

Born to be King

Many in Christendom read Jesus' birth from the viewpoint of our day, rather than from the unfolding Jewish context of revelation. We need to realize that the prophesied hopes for Messiah in Israel identify who the Jews and God expect the Messiah to be and do. It helps us to see Jesus in His context of the first century as the Messianic Jewish King. This Messianic emphasis is starkly accentuated by the affirmation and contrast of literature that considers Jesus birth.

Prophesied:

Two notable prophecies from the time of the threat of Assyria in the eighth century B.C. identify Messiah's birth. Micah 5:2–5 predicts that there will be a child whose goings are from everlasting but that He would be born in Bethlehem as king of Israel. His reign would bring peace to the ends of the earth. Until this time of Messiah's reign, God will give Israel up to being dominated by the Gentiles (Mic. 5:3).

Isaiah prophesies around 735 B.C. (on the basis of the kings warring in Isa. 7:1), predicting a sign for evil king Ahaz, who is troubled by Ephraim and Aram, the two kings north of Judah. Isaiah reassures Ahaz that within 65 years or about 669 B.C. Ephraim will be no more, in fact it was resettled by foreign colonists by then (Isa. 7:8). To encourage Ahaz to believe, a sign of a young woman of marriageable age (עַלְמָה / *lmh*)¹ will bear a son and she shall call him Immanuel (Isa. 7:14). Isaiah 8:1–3 explains that Isaiah arranged to marry a prophetess with a statement and theophanic name indicating a *visible manifestation of deity* to bring about the impending destruction of Ephraim and Aram from Assyria (*swift is the booty, speedy is the prey*; Isa. 8:1, 3) and faithful witnesses testify to the efficacy of the prediction. By the time the child knows how to cry “my father” and “my mother,” or about 732 B.C. the wealth of these two nations will be no more (Isa. 8:4), which happened through a raid on Ephraim and Aram by Assyria. By the time this child knows enough to refuse evil and choose good, implying he is becoming a man, or about 722 B.C., Judah will have Assyria battling Egypt on their land such that the crops and vineyards will be wasted, and the primary food will be curds (i.e. cottage cheese) and honey (Isa. 7:15–19). This battle took place as Shalmaneser swept through forcing Egypt back toward the Nile. The difficulty of the time would remind them that Judah will only be preserved by God's providential being with them implying a theophanic name of “*Immanuel*” (Isa. 7:14; 8:8, 10). These predictions came true by the dates indicated.

¹ עַלְמָה / *lmh* indicates a young woman of marriageable age as indicated by Proverbs 30:19 and in contrast to בְּתוּלָה / *betulah* which would indicate a married woman, as in Joel 1:8. The issue is not virginal until LXX translates עַלְמָה into παρθένος. For example, *BDB*, p. 761 indicates עַלְמָה means “young woman (ripe sexually; maid or newly married).” The concept includes the newly married woman who is receiving lovemaking from her man in contrast to the deceptive destructive activity of an adulterous woman (Pr. 30:19–20). The word is used also of those who have falsetto voice (1 Chr. 15:20; Ps. 9:1). Additionally, the young women would draw water; which is a task not reserved for virgins (Gen. 24:43; Jn. 4:7). If the point was to restrict Isaiah 7:14 statement to virgin then a clearer Hebrew word meaning “virgin” (בְּתוּלִים / *betulim*) could have been chosen (Lev. 21:13; Deut. 22: 14–20; Jud. 11:37–38; Ezek. 23:3, 8).

In the second century B.C., after these temporal sign indicators are ancient history, Jews translated “young woman of marriageable age” (תַּלְמִיחַ/*lmh*) into “virgin” (παρθένος), shifting the sign in the LXX to be more definitively on the woman, who as a *virgin* would bear a son called “Immanuel” (Isa. 7:14 LXX). The Christians made a strong case off the authoritative Greek LXX that the Biblical prediction was that Messiah Jesus was to be virginally born. The second century A.D. found some Jewish retranslation of LXX texts, which changed the παρθένος, into *teknia* or *hJ neanis* (both indicating young girl) as a Jewish reaction against Christian use of this prophecy making the term more generic, as תַּלְמִיחַ/*lmh* had been. For example, Justin repeatedly takes Jewish and Ebionite tradition to task for this LXX change and the proposal that Joseph was Jesus’ biological father.²

However, the pericope (or section) of Isaiah continues to develop the resolution from this dispersion³ time of Assyria in Galilee (Isa. 9:1–7). In the dark of dispersion and Gentile domination, the light of revelation and salvation dawns, with a child born to be the Davidic King and to bring peace, forever. This child will have throne names⁴ that declare His glory as king and maybe even “*Immanuel*” (“*God with us*” in maybe more than providence). He is the “Wonderful Counselor,” a quality of the ideal wise statesman, which Isaiah develops of the Messianic branch and of God (Isa. 9:6; 11:2; 28:29).⁵ As “Mighty God,” He is the champion who can carry out those plans, a title used elsewhere only of Yahweh (Isa. 9:6; 10:21). Does this hint that “*Immanuel*” means “God incarnate among us”? The title “Everlasting Father,” indicates the enduring benefactor for His people, as God supremely is, maybe hinting of deity (Isa. 9:6; 63:16). As “Prince of Peace,” He is the provider of universal peace (Isa. 9:5–7; which also could point to Yahweh, Judg. 6:24).

The Birth Narrative

Both Matthew and Luke identify that Jesus was born by virgin birth, through a process that can be described as the Holy Spirit *coming upon* her (Mt. 1:18, 20, 23, 25; Lk. 1:34–35).⁶ The process Luke describes is not a sexual intercourse, as myths of pagan gods describe, but rather an event of Spirit *coming upon* like at Pentecost (ἐπελεύσεται; Lk. 1:35; 11:22; 21:26; Acts 1:8; 8:24; 13:40; 14:19) or a *covering* like God’s presence on the Temple or protecting His people (ἐπισκιάσει; Lk. 1:35; 9:34; Acts 5:15; compare

² Justin, *Dial.* 43.3–8; 66.2–4; 67.1; 68.9; 71.3; 77.3; 84.1–3; *Apol.* 1.33.1, 4–6; A. Kamesar, “The Virgin of Isaiah 7:14: The Philological Argument from the Second to the Fifth Century,” *JThS NS* 49(1990): 51–75; M. Rösel, “Die Jungfrauengeburt des endzeitlichen Immanuel: Jesaja 7 in der Übersetzung der Septuaginta,” *JBTh* 6(1991): 135–51.

³ A word that indicates people living outside of their homeland.

⁴ Some conjecture that these are also theophanic names to describe God, and grammatically they could be but the focus in Isaiah 9:6–7 is on the child not the power behind Him, so throne names are preferred by most exegetes. The concept of throne names identifies qualities which are describing the child King and not primarily the God behind this child King, as would be the case if they were theophanic names.

⁵ *IQH* 11.9–10 describes the birth of the hoped for Davidic Messiah as being called “wonderful counselor.”

⁶ *Gos. Philip* 17; additionally a strange autobiographical annunciation to Mary is contained in the second century text *Questions of Bartholomew* 2.15–21 and also reflected in *Epistula apostolorum* 14[25] and *Protevangelium of James* 11.1–12.3.

LXX: Ex. 40:35; Ps.91:4). Matthew describes that this birth of Jesus fulfills Isaiah 7:14 (Mt. 1:22–23). Joseph as a righteous Jew almost did not go through with the wedding, until an angel appeared to him in a dream and explained what was going on (Mt. 1:18–21). Instead of having Mary stoned (Deut. 22:23–24),⁷ Joseph kept her a virgin until Jesus was born. Of course, some of Jesus opponents slandered Jesus as being a bastard.⁸ Sometimes the miraculous is a burden to bear.

However, this birth account in Luke is set up in parallel with that of the birth narrative of His forerunner John the Baptist (Lk. 1:5–25). So that, the faithful priest Zacharias offering the incense on the incense altar⁹ was confronted in fear by the angel Gabriel, who promised a nazirite like son to them in their infertility (Num. 6:2–5; Lk. 1:15). The promise indicated that this son will be filled with the Holy Spirit while in the womb so that he might come before Messiah in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the people back to obedience and righteousness. Zacharias asked how he might know this and was made mute, so that when he exited the holy place to give the benediction,¹⁰ he could not speak and all knew that he had seen a vision.

Mary visited with her cousin Elizabeth (Zacharias' wife), who was now six months pregnant. Upon hearing Mary's greeting, John leaped in Elizabeth's womb while she was filled with the Holy Spirit, and blessed Mary as the mother of her Lord. Luke records more of a role of women parallel to men, so Mary responds in praise similar to Zacharias.¹¹ Mary praises with joy and the hopes of a poor Jewish woman's expectations for Messiah's coming kingdom. These hopes include eschatological reversal, in which the proud and mighty will be destroyed in order for the hungry, poor and humble to be lifted up and filled (Lk. 1:51–55). Such eschatological mercy is rooted in the Abrahamic Covenant hopes for blessing in a land that is Israel's own, not dominated by external powers.

With the birth of John the Baptist, Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied about the Abrahamic redemption which the Davidic king would bring about in delivering Israel from its enemies, which in this context included the Romans (Lk. 1:68–79).¹² Zacharias was longing for a kingdom known for holiness, righteousness,

⁷ *11QT* Temple 61; *Sanh.* 7.4a. The betrothal was the legal equivalent of marriage in that a cancellation of it was through divorce (Deut. 22:23–27; *11QT* Temple 66.1–8; *b. Sanh.* 57b; *m. Ketub.* 1.2; 4:2; 7.6; *m. Yeb.* 2.6; *m. Git* 6.2; Josephus, *Ant.* 4.253).

⁸ *Acts Pilate* 2.3; Origen, *C. Cels.* 1.28, 32, 133; Tertullian, *Spec.* 30; *SB* 1. Such a designation identifies social outcasts, e.g., *Yeba.* 4.13.

⁹ Because the number of priests, it is likely that this is the only time in his life that the lot fell to him for this service (*Yoma* 2.2–4).

¹⁰ *Mishnah Talmud* 7.2 indicates that the priest who offers incense should lead in the benediction.

¹¹ Women are given greater voice in Luke and they are often placed parallel to male voice in their contexts: 1) Zechariah and Mary, 1:10–20, 26–38; 2) Simeon and Anna, 2:25–38; 3) Zarephath and Naaman, 4:25–27; 4) healing of demoniac and Simon's mother-in-law, 4:31–39; 5) centurion and widow, 7:1–17; 6) man with mustard seed and woman with leaven, 13:18–21; 7) woman-bent over and man with dropsy, 13:10–17; 14:1–6; 8) man with 100 sheep and woman with 10 silver coins, 15:4–10; 9) women are the first to experience and tell of the resurrection 24:10; 10) men and women in ministry together, Acts 17:17; 18:2; 21:9–12; cf. Joel Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 92–93.

¹² These hopes for a nationalistic deliverer are anticipated by *Ps. of Sol.* 17–18 and other texts included in the chapter "Jesus as King."

forgiveness, and peace. John was born as an initial light to prepare Israel for the Messiah and His Kingdom way of peace.

Jesus birth occurs in 5 to 4 B.C., during the reigns of: 1) Caesar Augustus, that is Octavian (27 B.C.–A.D. 14), 2) Quirinius governorship of Syria (twice governor during the Hebrew calendar: 4–1 B.C. and A.D. 6–9, each time having a census conducted, though Luke and Tertullian record the former one in 4 B.C. and Josephus only records the latter one in 6 A.D.),¹³ and 3) Herod the Great (40–4 B.C.; Mt.2:1, 19; Lk. 2:1–2).¹⁴ The Biblical Hebrew year begins with the Spring (lunar month of *Nisan*) normally in March (Ex. 12:2; 13:3–4; 23:15; Deut. 16:1, 6), but this means of computing the new year had largely been replaced, since the captivity by a Syrian calendar, reflected in the new year celebration, *Rosh Hashanah*, which occurs October 1st in the lunar calendar (sometimes occurring in September according to the Gregorian calendar). The Roman calendar, reflective of the regnal year of Tiberius would begin in August.¹⁵ Luke writing for a Gentile audience, probably followed either the Syrian or Roman calendar, so that Jesus' birth would likely be between September, 5 B.C. and March, 4 B.C. Herod died slightly before Passover 4 B.C.¹⁶ The first census during Quirinius governorship would also place the birth in this time period, since a census would often be done at the beginning of a new reign so that an accurate tax could be levied and provided to Rome.

The census brought Joseph and his betrothed Mary, late in her pregnancy, to Bethlehem to be registered under the Davidic family place (Lk. 2:3–6).¹⁷ Joseph took Mary as his wife, presumably in Nazareth but he kept her a virgin until the birth (Mt. 1:24–25). There is no mention of a donkey to ride; Mary may have walked the 80 miles to Bethlehem while 8 months pregnant. They were poor. Joseph may have carried their food and a few tools on his back. Bethlehem was flooded with people for the census registration so no room was found in the inn. Likewise, the dishonor of pregnancy during betrothal would dishonor them to the periphery. So they were staying where the livestock were stored, probably in a cave, but it could have been a built stable. When Jesus was born, he was wrapped in cloth and placed in a feeding trough for the animals (Lk. 2:7). There is no mention of animals in the stall. The animals have been assumed by commentators, who read into the account by the location and a misreading of Isaiah 1:3 and possibly connect the birth of the King with animal benefits in Kingdom (Isa. 11:6–9).

In the same region shepherds were watching over their flocks by night when an angel appeared to them announcing that the anointed to be King had been born that very

¹³ Tertullian identifies a census under governor Sentius Saturnus [9/8–4 B.C.] (*Marc.* 4.19); Josephus (*Ant.* 12.277; 18.89) confirms Quirinius governorship during 4–1 B.C. without mentioning a census, and then identifies Quirinius institutes a census when he is governor again 6–9 A.D. (*Ant.* 18.1).

¹⁴ Agreeing with these dates: N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 147; E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure Jesus* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 11; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, p. 375. The initial incorrect calculation of 0 had been done by Dionysius Exiguus in 533 A.D.; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.1.

¹⁵ E.g., In the year 14 A.D. the new year began between August 19 and September 30; Ben Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979), p. 115.

¹⁶ Josephus, *Ant.* 14–18; there is some evidence that for political purposes the Hebrew calendar was sometimes reckoned from September (or the lunar month *Tishri*).

¹⁷ Bethlehem is also mentioned as the place of Jesus' birth by *Sib. Or.* 8.478.

day in Bethlehem. Shepherds were in a despised vocation.¹⁸ Luke is sensitive to the poor working men like these shepherds and wood workers (like Joseph and Jesus).¹⁹ The angel was joined by a multitude of angels, praising God because He intended to bless humans with peace through His pleasure with them (Lk. 2:13–14).²⁰ They could recognize the Messiah because he would be the baby wrapped and lying in the manger (Lk. 2:12, 16).²¹ The shepherds came to see, told what had occurred, and went home praising God for all that they had heard and seen. Those who heard the shepherd's testimony were amazed; Mary treasured and pondered these memories.

Later in 4 B.C., after Joseph has moved his family into a rented house (probably about 15 foot square)²², wise men²³ arrived from the East having followed a sign star that came to rest over the place where Jesus was born (Mt. 2:11). We don't really know what the sign star was though there are many possibilities, but it probably had been visible for at least a year,²⁴ since it could take as much as two years to plan and traverse the desert from the East, and Herod killed the children two years old and under (Mt. 2:16). The wise men asked Herod where the Messiah child is and Herod's priests and scribes identify that he was to be born in Bethlehem according to Micah the prophet (Mt. 2:5–6). The wise men pay homage²⁵ to the child and present Him with gifts worthy of a king: gold, frankincense and myrrh. This fits with the Jewish expectation that Gentiles will pay tribute to the King, with gold and frankincense, as they praise the Lord (Isa. 60:6). The wise men were warned in a dream to not tell Herod where the child was so that they departed for their country by another way. Joseph was warned by an angel in a dream to

¹⁸ *Kiddushin* 4.14; *Baba Kamma* 10.9 but *Sib Or.* 8.480 identified shepherds visiting Jesus while a baby in Bethlehem.

¹⁹ John Meier (*A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, pp. 278–85) explores Jesus profession of wood worker as a constructor or day laborer who does not own land and is thus poor, getting by from day to day.

²⁰ The phrase, "People with whom God is pleased" refers to the elect of God (*IQH* 4.31–35; 11.7, 9).

²¹ *Sib. Or.* 8.479.

²² Also after they had offered the offerings of the poor in the Temple five miles away which will be discussed in the chapter, "Jesus is a Kingdom Oriented Jew" (Lk. 2:24). The size of house is average dimension for a poor family in Israel at that time.

²³ The wise men are largely undescribed in Matthew, though the *Gospel of the Nazarene*, fragment 28 describes their dress in great detail evidencing wealth and dark complexion. Many consider that they are of the best wisdom from Gentiles (Ps. 72:10–11; e.g., Balaam, Num. 22–24; cf. the Persian king arrived in Rome to honor Nero as prompted by Mithras and astrology: Dio Cassius 63.1–7; Pliny, *H.N.* 30.16–17; Suetonius, *Nero* 13), or parallel to Egyptian sorceress in the Mosaic account, but there are some of this category elsewhere who are Jews (Acts 8:9–24, Simon; 13:6–11, Elymas; Josephus, *Ant.* 20.142, Atomus).

²⁴ Star possibilities include: 1) a supernatural star from (Mt. 2:9), 2) supernova explosion that would be bright for weeks, 3) conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn, in Zodiachal constellation Pisees (which has sometimes been taken to be Messianic) during May, October–November of 7 B.C. 4) conjunction of Jupiter (king) with Regium (king) in constellation Leo (Israel) three times in early morning before sunrise in the East in July 3 B.C. and then in Sept.-Oct. with Venus and Jupiter two times and then fused in the West after sundown, then in 2 B.C. Oct. Jupiter and Venus conjunction again after their trip, 5) Halley's comet 12 B.C. and 6) maybe a metaphorical allusion for Jewish Messiah from Numbers 24:7, 17, since Balaam comes from the Eastern mountains (Num. 23:7; Josephus, *War* 4.312–313.4; Suetonius, *Vespasi.*; Tacitus, *Histories*, 13; Virgil, *Eclogue* 4).

²⁵ Such homage (προσεκύνησαν) was done regularly through Matthew to Jesus as King by: the disciples, women, a leper, rulers, a Canaanite woman and even in a parable (Mt. 2:11; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 18:26; 28:9, 17). However, the disciples post resurrection expression of this homage and in response to Jesus and Peter walking on water elevates the homage in those contexts to worship for Jesus is then seen as God's Son in a sense that is greater than just a king.

flee to Egypt, and he and his family did so that very night.²⁶ Herod retaliated by killing the children in the Bethlehem region who were two years old and under,²⁷ because Herod had considered that he himself was to be the Messiah and had spent years on the Temple construction project to demonstrate that he was the Messiah (Mt. 2:12–18; 2 Sam. 7:12–15; 1 Chr. 17:11–14).²⁸ The Matthew 2:18 quote from Jeremiah 31:15 identified the experience of Herod's hostility to be an experience of recapitulating Israel's continuing captivity and grief since Assyria and Babylon conquered Israel (Mt. 2:17–18). Within a few months, God judged Herod to death before March 29, 4 B.C.²⁹

Perhaps in selecting events from Jesus' life, Matthew might also be developing a parallel to a Jewish haggadic tradition (that is, a standard teaching type of contrary teaching about another) concerning Moses.³⁰ That is, Matthew recounts events from the historical threat and flight of Joseph, Mary and Jesus into Egypt that resonated with Jewish traditions concerning Moses, and thus indicated that Jesus is a new kind of Moses figure. Josephus painted Amram as the pious father, fearful about Moses birth in a context in which male children were to be destroyed, similar to Joseph with Jesus (Mt. 1:18–21; 2:16–18).³¹ Moses is *seventh generation* from Abraham, whereas Jesus is three times two times *seventh generation* from Abraham (Mt. 1:17).³² Amram was minded to put away his wife Yochebed, and was restrained by his daughter, much like Joseph was minded to put away Mary and was restrained by the angel (Mt. 1:19, 24).³³ Jewish tradition maintained that Pharaoh learned of a future liberator from sacred scribes and ordered the killing of Hebrew infants to try to kill the future liberator, similar to Herod's condition (Mt. 2:4–6, 16).³⁴ The Spirit of God came upon Miriam in a dream in which she saw an angel provide counsel for how Moses would save his people, similar to Joseph with Jesus (Mt. 1:20, 24; 2:13).³⁵ Moses, like Jesus, is providentially taken from the land

²⁶ Also corroborated in the sixth century account, *Papyrus Cairensis* 10735.

²⁷ While no independent extra-Biblical source mentions the murder of Bethlehem children (Eusebius, *Ec. Hist.* 1.8.1 describes the murder dependent upon the Biblical text), however, the murder is consistent with Herod's murderous activities (*As. of Moses*; Josephus, *Ant.* 15.7.4; 15.51–55; 16.5–7; 17.159, 164, 167, 181; *Bava Bathra* 3b–4).

²⁸ Josephus, *Ant.* 15.380ff. The Messiah is predicted to be the builder of the Temple (2 Sam. 7:13; 1 Chr. 17:12; Zech. 4:7–10; *Sib. Or.* 5.420–33 (this *Sib. Or.* prediction is after Herod and 70 A.D. destruction referring to the eschatological Messiah). *4QFlor.* 1.1–13 identifies that in the end times (utilizing 2 Sam. 7:13) the Jerusalem Temple will be built but by someone other than the Messiah. Elsewhere, God is portrayed to be the builder of the Temple (*1 En* 90.28–29; *Jub.* 1.17; 2 *Bar.* 4.3; 32.4; *11QTemple* 29.8–10; *4QFlor.* 1.3, 6; *Midr. Ps.* 90.17; *Mekilta* of R. Ishmael 3).

²⁹ Josephus, *Ant.* 17.9.3; *War* 2.1.3 describes that Herod was dead before a lunar eclipse (which occurred March 29) and the Passover (which occurred April 11) of 4 B.C.; H. W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), p. 13.

³⁰ W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), vol. 1, pp. 192–196; cf. Asher Finkel, *The Pharisees and the Teacher of Nazareth: A Study of their Background, their Halachic and Midrashic Teachings, the Similarities and Differences* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964), p. 97–102; comparisons are also made with Noah and Abram using the *Genesis Apocryphon* 19.9–20; cf. B. N. Fisk, “*Genesis Apocryphon (1QapGen)*” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, edited by Craig Evans & Stanley Porter (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), pp. 399–400.

³¹ Ex. 1:15–22; Josephus, *Ant.* 2.210–16; cf. *LAB* 9.

³² *Lev. R.* on Lev. 23:24.

³³ *Ex. R.* on Ex. 1:15; *Mid. Hag.* Ex. 2:1.

³⁴ Josephus, *Ant.* 2.205–209, 234; *Tg. Ps.-J.* on Ex. 1.15.

³⁵ *LAB* 9.10; *Mek.* on Ex. 15:20; *b. Sota* 12b–13a; *b. Meg.* 14a; Josephus, *Ant.* 2.216.

of his birth because of the royal death threat (Ex. 2:1–10, 15; Mt. 2:13–14).³⁶ The command of God to Moses and Joseph to go to Egypt is nearly identical words in Exodus 4:19 and Matthew 2:19–20.³⁷ Moses took his wife and sons and went to Egypt, Joseph did the same (Ex. 4:20; Mt. 2:21). The *Passover Haggadah* puts the exodus at night like Joseph's flight toward Egypt happens at night.³⁸ Moses came out of Egypt and Jesus recapitulated (or reenacted in His life) Israel's exodus by Himself coming out of Egypt (Ex. 12–15; Hos. 11:1; Mt. 2:15). The desert was seen as a place of preparing Moses and Jesus for leadership (Mt. 4:2, 11; Mk. 1:13; Lk. 4:2).³⁹ Jewish tradition develops that Moses was made king, much like Matthew develops that Jesus is the Messianic King (Mt. 2:2).⁴⁰ Within this ministry Moses and Jesus taught and miraculously fed the people (Ex. 16:14; Num. 11:31; Mt. 14:20–21; 15:37–38; Mk 6:42–43; 8:8–9; Lk. 9:17), healed lepers (Num. 12:10–13; Mt. 8:2–3; Mk. 1:41; Lk. 5:13), and were gloriously transfigured on a mountain overshadowed by clouds in which the divine voice was heard (Ex. 34:30; Num. 20:25–27; Mt. 17; Mk. 9; Lk. 9).⁴¹

Likewise, Matthew's account of the events following Jesus' birth recapitulate Israel's history up till this point. That is, Jesus in miniature identified with key events of Israel's history and relived them in some form. For example, Jesus recapitulated Israel's exodus by Himself coming out of Egypt (Ex. 12–15; Hos. 11:1; Mt. 2:15). Likewise, Jesus' setting of Herod killing Bethlehem children brought the horror of grief like a miniature of the Babylonian captivity contained (Mt. 2:18; Jer. 31:15; cf. Mt. 1:11–12). Even the locating of Jesus into Galilee reminds the reader of the Gentile dominated darkness out of which the birth prophecies present the Messiah's reign. Until the time of Messiah's reign God will give Israel up to being dominated by the Gentiles (Isa. 9:1–2; Mic. 5:3). Such a move to Galilee is consistent with the Jews distrust of Archelaus.⁴²

Echoed in the Arts:

There are a varied range of literary echoes of this birthing account. A broadly reassuring one comes from pop culture in “A Charlie Brown Christmas” with Charlie Brown frustrated at the ridicule for choosing so poorly for a scraggly limp tree. He cries out “What really is the meaning of Christmas?” To which, Linus answers with a simple retelling of the Lukan birth narrative with the shepherds and angels.⁴³ It is a heart warming story that transforms Christmas into a community unifying gathering celebrating the Christ's birth.

³⁶ Philo, *Mos.* 1.12; Josephus, *Ant.* 2.217–27; *Mid. Hag.* on Ex. 2:15.

³⁷ Ex. 4: 19 in the LXX is: τεθνήκασιν γὰρ πάντες οἱ ζητούντες σου τὴν ψυχὴν, compared to Mt. 2:19–20 which is: τεθνήκασιν γὰρ οἱ ζητούντες τὴν ψυχὴν τοῦ παιδίου.

³⁸ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:261.

³⁹ *Ex. R.* on Ex. 3:1 and 24:18.

⁴⁰ Philo, *Mos.* 1.334; *Mek.* on Ex. 18:14; *Sipre* on Num. 10:29; *ARN* 1(B); *b. Zeb.* 102a; *Ex. Rab.* on Ex. 34:27; *Midr. Ps.* on Ps. 5.11.

⁴¹ *Mech.* 12.3 (4a); 13.20 (29b); *b. B.B.* 75a.

⁴² Josephus, *Ant.* 17.11.1–4.

⁴³ The account is from the movie *A Charlie Brown Christmas* but the script is available in *A Charlie Brown Christmas: The Making of a Tradition*. Written by Lee Mendelson with reflections by Bill Melendez and edited by Antonia Felix (New York: Harper Resource, 2000), p. 177 for Linus' Lukan account and p. 181 for Charlie Brown's reflections on the Christmas story.

Late in the nineteenth century, Henri Lerolle painted “The Arrival of the Shepherds” as a realistic nativity glimpse into a dimly lit cave supported by large trees framing a simple presentation of baby Jesus in Mary’s arms. All who are present are simple peasants who have come to see the surprising entrance of the King of the Jews. The angelic message being confirmed brings wonder to their minds as to what this might mean.



One thing such an entrance meant was that Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus must flee the wrath of Herod, who thought of himself as Messiah. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Eugene Girardet painted “The Flight into Egypt” as a long wearisome journey. In fatigue and weariness, the parents approach the Nile (with the pyramids in the background) carrying all that they have of value: Mary with baby Jesus, and Joseph with a bundle of a little food, a few tools and the gifts from the magi. The lines on Mary’s face, Joseph’s body, and the donkey’s droopy headed gait indicate deep fatigue as they insecurely enter their protective banishment.



On the other side of culture is the bizarre picture presented by John Irving in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*,⁴⁴ who places Owen in the crib as baby Jesus for a Christmas pageant of 1953, because he is the only child of the church who would fit. Owen's family was also unusual, seemingly rarely showing up at the activities with which he was involved. Owen has only one guideline if he plays the part and that is that Mary Beth was not allowed to kiss him because Owen reasoned, "This is a very holy moment, very holy, sacred." We catch up with the cast getting ready for the play,

In the chilly vestibule of the parish house, Barb Wiggins proceeded to imprison Owen Meany in the swaddling clothes; but however tightly or loosely she bound him in the broad, cotton swathes, Owen complained.

"It's too tight, I can't breathe!" he would say, coughing. Or else he would cry out, "I feel a draft!"

Barb Wiggins worked over him with such a grim, humorless sense of purpose that you would have thought she was embalming him; perhaps that's what she thought of as she swaddled him-to calm herself.

The combination of being so roughly handled by Barb Wiggin and discovering that my grandmother had been free to attend the pageant-but had chosen *not* to attend-was deleterious to Owen's mood; he grew cranky and petulant. He insisted that he be unswaddled, and then reswaddled, in my mother's LUCKY scarf; when this was accomplished, the white cotton swathes could be wrapped over the scarf to conceal it. The point being, he wanted the scarf next to his skin.

"For warmth and for luck," Owen said.

⁴⁴ John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), pp. 158, 170, 193–201.

“The Baby Jesus doesn’t need ‘luck,’ Owen,” Barb Wiggin told him.

“Are you telling me Christ was lucky?” Owen asked her. “I would say he could have used a little more luck than he had. I would say he ran out of luck, at the end.”

“But Owen,” Rector Wiggin said. “He was crucified, yet he rose from the dead—he was resurrected. Isn’t the point that he was saved?”

“He was used,” said Owen Meany, who was in a contrary mood.

Averting a theological discussion on the luck of Christ, Owen was reswaddled, kissed for luck, and placed in the crib, as the play started with a readjustment of the beam of light back on the angel. At this point the story is told by Owen’s friend who plays the role of Joseph.

“Be not afraid,” Harold Crosby repeated; Barb Wiggin, a tad eager at the controls of the angel-lowering apparatus, dropped him suddenly—it was about a ten-foot free fall, before she abruptly halted his descent; his head was jerked and snapped all around, with his mouth open, and he swung back and forth above the frightened shepherds, like a giant gull toying with the wind. “Be not afraid!” Harold cried loudly. There he paused, swinging; he was stalling; he had forgotten the rest of his lines.

Barb Wiggin, trying to prevent the angel from swinging, turned Harold Crosby away from the shepherds and the congregation—so that he continued to swing, but with his back toward everyone, as if he had decided to spurn the world, or retract his message.

“Be not afraid,” he mumbled indistinctly.

From the hay in the dark came the cracked falsetto, the ruined voice of an unlikely prompter—but who else would know, by heart, the lines that Harold Crosby had forgotten? Who else but the *former* Announcing Angel?

“For behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people,” Owen whispered; but Owen Meany couldn’t really whisper—his voice had too much sand and gravel in it. Not only Harold Crosby heard the Christ Child’s prompting; every member of the congregation heard it, too—the strained, holy voice speaking from the darkened manger, telling the angel what to say. Dutifully, Harold repeated the lines he was given.

Thus, when the “pillar of light” finally followed the shepherds and kings to their proper place of worship at the crèche, the congregation was also prepared to adore him—whatever *special* Christ this was who not only knew his role but also knew all the other, vital parts of the story.

Mary Beth Baird was overcome. Her face flopped flat on the hay, then her cheek bumped the Baby Jesus’ hip; then she lunged further into prostration, actually putting her heavy head in Owen’s lap. The “pillar of light” trembled at this shameless, unmotherly behavior. Barb Wiggin’s fury, and her keen anticipation of worse to come, suggested the intensity of someone in command of a machine-gun nest; she struggled to hold the light steady.

I was aware that Barb Wiggin had cranked Harold Crosby up so high that he was completely gone from view; up in the dark dust, up in the gloom inspired

by the mock flying buttresses, Harold Crosby, who was still probably facing the wrong way, was flapping like a stranded bat-but I couldn't see him. I had only a vague impression of his panic and helplessness.

"I love thee, Lord Je-sus, look down from the sky, And stay by my cradle till mourn-ing is nigh," sang the choir, thus wrapping up "Away in a Manger." The Rev. Dudley Wiggin was a little slow starting with Luke. Perhaps it had occurred to him that the Virgin Mary was supposed to wait until *after* the reading before "bowing" to the Baby Jesus; now that Mary Beth's head was already stationed in Owen's lap, the rector might have feared what Beth would think was an appropriate substitute for "bowing."

"When the angel went away from them into heaven," the rector began; the congregation, automatically, searched the ceiling for Harold Crosby. In the front pews of faces that observed, no one sought the disappearing angel with as much fervor as Mr. Fish, who was already surprised to hear that Owen Meany *did* have a speaking part.

Owen looked ready to sneeze, or else the weight of Mary Beth's head was restricting his breathing; his nose, unwiped and unblown, had dribbled two shiny rivulets across his upper lip. Could see that he was sweating; it was such a cold day, the old church furnace was throwing out the heat full tilt-the raised altar area was a lot warmer than the wooden pews, where many of the congregation still wore outdoor clothes. The heat in the manger was stifling. I pitied the donkeys and the cows; inside their costumes, they had to be perspiring. The "pillar of light" felt hot enough to ignite the hay where the Baby Jesus lay pinned by the Holy Mother.

We were still listening to the reading from Luke when the first donkey fainted; actually, it was only the hind part of a donkey that fainted, so that the effect of the collapse was quite startling. Many of the congregation were unaware that donkeys came in two parts; the way the donkey crumbled must have been even more alarming to them. It appeared that a donkey's hind legs gave way under him, while the forelegs struggled to remain standing, and the head and neck surged this way and that-for balance. The donkey's ass and hind legs simply dropped to the floor, as if the beast had suffered a selective stroke-or had been shot; its rump paralyzed. The front half of the donkey- butted a shepherd into and over the low communion railing; the shepherd struck the kneeling cushions a glancing blow, and rolled into the center aisle by the first row of pews.

When the second donkey dropped the Rev. Mr. Wiggin read faster.

"But Mary kept all these things," the rector said, "'pondering them in her heart."

The Virgin Mary lifted her head from the Christ Child's lap, a mystical grin upon her flushed face; she thumped both hands to her heart-as if an arrow, or a lance, had run her through from behind; and her eyes rolled toward her shining forehead as if, even before she could fall, she were giving up the ghost. The Baby Jesus, suddenly anxious about the direction and force of Mother Mary's swoon, reached out his arms to catch her; but Owen was not strong enough to support Mary Beth Baird-chest to chest, she pressed him into the hay, where they appeared to be wrestling.

And I, Joseph-I saw how the little Lord Jesus got his mother off him; he goosed her. It was a fast attack, concealed in a flurry of flying hay; you had to be a Joseph-or Barb Wiggin-to know what happened. What the congregation saw was the Holy Mother roll out of the hay pile and across the floor of the manger, where she collected herself at a safe distance from the unpredictable Prince of Peace; Owen withered Mary Beth with a look as scornful as the look he'd shown Barb Wiggin.

It was the same look he then delivered to the congregation-oblivious to, if not contemptuous of, the gifts of the wise men and the shepherds laid at his feet. Like a commanding officer reviewing his troops, the Christ Child surveyed the congregation. The faces I could see-in the frontmost pews-appeared to be tensing for rejection. Mr. Fish's face, and Dan's face, too-both of these sophisticates of amateur theater were mouths-agape in admiration, for here was a stage presence that could overcome error and bad acting *and* deviation from the script.

Then I came to the faces in the congregation that Owen must have seen about the same time I saw them; they bore the most rapt expressions of all. They were Mr. And Mrs. Meany's faces. Mr. Meany's granite countenance was destroyed by fear, but his attention was riveted; and Mrs. Meany's lunatic gawking was characterized by a naked incomprehension. She had her hands clenched together in violent prayer, and her husband held her around her shaking shoulders because she was racked by sobs as disturbing as the animal unhappiness of a retarded child.

Owen sat up suddenly in the mountain of hay that several front-pew members of the congregation were startled into gasps and cries of alarm. He bent stiffly at the waist, like a tightly wound spring, and he pointed with ferocity at his mother and father; to many members of the congregation, he could have been pointing to anyone-or to them all.

"What do you think *you're* doing here?" the angry Lord Jesus screamed.

Many members of the congregation thought he meant *them*; I could tell what a shock the question was for Mr. Fish, but I knew whom Owen was speaking to. I saw Mr. And Mrs. Meany cringe; they slipped off the pew to the kneeling pad, and Mrs. Meany covered her face with both hands.

"You shouldn't be here!" Owen shouted at them; but Mr. Fish and surely half the congregation, felt that *they* stood accused. I saw the faces of the Rev. Lewis Merrill and his California wife; it was apparent that they also thought Owen meant *them*.

"It is a sacrilege for you to be here!" Owen hollered. At least a dozen members of the congregation guiltily got up from the pew at the rear of the church-to leave. Mr. Meany helped his dizzy wife to her feet. She was crossing herself, repeated-a helpless, unthinking, *Catholic* gesture; it must have infuriated Owen.

The Meanys conducted an awkward departure; they were big, broad people and their exit out of the crowded pew, their entrance into the aisle-where they stood out, so alone-their every movement was neither easy nor graceful.

"We only wanted to *see* you!" Owen's father told him apologetically.

But Owen Meany pointed to the door at the end of the naïve, where several of the faithful had already departed; Owen's parents, like that other couple who were banished from the garden, left Christ Church as they were told. Not even the gusto with which the choir-following frantic signals from the rector-sang "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" could spare the congregation the indelible image of how the Meanys had obeyed their only son.

And now for something completely different, reflect on the ancient Christmas carol, "Of the Father's Love Begotten," composed by Aurelius Clement Prudentius (A.D. 348-413).

Of the Father's love begotten, Ere the worlds began to be,
He is the Alpha and Omega, He the source, the ending he,
Of the things that are, that have been, And that future years shall see,
Evermore and evermore.

This is he whom sees in old time Chanted of with one accord,
Whom the voices of the prophets Promised in their faithful word;
Let no tongue on earth be silent, Let creation praise its Lord
Evermore and evermore.

O ye heights of heaven adore him; Angel hosts his praises sing;
All do minions, bow before him And extol our God and King;
Let no tongue on earth be silent, Every voice in concert ring,
Evermore and evermore.

Christ, to thee with God the Father, And, O Holy Ghost, to thee,
Hymn and chant and high thanksgiving, And unwearied praises be:
Honor, glory, and dominion, And eternal victory,
Evermore and evermore.

When we contemplate Jesus birth, we could all ask ourselves what are you doing here with Jesus?