

Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church, Lake Worth, Florida

Understanding Christianity:

Christmas In The New Testament: Fact or Fiction? (2001)

“Understanding Christianity” is a series on the fourth Sunday of each month, beginning on November 25th from 6 to 7 with additional discussion from 7 to 8 for those who care to remain. The November topic is “Christmas in the New Testament: Fact or Fiction?” If CNN video cameras had been available to record the circumstances of Jesus’ birth, what would be on the tape? Would there have been differences between CNN and New Testament reports? Canon Richard T. Nolan, editor of the educational website www.philosophy-religion.org and retired professor, is teaching the series. [Next month: Is there any practical use for Baptism?]

1. The Context:

- a. The shared purpose of the four Gospels: to proclaim Jesus as the Risen Lord and Christ.
- b. The Hebrew mind and history [providential; human freedom]
- c. Easter as the New Exodus: all else interpreted within this Event

Biblical studies in the Episcopal Church seeks to understand the Bible by means of: *careful analysis of the texts* (ancient languages and manuscripts; dates of texts; determine what the original authors wrote); *historical information* (accuracy of information in the texts; study of the culture in which the text was written; who were the authors; who was the intended audience); *literary criticism* (study of the internal makeup of the text (choice and function of words; arrangement of the text; style of writing); *source criticism* (study of the sources that might underlie a particular text: borrowed, edited, and shaped?); *form criticism* (joke? poem? history? folklore? music? parable? etc.); *redaction criticism* (redactor is an editor or compiler, one who corrects, rearranges, deletes, complements, modifies; how did the writers shape, structure, and edit their materials? What is the theological viewpoint, interests, life setting of the author?) *canonical criticism* (what is the significance of the biblical texts for the communities of faith that preserved them and for those who continue to use them today?) The Episcopal Church, therefore, is not a biblical-literalist church and has not been such for at least a century.

2. The Christmas Message: “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.”

- a. The pre-existent Christ, God’s Word, was enfleshed in Jesus.
- b. God’s Word (purposes/intentions for humanity) was enfleshed in Jesus.

3. The biographical details of the birth of Jesus were far less important than the basic proclamation that he is the Risen Lord and Christ, and the details are incidental to the Christmas Message.

4. Fact or Fiction?

From: *A Historical Introduction to the New Testament* by The Rev. Dr. Robert M. Grant [Episcopal theologian and seminary professor]

Part Three: New Testament History and Theology

Robert M. Grant is professor of New Testament at the University of Chicago, A foremost scholar in the field, his books include Gnosticism, The Earliest Lives of Jesus, and The Secret Sayings of Jesus. Copyright 1963 by Robert M. Grant. Originally published by Harper and Row in 1963.

The Birth of Jesus

At a relatively early time, Christians were concerned with asserting that Jesus had not simply ‘appeared’ among men as if he were an angel or a spirit. He was actually born as a human being; he ‘was born of the seed of David according to the flesh’ (Rom. 1:3); he ‘was born of a woman, born under the law’ (Gal. 4:4). ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us’ (John 1:14). In neither Mark nor John, however, is there any statement about the way in which he was born. In the New Testament such statements are provided only in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, which are in agreement in regard to several points. (1) The mother of Jesus, Mary, was betrothed to Joseph, a descendant of King David, but was a virgin at the time of his birth. (2) The conception of Jesus was due to the Holy Spirit. (3) An angel instructed either Mary or Joseph to name the child Jesus. (4) Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the reign of Herod I. The measure of agreement is obviously significant.

On the other hand, the stories diverge in regard to details. (1) The genealogies of Jesus in both Matthew and Luke genealogies which (a) disagree with each other and (b) lead from Abraham or Adam to Jesus through Joseph, not Mary. According to Matt. 13:55 a crowd asks, ‘Is not this the son of the carpenter?’ just as in John 6:42 (cf. Luke 4:22) the Jews ask, ‘Is not this Jesus the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?’ Of course, it can be answered that (a) genealogies can be traced in several ways and that (b) legally, Joseph was the father of Jesus. Crowds are not necessarily reliable authorities. The reference to the brothers and sisters of Jesus (Mark 6:3) is harder to explain, though they may have been children of Joseph.

(2) There are some difficulties in relation to the place of the birth. Mark 6:1 speaks of Nazareth as the *patris* or native city of Jesus. Even though the word *patris* does not necessarily refer to a birthplace, Jesus is described as ‘from Nazareth’ in Acts 10:38 (cf. John 1:45-6). Matthew describes Joseph and Mary as first going to Nazareth after the death of Herod; Luke says that they came from Nazareth to Bethlehem and then returned there. Finally, Matthew 2:5-6 states that the birth in Bethlehem was to fulfill the prophecy of Micah 5:1-3 (cf. John 7:41-2), while Matthew 2:23 relates that Jesus lived in Nazareth because of what was said ‘through the prophets’: ‘he shall be called Nazoraios’ (Lev. 21:12? Judges 13:5?). What conclusion should be drawn from these passages?

(3) As we have said, Matthew and Luke agree that Jesus was born in the reign of Herod, in other words not later than 4 BC. On the other hand, Matthew 2:22 describes the family as coming to Nazareth while Archelaus was reigning, and Luke 2:1-3 says that Joseph took Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem at the time of a census which was made for the first time when Quirinius was governor of Syria. The chief difficulty here is that Josephus (*War* 2, 118; *Ant.* 19, 355) describes what seems to be the same census as taking place when Judaea was placed under direct Roman rule in AD. 6. There is no *direct* historical evidence for an earlier census, though it is possible that one was taken. It is hard to believe, though not inconceivable, that all who claimed Davidic descent were enrolled at Bethlehem rather than at the places where they lived.

Historically, then, there are strong, if not insuperable, difficulties in regard to the story or stories of the conception and birth of Jesus. None of the New Testament evidence shows that the virginal conception was regarded as an indispensable dogma by the earliest Christians.

There are some historical analogies to this idea. The idea that God’s work is reflected in the births of patriarchs or heroes is to be found in the Old Testament patriarchal narratives (Gen. 17:19; 18:14; 21:1; 25:21; 29:31; 30:22) and in the accounts of Samson (Judges 13:3) and Samuel (I Sam. 1:19-20) -- as well as in the story of John the Baptist (Luke 1:25). In addition, whether the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 refers to a young woman or to a virgin who would conceive and bear a son Immanuel, among Hellenistic Jews, and doubtless among others, the

word was understood to mean 'virgin'. The fact that Greeks, Romans and others told stories about the miraculous conceptions of various 'divine men' suggests how the virginal conception of Jesus may have won ready acceptance in the Graeco-Roman world, but it does not explain the origin of the belief. In other words, analogies to be found either in the Old Testament or in the world outside Judaism are nothing but analogies. They neither substantiate nor demolish the historical nature of the story. Indeed, while some Graeco-Roman writers regarded virginal conceptions as possible, others insisted that they were not.

It has been suggested that the story of the virginal conception reflects an attempt to solve the problem of Christ's nature in relation to his origin. On this view, the picture of the pre-existence and incarnation of the Word in the Gospel of John is the result of a similar attempt with different results. We do not know, however, that the story came into existence for this reason.

If we turn from the main emphases of the stories in Matthew and Luke to their details, we find that Matthew concerned with relating his version as closely as possible to the Old Testament. He stresses the fulfillment of prophecy and describes Joseph as a dreamer like his Old Testament prototype. Some details have often been questioned. What of the star of Bethlehem and the visit of the Magi? Presumably the star is that predicted in Numbers 24:17, and the Magi are Zoroastrian astrologers who played a significant rôle in the first century. At the court of Archelaus were Chaldaean astrologers and Essenes who interpreted his dreams (Josephus, *War* 2, 112). Magi came to Rome in the year 66 and acknowledged the divine nature of Nero. This is to say that some aspects of the story are historically possible, at least. As for the slaughter of the innocents (Matt. 2:16-18), Matthew regards it as a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:15. Did he or some predecessor invent the story after finding the prophecy? Is the story intended to explain why Jesus was in Egypt and could be regarded as fulfilling Hosea 11:1? Or was there actually some such massacre in the last years of Herod's bloody reign?

Our judgement on such questions will depend upon the view we take of Matthew's writing as a whole. The entire second chapter of his gospel is tied together by means of a series of 'prophecies' regarded as fulfilled in the early life of Jesus. (1) There is an allusion to the star and rising sceptre of Numbers; then (2) comes an explicit quotation from Micah 5:2 (Bethlehem). (3) The journey to and return from Egypt fulfils Hosea 11:1, treated as prophecy because in Hebrew the perfect tense can refer either to past or to future. At the end of the chapter come (4) the quotation from Jeremiah and (5) the statement about the Nazoraios to which we have already referred. What are we to make of this collection of prophecies, and of the stories related to them? Some scholars have spoken of Matthew as a writer of haggadic legends, based on Old Testament texts and imaginatively expanding them. This theory might well explain the choice of all the Old Testament passages but one, Jeremiah 31:15, and Matthew or some earlier Christian may have been meditating upon the general resemblances between the early life of Jesus and such messianic texts as those discovered at Qumran. The fact that Matthew's narrative is historically possible does not prove that the events occurred just as he describes them, and it is very hard to reconcile with the account given in Luke 2:8-40.

The ultimate difficulty with the whole narrative of the conception, birth and infancy of Jesus lies in the modern (and ancient, too) belief in the general regularity of natural processes. In early Jewish Christianity there were those who held that Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary, though we do not know why they maintained this view. Theological ideas have varied in relation to this subject. Most Christians have insisted that if Jesus was the Son of God he must not have had a human father. Others have argued that if he was fully human as well as fully divine he must have had two human parents. The more traditional view is based on a definition of human and divine nature in terms of essences, natures or origins. The less traditional view is primarily concerned with Jesus in terms of the response of faith to him, though the question of 'nature' is not necessarily overlooked.

Many New Testament data or phenomena are related primarily to what we should regard as historical events. The resurrection of Jesus must somehow belong to this category. Without such an event the existence of the Church is inexplicable (cf. Cor. 15:14-18), though obviously the theological significance of the event is not in any way limited to its 'happenedness' or to the explanations given by the earliest witnesses. On the other hand, such a story as that of the virginal conception is much less important. In the New Testament it is never

regarded as possessing central significance. It has no place in the apostolic preaching to Jews or to gentiles; there is not even an allusion to it except in the two narratives in Matthew and Luke; even where Paul and others point towards esoteric teaching they are not pointing in the direction of this story. What it must represent is an attempt to state a way in which God's creative activity, reflected in the resurrection and in the ministry of Jesus, was manifest in the way in which he was generated. In Matthew the virginal conception takes place in order to show that Jesus' origin was due to the Holy Spirit. He is, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, Emmanuel, 'God with us'. Similarly in Luke's account Mary is to conceive because the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her; her son will be called the Son of God. The environment of both stories is to be found in Jewish Christianity, but it is a kind of Jewish Christianity concerned with making the meaning of Jesus comprehensible to gentiles. And it is at this point that we can probably understand the tendency of Ebionite Jewish Christianity to speak of Jesus as the son of Joseph and Mary. Not only did the Ebionites often retain archaic traditions; they had no mission to the gentile world except in the sense that they wanted gentiles to become Jews and accept Jewish customs.

The kind of Jewish Christianity in which the story of the virginal conception makes historical sense is one which, like that of Philo, looks outward to the gentile world and has a mission to it. And this is obviously the kind of Jewish Christianity reflected in both Matthew and Luke. In Matthew, Jesus first sends his disciples only to the empirical Israel, but after his resurrection he sends them out to all the world; a similar picture is set forth in Luke; after the resurrection the disciples are told to remain in Jerusalem until they have received power from on high and then to preach to all nations.

The story of the virginal conception, then, is likely to be an explanation of the significance of Jesus in terms of origins and in the light of the resurrection and the consequent gentile mission. It is analogous to Paul's interpretation of Jesus as the pre-existent Wisdom of God, the instrument not only of redemption but also of creation, and to John's picture of the pre-existent word of God who became incarnate. Symbolically it is important because it reflects an insistence upon God's freedom to act and to create novelty. God's freedom is not limited by his creatures. But at the same time, as some of the early Fathers recognized, the Jesus who was son of Mary was not a creature in the sense that God created him absolutely *de novo*. Because he was son of Mary he was a human being. He really lived, really grew up (as Luke makes clear), and really died.

It is always difficult, if not dangerous, to try to separate events from their significance, or vice versa. But there are examples in the Old Testament of 'events' which, while not historical in the ordinary sense, convey important theological insights. The most obvious example is the story of creation and the life of Adam in paradise. And it may well be the case that not everything in the New Testament should be regarded as historically true. Probably it would be right to say that everything is historically true in the sense that it reflects the life and thought of the early Church, but not in the sense that it is literally true.

If one attempts to by-pass theological questions by an 'appeal to history' it must be admitted that the historical method as such can provide little guidance on this problem. Two evangelists describe the virginal conception and the birth of Jesus in rather different ways. If they were in complete agreement, it might be suspected that they had relied on a previously invented story. Suspicion arises in relation to the differences which now exist. How many differences would be required in order for us to regard their narratives as absolutely authentic and reliable? To ask this question suggests that it cannot be answered.

In a Collect what does it mean to pray *who hast caused* or *who caused all holy Scriptures to be written*... ? Does it mean that God controlled or dictated the writing of the Bible? This Collect was composed by Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer for the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* and reflects the usage of that era. "Caused" need not mean "compelled," "forced," or "coerced," nor does it imply "dictated." A book in "The New Church's Teaching Series" notes that "...we can appreciate the authority of scripture within the context of the Incarnate Christ: the Bible is not the only or last word of God to us. Certainly it is, as Hooker said, 'an oracle of God,' but it is also a historical book, one written by fallible human beings. We can believe that by the guiding of the Holy Spirit its writers were led to witness authentically to the revelation of God in Christ, but

most Anglican biblical scholars and theologians, as well as most ordinary Episcopalians, would agree that it always needs to be interpreted and understood within the church itself - in the light of Christ." [Griffiss, *The Anglican Vision* (1997), p. 106] Note also the Prayer Book's Catechism section on "The Holy Scriptures" (pp. 853f.), especially: "We call them [the Scriptures] the Word of God because God inspired their human authors and because God still speaks to us through the Bible." In less elegant language the Collect means: "Blessed Lord, who inspired the writing of all holy Scriptures for our learning....."

"Matthew explicitly connects the birth of Jesus with the government of King Herod, and the reference to this ruler's successor Archelaus proves that he meant Herod the Great. The years during which Herod was King of the Jews are known from [the first century AD Jewish historian] Josephus [and confirmed by others]. According to his colorful reports, Herod was elected the king of the Jews by the Roman senate in 40 BCE, and he died at springtime thirty-six years later, which gives us the year 4 BCE. Matthew thus reports that Jesus was born some time before the year 4 BCE." [from "Chronology" in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p. 119] ("BCE" - "Before the Common Era" is often used among scholars as the calendar equivalent of "BC.") Thus, in terms of our current calendar, Jesus was born sometime between 4 and 7 B.C., making the year 2000 - if reckoned more accurately "in the year of Our Lord" - at least 2004!

According to Anglican biblical scholarship, in what sense were the first Christmas and the visit of the Wise Men historical events? It is incorrect to affirm every detail of the New Testament birth and infancy stories of Jesus as if they could have been photographed; it is equally mistaken to declare them all as products of spirited fantasy or inner conviction alone. The birth and infancy passages include actual persons and events that could have been videotaped, especially Mary, Joseph, Jesus, the birth place, the delivery process itself, and, perhaps, visitors to the newborn. These passages also contain wonder-filled metaphorical embellishments, heightenings, exaggerations, and meanings beyond the range of any human or camera lens.

Within and beneath all the words of the Christmas and Epiphany texts, whether statements referring to photographable incidents or accounts fabled by poetic imaginations, is this central Christian *discernment*, that at an actual time and tangible place of the Creator's own choosing, God's intentions for humanity (God's "Word"), embodied in Jesus the Christ, was born; this Word is for all humanity, Jew and Gentile alike. Thus, the Incarnation (literally, "becoming flesh") was an historical happening; God's Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

What do we know about Mary, Mother of Jesus, from the Bible? "Of her early life Scripture tells us nothing, but in the Gospels Mary figures most prominently in Christ's infancy narratives of Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2. It has often been observed that Luke's account gives the story from Mary's viewpoint, while Matthew's gives more prominence to Joseph. In both, the virginal conception of Christ is clearly, but equivalently stated. During Christ's public life Mary occasionally appears (e.g. at the marriage feast of Cana), but remains habitually in the background. She reappears in John's gospel at the foot of the cross, where the beloved disciple received Christ's injunction to treat her as his mother; thenceforth presumably she lived in his household. In the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles she was with the Apostles and received the Holy Spirit with them on Whitsunday [Pentecost]. But her role was not the active one of teaching and preaching; in the early church, as in Christ's ministry, she remained so much in the background that it is difficult to know where she lived or even where she died." [from *The Oxford Dictionary of the Saints*, pp. 267ff.]

Church fathers of the early middle ages and afterwards elaborated extensively on Mary's significance to the Faith. Many Christians suspect that non-biblical Marian doctrines based on devout speculation are overstated and perhaps erroneous. In any case, Mary has been honored widely as "representing inner strength and the exaltation of the oppressed over the oppressor. ... For many, the adoration of a female figure is a vital psychological supplement to their faith." [from "Mary, Mother of Jesus" in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, pp. 499f.]

As in certain Gospel selections [Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-56], Mary represents loving, faithful, and exemplary acceptance of God's will for her life. Although no prayers in *Episcopal Book of Common Prayer* are addressed to Mary, she is associated with or mentioned in several (e.g., on pages 50, 53, 161, 188, 189, 192, 345, 368, 374, 375); Mary is mentioned in the Prayer Book's "Catechism" on page 849 (as the instrument of Jesus' birth). Within Biblical scholarship, and also among Anglican clergy and laity, individuals differ whether "virgin" means "biological virgin" (to be understood literally or metaphorically) or "young girl."

From: *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*

The Birth and Upbringing of Jesus. The birth stories in Matthew and Luke are relatively late, and belong to stages II and III. But they contain certain items that go back to earlier tradition. Some of these are clearly theological: Davidic descent, conception through the Holy Spirit while his mother remained a virgin, homage at birth. Factual data in these common items include: the date of Jesus' birth in the last years of the reign of Herod the Great (died 4 BCE); the names of Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph; the fact that the child was conceived between betrothal and wedding; the birth at Bethlehem (though this may be a theological assertion, associated with the Davidic descent). In any case, Jesus was brought up in Nazareth. His father is said in [Matthew 13.55](#) to have been a carpenter, and Jesus is said to have been one himself in [Mark 6.3](#). Since sons habitually followed their father's trade, this is not improbable. Presumably, Jesus received the education of the devout poor in Israel, with thorough instruction in the Hebrew scriptures.

The Rev. Dr. REGINALD H. FULLER [EPISCOPAL PRIEST, BIBLICAL SCHOLAR, AND SEMINARY PROFESSOR]

From: *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* by The Rev. Dr. RAYMOND E. BROWN [ROMAN CATHOLIC SCHOLAR]

If we leave until later the story of Jesus at age 12 (Luke 2:41–52), the following features of the infancy narratives that constitute the gospel beginnings of Matthew and Luke (first two chapters in each) are important.

(1) They agree on these points: Chap. 1 deals with the prebirth situation; chap. 2 with the birth or postbirth situation. The parents of Jesus are Mary and Joseph, who are legally engaged or married but have not yet come to live together or have sexual relations. Joseph is of Davidic descent. There is an angelic announcement of the forthcoming birth of the child. The conception of the child by Mary is not through intercourse with her husband but through the Holy Spirit. There is a directive from the angel that the child is to be named Jesus. The roles of Savior (Matt 1:21; Luke 2:11) and Son of God (Matt 2:15; Luke 1:35) are given to Jesus. The birth of the child takes place at Bethlehem after the parents have come to live together. The birth is chronologically related to the reign of Herod the Great (Matt 2:1; Luke 1:5). Eventually, the child is reared at Nazareth.

(2) Matthew and Luke disagree on the following significant points. In chap. 1, the Lucan story of John the Baptist (annunciation to Zechariah by Gabriel, birth, naming, growth) is absent from Matthew. According to Matthew, Jesus' family live at Bethlehem at the time of the conception and have a house there (2:11); in Luke, they live at Nazareth. In Matthew, Joseph is the chief figure receiving the annunciation, while in Luke, Mary is the chief figure throughout. The Lucan visitation of Mary to Elizabeth and the Magnificat and Benedictus canticles are absent from Matthew. At the time of the annunciation, Mary is detectably pregnant in Matthew, while the annunciation takes place before conception in Luke. In chap. 2 in each gospel, the basic birth and postbirth stories are totally different to the point that the two are not plausibly reconcilable. Matthew describes the star, the magi coming to Herod at Jerusalem and to the family house at Bethlehem, the magi's avoidance of Herod's plot, the flight to Egypt, Herod's slaughter of Bethlehem children, the return from Egypt, and the going to Nazareth for fear of Archelaus. Luke describes the census, birth at a stable(?) in Bethlehem because there was no room at the inn, angels revealing the birth to shepherds, the purification of Mary and the

presentation of Jesus in the temple, the roles of Simeon and Anna, and a peaceful return of the family to Nazareth.

(3) None of the significant information found in the infancy narrative of either gospel is attested clearly elsewhere in the NT. In particular, the following items are found only in the infancy narratives. (a) The virginal conception of Jesus, although a minority of scholars have sought to find it implicitly in Gal 4:4 (which lacks reference to a male role), or in Mark 6:3 (son of Mary, not of Joseph), or in John 1:13 (“He who was born . . . not of the will of man”—a very minor textual reading attested in no Gk ms). (b) Jesus’ birth at Bethlehem, although some scholars find it implicitly in John 7:42 by irony. (c) Herodian knowledge of Jesus’ birth and the claim that he was a king. Rather, in Matt 14:1–2, Herod’s son seems to know nothing of Jesus. (d) Wide knowledge of Jesus’ birth, since all Jerusalem was startled (Matt 2:3), and the children of Bethlehem were killed in search of him. Rather, in Matt 13:54–55, no one seems to know of marvelous origins for Jesus. (e) John the Baptist was a relative of Jesus and recognized him before birth (Luke 1:41, 44). Rather, later John the Baptist seems to have no previous knowledge of Jesus and to be puzzled by him (Luke 7:19; John 1:33).

(4) None of the events that might have been “public” find attestation in contemporary history. (a) There is no convincing astronomical evidence identifiable with a star that rose in the East, moved westward, and came to rest over Bethlehem. In Matthew’s story this would have happened before the death of Herod the Great (4 B.C. or [Martin 1980] 1 B.C.). There have been attempts to identify the star with the supernova recorded by the Chinese records in March/April 5 B.C., or with a comet (Halley’s in 12–11 B.C.), or with a planetary conjunction (Jupiter and Saturn in 7 B.C.; Jupiter and Venus in 3 B.C. [Martin 1980]). (b) Even though the Jewish historian Josephus amply documents the brutality in the final years of Herod the Great, neither he nor any other record mentions a massacre of children at Bethlehem. Macrobius’ frequently cited pun (Sat. 2.4.11) on Herod’s ferocity toward his sons is not applicable to the Bethlehem massacre. (c) A census of the whole world (Roman provinces?) under Caesar Augustus never happened, although there were three Augustan censuses of Roman citizens. It is not unlikely that Luke 2:1 should be taken as a free description of Augustus’ empire-cataloguing tendencies. (d) Luke’s implication that Quirinius was governor of Syria and conducted a “first census” (2:2) before Herod’s death (1:5) has no confirmation. Quirinius became legate of Syria in A.D. 6 and at that time conducted a census of Judea, which was coming under direct Roman administration because Archelaus had been deposed (Brown 1977: 547–56; Benoit DBSup 9: 704–15). (e) Although this item differs somewhat from the immediately preceding one, Luke’s idea that the two parents were purified (“their purification according to the Law of Moses”: 2:22) is not supported by a study of Jewish law, whence the attempts of early textual copyists and of modern scholars to substitute “her” for “their” or to interpret the “their” to refer to other than the parents.

A review of the implication of nos. 1–4 explains why the historicity of the infancy narratives has been questioned by so many scholars, even by those who do not a priori rule out the miraculous. Despite efforts stemming from preconceptions of biblical inerrancy or of Marian piety, it is exceedingly doubtful that both accounts can be considered historical. If only one is thought to be historical, the choice usually falls on Luke, sometimes with the contention that “Those who were from the beginning eyewitnesses and ministers of the word” (Luke 1:2) includes Mary who was present at the beginning of Jesus’ life. See Fitzmyer Luke I–IX AB, 294, 298, for the more plausible interpretation that it refers to the disciples-apostles who were eyewitnesses from the beginning of Jesus’ public life (Acts 1:21–22) and were engaged in a preaching ministry of the Word. There is no NT or early Christian claim that Mary was the source of the infancy material, and inaccuracies about the census and purification may mean that Luke’s infancy account cannot be judged globally as more historical than that of Matthew.

Such a general judgment, however, need not imply that there are not some historical elements in either or both accounts. The mutual agreement have an importance, for they probably represent points that were in a tradition antedating both Matthew and Luke. For instance, an intelligent case can be made that Jesus was truly descended from David and born at Bethlehem in the reign of Herod the Great. Arguments to the contrary are far from probative (Brown 1977: 505–16). In particular, the virginal conception (popularly but confusingly called the Virgin Birth) should be evaluated cautiously. Despite extremely limited attestation and inherent difficulties, no satisfactory nonhistorical explanation which could dispense with the virginal conception has been brought forward. The frequent approach to the virginal conception as a theologoumenon, whereby the common “Son of God” title of Jesus would have been translated into a (fictional) narrative in which he had no

human father, could acquire plausibility only if there were a good antecedent or parallel for the idea of virginal conception. There is no good antecedent or parallel. While there were Greco-Roman and other examples of male gods impregnating earth women to produce a divine child, the NT contains no hint of such a sexual union. Within Judaism there was no expectation that the messiah would be born of a virgin. (The MT of Isa 7:14 does not clearly refer to a virgin, and even the LXX need mean no more than that one who is now a virgin will conceive through future intercourse. Matthew has not derived Jesus' conception from Isa 7:14, but interpreted the OT passage through Christian data.) A claimed Hellenistic-Jewish tradition that the patriarchal wives conceived from God without male intervention (Philonic allegory; Gal 4:23, 29) is far from certain. (On all this, see Boslooper 1962; Brown 1977: 517–33). In terms of historical catalysts behind the concept of a virginal conception, those worth noting are: (a) the agreement of Luke (implicit) and Matthew that Jesus was conceived before Joseph and Mary came to live together and hence that the birth might be noticeably early after cohabitation; (2) the 2nd-century Jewish charge that Jesus was illegitimate (Or. Cels 1.28, 32, 69), possibly reflected earlier in John 8:41. If there was a family tradition of a virginal conception, the pre-Gospel shaping of it into a narrative may reflect Christian pastoral needs in face of Jewish polemics.

B. Theological Motifs

The question of historical elements in the infancy narratives should not distract from the clearer theological intent to Matthew and Luke. The following major theological emphases are to be noted:

1. **Christology.** By referring to Jesus from his conception as descended from David through Joseph and as the Savior/Son of God through the Holy Spirit, the two Evangelists are adapting to this first stage of Jesus' life language that elsewhere in the NT is related to the resurrection or the baptism. Rom 1:3–4, for instance, refers to “. . . the gospel concerning God's Son who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh; designated Son of God in power according to a Spirit of Holiness [= Holy Spirit] as of resurrection from the dead.” A combination of Holy Spirit, designation as Son of God, and divine power is found in relation to the baptism in Luke 3:22; 4:1, 14. The angelic annunciation at the time of conception in Luke combines Davidic descent in 1:32–33 with 1:35, where the Holy Spirit comes on Mary and the power of the Most High overshadows her so that the child is called Son of God. Thus, the conception and infancy of Jesus become the vehicle of the basic gospel message of Jesus' fundamental identity.

2. **Imagery from Jewish Scriptures.** Matthew begins his narrative with the genealogy of Jesus that includes the Hebrew patriarchs and the Judean kings. Matthew's story of Joseph, who receives revelation in dreams and goes to Egypt, clearly recalls the story of the OT Joseph, the dreamer or master of dreams (Gen 37:19) who went to Egypt. The wicked king Herod who kills the male children at Bethlehem evokes the pharaoh who killed the male children of the Hebrews in Egypt. Jesus, the one child who escapes to become the Savior of his people, offers a parallel to Moses. The words spoken to Joseph by the angel after Herod's death, “Go back to Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead” (Matt 2:20) are almost verbatim the words to Moses in Midian, “Go back to Egypt, for all those who were seeking your life are dead” (Exod 4:19). When ultimately Moses went from Egypt through the desert toward the land of Canaan, he encountered another wicked king with homicidal tendencies. Balak of Moab summoned Balaam, a visionary or magus (Philo, Vita Mos 1.50 §276) who came from the East (LXX Num 23:7) with two servants (22:22). Balaam foiled the hostile plans of the king by delivering oracles seen in a vision (as of one who sees God in his sleep; LXX 24:4, 16). These predictions concerned a star coming forth from Jacob (24:17) and a king who would rule many nations (24:7). The Matthean magi echo this story. Indeed, the blending of the pharaoh and Balak into Herod may have been facilitated by developments of the Moses story attested in Josephus (Ant 2.9 §205–37) and in early midrashim, whereby the pharaoh was forewarned by his sacred scribes (or in a dream which had to be interpreted by magi) that a Hebrew child who would deliver his people was about to be born. At this news, the Egyptians were filled with dread (cf. Matt 2:3: “When King Herod heard this, he was startled and so was all Jerusalem with him.”). The pharaoh's plan to forestall the work of the promised child by executing all the male Hebrew children was frustrated because God appeared in a dream to Amram (Moses' father), a Hebrew whose wife was already pregnant. Obviously, Matthew's infancy account is quite close to these midrashic developments of the Moses story.

To the genealogy of patriarchs and kings, and to this narrative evocative of Joseph, Moses, and the Exodus, Matthew has added five citations from the Hebrew prophets which are fulfilled by the infancy happenings.

These citations echo the LXX (Isa 7:14 in Matt 1:22–23), the MT (Hos 11:1 in Matt 2:15), or other texts and combinations (Mic 5:1 [—Eng 5:2] and 2 Sam 5:2 in Matt 2:5–6; Jer 31:5 in Matt 2:18, 23). The fifth “prophetic citation” appears in Matt 2:23, but the source from which Matthew took that quotation is unknown: it may be from Isa 4:3 and Judg 16:7 (for extended discussion, see Brown 1977). Such eclecticism and combining of different prophets and versions have led some to describe Matthean composition as a school-like exercise, carefully comparing texts to find the most suitable way of interpreting Jesus (Stendahl 1968; see also Soares Prabhu 1976). The geographical motif that appears in the four citations of Matthew 2 may be a key to the development of the Matthean infancy message. If the genealogy and the annunciation plus Isa 7:14 in chap. 1 help to tell us who Jesus is (Son of David and Savior sent by God), how he is that (legal acknowledgment by the Davidide Joseph, and conception from a virgin through the Holy Spirit), then the magi/Herod/flight-to-Egypt story in chap. 2 commented on by four citations tells us where Jesus was born (Bethlehem) and whence he went subsequently (Egypt, Nazareth). The quotation in Matt 2:23 may be from Isa 4:3 and Judg 16:17 (Brown 1977; see Stendahl 1964).

Luke also makes good use of imagery drawn from the Jewish Scriptures but with a technique less obvious than Matthew’s. (Luke’s Davidic genealogy for Jesus [3:23–38—some names different from Matthew’s] is placed after Jesus has been addressed by God from heaven and before he begins his mission, even as the genealogy of the tribes and of Moses in Exod 6:14–25 is given after Moses has been addressed by God but before he begins his mission of leading the tribes out of Egypt.) If Matthew’s infancy narrative begins with Abraham begetting Isaac, Luke’s narrative begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth, parents of John the Baptist, who resemble closely Abraham and Sarah (for these are the only two biblical couples whose childlessness is traced to both old age and barrenness; cf. Gen 18:11; Luke 1:7). The birth announcement only to the father, the response of Zechariah (“How am I to know this?” which is a verbatim quotation from Abraham in Gen 15:8), the rejoicing with Elizabeth of those who hear about the conception/birth (Luke 1:58, echoing Gen 21:6)—all these features show the extent to which for Luke too, the Abraham story is the gospel beginning.

The angel who speaks to Zechariah at the hour of incense is Gabriel, who appeared in Dan 9:20–21 at the time of liturgical prayer—his only other appearance in biblical literature. A comparison of Dan 10:7–15 with Luke’s infancy account shows a number of similarities, including the visionary being struck mute. If the Abraham story of Genesis stands near the beginning of the collected Law and Prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures, Daniel would have had a place at or near the end of “the other Books” which terminated the collection (even if this last category was a fluid grouping in NT times). Gabriel interpreted for Daniel (9:24–27) the seventy weeks of years, including the end when “everlasting justice will be introduced, vision and prophecy will be ratified, and a Holy of Holies [a place or person?] will be anointed.” (See Legrand 1981 for a strong apocalyptic motif in Luke’s annunciation.) Thus, Luke’s infancy opening has motifs ranging from the beginning to the end of the sacred story of God’s people.

From the midst of that sacred story comes another parallel that helped to fashion a major part of the Lucan infancy narrative: conception by Hannah of the child Samuel. Luke’s words, “Zechariah went back to his home; afterwards, Elizabeth his wife conceived,” resemble strongly 1 Sam 1:19–20; Mary’s Magnificat resembles Hannah’s song of praise after she conceived and bore a son (1 Sam 2:1–10); the presentation of Jesus in the temple and his reception by the aged Simeon (Luke 2:22–40) echoes the presentation of Samuel at the central shrine in the presence of the aged Eli (1 Sam 1:21–2:11); the two descriptions of Jesus’ growth in Luke 2:40, 52 resemble the two descriptions of Samuel’s growth in 1 Sam 2:21, 26. Thus, while the Matthean infancy narrative was heavily influenced by the Joseph/Moses epic, the Lucan infancy narrative is heavily influenced by the Samuel epic, perhaps because of the liturgical setting of the Samuel story in the central shrine. For Luke, the Gospel of Jesus begins and ends (24:53) in the temple, and the continuity of Jesus with the cult as well as with the Law (2:22–24, 27, 39) is important. The Lucan narrative has minor reminiscences from the David story, e.g., the shepherds and the “City of David” (2:1–20).

The prophetic books of the OT are not neglected either, for a context of prophetic oracle and inspiration (1:67; 2:27) surrounds the Lucan canticles: the Magnificat (1:46–55), the Benedictus (1:68–79), the Gloria in Excelsis (2:14), and the Nunc Dimittis (2:29–32). Almost every line in these hymns echoes OT psalms or prophets, in the manner of Jewish psalmody attested in the last two centuries B.C. (Maccabean hymns; DSS Thanksgiving Hymns). In particular, the Benedictus is a paean of continuity, citing “our fathers, Abraham, the covenant, the House of David, and God’s holy prophets.” Luke’s two-volume work culminates with the

proclamation of Paul that God has sent this salvation to the gentiles and they will listen (Acts 28:29); the two-volume work opens with the insistence that this salvation stands in continuity with Israel.

In summary reflection on the two principal theological points common to Matthew and Luke, we see a strong affirmation of the identity of Jesus in common Christian terms (Son of David, Son of God) combined with a remarkable compendium of scriptural narratives and motifs. Thus, the infancy narratives become a bridge summarizing the story of Israel and anticipating the gospel of Jesus Christ.

3. **Relation to Gospel of Jesus Christ.** The reaction to that gospel is anticipated in the two infancy narratives, but in different ways. In Matt 1:19, Joseph is described as a just man in a context which implies that his justice consists in the observance of the Law of Moses. He accepts the divine revelation about Jesus' identity; and by being obedient to God's direction given by an angel, he protects Jesus and brings him ultimately to Nazareth. The magi are gentiles who receive revelation through a star and come eagerly to Jerusalem seeking the newborn King of the Jews; yet they cannot find him without the precise revelation in the Scriptures. When the prophet Micah is explained to them, they hasten to Bethlehem to worship. A third reaction is exemplified by Herod, the chief priests, and the scribes: they have and can read clearly the message of the Scriptures about the messiah. However, not only do they not come and worship, but they also seek to end Jesus' life (2:20: note the plural). Matthew's community has encountered or embodies all three reactions. The gentiles who eagerly become disciples are clearly part of Matthew's world (28:19). Joseph, who is just in his observance of the Law, and yet open to new divine revelation about Jesus, is the hero of the story because for Matthew he exemplifies the ideal reaction of Jews to Jesus. Elsewhere, the author praises a scribe who can combine the new with the old (13:52). Herod the king, the chief priests, and the scribes who would destroy the infant Jesus foreshadow Pilate the governor, the chief priests, and the elders who put Jesus to death (chap. 27). Almost surely, Matthew relates them to the Pharisees whom Jesus criticizes fiercely (chap. 23) and who find a conflict between Jewish traditions and Jesus. From the beginning, then, in Matthew's portrayal there has been a divided reaction to Jesus in Judaism—a just Joseph versus priests, scribes, and rulers.

Turning to Luke, we find a passing reference to a similar set of ideas in 2:32–34, where Jesus is a light to the gentiles, and a glory for the people of Israel—but not for all in Israel, since he is set for the fall and rise of many. This one Lucan infancy suggestion that many in Israel will not accept Jesus is overshadowed by the dramatic examples of Law-observant Jews who eagerly accept the new revelation given by God concerning Jesus, namely, Zechariah, the shepherds, Simeon, and Anna. The shadow of rejection is, therefore, not nearly so dark in Luke as it is in Matthew. A special emphasis is given to Mary's reaction to the proclamation of Jesus. The first one to hear about Jesus, Mary is a model disciple according to the criteria of Luke 8:21 and 11:28, namely, being willing to hear the word of God and keep or do it. This is exemplified in her response to the angel's annunciation: "Be it done to me according to your word" (1:38), a reaction praised by Elizabeth (1:45). Her interpretation of the significance of Jesus expressed in the Magnificat (scattering the proud; putting down the mighty; exalting the lowly; filling the hungry) is an anticipation of Jesus' own interpretation of his basic message in Luke 6:20–26 ("Blessed are you who are hungry. . . . Woe to you who are full now"). In the reiterated motif that "Mary kept with concern all these events, interpreting them in her heart" (2:19, 51), Luke is portraying Mary as one to whom God communicated gradually the interpretation of the mysterious revelatory events of Jesus' infancy in which she participated, and as one who was a receptacle of God-given wisdom (Brown 1986: 672).

C. Pre-Gospel Sources and Traditions

It is extremely difficult to determine the extent to which Matthew and Luke (1) composed freely through reflection on the Scriptures and on Jesus; (2) composed freely by combining such reflection with traditions they received about Jesus' infancy; and/or (3) reused verbatim already-existing narratives or sources (in Greek or Semitic). There is a particular problem in the instance of Luke/Acts, a work which employs different compositional styles, illustrating either the use of fixed sources or the skill of the author who employed a style most appropriate to the narrative at hand, e.g., a highly Semitized style in the infancy narrative, where all the characters are Jews and many of them clearly parallel to OT figures. Brown (1977: 246) stated that he abandoned "the thesis that by style and language one can decide the question of sources; the linguistic opponents have fought one another to a draw." Farris (1981) thinks it probable, however, that Luke used Hebrew sources. Two facts seem relatively clear: (1) both Matthew and Luke used earlier material, and (2)

both authors reworked considerably the material they took over. The following treatment does not attempt to settle the question whether that material was freely used tradition (oral or written) or from already fixed sources.

1. Pre-Matthean Sources/Traditions. a. Matt 1:17 insists on a 3×14 pattern of the generations in the genealogy. (There are actually only 13 generations [14 male names] in the first part; 14 generations [14 new male names, but 4 royal generations and 6 ruling kings omitted] in the second part; and only 13 generations [13 new male names, with no other biblical attestation of any figure between Zerubbabel and Joseph] in the third part.) The Evangelist's air of discovering the marvelous in this design makes it difficult to think that he completely invented the genealogy. Yet, it is equally difficult to think that he has given us an exact copy of a family record. For the patriarchal period, Matthew may have drawn on a genealogy similar to that in Ruth 4:18–22 and 1 Chr 1:28, 34; 2:1–15. For the monarchical period, he may have drawn on a popular genealogy of the royal House of David—one in which there were accidental omissions because of similar sounding names. For the last part of the genealogy, Matthew himself may have added the names of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus to a list of uncertain derivation pertaining to putative descendants of Zerubbabel. The addition of the four OT women (all appearing in stories colored by the apparently scandalous or irregular, and yet women who showed initiative or played an important role in God's plan, three of them outsiders to Israel and the fourth married to an outsider) was Matthew's attempt to prepare for Mary's role (apparently scandalous but a unique vehicle of God's plan) and for the spread of the gospel to gentile outsiders.

b. A narrative centered on three stylized angelic dream appearances of Joseph, with Joseph's response to each (see Brown 1977: 109 for reconstruction). The basic-story theme would have been the forthcoming birth of a savior, Herod's jealous suspicions, the flight to protect the newborn child, and the ultimate return after Herod's death—a narrative based on the Moses story.

c. A narrative of magi from the East who saw the star of the King of the Jews at its rising and came to worship—a narrative based on the Balaam story.

d. An annunciation of birth that involved Jesus' identity as Son of David and Son of God, with conception through the Holy Spirit (rather than through a male parent) as part of that identity. This followed an OT pattern of birth annunciations with stereotyped features (Brown 1977: 156), including the appearance of an angel, fear by the visionary, a divine message, an objection by the visionary, and the giving of a sign. In the infancy narrative, the message was shaped in part by the christology of the early preaching now being applied to Jesus' conception.

2. Pre-Lucan Sources/Traditions. a. An annunciation similar to pre-Matthean d. The similarities between the two gospels on this item (amidst great dissimilarities on other items) is a reason for positing this as a once-separate element. Luke's annunciation pattern is even fuller than Matthew's, involving some elements of OT annunciations that commission divinely chosen figures like Moses (Exod 3:2–12) and Gideon (Judg 6:11–32). The added features reflect the Lucan use of the scene as also a call of Mary to be the first Christian disciple (see discussion in Legrand 1981: 90–96; Muñoz Iglesias 1984).

b. Tradition about John the Baptist, involving his priestly origins. (Luke is noteworthy accurate in his description of the temple courses of priestly service.) Some (like Fitzmyer Luke I–IX AB, 316, 320) posit a relatively fixed birth source from Baptist circles behind Luke 1:5–25, 57–66. Indeed, this posited John the Baptist infancy narrative is often considered the pattern on which Luke constructed the story of Jesus' infancy, granted the clear parallelism between the two annunciations and the two accounts of birth. Others (Brown 1977: 266–69) think of some tradition about John the Baptist's family plus retroversion of John the Baptist material from the ministry (e.g., 1:15 compared with 7:28, 33; 1:42–45 compared with 11:27, 28), rather than a fixed source. The shaping of the annunciation of John the Baptist's birth may have been influenced by the already-circulating story of the annunciation of Jesus' birth.

c. The infancy narrative canticles discussed above, stemming from a Jewish-Christian group, perhaps from the Jerusalem community of temple-observant poor (*anawéÆm*) described with enthusiastic idealism in Acts 2:43–47. Scholars debate whether these canticles were originally composed in Semitic or in Greek (Brown 1986: 660–62).

d. Some traditions from Jesus' family about his birthplace, circumcision, and presentation. The extent and detail of such traditions are debated, depending in part on whether one thinks Mary was the ultimate source of

Lucan information. The present writer judges that this cannot be shown and remains quite dubious, especially because of apparent inaccuracies about the census and Jewish customs.

e. A story of Jesus at age 12. Having the air of an appendage after the conclusion of 2:40, the narrative in 2:41–51 was probably once independent of the conception and infancy tradition. Read by itself, 2:47–50 gives no indication of what has preceded in Luke by way of the revelation of Jesus' divine identity. Probably this story is an example of a wider collection of boyhood-christology stories (see Infancy Gospel of Thomas), where the knowledge and power evident in the public ministry of Jesus appear in contexts of his youth as he worked miracles (on the Sabbath) and speaks with divine knowledge. This type of story was another way of demonstrating that Jesus did not become divine at the baptism; he was divine throughout his whole life, as could be seen in the first times he acted and spoke.

The infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, once written, contributed to a wider efflorescence of infancy gospels, e.g., the Protevangelium of James and the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy. It is not always easy to determine the extent to which these subsequent infancy gospels draw only from the canonical narratives or from other oral traditions (however imaginative).

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

A monthly forum on the third *Saturday* of each month from 6:30 to 7:30 P.M. following Evening Prayer at 6
Forums usually with Dr. Richard T. Nolan
Saturday, Dec. 16, 2006

Tonight's Topic: THE HISTORICAL BASES AND MEANINGS OF CHRISTMAS

A Prayer To Be Said In Unison

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who has committed to your Church the care and nurture of all the faithful; Enlighten with your wisdom those who teach and those who learn, that, rejoicing in the knowledge of your truth, they may worship and serve you from generation to generation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

1. THE CONTEXT FOR THE TOPIC:

- a. The shared purpose of the four Gospels: to proclaim Jesus as the Risen Lord and Christ.
- b. The Hebrew mind and history [providential philosophy of history; human freedom]
- c. Easter as the New Exodus: all else interpreted within this Event

Biblical studies in the Episcopal Church seeks to understand the Bible by means of: *careful analysis of the texts* (ancient languages and manuscripts; dates of texts; determine what the original authors wrote); *historical information* (accuracy of information in the texts; study of the culture in which the text was written; who were the authors; who was the intended audience); *literary criticism* (study of the internal makeup of the text (choice and function of words; arrangement of the text; style of writing); *source criticism* (study of the sources that might underlie a particular text: borrowed, edited, and shaped?); *form criticism* (joke? poem? history? folklore? music? parable? etc.); *redaction criticism* (redactor is an editor or compiler, one who corrects, rearranges, deletes, complements, modifies; how did the writers shape, structure, and edit their materials? What is the theological viewpoint, interests, life setting of the author?) *canonical criticism* (what is the significance of the biblical texts for the communities of faith that preserved them and for those who continue to use them today?)

The Episcopal Church, therefore, is not a biblical-literalist church and has not been such for at least a century.

2. THE CHRISTMAS MESSAGE: "AND THE WORD WAS MADE FLESH AND DWELT AMONG US."

- a. The pre-existent Christ, God's Word, was enfleshed in Jesus; or
- b. God's Word (purposes/intentions for humanity) was enfleshed in Jesus.

3. **IN ANY CASE, THE BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS** of the birth of Jesus were far less important than the basic proclamation that he is the Risen Lord and Christ; the details of his birth are incidental to an event that grounds the Christmas Message in history.

"CHRISTMAS" – from THE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Though speculation as to the time of year of Christ's Birth dates from the early 3rd century Clement of Alexandria, *e.g.*, suggesting 20 May, the celebration of the anniversary does not appear to have been general till the later 4th century. The earliest mention of the observance on 25 December is in the Philocalian Calendar (*i.e.* the calendar of martyrs venerated publicly in the fourth century at Rome; named after Furius Dionysius Philocalus, an artist who illuminated part of it), representing Roman practice of the year 336. This date was probably chosen to oppose the feast of the *Natalis Solis Invicti* by the celebration of the birth of the 'Sun of Righteousness'. Another tradition, however, derived the date of Christmas from that of the Annunciation. The Pseudo-Chrysostomic tractate *De solstitia et aequinoctia conceptionis et nativitatis domini nostri Iesu Christi et Iohannis Baptistae* argued that the Lord was conceived and crucified on the same day of the year, and calculated this as 25 March, a computation mentioned by Saint Augustine (*De Trinitate*, 4. 5). Whatever the origin of the 25 Dec. date, after the accession of the Emperor Constantine its observance in the West seems to have spread from Rome. In the East the closely related feast of the Epiphany (6 Jan.), which commemorated also the Baptism of Christ, was at first the more important; but in the later 4th century it was connected with the Nativity, esp. in Syria, and by the middle of the 5th cent. most of the E. had adopted 25 Dec., though the Church of *Jerusalem held to 6 Jan. until 549. In the Armenian Church 6 Jan. is still the only day devoted specifically to the celebration of the Incarnation. The controversies of the 4th to 6th cents. on the Incarnation and the Person of Christ doubtless contributed to the growth in importance of the feast.

The day is celebrated in the West rite by three Masses, of the night (normally said at midnight), of the dawn, and of the day, which have been held to symbolize the threefold birth of Christ, eternally in the bosom of the Father, from the womb of the Virgin Mary, and mystically in the soul of the faithful.

The popular observance of the feast has always been marked by the joy and merry-making formerly characteristic of the Roman *Saturnalia* and the other pagan festivals it replaced. It developed considerably in England in the 19th cent. through the importation of German customs by the Prince Consort (*e.g.* Christmas trees) and the influence of Charles Dickens. The singing of carols has become a widespread feature in both ecclesiastical and secular contexts.

"JESUS CHRIST" – from THE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Jesus of Nazareth is called by His followers 'Christ', *i.e.* (God's) Messiah or anointed one (Mt. 1:16). His historical existence was not doubted by early Roman sources (Pliny, Tacitus, Suetonius), by Josephus, or later by the Talmud, and the modern so-called 'Christmyth' theory (that Jesus never lived) has convinced few. Jesus was apparently born shortly before the death in 4 BC of Herod the Great and was executed in or around 30 AD after condemnation by Pontius Pilate.

"CHRONOLOGY" from THE OXFORD COMPANION TO THE BIBLE

"Matthew explicitly connects the birth of Jesus with the government of King Herod, and the reference to this ruler's successor Archelaus proves that he meant Herod the Great. The years during which Herod was King of the Jews are known from [the first century AD Jewish historian] Josephus [and confirmed by others]. According to his colorful reports, Herod was elected the king of the Jews by the Roman senate in 40 BCE, and he died at springtime thirty-six years later, which gives us the year 4 BCE. Matthew thus reports that Jesus was born some time before the year 4 BCE." ["BCE" - "Before the Common Era" is often used among scholars as the calendar equivalent of "BC."] Thus, in terms of our current calendar, Jesus was born sometime between 4 and 7 B.C., making the year 2006 - if reckoned more accurately "in the year of Our Lord" - at least 2010!

ANGLICAN BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP and CHRISTMAS

According to Anglican biblical scholarship, in what sense were the first Christmas and the visit of the Wise Men historical events? It is incorrect to affirm every detail of the New Testament birth and infancy stories of Jesus as if they could have been photographed; it is equally mistaken to declare them all as products of spirited fantasy or inner conviction alone. The birth and infancy passages include actual persons and events that could have been videotaped, especially Mary, Joseph, Jesus, the birth place, the delivery process itself, and, perhaps, visitors to the newborn. These passages also contain wonder-filled metaphorical embellishments, heightenings, exaggerations, and meanings beyond the range of any human or camera lens.

Within and beneath all the words of the Christmas and Epiphany texts, whether statements referring to photographable incidents or accounts fabled by poetic imaginations, is this central Christian *discernment*, that at an actual time and tangible place of the Creator's own choosing, God's intentions for humanity (God's "Word"), embodied in Jesus the Christ, was born; this Word is for all humanity, Jew and Gentile alike. Thus,

the Incarnation (literally, "becoming flesh") was an historical happening; God's Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

from *THE OXFORD COMPANION TO THE BIBLE*

By The Rev. Dr. REGINALD H. FULLER [EPISCOPAL PRIEST, BIBLICAL SCHOLAR, AND SEMINARY PROFESSOR]

The birth stories in Matthew and Luke are relatively late But they contain certain items that go back to earlier tradition. Some of these are clearly theological: Davidic descent, conception through the Holy Spirit while his mother remained a virgin, homage at birth. Factual data in these common items include: the date of Jesus' birth in the last years of the reign of Herod the Great (died 4 BCE); the names of Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph; the fact that the child was conceived between betrothal and wedding; the birth at Bethlehem (though this may be a theological assertion, associated with the Davidic descent). In any case, Jesus was brought up in Nazareth. His father is said in Matthew 13.55 to have been a carpenter, and Jesus is said to have been one himself in Mark 6.3. Since sons habitually followed their father's trade, this is not improbable. Presumably, Jesus received the education of the devout poor in Israel, with thorough instruction in the Hebrew scriptures.