²⁷ "Concerning the home life of Joseph and his family in Nazareth, the scriptural record makes but brief mention. The silence with which the early period of the life of Jesus is treated by the inspired historians is impressive; while the fanciful accounts written in later years by unauthorized hands are full of fictitious detail, much of which is positively revolting in its puerile inconsistency...With hallowed silence do the inspired scribes honor the boyhood of their Lord; he who seeks to invent circumstances and to invest the life of Christ with fictitious additions, dishonors Him." James E. Talmage, [Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission According to Holy Scriptures Both Ancient and Modern](#), p. 104.

The Childhood of Jesus

Frederick Farrar said this of Jesus' youth:

“We cannot imitate Him in the occupations of His ministry, nor can we even remotely reproduce in our own experiences the external circumstances of His life during those three crowning years. But the vast majority of us are placed, by God's own appointment, amid those quiet duties of a commonplace and uneventful routine which are most closely analogous to the first thirty years of His life; it was during these years that His life is for us the main example of how we ought to live.”²⁸

The Liturgical Significance of Luke's testimony

Gabriel greets Mary and tells her that that her child will be “Son of the Highest”. Biblica scholar Margaret Barker contends that this is the key to understanding the original story of the birth of Jesus. In some places in the Hebrew Bible the title “Son of God” can be applied to the king at the First Israelite Temple, and by extension can be interpreted also as Yahweh son of the Most High God.²⁹ The king, acting as both king and priest, is then given the title “Son of God” after his initiation in the Holiest Place of the temple.³⁰ In proclaiming the king as “Son of God,” essentially God's presence was considered to be with the people, especially as the king and queen kept the terms of the covenant and the people were obedient to Yahweh.

Thus, the child Jesus can be seen as a manifestation of God being present with his people, the High Priest coming into his temple. This theme can be elaborated by looking in detail at just one verse from the Christmas story: “And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2.7).

Margaret Barker comments on several phrases in this verse.³¹

First born son

In the days of the original temple, “first born” is the title given to the person who has become the representative presence of the Lord on the earth. Then, it was the priest-king. Now in Luke's narrative, this is describing the “only-begotten of the Father,” Jesus himself. Barker writes, “The ‘first born’ sets the scene because in the temple, Firstborn is the title for the human person who has become the presence of the Lord on the earth. The original Firstborn had been the Lord himself, the first of the angel sons of God. Paul assumed knowledge of this when he explained, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God... in order that he might be the Firstborn among many brethren’ (Romans 8.14, 29). The newly appointed Davidic King was given this title; he cried out to the Lord ‘You are my Father’ and the Lord appointed him the Firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth (Psalm 89.26-27). This was the liturgical concept of the promise made to David through Nathan: ‘I will raise up your offspring after

²⁸ Frederic Farrar, [The Life of Christ](#), electronic manuscript, Cumorah Foundation, 2008, p. 78.

²⁹ I realize that the Hebrew Bible is not consistent on this point, and that Yahweh (like Zeus in the Greek tradition) will overtake the roles and descriptions of his father over time in the development of Israelite religious ideas and practices.

³⁰ See Psalm 2 and Psalm 110.

³¹ Her commentary can be found in Margaret Barker, [Christmas: The Original Story](#), SPCK, 2008, starting on page 74.

you... I will be his Father and he shall be my son (2 Samuel 7.12, 14). Paul shows that this divine sonship was central to the gospel, and all Christians being one in Christ meant that they all shared his status. They would be the assembly of the Firstborn in the heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 12.23).³²

Wrapped in swaddling clothes

The clothing of the “new born” priest-king in the days of the First Temple was an important part of his becoming the “first-born son.” Jewish mystical lore referred to these as “the residual garments,” because they were “emanations of supernal mystery, proceeding from the Glory of the Lord.”³³ In the Slavonic version³⁴ of the Enoch literature (2 Enoch), coming from around the time of Jesus, Enoch ascends to heaven and becomes the angelic high priest, “clothed in the glory of the Lord” (2 Enoch 22).³⁵ The new-born child is portrayed in the Gospel of Luke as being clothed with earthly garments, perhaps because the Enoch process of deification is being reversed here: Jesus is descending from the heavens, leaving behind his garments of glory, becoming mortal. The Son of God has now become embodied, and now the presence of Yahweh, which faithful sons and daughters of Israel had prayed for so long, has finally arrived and now “God is with us” (Isaiah 7.14).

Clothed in Glory

Barker relates that the Epistle of the Apostles said that at his incarnation, the Lord was robed in Wisdom and Power. In an early Christian wisdom text, Wisdom Mother gives to her son priestly garments that is

³² Barker, Christmas, p. 75.

³³ Father Michael Hall, [Christmas: The Lord who enters his Temple, The Bible and Catholics](#), accessed 11.30.22.

³⁴ Coptic copies have now been found, indicating that 2 Enoch was more widely read than previously thought. See: Andrei Orlov and Gabriele Boccaccini, (editors) [New Perspectives on 2 Enoch: No Longer Slavonic Only](#), Leiden: Brill, 2012.

³⁵ We read of this in 2 Enoch when the prophet Enoch makes his ascent:

And on the 10th heaven, [Aravoth](#), I saw the view of the face of the LORD, like iron made burning hot in a fire |and| brought out, and it emits sparks and is incandescent. Thus even I saw the face of the LORD. But the face of the LORD is not to be talked about, it is so very marvelous and supremely awesome and supremely frightening. |And| who am I to give an account of the incomprehensible being of the LORD, and of his face, so extremely strange and indescribable? And how many are his commands, and **his multiple voice**, and **the LORD’s throne, supremely great and not made by hands, and the choir stalls all around him, the cherubim and the seraphim armies, and their never-silent singing.**

Who can give an account of his beautiful appearance, never changing and indescribable, and his great glory? And I fell down flat and did obeisance to the LORD. And the LORD, with his own mouth, said to me, “Be brave, Enoch! Don’t be frightened! Stand up, and stand in front of my face forever.” And Michael, the LORD’s archistratig, lifted me up and brought me in front of the face of the LORD. And the LORD said to his servants, sounding them out, “Let Enoch join in and stand in front of my face forever!” And the LORD’s glorious ones did obeisance and said, “Let Enoch yield in accordance with your word, O LORD!”

And the LORD said to Michael, “Go, and extract Enoch from |his| earthly clothing. And anoint him with my delightful oil, and put him into the clothes of my glory.” And so Michael did, just as the LORD had said to him. He anointed me and clothed me. **And the appearance of that oil is greater than the greatest light, and its ointment is like sweet dew, and its fragrance myrrh; and it is like the rays of the glittering sun. And I looked at myself, and I had become like one of his glorious ones, and there was no observable difference.** See: [2 Enoch, \[Longer recension\] translated by F. Andersen, chapters 20-22](#). Accessed 3.21.21, emphasis added.

woven from every Wisdom.³⁶ We read something similar in the Hymn of the Pearl, where the prince needs to return back to heaven where his garment of glory awaits in the presence of his heavenly parents.³⁷

Laid in a manger

Margaret Barker writes that, "Then the child is set in a manger. The Hebrew word for manger *'ebus* (אֵבוּס), is almost the same as the ancient name of Jerusalem, *ḡbûs* (גְּבוּס), and so the scene Luke describes is almost, but not quite, the Virgin who clothes the first-born and sets him in ancient Jerusalem. This manger/Jerusalem wordplay appears in the opening verses of Isaiah. In its original context it was part of a complex oracle about the rebellious sons of God, the fallen angels. They are corrupted sons... the whole passage is political, a condemnation of the princes and priests of Jerusalem, woven throughout with wordplay. The ox, *šôr* (שׂוֹר), knows its owner, *qānoo* (קָנוּוּ), and the ass, *ḥāmôr* (חָמוֹר), is very much like the word for priest *komer* (כֹּמֵר). The humble animals recognize their master

³⁶ [The Teachings of Silvanus](#), CG VII.4.89. The text goes as follows: ***My son, listen to my teaching***, which is good and useful, and end the sleep which weighs heavily upon you. Depart from the forgetfulness which fills you with darkness, since if you were unable to do anything, I would not have said these things to you. But Christ has come in order to give you this gift. Why do you pursue the darkness when the light is at your disposal? Why do you drink stale water, though sweet wine is available for you? ***Wisdom summons you***, yet you desire folly. Not by your own desire do you do these things, but it is the animal nature within you that does them.

Wisdom summons you in her goodness, saying, "***Come to Me***, all of you, O foolish ones, that you may receive a gift, the understanding which is good and excellent. ***I am giving to you a high-priestly garment which is woven from every (kind of) wisdom.***" What else is evil death except ignorance? What else is evil darkness except familiarity with forgetfulness? Cast your anxiety upon God alone. Do not become desirous of gold and silver, which are profitless, but clothe yourself with wisdom like a robe; put knowledge on yourself like a crown, and be seated upon a throne of perception. For these are yours, and you will receive them again on high another time.

For a foolish man usually puts on folly like a robe, and like a garment of sorrow, he puts on shame. And he crowns himself with ignorance, and takes his seat upon a throne of nescience. For while he is without reason, he leads only himself astray, for he is guided by ignorance. And he goes the ways of the desire of every passion. He swims in the desires of life and has sunk. To be sure, he thinks that he finds profit when he does all the things which are without profit. The wretched man who goes through all these things will die, because he does not have the mind, the helmsman. But he is like a ship which the wind tosses to and fro, and like a loose horse which has no rider. For this (man) needed the rider, which is reason. For the wretched one went astray because he did not want advice. He was thrown to and fro by these three misfortunes: he acquired death as a father, ignorance as a mother, and evil counsels - he acquired them as friends and brothers. Therefore, foolish one, you should mourn for yourself.

From now on, then, my son, return to your divine nature. Cast from you these evil, deceiving friends! Accept Christ, this true friend, as a good teacher. Cast from you death, which has become a father to you. For death did not exist, nor will it exist at the end.

But since you cast from yourself God, the holy Father, the true Life, the Spring of Life, therefore you have obtained death as a father and have acquired ignorance as a mother. They have robbed you of the true knowledge.

But return, my son, to your first father, God, and Wisdom, your Mother, from whom you came into being from the very first in order that you might fight against all of your enemies, the Powers of the Adversary.

³⁷ Day, [The Cosmic Myth](#).

but the rulers of Jerusalem have not understood. In the Christmas story, this was a comment on the current rulers and the priests.”³⁸

No place in the inn

This phrase has been a source of much comment over the centuries for those who reflect on the nativity story, and what follows is not intended to weaken the impact of the Holy Family’s association with all those in our world today who find “no room at the inn”. But the words used in the Greek of Luke’s gospel are significant. There was no room (*topos*) in the inn (*kataluma*).³⁹

Topos is a very common Greek word meaning “place.” But in Jewish mystical writing from the centuries either side of our Lord’s birth, it had a much more specific meaning. The attributes of God were used as circumlocutions to avoid the presumption of talking directly about him. One very common one was to talk about the “Glory” – *shekinah* – which came down to inhabit the Holiest Place of the temple (at least in former years). In a sort of “double circumlocution,” even *shekinah* became too holy a word to use. So mystics would talk about the place – the *topos* – where the glory of the Lord came to dwell. As Philo, the first century Jewish mystic, used *topos* to mean *Logos* – the Word – this common Greek word might refer to the glory of God present among us. *Kataluma* is not a common Greek word. It is used in Luke chapter 22 for the location of the Last Supper. But its association here with *topos* suggests that Luke is pointing us to the Holy of Holies. Many technical temple terms were not translated from Hebrew into the Greek used in the centuries before Jesus’ birth. Instead, Greek words were invented that sounded like the Hebrew. It is possible that *kataluma* is one of these – a transliteration of *ta’alumah* – “hidden or secret place.” What happened to the baby Jesus happened because there was no Glory in the Holiest Place. “The Firstborn and the Glory, the Logos, was not ‘born’ in the Holy of Holies and did not appear in the garments of Glory in Jerusalem. He was swaddled in a manger elsewhere – the expected in the unexpected.”⁴⁰

Final thoughts: ways to read the birth story

Peshat: Literal Readings

Generally in the Church we read this story as a literal account of Jesus’ birth. We conflate both Matthew and Luke and present the images and information in a literal way, and this is good. I even think that conflating these accounts is good, as it makes things simple. We walk away knowing that Jesus, mighty son of God in the heavens, is born in humble circumstances in a lowly manger in a backwater part of the

³⁸ Margaret Barker, [Christmas: The Original Story](#), SPCK, 2008, p. 76.

³⁹ Luke explains: καὶ ἔτεκεν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτῆς τὸν πρωτότοκον καὶ ἐσπαργάνωσεν αὐτὸν καὶ ἀνέκλινεν αὐτὸν ἐν τῇ φάτῃ διότι οὐκ ἦν αὐτοῖς τόπος ἐν τῷ καταλύματι “And she brought forth her firstborn son, and she wrapped around him swaddling clothes, and she laid him in a manger, because there was no place for him in the inn.” (My translation). ἐσπαργάνωσεν is the 3rd person singular aorist of σπαργανόω, related to σπάργανον, the band for swaddling infants. It comes from the same root as σπεῖρον, the Greek word for a burial shroud. It is worth nothing that the Greek word σπάργανον can also be objects left with an exposed child, thereby being a token of the child’s true identity and parentage. See: Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, [A Greek-English Lexicon](#). See also: Day, [Jesus Christ: His Birth and its Message](#).

⁴⁰ Barker, *Christmas*, p. 78. She notes, “None of these suggestions constitutes proof, but together, they seem too much to be just coincidence.”

Roman Empire. Jesus experiences great irony in this situation. We are to be like Jesus, subject to the powers that be and meek and humble.

Remez: A Allegorical Approach

We can also see this story as an allegory of the Christian Church. Believers in Christ come to earth, subject to Rome (or the powers that be) and in so doing, eventually the kings of the earth (the Magi) will bow to them (meaning that the kingdoms of this world will acknowledge the Kingdom of God as sovereign). We see a bit of this in Isaiah 26.18, at least in the Greek translation: ἐν γαστρὶ ἐλάβομεν καὶ ὠδινήσαμεν καὶ ἐτέκομεν πνεῦμα σωτηρίας σου ἐποίησαμεν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἀλλὰ πεσοῦνται οἱ ἐνοικοῦντες ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς. My translation: “In our belly we have seized and felt the pains of childbirth, and also we have brought forth the spirit of your salvation, this we have created on the earth, but those dwelling upon the earth will fall down prostrate (πεσοῦνται).” Read in its context, Isaiah 26 can be read as portraying the worldly nations that have dominion over man that will one day fall down prostrate to the disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. This can also be seen by a careful reading of Psalm 72, as kings fall prostrate before “the kings son” (Ps. 72.1, 11).

This story can also be seen as an allegory of the future sacrifice of the Son of God. Jesus is wrapped in bands that can be seen as death bands, and laid in a stone box. The image cannot be missed, especially as he closes his eyes and sleeps. This image will be seen as he is laid in the Garden Tomb at the end of his mortal life.⁴¹

Derash: Applying the Text

In this method of reading, a *derash* reading, we try and find how it applies in our lives. We hear and feel the sermon speaking to us individually. Every person gains a different personal application, and I would suspect, find different applications based on where they are in their life journey. You will not see the same things in this story at 20 that you might when you are 50. We gain experience, and we have different perspectives. For me, I see this story as one that encourages me to subject myself to the powers that be. Things are not always fair. Rome wins most of the time. Joseph and Mary don't go about claiming that they have been wronged. Rather, they subject themselves to these things, and, I would guess, make the best of the circumstances that they are placed in.

Sod: The Mystical Meaning, or Ascent unto God

In this reading, some provocative images are available to us. When we combine the way Margaret Barker, Stephen Ricks and LeGrand Baker see the temple and how it is used to teach us of our ascent unto Jesus, we see some interesting possibilities with this image of the birth of the Savior. We see the image of the Divine Mother holding the Son of God. In the traditional images, we also see the donkey and the ox, reminiscent of the passage in Isaiah 1.3:

*The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib,
but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.* Isaiah 1.3

As Father Hall notes, “Any nativity play, any religious Christmas card, any continental *presepio*, will have the manger surrounded by the ox and the ass. Neither Luke nor Matthew mention this, but from the

⁴¹ Day, Jesus Christ, [His Birth and its Message](#).

earliest days of the Church this Isaiah verse was used as a commentary on the nativity. ***That whole first chapter of Isaiah is a political condemnation of the princes and priests of Jerusalem***, “woven through with wordplay.” Margaret continues: “The ox, (*šor*), knows its owner, (*qoneh*). This is very similar to the prince (*šar*) knowing his begetter (*qoneh* again).” The word for ass (*chamor*) sounds very similar to that for priest (*komer*).”⁴²

So in our image of the nativity, we have the kings coming to the Savior, the king. We have the father and mother image present (Joseph and Mary). With this we have the images of the ox and the donkey, images that could represent our ability to get past the “princes” and the “priests” of our time and see truth. In Jesus’ day these rulers were those who held the power in Jerusalem. This birth story has Jesus born in a different temple, the cave perhaps, representing that Jesus is coming out of the earth to reclaim his kingdom. The pronouncement of his birth from the heavenly heralds to the lowly shepherds could represent men and women of the earth, being taught from on high, and coming into the divine presence as they heed the voices of heaven proclaim Jesus’ right to rule. This whole scene can be seen as our personal ascent back to God the Father and our Heavenly Mother, back into the presence of Jesus Christ, where we offer our very lives as a consecrated gift to him. This personal gift is greater than gold, frankincense, and myrrh, for it is the very thing he requires of us in order to be one with him in the Church of the Firstborn.

⁴² Hall, Christmas: “The Lord who enters his Temple,” [The Bible and Catholics](#), accessed 11.30.22.