

INTRODUCTION (1)

- Which is more important in the history of Christianity: the death and resurrection of Jesus or the birth of Jesus?
 - Which is more exciting for you: the death and resurrection of Jesus or the birth of Jesus?
- Even though the death and resurrection of Jesus, namely Easter, is more important for the Church, on a personal level, we're intrigued by his birth. There's something about it that is fascinating.

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- What do we know about the things related to the birth of Jesus?
- Who were his parents?
- Who were his grandparents?
- Who were his ancestors?
- Where were his parents from?
- Where was he born?
- How did his parents get there?
- In what kind of shelter was he born?
- When was he born? What year? What day? What hour?

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- Who came to see him?
- When did they see him?
- Where were they from?
- How many of them were there?
- Did they have names?
- What did they bring?
- What else do you know?

Interestingly enough, even those of you who don't have a Christian background knew some of these details. The infancy of Jesus is something that fascinates all of us.

And so tonight we're going to talk about it in more detail, but with a fairly brisk pace because there's a lot of material to cover in a short amount of time:

- First, we'll look at some general themes
- Second, we'll look at both Matthew and Luke's infancy narratives in detail, and
- Third, we'll look at a few other traditions related to the birth of Jesus

Throughout the talk, I'll show some artwork related to this remarkable event.

OK, let's get right into it. First, let me set the context in which each of the two gospel infancy narratives were written. Note that Matthew and Luke are the only 2 gospel writers who provide infancy narratives. Mark and John do not. And here it's important to remind you of something we talked about in our presentation on Scripture, namely the Church's approach to understanding how the gospels got written. The Church reminds us that the Gospels are not journalistic accounts written down at the time of the event they are recording. That's a very recent approach to newsworthy

events. There was no CNN at the time of Jesus. Instead, the Gospels are part of a 3 phase process. First, there was the actual life, actions, and sayings of Jesus, which were experienced by the apostles and other disciples. Next, there was a period of apostolic preaching in which the Apostles shared their experience of Jesus, were inspired to find the meaning of those experiences, and worked out how to best convey the meaning of those experiences to others. This oral development of the stories was critical, and was common. There were no printing presses at the time, and it was through the lost skill of oral recounting that most history came to be known. It was only after a period of several decades, that the gospels were written down in an attempt by non-apostles to ensure that the apostolic experiences were faithfully recorded. Each gospel was written in a different place, with a specific community of believers in mind, and with different material and traditions at hand. The purpose of the gospels is not to merely recount a series of factual events, but to convey their meaning so that the faith impact inherent in the experience of Jesus comes to the fore. They are written by believers so that others may come to believe.

In the specific cases of Matthew and Luke, each gospel was probably written in the 80's, some 40 to 50 years after the death of Jesus. In that time, some significant events had occurred:

- The Jewish temple in Jerusalem, which was the center of Jewish worship, was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD after a 4 year revolt of some Jews, called zealots, to Roman rule.
- The Christian sect of Judaism had increasingly become separated from the rest of Judaism in their claim that the messiah had already come. This was exacerbated as the Jewish faithful tried to reclaim their identity in the wake of the loss of the temple, which had become the symbol of their identity.
- The Christian communities had grown, from the initial band of apostles and disciples, to separate communities spread throughout the Roman Empire, including southern Europe, Asia Minor, and Northern Africa.
- Each of these communities claimed a lineage to one or more of the Apostles, as they were probably founded by different Apostles in the years following the death of Jesus. As such, all heard the story of Jesus through the words and experiences of different subsets of Apostles.
- Each of these communities had their own issues, many of which were addressed by the person who wrote the gospel within that community.

It's also important to note that the infancy narratives are different than the rest of Matthew and Luke's gospels.

- First, we don't find reference to information from infancy narratives anywhere else in scripture. This would lead us to suspect that the other parts of the gospels were fairly solid before people started asking about the origins of Jesus. They wanted to know who he was before they wanted to know where he came from.
- Second, they contain material that is significantly different in style than the rest of the gospels, which is why they're so memorable. The infancy narratives are filled with miraculous events, like angels and celestial signs. They contain almost all the content we have about the parents of Jesus. They are vivid and highly imaginative versus the rest of Matthew and Luke's gospels.
- And finally, they contain many parallels with the passion and death narratives of Jesus, as if they were a bookend to this core experience of Jesus. Both the passion and infancy narratives of the gospels contain parallels: they have dreams, signs (like stars and earthquakes), and memorable characters (like kings, parents, etc.).

So what's the purpose of the infancy narratives, if they are different than the rest of Matthew and Luke's gospels?

- Well, as I've mentioned already, once people came to believe that Jesus truly was the messiah and the Son of God, they were naturally curious to know more about him. Not only were they interested in his teachings and how he acted, but they were curious about where he came from, what his roots were. This is a common human approach to things. Think about someone you've fallen in love with. You first come to appreciate their importance in your life. But once you do that, you want to know more about them, including where they were born, where their parents came from, and their heritage. You want to know their roots.
- The next objective of the infancy narratives was to describe, in larger terms, our belief about Jesus, or what is called Christology. They attempt to define who Jesus is on a cosmic scale, his relationship to and fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, or what we now call the Old Testament. As a result, both Matthew and Luke spent a lot of time bridging the Old Testament with the story of Jesus.
- While both Matthew and Luke had access to the gospel written by Mark, they had an additional challenge that Mark did not have. Mark was writing to a community that had strong Jewish heritage, in other words, Mark's community was already familiar with the Old Testament, but Matthew and Luke's communities contained gentiles who needed to become familiar with the fact that God had been acting consistently with us throughout time, not just through Jesus. The infancy narratives are a sort of bridge between the Old Testament and the story of Jesus.

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MATTHEW

So, with that long introduction, we're going to cover the infancy narrative of Matthew first.

Matthew is writing in Greek, and begins his Gospel with the Greek word for the first book of the Bible: *genesis*. Matthew is describing a new genesis, whose only possible comparison is to the creation of the world as a whole. Matthew frames his story not as a book of the descendants of Abraham, but as the genesis of Jesus. Note the subtle difference. Matthew is telling us that Jesus outranks the father of the faith. And he'll make that more obvious through a genealogy.

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So we find ourselves in a genealogy that will show us that Jesus' birth really begins way back with Abraham and the story of all that God has already done for us and he goes on to mention 14 patriarchs on the way to David the King. Now a side note here: 14 is the numeric value of the name David in Hebrew (in an analogy, if we were to number the letters of our alphabet 1 to 26 and then add up the numbers within a name, you'd get a total of 14 when it comes to David). But notice that Matthew uses an odd assortment of characters to describe the lineage of Jesus. He talks about how Abraham was the father of Isaac. But Ishmael was the first born of Abraham, even though he wasn't born of Abraham's wife Sara.

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Matthew talks about how Isaac was the father of Jacob, but Esau was the first born of Isaac, and was tricked out of his inheritance by Jacob.

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Next he talks about Judah, who sold his brother, Joseph, into slavery. Matthew is emphasizing the Old Testament theme that God works through all of us, good and bad. He's also telling us the fact that there were sinners in the ancestry of Jesus, and it was the sinners and outcasts of this world that Jesus would choose to spend his time with. Matthew uses the infancy narratives to foreshadow a lot of the life of Jesus.

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As I said, Matthew mentions 14 patriarchs in all on the way to King David, who was the greatest King of all. He follows this by mentioning 14 more kings who were not particularly great, and the end result of their reign is the loss of everything, when the Babylonians forced the Jews into exile. In other words God is at work in our successes and our failures. God is at work in making us bigger and better and in making us smaller and more dependent. But it's a hard lesson to learn not to judge our success by whether we're growing or not, be it our income, our nation, or our Church. The Old Testament message is that even in our loss, we are being blessed and guided toward success by God. God is continually fulfilling his promise to Abraham.

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Next, Matthew talks about kings after the exile. These kings are not well known. In fact, most of them are not recorded in any history of Israel. The message here is that the famous and the infamous are all part of God's kingdom. Jesus ancestry includes the great and the small.

So we've got a genealogy that tells us

1. God works through all of us, good and bad
2. God is at work in our successes and our failures, and
3. the famous in the infamous are all part of God's kingdom.

Now, the part of the genealogy which I find most interesting is the list of 4 women which Matthew has inserted. He has chosen not to include the 4 most noble women of the Old Testament, but rather women who could be seen as scandalous. All these women are in suspect circumstances and God is working through them in a different way than most. In addition, 3 of the women are not even Israelites, and the one who is is referred to as the wife of Uriah, who was not an Israelite. This is all to emphasize that Christianity was being received more by those outside of Israel than within Israel.

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Tamar was married to one of the sons of Judah, whom we've already talked about. When Tamar's husband died, Judah didn't go through the effort to get her another of his sons as her husband as Jewish law directs, and she was left without offspring, and since Jews did not believe in an afterlife, she was deprived of her future, for Jews believed we live into the future through our children.

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So, she disguised herself as a prostitute, enticed Judah to sleep with her, and got pregnant – don't stories like this make you want to read more of the Old Testament? ☺ When Judah asks how she pregnant, she tells him, and instead of getting angry, he comes to realize that she fulfilled the law to take it on herself to ensure that children would be raised up to her deceased husband when Judah didn't care about it. In the end, she was holier than Judah.

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Rahab is remembered as a prostitute, but she is the one that got Israelite spies into the land of Canaan by hiding them in her apartment, and without her, there would have been no conquest of the land.

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She and her family came to live with the Israelites from that day forward.

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Ruth was a noble and pious woman who had to put herself into an awkward circumstance. When her husband died, she wanted to go back to Israel with her mother-in-law, even though she was not a Jew.

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But none of her Jewish relatives took any interest in raising up her children, and she had to force herself on one of the relatives, had a son, and eventually became the great grandmother of King David.

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Finally, Bathsheba, was the wife of Uriah, the great military leader of King David. She was seduced by King David while her husband was at battle and became pregnant. Another saucy tale which is well represented in art, but art that is a bit more revealing than this presentation will allow. In an effort to hide his sin, David had her husband killed. Bathsheba gave birth to the king renown for his wisdom: Solomon.

Matthew is saying that without these scandalous women, there would be no Jesus

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So when we finally hear Mary's name at the end of the genealogy, we suspect that she'll be scandalous too, like these women who were effective in the accomplishment of God's plan, despite their external circumstances. And we wonder how God's mysterious workings will soon be revealed in Mary.

So now we move from the genealogy to the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus. Joseph is described not as the father of Jesus but as the husband of Mary. Again, there is foreshadowing in that the genealogy pattern, “Joseph, the father of Jesus” is deliberately broken. Now we are that much closer to finding out about the scandal surrounding Mary.

It is here that Matthew presents the role of the Holy Spirit. His intention is not so much to convey that the Spirit conceives, as it is to convey that the Spirit creates. Just like it hovered over the waters at the creation of the world, so the Spirit brings about a new creation in Jesus.

We see how Joseph himself came to find out about the strange circumstance in which he was placed, and we come to see him as an obedient Jew. Matthew is reinforcing that it is not only the marginalized, the foreigner, the scandalized who come to follow Jesus, but that obedient Jews also do. He is a God for all, not a select few. Like many of us, Joseph struggles in his understanding of Jesus, and in that struggle almost comes to divorce his betrothed. But when he listens to God, he obeys and does what he must do. And in giving Jesus his name, he claims him as his son and becomes the legal father of Jesus. And the genealogy makes clear that it is only through Joseph that Jesus is the son of David.

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The name Joseph chooses is Joshua, which can be interpreted as “Yahweh saves.” In the Old Testament, Joshua is the one who brings the people out of the desert into the Promised Land. Jesus is being foreshadowed as someone who will save God’s people.

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So, in his first dream, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph and tells him what to do. This is a typical convention in Old Testament literature. Angels appear to the Patriarchs, to Abraham, Moses, and others. And just like the genealogy tied Jesus to the kings of Israel, or the Law, now Matthew ties him to the prophets of Israel.

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In Christianity, when we mention Joseph, we think of Jesus’ father, but the original hearers of this gospel would have immediately thought of Joseph from the Book of Genesis, who was called the “master of dreams” because he interpreted Pharaoh’s dreams. This New Testament Joseph is echoing the Old Testament Joseph. Furthermore, we’ll later find out that the New Testament Joseph goes to Egypt just like the Old Testament Joseph did. Matthew is deliberately superimposing a New Testament story on top of an Old Testament story, lending each deeper significance. In Genesis, the Old Testament Joseph story is immediately followed by the story of a Pharaoh who killed all the male children because he wanted to control the population.

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We also know that at the time of Matthew’s writing, there were well known pious offshoots of that Old Testament story. In those stories, Pharaoh had advisors, or magi, who told him that a great child

would be born, and Pharaoh killed the children to block the birth of the marvelous child who would lead them to freedom.

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But Pharaoh failed, and the infant Moses survived, and delivered his people.

Knowledge of this story would anticipate the nativity story of magi and a wicked king who will kill the children of Jesus' time.

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Just as the story has worked out an alignment between the Old Testament and New Testament Josephs, this part of the story starts to work out an alignment between Jesus and Moses, the savior of God's people in the Old Testament.

Now, while we have just been introduced to a faithful Jew who comes to accept Jesus, we next hear about magi, from a distant land, who also come to accept him. And that brings us to chapter 2.

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Magi are a combination of wise men and astrologers. They are called magicians elsewhere in the New Testament, usually with malicious intent behind them. But this is not the case here. The magi understood that certain combinations of stars would indicate the birth of the King of the Jews. In the letters of Paul, Paul indicates that for the Jews God reveals himself more directly, but to the gentiles, he reveals himself through nature. This same notion may be going on in this story as well: Joseph gets dreams, the magi have to find a natural phenomenon. But to date, no one has found any evidence of special stars, comets, or conjunctions of planets at exactly this time. They're always a few years too early or too late.

Instead of looking for celestial evidence, we'd be better off thinking of this in a different way. Matthew is really thinking of a star that his hearers would recognize. Remember that pretty much the sole source of stories for most people at the time was exclusively the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, Moses encountered 2 wicked kings, one who tried to kill him at his birth, and the second being the wicked King of Moab, who sent to the east for a man with magical powers, a magus, who came with 2 companions, in order to curse Israel and make it perish. But the magus could not do it because he saw a star rising, the star of the house of David. Instead of cursing them, he predicted the rise of the house of David, which to this day is the star on the Israeli flag.

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It is this figurative star of the house of David that Matthew is dealing with, and it's easier to understand Herod's response as a result if he, too, recalled the Moses story where a gentile from the east sees a star with special powers. Herod would see it as signifying the birth of the King of the Jews.

The gentiles are willing to come to Jesus, but cannot find him until they get the special revelation that belongs to the Jews (the magi must come to Herod). For Matthew, this means the Scriptures. The Gentiles cannot come to understand Jesus unless they understand the Jewish scriptures. In contrast to this, the ones who can understand scriptures, the chief priests and scribes, know where he is to be born (Bethlehem) but they will not come and worship. This is a reflection of the experience of Matthew and his community who are finding that there are more gentiles believing in Jesus than Jews.

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Now, unlike in Luke, Matthew implies that Mary and Joseph have a house in Bethlehem. There's no traveling involved on their part. Matthew doesn't appear to have any knowledge about their coming from Nazareth. Instead, the magi find them in a house and offer exotic gifts which catch the imagination and call to mind other events from the Old Testament and Roman history.

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We know that exotic kings had come to the Roman Emperor and brought him gifts. In doing the same thing for Jesus, we see a pattern of respect. In addition, Matthew hints at certain Old Testament passages.

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- In Psalm 72, the kings of Tarshish, Arabia and Saba, bring gifts and pay homage

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- In Isaiah 60 "all those from Sheba will bring gold and frankincense." At the end of the talk, we'll see how there came to be 3 wisemen who were kings.

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Continuing with the story, the magi are warned in a dream to not return to Herod and go back home a different way. See, in describing the revelation of Jesus in the infancy narratives, both Matthew and Luke create a problem. If it was known at his birth that Jesus was the unique Son of God, then why didn't people come to know him during his childhood and young adulthood? Both Matthew and Luke had to find some cloaking mechanism to explain this. In Matthew, it is because the magi go home by a different route and don't tell Herod.

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Now the angel of the Lord talks to Joseph in a second dream. In response, Joseph, who is the model of the obedient believer, immediately picks up family and moves to Egypt, again recalling the Joseph of the Old Testament. This is typical of the immediacy of response that God requires of the believer.

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Next, we get a prophetic statement from Hosea, "Out of Egypt I called my son," which at the time of Hosea's ministry was meant to indicate all of Israel was called out of Egypt,

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but here Matthew uses it to indicate Jesus, the fulfillment of Israel.

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While Joseph and family are in Egypt, Herod massacres the innocent children. Now, there is no recorded evidence of Herod massacring children at this time, but the action is not inconsistent with the hard hearted and violent nature of Herod the Great, especially near the end of his reign.

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But Matthew's focus is not so much on aligning us with recorded contemporary history as it is to align us with recorded Old Testament history. He is paralleling Herod's actions with that of Pharaoh in killing the Hebrew children at the time of Moses, aligning Jesus with the great prophet of Judaism.

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Joseph later has a 3rd dream that it is safe to return to Israel, for "those who sought the child's life are dead." Notice that he uses the plural, those, not the singular. This echoes what was said to Moses when he had to flee from Egypt for a short time: "for all the men who sought your life are dead". Again, Matthew is aligning Jesus with Moses, who saved the Hebrew people.

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Finally, on the way home, Joseph has a 4th dream that led him to return not to Bethlehem but to Galilee. I mean, there's one thing to say about Joseph: that guy could sleep! Newborn baby and all! See, there's some significance in both Matthew and Luke that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, called the city of David, but grew up in Nazareth. Both of them find different ways to account for this reality. Interestingly enough, Matthew will associate Galilee, the northernmost region of Israel, as the region of the Gentiles. Again, indicating revelation as being partaken in by the Gentiles as well.

Matthew has told some of the key ideas of the Old Testament, and has set the stage for some of the key ideas of the New Testament. His is a masterful bridge that brings together the past and the future with a symbolism and manner that makes it more memorable than any other 2 chapters of his.

LUKE

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Now, since time is short, let's move on to Luke and his general themes. While Matthew tended to see things in terms of God's cosmic plan, Luke sees things in terms of worldwide implications. Luke sees the world as that defined by the expansive Roman Empire, whereas Matthew sees it in terms of the Jews. Luke is concerned with journeys. 9 of his 24 chapters are Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Most of his Acts of the Apostles is the journeys of Paul. His whole gospel is a movement from the outskirts of Jewish life, Galilee, to the center of Jewish life, Jerusalem. Acts is a movement from the outskirts of Roman life, Jerusalem, to the center of Roman life, Rome. Luke's gospel begins in the temple of Jerusalem, journeys away from it and comes back to it at the end. And so his infancy narrative contains the theme of journey as well, starting in a Jewish town, but impelled by the civilized world, the Roman Emperor, to move on to another town.

And it is thus that Luke begins what he considers the 2nd book of God's word. The first book was the story of Israel and God the Father, and now he begins a story of Jesus, and in Acts he will write the 3rd book, the story of the Holy Spirit. And so, his initial concern, like Matthew, is to connect the first story with the second story. And he does this with a bridge: the infancy narratives. His bridge does not specifically present Old Testament characters, but the characters he does present belong in the Old Testament. Let me explain.

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Zechariah and Elizabeth are aged and barren, just like the only 2 similar characters in the Old Testament: Abraham, the father of our faith, and Sara, his wife. Both couples want a child desperately, and God appears to the fathers and tells them that their wives shall bear a son. Both respond with the same exact words "how shall this be?" In a similar parallelism, both Sara and Elizabeth rejoice. Later on, Simeon and Anna echo other Old Testament characters.

Besides simply giving us characters who belong in the Old Testament, Luke also gives us beautiful hymns that belong to the Old Testament as well, but which are spoken in the context of the New Testament, all as a way of echoing the instinct of Matthew: you must bring into the story of Jesus what God has already done for His people.

And so Luke begins with someone deeply imbued in the Jewish customs and the Jewish history, the priest, Zechariah, who is allowed to enter the sanctuary of the Lord. This pious man represents the holy and righteous in Israel who await their salvation.

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And while in the sanctuary, he is visited by an angel who starts out with what all angels say "Be not afraid" for this is a cosmic occurrence. It's not everyone who gets visited by an angel, especially the angel Gabriel who appears only in the Book of Daniel, the prophet of the last times. Zechariah is aligned with Abraham and the beginning of Jewish history, and with Daniel and the end of Jewish history. Thus, Luke bookends the entire Old Testament and brings it into this story. Now, you'd think that this will introduce the main character of Luke's story, but in fact, it brings about a predecessor to Jesus,

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John the Baptist. See, Christian memory knew that John the Baptist was a very important figure who was the gateway to the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and so Luke must tell us about the conception and birth of John before the birth of Jesus – John must prophecy Jesus. Through Gabriel's words, which echo descriptions of Elijah, Luke gives John qualities that are known about through the Christian memory: he will be an ascetic and he will be set aside.

Luke pays a lot of attention to Zechariah and Elizabeth not only because of John the Baptist, but also to represent the fullness of the Old Testament. Zechariah and Elizabeth have begged for something and God hears them – grace that's prayed for – the yearning of the pious is fulfilled. This is different from the New Testament action of God which we'll see in Mary. She's not awaiting anything, and then God steps in and tells her something she's never even dreamed about – grace that's unexpected, just like the intervention of God through Jesus is a surprise.

And so, just like Daniel was struck mute when he encountered Gabriel, the angel who proclaims the end time, so is Zechariah struck mute until the birth of John. I sometimes wish God would bestow such a grace upon my wife. Just kidding.

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Now, Luke is a masterful writer, and each of his works has a framing that is wonderful. As Zechariah leaves the sanctuary, the people are gathered, awaiting his blessing, but because of his muteness he is unable to give that blessing. In fact, no blessing is given until at the end of Luke, Jesus blesses the apostles, and they return to the temple.

So, now that the annunciation of and conception of John the Baptist has been presented,

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Luke begins a parallel story, that of the annunciation of and conception of Jesus. Now, remember how Matthew focused on Joseph as the one who represents the early Christians in their obedience to God, Luke focuses on Mary as the model for Christians. She is the first one to hear the Gospel and believe in it. For Luke, this action of hearing **and** believing/doing is the true sign of a Christian.

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In the story of the annunciation of and conception of Jesus, Luke has the angel Gabriel go to Nazareth. Since Jesus ended up in Nazareth, Luke sees that as the home of his parents. Luke indicates that the way Mary has already lived her life places her in God's favor, and so Gabriel greets her as already in God's favor and he is about to grant her an even greater favor. Gabriel greets her with the common "The Lord be with you" and then uses language that can be interpreted only one way: there will be a new king from the house of David, who had not ruled for almost 500 years. And it is the fulfillment of the promise given David in 2 Samuel 7, indicating that the child to be born will be the messiah, the anointed one of the house of David, the King of the Jews.

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To this amazing news, Mary's question is similar to Zechariah's "how will this be?" but instead of an Old Testament response, she is given a response in the language of Christian preaching: the Holy Spirit will make it so. So now Jesus has a twofold identity: the messiah of the house of David, and the unique Son of God through the Holy Spirit. Mary is now hearing what the Christian preachers said of Jesus, as we hear in Paul's letter to the Romans: Jesus is descended from David according to the flesh, but constituted the Son of God in power through the Holy Spirit. In other words, his fleshly lineage of his flesh is that of his mother, but the lineage of his power is that of the Holy Spirit.

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Mary responds by saying "I am the servant of the Lord." But a purer way to translate this would be "I am the slave woman of the Lord" which strikes us as harsh, but Luke wouldn't want us to soften his language, since his gospel is about the poor, the outcast, the social situation. In the same way, his version of the Beatitudes is much harsher than Matthew's version, which has spiritualized the social message. Luke says things like "Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry." Christianity was most successful among the poor of the Roman Empire and Mary is connecting with the early Christians. The goal was not to make the story socially acceptable, but to connect the true message of Jesus with the ones who need to hear it.

And it is at this point that Luke shows that Mary is a true disciple, the first disciple. She hears the word of the Lord, and then she **does** it. She says "let it be done to me according to your will." While Mary is a member of Jesus' family, a consistent theme in Luke has Jesus saying his real family consists not of his blood relatives, but of those who hear the word of God and keep it. Mary is a model disciple not because she is the loving mother of Jesus, but because she models the appropriate response to Jesus.

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Now a little side note here. In terms of Catholic beliefs about Mary that sometimes strike others as strange, there are two particular items: the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. The Immaculate Conception says that Mary is conceived without sin. How can that be? We are all born with sin. But Christians universally believe that the baptized are delivered from sin by the power of the cross. And so what the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is really saying is that as the first disciple, Mary is the first to be delivered from sin. The Assumption says that Mary was assumed bodily into heaven. Christians also say that all the dead who believed in Christ will be delivered to God.

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What was done to Mary in her assumption will eventually be done to all who believe – it's just that the priority of what happens to her follows the implication of her being the first disciple, and thus the first to receive the privileges of discipleship. It's all about the redemptive power of Christ for human beings, not making Mary so different from ourselves.

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She's just the promise of the pattern that will occur for us as well.

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Luke ends the parallel annunciations, and moves to the Visitation of Elizabeth by Mary. As the model of discipleship, and like Joseph in Matthew, she immediately follows the angel's message and goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth. And here we see the role of John the Baptist as the prophet of Jesus come to light. When Mary greets Elizabeth, the infant leaps in Elizabeth's womb and she becomes filled with the Holy Spirit. Mary has not told Elizabeth about her pregnancy, but Elizabeth knows it because of the infant, John, in her womb. And she not only knows that Mary is pregnant, but she knows that the Lord is in her womb. Her first greeting blesses Mary because she is the mother of Jesus. In other words, how blessed are you that the Lord is in your womb. You've heard jokes about Jewish mothers bragging "this is my son, the doctor." But imagine being able to brag "this is my son, the Messiah." By the way, it is from Gabriel's greeting and Elizabeth's greeting that the Hail Mary prayer derives. Elizabeth further echoes the ongoing discipleship definition of Luke in her second blessing which blesses Mary because she believed what she heard.

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Mary responds to Elizabeth not by blessing her in return, but by blessing God. Her response is known as the Canticle of Mary, or the Magnificat. It's one of a several hymns that Luke gives us in his infancy narrative, each of which I'll point out. Each of these hymns has the tone of being added. They fit slightly awkwardly where Luke has put them, having reference to things that aren't mentioned in Luke and only a loose connection in their context, but each of them fit the piety of the person who is saying them. For example, in this hymn, Mary says "he has cast down the mighty from their thrones" and "he has filled the hungry with good things." While these things may be aligned with Luke's gospel message, they seem out of context with what Mary is focused on and what she knows at the time. Scholars believe that Luke took hymns that were popular in the early Church and inserted them into the story. We know from the Book of Maccabees and from other sources called the Dead Sea Scrolls, that Jews at this time composed hymns based on the Old Testament. If you recall, the Old Testament was the primary piece of literature for the Jews, and they quoted extensively from it. In a similar way, we quote from movies and TV shows and people immediately understand the larger context of our statement, often with humorous effect. For example, when I play golf, it's pretty common to use a number of lines from Caddy Shack and Tin Cup. In a similar way, these hymns reference lines from the Old Testament to comment on the present situation. So, here we're hearing echoes of the very first Christian prayers, fully Jewish in nature, and using Old Testament language to comment on the message of Christ.

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In this case, the Magnificat is reminiscent of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, who yearned for a child and praises God for her pregnancy in 1 Samuel 2, saying "look on the low estate of your handmaid..." and she goes on to praise God who made the poor rich, reducing to lowliness those how have been raised up. Mary's response is that of a model disciple: instead of praising God for putting the child in her womb, she magnifies the Lord because of His social actions. This becomes a real preparation, if not an actual synopsis, of the Gospel. This connection of Mary with the poor and oppressed is reflected in many of the appearances of Mary. Czestochowa, Guadalupe, Fatima, Medjugorje all have to do with the hope God provides to people who are oppressed and poor.

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Once Mary's Visitation is complete, Luke goes on to the second parallel between John and Jesus. He has completed the annunciation parallels, and now he'll go on to describe the birth parallels. He starts with the naming of John. Now, the custom for most Jews is to name the child after the grandfather, not the father, but Luke's tradition must have had the child named after the father. Elizabeth, without consulting with her husband, Zechariah, says that their child is to be called John, not Zachariah. When Zechariah confirms this independently, all are amazed at the prophecy involved.

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And then it is time for the second hymn that Luke presents, called the Canticle of Zechariah or the Benedictus. Again, the style is to combine Old Testament references in a new Christian connection. And in the final line of the chapter, Luke's reference to the child growing in wisdom in the wilderness is reminiscent of many of the Old Testament children who are destined to go on to do great things for Israel.

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So as we begin Chapter 2, we now have the final parallel between John and Jesus, but this time, Luke is significantly more extravagant in his description. Luke is going to show how Jesus' birth impacts the entire world, so he brings in Caesar Augustus as the leader of the known world. Augustus was known as the one who organized the Empire and he conducted a lot of censuses to do this. Trying to connect a historical census with this message is beyond his point. Luke is merely trying to show that the event of Jesus' birth has global significance. In addition, the time when Luke wrote his gospel was just after the Jewish rebellion against Roman rule, and he's writing about a central character, Jesus, who was put to death by the Roman Empire as a "so called King of the Jews." Luke is trying to show that Jesus was not associated with the separatist rebels who caused trouble for Rome, and so he is careful to show that Mary and Joseph were obedient subjects of the Empire, not zealots.

So, in obedience to the Emperor, who is part of God's providential plan, Jesus is born in the city of David. Actually, the City of David is Jerusalem, a city David built from nothing in order to unite the separate kingdoms he was to rule. But the city of David's birth was Bethlehem. So, the son of David will be born where David was born.

Luke's next commentary about where Jesus was born is in keeping with his interest in Psalm passages rather than his disdain for innkeepers. Remember, the gospel writers are more interested in connections with the Old Testament than with reporting the journalistic details of the scene – which is a relatively modern preoccupation.

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The reference to the manger, or feeding trough, called to mind a passage from the first chapter of Isaiah, where he says "An ox knows its owner, and an ass, its master's manger; But Israel does not know, my people has not understood." In other words, Israel doesn't know where to find Jesus, the

food of eternal life. Luke then goes on to talk about shepherds in the field. Here, Luke is doing what Matthew also sought to do, saying that there are pious Jews who accepted Jesus.

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Luke's particular manner is to echo the language of the prophet Micah through the reference to shepherds and sheep. But Luke also ties in the contemporary secular environment by again referencing Augustus in the Cantic of the Angels, called the Gloria in Excelsis: "Glory to God in the highest and *on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.*" This reference to peace and the imperial way it is phrased would have further called to mind Caesar Augustus. When he came to power, the Republic had seen war for many years, and Augustus' promised peace. In fact he built an altar of peace and an obelisk whose shadow point down the street to the altar of peace on Augustus' birthday. So Luke is taking the language of Augustus, and applying it to the birth of Jesus, saying the one who brings peace to the world is not Augustus but the Son of God.

By the way, Luke, who as we've already shown in his use of the temple blessing of Zechariah being given by Jesus at the end of the gospel was masterful in framing events with a later event completing an earlier one. In this case, the Cantic of the Angels, is echoed by the people as Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey in Chapter 19. The people say "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest" in much the same way that one side echoed the other side when we did the Liturgy of the Hours.

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So, when the shepherds hear the message of the angels, they journey (a central theme in Luke) to see what has happened.

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And like Mary, they act with haste upon the revelation of God.

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Now, while the shepherds may have responded with praise and making known the content of their revelation,

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Mary instead reflects on things in her heart. She is like Joseph in the Old Testament, who has a dream about the sun and moon and stars, but his father kept all of this with concern because he did not understand it fully. Daniel interprets the dream of great king Nebuchadrezzar, who keeps it in his heart and reflects on it. They will not understand it until later on. In the same way, Luke is saying that Mary does not fully understand God's plan because the revelation of Jesus is not fully contained in the nativity, but becomes clear only later on. Just like Matthew had to find a way to explain how such a public birth could be kept quiet until the public ministry of Jesus, Luke is using Mary's reflective response as a way to allow Jesus to grow in obscurity until his public ministry.

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Right after the birth, Luke has Jesus circumcised and the family journey to Jerusalem for the presentation in the Temple, foreshadowing Jesus' later journey to Jerusalem. Luke is working out that every detail of Jewish life is undertaken in Jesus' life. In other words, Jesus has full Jewish roots. In this case and in others, Luke is a little confused about Jewish family customs, which makes us think that he may have been a convert to Judaism.

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The firstborn child is to be given to God, and in so doing an offering must be proffered. In this case, it's a pair of turtledoves. This part is correct. But Luke seems to think that both parents must be purified, where Jewish custom says only the mother must be purified.

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Now, why does Mary need to be purified? Is it some kind of sense that when a woman gives birth that she's unclean and needs to be purified again? Actually it's just the opposite. The Jews recognized a division between the secular and the sacred. They recognized that giving birth was a creative act, which is as close as humans can get to the realm of God. The woman who has given birth has been in touch with the divine, and after a short period, the time must come for her to return back to the ordinary world again. In order for her to return to the world of the secular, she needed to mark the end of her contact with the divine and that's what was celebrated.

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To close out the infancy narrative, Luke again uses a framing technique. Just as he began with a pair of pious people, Zechariah and Elizabeth, so he closes it with a pair of pious people: Simeon and Anna. Both are awaiting the consolation of Israel, the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise. And both will receive that consolation when they recognize that Jesus is the messiah for whom they have waited from of old. For Simeon, that recognition is enabled by the Spirit, and he picks up the infant Jesus and proclaims the Canticle of Simeon, or the Nunc Dimittis. Again, it is an early Christian hymn, based on Old Testament phrases. This pious pair represents, in Luke's vision of social justice, the righteous, the poor ones of Israel, who not only hear the word of God, but do it.

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And it is in the midst of the joyous outpouring of words from Simeon, that he gives a foreboding prophecy of the difficulty of what it means to follow that savior. Simeon refers to a sword that will pierce Mary. It is not so much a reference to a physical sword, but to the fact that Mary will need to make a decision in life. As she ponders all these things in her heart, she will need to decide whether she will be a disciple or not, and she will need to count the cost of doing so.

Finally, Luke presents the aged prophetess Anna who was a widow for 84 years. She would remind the reader of the widows of Israel, like Judith, who saved Israel and who lived as a widow until she was 105. Luke also reminds us of the importance of widows in the early church, who were almost like a religious order. To be a widow in the early church, you needed to be enrolled to commit your

life to the service of the church and the poor. Anna shows us the spontaneous recognition of Jesus by those whose hearts are prepared.

And with the return to Galilee and the reference to Jesus growing in wisdom and favor with God, just like Samuel, Luke's infancy narrative comes to a close.

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OTHER TRADITIONS

So, let me close out this talk by commenting on a few Christmas traditions that have become associated with the infancy of Jesus, but which do not come directly from the narratives of Matthew and Luke.

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First, there are a number of items which come to us from a work composed in the 100's or 200's AD, and known as the Protevangelium of James. It's a good record of the popular traditions about Jesus' birth in the period right after the New Testament writings. Its author is supposedly James, the stepbrother of Jesus from the first marriage of the widower, Joseph. It explains that Mary was wed to an elderly widower and echoes the tradition of the early Church which retains Mary's virginity while at the same time acknowledging that Jesus had a larger family, particularly a brother who was specifically mentioned in the Bible and was the initial Christian leader of the Church in Jerusalem. This explanation will also provide some context around what happened to Joseph. Somehow he disappears from the story by the time Jesus' public ministry begins. His elderly state at Jesus' birth provides context for his death by the time Jesus begins ministering. It also talks about the birth of Mary, and gives us the names of her parents: Joachim and Anne. It emphasizes Mary's unparalleled purity. He has Mary and Joseph journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, while one of Joseph's sons leads their donkey, thus introducing the image of Mary traveling on a donkey, and foreshadowing Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem on a donkey. He has Jesus being born in a cave and introduces a midwife, Salome, who assisted Jesus' birth, and who is doubtful of Mary's virginity after the birth, saying: "unless I put forward my finger and test her condition, I will not believe a virgin brought forth." A line that foreshadows the doubting Thomas after Jesus' resurrection.

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The Ox and the Ass

There is a tradition that there were animals present at Jesus' birth, most especially an ox and a donkey. This may or may not have been true. A manger is a feeding trough for animals, so it seems likely that there might be animals present, but they are not mentioned explicitly in either gospel.

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However, the tradition comes from the association people naturally made between the gospel text and the Old Testament text to which it alluded. Luke mentions a manger, and that alluded to the beginning of the prophet Isaiah, who says: "An ox knows its owner, and an ass, its master's manger; But Israel does not know, my people has not understood." So, it did not take much to begin

associating Isaiah's ox and ass to Luke's setting. Luke, by the way, doesn't describe anything about the shelter in which Joseph and Mary stayed, only that they laid Jesus in a manger.

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Additional animals were also soon made part of the imagery of the birth scene.

The Magi

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Again, through allusion to other texts, the evangelists added texture to their accounts. Matthew mentions the gifts of the kings, and the listener would think of another passage in Isaiah that reads "Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah; All from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the LORD." Again, it would not take much stretching of the imagination to think that magi from the East would come on camels.

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This same passage of Isaiah (Chapter 60) also mentions foreign kings several times. Over time, the close proximity of mention of foreign Kings to the gifts brought by the magi, would eventually cause people to associate the kings prophesied in Isaiah with the magi described in Matthew, and the magi would become kings. The concept that there were 3 of them grew from the fact that they brought 3 gifts.

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Their names are often known as Balthasar, Melchior and Caspar which are first explicitly mentioned in a number of sources in the 6th century. Balthasar is the name given to the prophet Daniel in Babylonia, which is east of the holy lands. Melchior means the "king of light." And Caspar was a famous king in India.

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In the late 600s, an English monk, St. Bede, wrote "spiritually interpreted, the three magi signify the 3 parts of the world, Asia, Africa, and Europe, that is, the entire human race, which took its origins from the 3 sons of Noah."

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In this same vein, people will seek to understand the significance of each gift. Matthew probably just cites them because of their connection with the East, but soon people will see gold as symbolizing Jesus as king, incense will symbolize his divinity, and myrrh, used in embalming, will symbolize he will die, therefore his humanity

The Date of Christmas

There are two elements to the date of Jesus' birth: the day of the year on which he was born, and the year of his birth. There are many complexities to putting this together, so I'll only cover it at a surface level. Let's look at the day of the year first. It is a long held Jewish tradition that holy people lived full years. By this I mean that they were born and died on the same day. For example, when the Book of Deuteronomy says that Moses lived to be 120 years old, the associated tradition says that he didn't live one day less or more, he was a perfect 120 years old. The same idea was applied to Jesus. While the scriptures didn't say much about the day of his birth, they do give us clues about his death. We know that he died around the day of Passover, although we don't know the year. We also know that the calendar in use at the time was the Jewish calendar, which is based on lunar months. A lunar year is a collection of 12 lunar months or 354 days. The Roman calendar, on which we base our current American calendar was not based on lunar months but on the solar years of 364 days. Both calendars also had to adjust every once in a while to avoid becoming too out of sync with the astronomical year of 364 and a quarter days. So, we're used to a leap year every four years. The Jewish calendar has similar corrective mechanism every 19 years. So, there's a discrepancy in how the Jews counted years and how the Romans counted years. If you remember the worry in the computer world that the year 2000 would expose a lot of computer bugs. My Jewish friends and work companions used to joke that it was the year 5760 on the Jewish calendar and if would just use the Jewish calendar we'd have no year 2000 problem.

The point of this is that we know that Jesus died around Passover. That would associate the springtime with his death, but would not let us know the exact date on the Roman calendar because we didn't know the year and thus couldn't calculate the 354 day to 365 day shift.

In the 2nd century, the Roman writer Hippolytus calculated March 25th as the date of Jesus' death. This also happened to be the date of the Vernal Equinox. It also coincided with the belief that the Vernal Equinox was the anniversary of creation. Thus, with so many things aligning, it seemed right that March 25th be the date of Jesus' death: it fit with Passover, it was a critical date in the history of the world, it was a critical date in the solar year, and, with the whole year theory of holy people's lives, it meant that Jesus was born on the date of the creation of the world. However, one more clarification was needed. March 25th would not be the date of Jesus' birth, it would be the date of his creation, his conception. In other words, it is the date of the Annunciation to Mary, not the date of Jesus' birth. Jesus' birth would occur 9 months later, which brings it to December 25th. Now, this date, too, has solar implications. It's the date (in the old Roman calendar) of the Winter Solstice, the day on which all future days grow longer. If tied to John the Baptist's remark "I must decrease while he must increase" it brings in cosmic implications. At their births, Jesus increases the light he shines on the world, while John decreases. That is why we celebrate the Birth of John the Baptist on June 24th (we don't know why it's the 24th rather than the 25th), 6 months prior to Jesus (according to Luke) and the day of the year in which the hours of daylight on each day begin to decrease.

One other challenging fact is that the calendar itself has shifted a few days here and there, and so now the solar events which occurred in the old calendar on the 25th of their respective months, now occur somewhere between the 20th and the 22nd of those months.

Now, when it comes to the year in which Jesus was born it was not until the 6th Century that a monk named Dionysius Exiguus worked out the official calculation. If you remember, the Emperor Constantine called the Council of Nicea in 325 to, among other things, work out the date of Easter. This was due to the conflict between Jewish and Roman calendars. But the controversy continued

hundreds of years later, and this monk was brought in to once and for all figure out the date controversy. Besides determining the date of Easter, he also looked into the date of Christmas. He figured that Jesus was born 754 years after the founding of Rome and called that year 1. There was no year 0 because the concept of the number 0 was only made popular by the Arabs in the middle ages. But Dionysius miscalculated. Unfortunately, it was only later, after this B.C. / A.D. numbering system had become entrenched that people noticed his error. In trying to align the year 1 with the years of Herod's rule, Dionysius was 4 years off – Herod died in 4 B.C. according to this numbering system. And, since Matthew has Herod killing all children 2 and under, it's possible that Jesus was born between 4 BC and 6 BC, if the massacre of the innocents was one of the last things Herod did. Most scholars now agree that the year of Jesus' birth is between 4 and 6 BC.

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