

*Reading the Gospels 2010*

## **2 - The Birth and Childhood of Jesus:**

- 03 - John Baptist's birth announced to Zacharias*
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## Info from the Old Testament

### 1 – The Priestly Roster.

After the death of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's two eldest sons [Leviticus 10], the two remaining sons Eleazar and Ithamar had families. By King David's time they were 24 families. To these families David distributed by lot the order of weekly service. They served eight days each from Sabbath to Sabbath [1 Chronicles 24.1-19; 2 Chronicles 31.2].

After the exile in Babylon, only four of these families returned; they were, Jedaiah, Immer, Pashur and Harim [Ezra 2.36-39]. The 24 courses of David's time were distributed over these four families, using their original names [Nehemiah 13.30].

Under that administration the eighth lot fell for Abijah, one of the names revived at that time [Ezra 12.4].

### 2- Burning of the Incense in the holy place

The most coveted of priestly functions [Exodus 30.1-10; Numbers 16.1-40; Deuteronomy 33.10]; we remember that King Uzziah was smitten with leprosy for trying to usurp it [2Chron 26.18]. Incense, symbolizing prayer [Psalm 141.2; Hebrews 9.4; Revelation 8.3-4], was offered twice a day, before the morning an evening sacrifice of a lamb.

The golden altar of incense stood before the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies [Exodus 30.6]. The priest, having entered in white robes with bare feet, was accompanied by two attendants. They withdrew when they had made everything ready. The people would be prayerfully waiting outside until the priest, who would be sacrificing the evening lamb, signalled to his colleague, [by a bell – Exodus 30.1-10, Malachi 1.11]. He then threw the incense on the fire of the golden altar, and the fragrant smoke was mingled with the prayers of the people.

### 3 – Nazarite

In Hebrew, the term nazir is derived from the verb nazar. It means to consecrate, or to set apart. It is used of the person who is separated from the people. Throughout the Old Testament, we have important figures recorded who do great exploits within the history of the people of God. Some of these are

[a] Nazarites for life;

[b] others take a Nazarite vow for a time and then, when the vow comes to a finish, they revert to the life style they had before. Their hair was burnt as an

offering to the Lord at the end of the time. Numbers 6 describes this as a man or woman taking a special vow to be dedicated to the Lord.

Of the first group [a] above, we have a number of Nazarites who are central in the history of the Hebrew people.

### **[1] Samson**

Judges 13-16 has the record of this man's life is of a child, born to the wife of Manoah, who, in her barrenness is instructed by the angel of the Lord that she should conceive and bear a son. During her pregnancy she is not to drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing. He son shall never shave his hair, and from the womb will be a Nazarite, dedicated to the Lord. He shall begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines [Judges 13.3-5].

The boy is born, grows up, and is named Samson. He is blessed by the Lord and "the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him...". As a judge, he is a deliverer of the Israelites from their enslaving oppressors. He loses his power and great strength as the secret of his vow is revealed to Delilah [Judges 16.16]. We are left in no doubt – his separation to the Lord for his great task, and his power to carry it out under the Spirit of God, is compromised by his vow coming under question as his hair is cut.

### **[2] Samuel**

In 1 Samuel 1.9-12 we have recorded the vow of Hannah that, if the Lord would give her a son, she would dedicate him to the Lord all the days of his life and that "... a razor shall never come upon his head." [1 Samuel 1.11]. Here is a mother dedicating her, as yet, unborn son as a Nazarite.

Mistaken by Eli to be drunk, she makes clear that she herself has not taken wine or strong drink. She is under a vow herself. When finally he is dedicated to the Lord at the temple [1 Samuel 1.21-28] Hannah then utters a prayer of how God exalts the lowly and contends for his holy ones [1 Samuel 2.1-10].

The prophet Amos makes mention of the way Israel, in rebellion over holy things, made the Nazarites to drink wine and the prophets to cease from speaking God's word. [Amos 2.12].

The issue of abstaining from strong drink, as the Rechabites of Jeremiah 35 did in following their forefather's requirements, is similar to the priests [Leviticus 10.8] that they are making a distinction between a holy [separated] and profane [common] life.

The implication is that to be intoxicated is to lose control of their senses and faculties; whereas the life of the dedicated to God often did amazing things and could be seen to be strange. In this way, it was vital to distinguish whether

a person was under the power of the Spirit of God or simply drunken and out of control. This surely is the issue with Eli and Hannah, he supposes her to be drunkenly babbling as she prays intensely out of deep sobriety.

A similar contrast is struck in Ephesians 5.18, where it is that Christians are instructed not to be drunk with wine, but to be filled with the Spirit. This life, heavily influenced by the Spirit, will allow people to see them addressing one another in psalms and hymns, making melody in their heart to the Lord and giving thanks to God for things. They will also be submissive one to another. These are wonderful and strange things, in a wicked, self-centred world. But their origin is the Spirit.

### **[3] John the Baptist**

Luke 1.15-17 is described by Gabriel as great in the eyes of God, he will drink no wine or strong liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb. So we have a clear understanding that John stands in the line of such men and women as God has used in history of his people to carry out his purposes for their welfare.

It is no wonder to us that Jesus, in castigating the generation who, having heard John and rejected his ministry, said that they did not make the appropriate response to him. John came abstaining from wine and strong drink and common food, and they said that he was a drunkard, a glutton and a friend of tax gatherers and sinners [Luke 7.34]. Jesus links the response the same generation made to John as that which they made to himself as equally blind and perversely contrary to the facts of their respective lifestyles.

We must not miss then, that Luke's record makes clear that the visit of the angel to Zacharias is in strong parallel with that of the wife of Manoah, the mother of Samson. In the case of John, as with Samson and Samuel, we see that the child is destined for these things even from his birth. It is not that he is set apart by his own dedication and vow taking [along the lines of Numbers 6] it is rather that the Lord has set these men apart for his own purposes and made that clear from their birth.

In this way, the sovereign mind of God is declared, in advance. Which leads us to our next theme.

## **4 – Announcements of God before the event.**

We are now entering, in our reading sequence, upon a series of announcements made at the beginning of John the Baptist's life and also at the birth of Jesus.

It is said by the prophet Amos, in expressing his own mandate and zeal

to prophesy, that the act of prophesying follows from the cause of the matter; that God has spoken. Further, that it is the way that the Lord does things that He makes revelation to his servants, the prophets, of his secret counsel before He acts in history [Amos 3.4-7].

So we see here, in the beginning of the Gospels, there are announcements made to the people of God concerning these two baby boys. John and Jesus are linked in their families, their birth timings, and by the announcements that accompany the circumstances of their mother's pregnancies and their family life and situations. Their ministries are integrated in the history of the Hebrew people.

Luke has a reason in presenting these pre-birth and after-birth announcements uttered through the mouths of various people. For, in his prologue, he said that he was compiling an account of those "things that were accomplished among us" [Luke 1.1]. 'Accomplished' in the sense of 'having been brought to fulfillment'. He has searched out the early matters, even pre-birth utterances - especially pre-birth statements - to see what God has said of these men at the time of their birth.

For as it is with Samson, Samuel, and also some of the patriarchs, God had declared things in advance by an announcement, so that His purposes would be recognized and His glory shown in that He declares the end from the beginning.

We are not simply looking at "apostolic" witnesses here. The apostles can testify concerning the matters from the baptism of John to the Ascension; Luke has witnesses, from family sources and from local people, such as Anna, to bring forward for us to see "what has been fulfilled".



# nt 03 – Luke 1.5-25

## John the Baptist's birth announced to Zacharias

*Read also Exodus 30.1-10, 34-38  
for an understanding of the offering of incense.*

03-1 A priestly family

03-2 Zacharias prays for the coming of the kingdom of God

03-3 Zacharias' doubt

03-4 Elisabeth falls pregnant.

03-5 John and Jesus were relatives

03-6 John Baptist is to be read in the light of Jesus

03-7 John's ministry foretold

03-8 There are some contrasts here for us to notice.

03-9 Arrival of the kingdom intersects these two families

### 03-1 A priestly family

We are introduced to the priestly family of Zacharias and Elisabeth [1.5-7] as an upright pair of people maintaining impeccable priestly connections expressed in their marriage. They are righteous folks and walked blamelessly, fulfilling the requirements of the Lord. This introduction establishes them for us as people who are barren as to the fruit of their union in such a way as to remove the idea from our mind that the barrenness, in their advancing years, is not a punishment for anything they had done. That usual way of Jewish thinking [John 9.2] is rejected for us right from the beginning. What we are directed to by this is to consider the timing of God's arrangements.

### 03-2 Zacharias prayed for the coming of the kingdom of God

There were about 18,000 priests at that time ministering in their roster at Jerusalem. So, in their life time, each would only be permitted to minister the incense burning only once. This would have been a big day in the life of Zacharias, whether an angel spoke to him or not!

Zacharias, as was the appropriate custom, would have been praying for the kingdom of God. He was offering prayers that were appropriate, as a priest ministering on behalf of others.

So, [1.8-17] as the angel Gabriel [verse 19] makes clear to him that his prayer has been heard, we are not to think that he was praying for a son. But we are to understand that this good man, who found himself praying for God's kingdom, found the angel telling him that:

[1] Elisabeth would bear a son. His father would, of course, name him. But the name was out of the ordinary for their family - it was to be John [= the "favour of Jehovah" see Genesis 17.19].

[2] They would have much joy at his birth.

[3] About John:

[a] He would be great in the eyes of the Lord.

[b] Like the Nazarites of old [Numbers 6; Judges 13-16; 1 Samuel 1.12] he would be dedicated to the Lord and this is illustrated in that he would not drink alcohol, and

[c] He would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb

[d] He will turn back many sons of Israel to their God

[e] He will be a forerunner before the Lord, in spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn back the hearts of the father to their children, the disobedient to the righteous, and make the people ready for the Lord.

The expression, 'spirit and power of Elijah' recalls the reception of the spirit of Elijah by Elisha. The Spirit of God worked through him in just the way that the Spirit of God worked through Elisha. But the important thing is that this was the reception of the knowledge of God which Elisha received by receiving the spirit of his master, Elijah. So, Elisha would have 'taken knowledge' of God according to what his master, Elijah, would have known. John the Baptist is so like Elijah, in dress, place of ministry, time - for he operates in a time of a weak king and a strong manipulative woman, as Elijah did - and message. The implication here is that John the Baptist is a person operating in an Elijah -type way.

Indeed, when we come to **nt117**, we shall see that Jesus identifies John the Baptist as the Elijah who was to come of Malachi 3.1.

### 03-3 Zacharias' doubt

Zacharias, asks how shall he know this for certain. He mentions that he is old and his wife is advanced in years; by which we understand her to be post-menopausal. The issue is "how can this be?"

Gabriel, carrying great authority as one who stands in the presence of God, claims he has been sent to bring this news. Since the trusting of this news is the issue, Gabriel disciplines Zacharias. He will be silent and dumb until the birth happens. So while we are to understand that they carry out their priestly requirements without error [**03-1** above], Zachariahs' failure here opens up for

us a sharp contrast with Mary that will be drawn later.

As he completes the incense burning, the crowd outside understand that he has had an encounter with the Lord. They know something has taken place - he is dumb. He cannot tell them of the plans of the Lord. It is not for him to anticipate his son's later ministry. What is told to him is not for their consumption. Later, as for us who are the readers of the narrative, when all of John's and Jesus' ministry has come to fruition, this may be told as a testimony. Zacharias finishes his weekly roster and returns home.

### 03-4 Elisabeth falls pregnant.

The intercourse and conception is not commented upon – it is assumed that they are both natural. What is remarkable is the time in their lives when they are having this pregnancy. The implications for Elisabeth are deeply personal; five months would show her to be pregnant before she says that she is. God has favoured her and thus has taken away her disgrace among her human companions. Luke records her personal satisfaction.

*Father, there are many things that cause us personal rejoicing in life; and we thank you personally for them. Help us however, to look to you and your purposes to know their meaning. Amen.*

### 03-5 John and Jesus were relatives

John the Baptist may be thought of as Jesus' cousin. This may be not strictly true in the narrower sense of cousin in English. That Zacharias and Elisabeth are relatives [Luke 1.36,58 – the word “συγγενις” means kinsfolk; it is rendered “cousins” by AV.] of [Joseph and] Mary is clear [Luke 1.26]. But by subtitling John as ‘the cousin’ I want to make sure that we appreciate the close family bond which is being made here by Luke; and it may indicate for us the origin of his sources for this section of the Gospel narrative which is peculiar to him.

### 03-6 John Baptist is to be read in the light of Jesus

While there may be continuity in regard to their two families however, there is a deep discontinuity in the contrasting roles between John and Jesus. We learn from Gabriel, and the teaching of Jesus will confirm, concerning John that he is indeed, in the eyes of the Lord, a great prophet. From Jesus we learn there is more to this [See **nt116**]. John is the last of the great prophets of the old era. John is the place where the old moves over into the new; he is the bridging person



appointed by God to be the forerunner of the Messiah.

Luke presents the arrival of John, within his own family, as a great joy to his mother and father and their extended family. Indeed the whole of Luke 1, apart from the prologue, is set within the domestic life of these relatives. The prophetic things that God causes them to say, one to another, in different settings provide for us an opening into the great themes of the gospel.

### 03-7 John's ministry foretold

John the Baptist's ministry is anticipated for us here, even before he is born. We are told that he will bridge the generations of fathers and sons. He is likened to the ministry of Elijah, but we must wait for the later exposition of that by Jesus. But he will meld together the fathers, calling them to admit their sins and seek the forgiveness that is foreshadowed through the Baptist's ministry.

And the young, who see their older ones admitting their mistakes, are drawn alike into the baptism which John will call them to share in as they, fathers and sons, prepare for the coming One towards whom John is pointing. With John, two generations intersect in his ministry, and the kingdom is to be sought out and anticipated by them as they wait for Jesus.

### 03-8 There are some contrasts here for us to notice.

Zacharias and Elisabeth have their shame relieved and their social stigma taken away as the old era closes and their rejoicing is clearly a fulfilment of their longings.

Joseph and Mary stand in a different time and place. They, as those given to share in the days of grace, will bear shame as they make room and welcome the arrival of the baby that God has given them.

Zacharias is rebuked for his unbelief. Both Joseph and Mary are people of unparalleled faith in the word of God given to them. Joseph will take care of a child he does not sire, and embrace the shame and social stigma that falls to both himself and Mary. Joseph has no part in the siring of the Messiah – and in this he stands for us all. We have not had any hand in saving ourselves; the process is entirely one of God's doing and there is no place for a man's work in the matter.

### 03-9 The arrival of the kingdom intersects these two families

A priest, praying on behalf of Israel, in the course of his normal everyday duties, finds that he will have a son. This son will be the forerunner of another who

brings the Kingdom of God in his own Person.

In this way, the good news of the kingdom begins with the closure of something which is going to be shown to be “old” in the face of the kingdom which is come in the Person of the King, which, in just the same way, can be seen to be “new”. One man’s ministry will close up the time in which he lives and then, as the other comes on stage the new chapter is opened in such a way as the ministry of two men are compared and contrasted. This theme will operate consistently for all four Gospel writers. All of them speak of the work of John as marking the transition to the new kingdom of God. John is a hinge person, he closes one door so that another may open.

God is working through men to accomplish his purposes. Two “sons” of a related family are pivotal to the purposes of God. One points to the other, the Other accepts the testimony of the former but has a greater testimony as well [John 5.30-37].

*Father, help us, as we read the Gospels, to pay full attention to the ministry of John the Baptist. For as your Son taught, those who receive him as called by God to do what he did; are well prepared to receive your only Son. Give us to see this clearly; we ask in your Son’s Name. Amen*

## nt 04 – Luke 1.26-38

### Jesus’ birth is announced to Mary

04-1 Galilee, the place Isaiah spoke about

04-2 Mary’s reaction to Gabriel’s news – she has found favour with God

04-3 Son of Mary

04-4 The offspring shall be called Son of God

04-5 Mary’s submission to the Lord

04-6 A miraculous conception

04-7 What does it signify?

04-8 No man is involved

04-9 Not a union between God and a woman

04-10 Mary takes no initiative

04-11 Word of God enters our created fallen state

04-12 The Word of God takes fallen, sinful flesh

04-13 The faith of Mary and Joseph

#### 04-1 Galilee, the place Isaiah spoke about

Luke records the announcement to Mary by the archangel Gabriel was

made at a time when Elisabeth was in her 6th month of pregnancy. In this way he links the two women for us again, and also drives his narrative forward with a time relation we can understand. John the Baptist will be six months older than Jesus.

Not only the time but also the place is crucial to Luke. It is a young woman, a virgin, who is living in a town called Nazareth in Galilee. This virgin is engaged, she is betrothed – spoken for – to a man named Joseph, who is a descendant of David.

These factual statements are simply presented; but to the reader of the Old Testament, the fact that what is about to take place happens in Galilee recalls the prophecy of Isaiah; that the people from a defiled region with a southern, pig raising area, who walk in darkness, will see a great light [Isaiah 9.1-2] and that their gloom of earlier times will now change.

Isaiah's understanding that there will be an off-shoot [Isaiah 11.1-2] from the line of Jesse - king David's line - is also dropped in for us concerning Joseph's family line.

## 04-2 Mary's reaction to Gabriel's news – she has found favour with God

In contrast to the exchange with Zacharias, Gabriel greets Mary as a favoured person of God. Mary's reaction, as given to us by Luke, is one of puzzlement, a wondering as to what it might mean to be greeted in this way. She does not immediately look at her life to draw a conclusion about herself. Luke makes clear to us Mary had no idea of what was about to be spoken in reference to herself. Her "troubled" face must have included fear, for Gabriel assures her not to fear. She has found favour with God.

The favour she has found with God is declared by what shall happen. She will conceive, bear a son and name him Jesus.

## 04-3 Son of Mary

The child, the Son of Mary will be:

[a] as to his Person: will be great, called the Son of the Most High;

[b] as to his status: the Lord God will give Him the throne of his father [forefather] David; He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will not end.

This is why Mary can be addressed as a favoured one. She has been chosen by God for this work, this honour.

## 04-4 The offspring shall be called Son of God

Mary is engaged, she is looking forward to her marriage. If she is to immediately conceive, she has a question; 'how can this be – she is a virgin'? She does not see, as to method, how it is possible. She is not expressing that it will not happen, she is asking how can it happen.

The angel answers the question. It is a conception that will take place under the power and work of the Holy Spirit of God. Mary will be "come upon" and "overshadowed" – Old Testament words a Hebrew maiden would know and understand. God is going to do a work in and through her by his own initiative and presence.

And because it will be a work of God, the offspring to be born shall be called Son of God. The originating, siring personage is God Himself.

To encourage her, through matters taking place in her own domestic circle, about which she would be aware, Gabriel points to Elisabeth's barrenness and how it is overcome. Conception is God's gift and work in the face of human impossibilities. There is nothing impossible with God.

## 04-5 Mary's submission to the Lord

Mary's view of herself is that she is a bonds slave of the Lord. He is her Lord, she accedes to His Lordship. She responds with softness of spirit and simply says, "be it unto me according to your word". If God has spoken through his angel, then the how is solved for her, the agreement of her will is all that is required. She will receive.

She makes no mention of the timing; whether it is awkward for her or not. She is unconcerned about her own schedule, making no statement about her upcoming marriage. She leaves the Lord to deal with Joseph - and He does!

*Father, would You work in us the softness of spirit that your Son had toward You. Thank You for His Spirit in union with us. Help us to trust and obey what we hear from You. Amen*

## 04-6 A miraculous conception

We are not so much as presented with a "virgin birth" being foreshadowed here. The birth that followed was natural in every way. What Luke is presenting to us is a miraculous conception; for that is what Mary's question is really about. How can this be? It is a question concerning her virginal state in the light of the angel's announcement of what is about to happen.

In thinking about this question we must be clear that the text in no way

answers the question of ‘how can this be?’ in the sense of describing a technical method. The question is answered using the Mary’s traditional framework. It will be an act of her God to Whom nothing is impossible. The answer is framed in drawing attention to the Person who is the acting Subject, not his mechanical method of doing what He does.

### 04-7 What does it signify?

But if we ask what is that this miraculous conception signifies to us that is a fruitful question indeed. What does the text lead us to consider? The first thing to say is that it is a sign – it points to the work of God in the wider sense of His gracious coming to us.

A sign is an action of God, expressed in the human sensual realm, which points to the real work of God which is being done. It is a window, and we need, as with all human words, to look “through” the sign to the work of God that it signifies.

### 04-8 No man is involved.

The first thing signified here is that, when Jesus is conceived, there is no man involved in the process. God has taken the initiative Himself and acted. No man has decided that he will have a child simply because he has the sperm and simply needs a woman and then acts to unite to her. Here, we are directed to a sovereign act of God at work with a receptive woman. The will of man is not decisive here, just as it is not decisive anywhere when it comes to the actions of God’s grace [Romans 9.14-18].

### 04-9 Not a union between God and a woman

We understand [see *nt02 & Assignment 1*] that God has brought about His Word taking flesh; but the text ensures that we do not think of this in the Greek mythological way. We have no demi-god coming to earth and having intercourse with a woman and some half-god/half-human product ensues. There is no union here. That is clearly denied us to even contemplate.

### 04-10 Mary takes no initiative

The text also makes clear that we must not think of Mary giving to the Godhead what by nature the Godhead did not have. Here we have the Word of God taking flesh in the womb of the virgin. Mary does not give, she receives. The text does not present her with the initiative. She is a partner in this matter, not by ini-

tiative and taking; but by faithfully receiving and responding to the word of God which, as a gift, came to her in her God-given faith and availability.

### 04-11 Word of God enters our created fallen state

The text also makes clear that Jesus is not coming into existence out of nothing. God does not simply say, "Let there be..." here. What is required is that there is a woman, already in existence, through whom the Son of God will be born. The Word of God takes flesh which is flesh like ours, sinful flesh of the womb of his mother, fallen humanity which He is going to take here and then live in such a way as He will redeem it for us all to share.

### 04-12 The Word of God takes fallen, sinful flesh

The text also insists that Mary is an ordinary person - fallen - like us. We are not to embrace here the doctrine of the immaculate conception. If Mary was an immaculate person, then the Saviour born of her could not save us. What is needed here is that the Word of God takes fallen flesh so that the salvation He works is in fact our redemption.

He is acceptable to God in his humanity, not because He did not share in our fallen flesh. He did share in our fallen flesh; and then by His own act of will, with faith in God, lived a life in the flesh which was victorious over it and beautiful in God's sight. A life we can share now by His Spirit. He was a true human, flesh-and-blood person, born of a real mother.

### 04-13 The faith of Mary and Joseph

That Christ is to be born of a virgin emphasizes the Grace of God, that He acts solely here alone. God will overshadow Mary, caring for her as He acts to save through the Son of God, who will be born of her.

For Joseph, who stands as a sign for all men and women, this whole event is God's gracious judgment that no man is involved in this process. He participates in a way that he stands beside his fiancée, and, as the angel later clarifies for him the conception as a work of God, Joseph will take her to be his wife in faith. But he does not participate as a siring husband. The event costs him dearly, socially it is humiliating. He has to appreciate it by faith – for he has no part in his saviour coming into the world.

*Father, how wonderful that no man had any part in bringing Jesus Christ into the world. That all here is by Your grace, by Your gift, and was no human work; makes it solid to us. We owe it to no man that he sired the*



*Christ. Such are Your wonderful ways that You would give us a proper man, a true man, like us and yet different from us in the way He responded to You. And all for our sakes. Praise You! Amen.*

## nt 05 – Luke 1.39-56

### Mary visits Elisabeth

*05-1 Mary journeys south*

*05-2 In vitro, John registers the mother of the Lord*

*05-3 Elisabeth prophesies.*

*05-4 Mary exalts the Lord*

*05-5 Mary attends Elisabeth in her confinement*

*05-6 Mary's submission to God's honouring grace*

*05-7 Mary as a recipient of God's mercy*

#### 05-1 Mary journeys south.

We left the last reading with the words of the angel Gabriel directing Mary to consider her relative Elisabeth as someone in the extended family who is to be an encouragement for her in this work that God is currently initiating. Both their families are involved in this. We are told that Mary immediately arose, and in a hurry, set out from Galilee to visit her relative who lived in the hill country of a city in Judah. This is a considerable journey.

#### 05-2 In vitro, John registers the mother of the Lord

As Mary enters Zacharias' and Elisabeth's home she greets Elisabeth. Elisabeth has an immediate reaction to her greeting. The baby "leaped" in her womb and Elisabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. Even in Elisabeth's womb, John is testifying to Jesus, by recognising Jesus' mother's voice and confirming it through his own mother's recognition and speech.

Luke uses the expression "filled with the Holy Spirit" throughout his Gospel and also the Acts of the Apostles. He does not use it to describe the state of a person so much. He uses it to tell us that what is happening, - what someone is doing - is a pure work of the Spirit. To be operating "full" of the Spirit is a way of saying not only that the Holy Spirit is responsible for the speech or action. It is also saying that there is no mixture of the flesh of the person coming through as

well. [See Luke 1.15,41,67; 4.1,14; Acts 2.4; 4.b,31; 5.1; 9.31; 11.24; 13.9;].

We have already learned that John the Baptist is filled with the Holy Spirit. Here is the occasion that demonstrates that - he “leaped” [kicked] in the womb at the entry of Mary and at the sound of her voice. While it is the babe who is responding, we are told it from the perspective of Elisabeth; we are shown what she registered. Luke does not let us forget it is all of the Spirit.

### 05-3 Elisabeth prophesies.

Now, in response to the babe kicking, the Spirit inspires Elisabeth to speak with respect to Mary. Concerning Mary, Elisabeth acknowledges:

[a] she is a blessed lady and so is the fruit of her womb.

[b] Mary is blessed because she believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her “by the Lord” - which is the same as hearing from Gabriel.

Notice the emphasis placed upon Mary’s faith by Elisabeth. The Holy Spirit is emphasising through her that Mary’s response of trust to the Lord was itself a blessing to her. As to the content of the faith she had, Mary is said to have believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was said. So, as the angel had spoken, she had no doubt as to the fact that it would be so – it would come to pass “according to his word”.

### 05-4 Mary exalts the Lord

Mary’s response to this is to extol how God uses the humble and lifts them up - exalts them - as He takes them into sharing the work of bringing His purposes to pass. She states in her reply:

[a] Her soul is currently exalting the Lord as she speaks, for her spirit has already rejoiced in God Who is her “saviour” because He has had regard to her humble estate and now she understands that all generations will call her blessed. We shouldn’t think of this evaluation as a later overlay. If Mary had taken to heart the greatness of the One born of her, as the angel described Him – she already has grounds for knowing that she is a blessed lady for all generations.

[b] God is holy and merciful to those that fear Him. He brings down the proud and exalts the humble. Mary sees her blessedness as an example of this mercy.

[c] God fills the hungry, but those rich who have no hunger, He sends them away empty.

[d] She sees that the same God who had mercy to Israel has kept his covenant with Abraham and his offspring. This sets the work of this miraculous conception within Israel, as a work of God extended for His people’s sake.

*Father, all Your commands are a blessing to us. They lead us into Your paths and it is your own work to evoke from us faith in what You say. Thank you that your ways are with the lowly and humble of spirit – dwelling with them is no problem to You, but the very nature of your Son, Who was among us as One who was “meek and lowly of heart”. He brings rest to our souls. In His Name Amen.*

### 05-5 Mary attends Elisabeth in her confinement

Mary stayed three months with Elisabeth and then went home. She was there, to care for the older woman in her later days of her confinement. She was there, registering the beginnings of her own pregnancy. Three months pregnant herself, she returned to Galilee.

### 05-6 Mary’s submission to God’s honouring grace

Mary’s speech - or was it a song? – reflects her own humble state as a “bond-slave” [a female slave] as it also shows the dominant theme of the mercy of God, so well known to his people. Out of her mouth the Holy Spirit has brought forth remembrances of the word-fall of certain Psalms and also from Job.

Psalms 138.6 – a psalm of David, reads, “for though the Lord is exalted, Yet He regards the lowly; but the haughty He knows from afar.”

Psalms 103.17 – which majors on the Lord’s compassion and forgiveness to his people [8-14] and then moves to the understanding of His mercy

Job 5.11- has Eliphaz the Temanite assuring us that he would confidently take his appeal to God for He is the carer of those who are mourners and looks after the lowly, lifting them on high.

In this way the whole speech of Mary in response to Elisabeth extolling her blessedness is that she is a lowly one who has received mercy from God who loves her and has looked upon her humble setting in life. Mary’s basic awareness is that for those who are in a low place, God takes a great deal of joy in exalting them by the fact that He deigns to use them in the prosecution of his purposes.

Mary is celebrating the nature of her, and Israel’s, God in that she has been honoured from within her lowly place to be of use to the Lord in His saving purposes.

We have here the basic understanding of the gospel message in its effect upon the soul of a lowly woman. She is convinced that, of herself, she really occupies a very low place in society, and also in the religious society of the day. She has a humble, revering attitude towards the Lord and is happy to be used by Him in any way that he sees fit. She has already sorted that out.

As the announcement of the angel informs her of what it is that God plans to do through her, she sees herself as being mercifully dealt with. Relationally, she registers the honour that has been placed upon her. She is being entrusted with a work for the Lord that offers her to render her body as the domicile of the infant Jesus. She has no difficulty with that, as no bondsman who had served her master would. The body of the slave is simply the effective executive arm of the will of her Lord. She has already sorted that. Her lowly attitude and station equips her for the bodily task. So she readily places herself at the disposal of the One who sent his angel to her.

### 05-7 Mary as a recipient of God's mercy

If grace is giving to us what we cannot earn, mercy is dealing with us other than we deserve. So often the setting of mercy is that we are, as sinners, undeserving of God's acceptance.

This is simply true, but there is another setting of mercy being presented to us here. It is the inclusion of a lowly servant, who would never dare to consider herself as anything else than at the bottom of the household pack, in the plans and schemes of the Master.

It is mercy that is at once a relational exaltation of that person's place to being a co-worker with the Lord. It is the deep privilege, undeserved, but simply granted – so it is an exaltation which is the act of mercy at the same time. This is why all generations will call Mary blessed. Her blessing is founded upon the lowly place she occupies, in her own estimation of her relation to the Lord and his purposes.

In this way Mary is blessed among women. She is an object of God's mercy and exaltation. She has been chosen to serve a Lord who serves His people. We need to remember this clearly whenever we think of Mary, particularly in the light of the exalted place given to her by some sections of the Christian church. For if she is highly exalted by God, she means that is only because, in her own estimation, she was the lowest of the low. It is "mercy" because of where she was; she is not thinking of her place in the eyes of later believers.

*Father, as we consider your mercy to Mary, how we thank you for such a Saviour who rendered up his body to death, for the sake of serving His Father in heaven, and for our salvation. We worship Him, who as your Son, was One who came to serve and to give His life a ransom for many. In His name we pray, Amen.*

## nt 06 – Luke 1.57-80

### John is born, circumcised, named and prophesied over

*Genesis 17.12, Leviticus 12.3*

*06-1 John's birth fulfils God's word to Zacharias 1.57-58*

*06-2 John is circumcised and named 1.59-66*

*06-3 Zacharias, with tongue loosed, prophesies 1.67-80*

*06-4 Thanks to God for Sending the Messiah 1.68-70*

*06-5 Deliverance is a mercy of God to them. 1.71-75*

*06-6 The part that John will play 1.76-77*

*06-7 The salvation the Messiah will bring 1.78-79*

#### 06-1 John's birth fulfils God's word to Zacharias 1.57-58

The joy and celebration of family circles ["cousins" AV], with their neighbours, continues to be the centre of Luke's first chapter; the setting being Zachariah and Elisabeth's place in the hill country of Judea. Once again, the mercy of God to Elisabeth is centre-stage; that God has been gracious to her is the setting of the celebration in regard to Elisabeth. John's birth is to become the focus in what follows.

The theme of "fulfilment" is struck in the record here again. What God had promised has come to pass. This will be central in Zacharias' words later, but not in the narrower sense of the angel's disciplining word to him, but in the faithfulness of God to Israel and His covenant promises.

#### 06-2 John is circumcised and named 1.59-66

Reading Genesis 17.12, Leviticus 12.3 and recording Paul's own testimony [Philippians 3.5] concerning how he was circumcised on the "eighth" day, we see that the naming of the child took place at his circumcision. Perhaps this was so in the light of the change of names given to Abram and Sarai when circumcision was instituted as a sign of the covenant.

The locals gathered with the relatives think of calling him Zacharias, even though it was more the custom to name a child after his grandfather. Elisabeth's reply to this suggestion is a "no", expressed in the strongest way Luke can in Greek. She goes on to say it is John; which means, "Grace of the Lord". This meets with the objection that there is no one in the family history with that

name. And so they look to Zacharias to make a decision. Zacharias appears to be deaf as well as dumb.

This extended interchange brings the focus on to the name of John. For, as we, the readers, know, but the extended family do not, this is the name the Lord, through his angel, indicated. We learn that Zacharias and Elisabeth had not communicated to others exactly what the angel had said.

The amazement recorded as her husband confirmed Elisabeth indicates what this departure from the family names implies. The gathered people seem to understand that this devout, priestly family, in making this deviation must have good reason. In the minds of the people, and also the readers of Luke's record, the question is thrown up, "what kind of a person John will grow up to be?"

### 06-3 Zacharias, with tongue loosed, prophesies 1.67-80

John's father has been silent for nine months now. He has had time to reflect upon what is happening within his family and also, since he seems to know of Mary's pregnancy [1.69], he must be aware of the concurrence of events and tried to see how they intersect. His prophecy expresses the mind of the Lord.

The prophecy breaks stylistically into two sections.

First, there is a blessing [berakah] where the Lord is praised for redeeming his people from their enemies, keeping faith with the ancient fathers and remembering his covenant [67-75].

Second, we have a statement in honour of a child at his birth [76-78].

Perhaps it is better, on analysing the content to think of it as:

[1] Giving thanks for the provision of a Messiah 1.68-70

[2] The mercy of being delivered 1.71-75

[3] The part that John will play 1.76-77

[4] The Salvation the Messiah will bring 1.78-79

*Father, as the 'grace of God' is brought to us You bring us to focus on John. He was a man who called Israel to repentance, and insisted on them understanding that unless their sins were dealt with there was no salvation for them. It is so with us. Help us to hear his message and lead us to Jesus. Amen.*

### 06-4 Thanks to God for Sending the Messiah 1.68-70

Israel's God has visited his people. This is the matter that Zacharias wants to bless the Lord about. He uses the "prophetic past tense" – this doesn't think of the events as over, rather, it presents them as very certain if they are yet



to happen. This is so because God has willed it to be.

A “visitation” is a gracious coming of God among his people to work their redemption from all that enslaves them. Luke uses the noun in Luke 19.44 recording Jesus weeping over the city of Jerusalem because it did not recognise the season of God’s visitation. When Zacharias speaks of God redeeming His people we understand a release that has cost God significantly to accomplish for them.

Raising up a “horn”, a symbol of strength, from the house of David alerts us to Zacharias’ understanding the lineage of Mary. For Zacharias is referring to Jesus and not John here. Jesus is of David’s line, John isn’t. At this time, Zacharias cannot be taking into account Joseph’s Davidic line. He does not know, as yet, what will be Joseph’s reaction to the pregnancy developing in Mary’s womb. Will Mary be divorced or not? Luke will go on to establish the genealogy of Jesus from Mary’s line [See *nt007* and parallels].

Zacharias sees the fulfilment of the prophetic voice from of old. It is not a new idea, there is a deep continuity with what has gone before in what will now become the Old Testament.

## 06-5 Deliverance is a mercy of God to them. 1.71-75

“salvation” from “our enemies” might, at first, cause us to understand Zachariah to mean a freedom from the occupying Roman forces. No doubt, many of his zealous countrymen would have thought of Messiah as doing just that. However, his meaning is made clear by verse 74 where it is the freedom to serve God without fear; and in verse 77 he defines it as forgiveness of sins.

He has in mind that the deliverance will lead to a life long [“all the days of our life”] service [in the sense of worship] to God. It is because it is drawn voluntarily from us that it is freely offered. The basis for such freedom is that forgiveness of sins has brought us onto practical reconciliation to God. It is a service “in righteousness” – a righteousness granted through the work of redemption accomplished in Christ.

Once again, the theme of the mercy of God to the forefathers is seen in the fulfilment of his promises associated with God’s covenant with Israel. The faithfulness of God is uppermost here.

## 06-6 The part that John will play 1.76-77

He now turns to the little, eight day old, boy. He has been speaking of the work of Messiah, of the line of David; now he turns and says, “and you, child..”. Here we see that John is not Jesus, and yet that they may be spoken of in

the same speech because, while distinct as persons, they are in tandem as to the work.

John is a prophet of the most High God, he will go before [Messiah] to prepare his way. That is his work in relation to the Messiah. As to the people, John will prepare this road by giving a knowledge of salvation to Messiah's people. It is a salvation that will arouse within them the desire and possibility of their sins being forgiven. This is how he will prepare them.

## 06-7 The salvation the Messiah will bring 1.78-79

It is in the tender mercy of God that He visits his people. The people are pictured as sitting in darkness, in the shadow of death. In this lost place for them, a light appears in the sky and leads them out from this dark place and guides their feet into the way of peace [with God].

*Our Father, You have brought us to freely serve You by drawing forth from us such gratitude for Your mercies to us in Jesus Christ. It is a free thing for us to lovingly serve You. Thank You today that You are a God of "tender mercies" to your people. In Jesus' Name, Amen*

# nt 07 – Matthew 1.1-17

## The Genealogy of Jesus

*See Luke 3.23-28*

07-1 Differences between the genealogies of Matthew and Luke.

07-2 Why is the genealogy there at all?

07-3 Jesus being of the line of David

07-4 Our genealogy, our hereditary, has nothing to do with us before the event.

07-5 Matthew divides Jesus' genealogy into three, fourteen generation sections.

07-6 David as a pattern

## 07-1 Differences between the genealogies of Matthew and Luke.

We move to Matthew to consider the genealogy of Jesus. Luke delays the genealogy of Jesus, who he says, “was thought to be the son of Joseph” until the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, following his baptism. When in a public way, people would begin to ask, “Who is this?”

[a] Luke works back from Joseph all the way to Adam: indicating that Jesus is the Saviour of all men and women; all of whom need Him. Matthew begins at Abraham and works forward.

[b] Matthew starts the genealogy at Abraham. He is concerned to make clear that the promise of salvation is explicitly stated there in the covenant promises to the forefather. He makes clear throughout his gospel that salvation comes as a fulfilment of God’s promises to the Jews, as does the Gospel of John [John 4.22].

[c] Luke appears to be looking at the natural line of descent. Matthew, having omitted some people in the line to accommodate his easily memorable 3 segments of 14 generations each, is concerned to look at the pre-eminence of the line of Judah, rising from Abraham to its apex in David, then its decline to Jeconiah and the exile, and then its poor state from the exile until the time of Jesus.

[d] There are also differences in the persons named.

[1]Canaan – is not found in the genealogy of Noah to Abram in the Hebrew version, but is found in the LXX.

[2] Heli – is the father of Mary and hence the father-in-law of Joseph.

[3] Concerning Joseph; his mother married two men. Of one he is son by direct siring, and by the other a son by adoption.

[4] There are variations between David and Joseph in each of the genealogies. Between Abraham and David they agree, after that there are differences. Often people are left out of large genealogies. The establishment of the line is being introduced; not the counting of each member.

## 07-2 Why is the genealogy there at all?

The genealogy is the first piece of evidence Matthew presents to us. In Matthew and Luke, both genealogies end in Joseph. Does this mean that they don’t prove what we might think they ought to prove, that Jesus’ physical line is coming through his “father”.

Indeed the next section in Matthew will be the record of how the angel informs Joseph that he must come to terms with the pregnancy already established in his fiancée, and that he is not to worry about going ahead with the marriage. If Jesus is of the line of Joseph, then what if he is not sired by Joseph? That Mat-

thaw is aware of this point sets us to wonder what is the point of the genealogy at all. This question will be the background for the following sections.

### 07-3 Jesus being of the line of David

Romans 1.1-4 gives us an example of how Paul makes much of the fact that Jesus is of the line of David. The genealogies then, are not given here to establish the lineage of David by unbroken, physical descent, nor even to establish the legality of Joseph's line as being Jesus' line.

Today, a blood line is an historic register of genetic siring. But in the ancient world, and still today, conception is not something that is mechanically certain; it was a gift of God. All birth and every conception leading to it, is a gift of God at any historical time.

This turns us away from looking at the mechanics, which is the pre-occupation of our day; to see that, if life is the gift of God, then God can arrange anything. As the source of all life, He often uses a man and a woman as the way He chooses to bring it about. This fundamentally changes how we view any genealogy. A genealogy is a record in history of God's relational arrangements.

### 07-4 Our genealogy, our hereditary, has nothing to do with us before the event.

What accounts for our parents, our relatives? We are highly passive in the matter of our birth; we just arrived. In considering a genealogy, we are looking at something seen clearly after the event of the birth. A genealogy is a set of people brought into relation by God. It shows that God has arranged for this child to be conceived and brought into the world. But with this particular set of caring parents, who come from this particular line of history. In this way God is fulfilling the promise of a Messiah – the genealogy of the boy asserts that it is so – for He arranges all lines, and histories. It tells us something about God's arrangements, and so his fulfilled promises. We are back to 07-1 [b] above.

In considering the genealogy Matthew presents, we see that this prepares us to lead on to the record of how Joseph is informed by the angel concerning the state of things God has initiated with regards to Mary. Accordingly, the genealogy really puts the focus on the God of Israel who arranges all genealogies of all men and women. So we have seen that the choice of the lineage of David is reflected in the parents that God has arranged for Him. This is the main way we are lead to see the fulfilment of the promises of God to the Jewish people in regards to their Messiah.

## 07-5 Matthew divides Jesus' genealogy into three, fourteen generation sections.

While some think this is done as an aid to memory, and well it might be, we are surely right to look for a deeper meaning in this presentation. This is particularly so if Matthew has truncated the fullness of the genealogy to accomplish the divisions.

The three periods point us to three situations of the people of Israel throughout the flow of God's promises and their fulfilments. The decisive understanding is *the thread of rule and sovereignty*.

Section 1: From Abraham to David, there is a promise running concerning the tribe of Judah. It is stated by Jacob, that as he called his sons together at the time of his impending death, that he prophesied that "the sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs; and to him shall be the obedience of all the peoples." [Genesis 49.10 RSV]. It is true that the tribe of Judah was distinctively prominent among the tribes; it is not until the time of David that the issue of kingship, and thus direct rule, comes to the fore.

Section 2: Among the tribal confederacy of God's people, seen at the times of Joshua and the Judges and beginning of Samuel's ministry, we see no king. But after Saul is raised up, only to be rejected from being king, we see the rule of David as the apex of the undivided monarchy. In the genealogy, David alone is honoured with the title "king" [Matthew 1.6]. And, notwithstanding that the kingdom splits after Solomon's death, the tribe of Judah maintains an ascendancy in the rule evident until the time of Jeconiah.

Section 3: From the period of the exile until the coming of Jesus there is a decline in power and a disorientation of the people of God. Jesus sees them as sheep, not having any shepherd. As a small number, they have returned to their land. But they are living in an occupied country, under the foreign domination of Rome, the fourth power that the exilic prophet Daniel saw as the power which the "little stone" would bring down of the beasts of Gentile powers which dominate God's people.

Matthew is developing for us the promise of Kingship, and the whole understanding that the flow of that rule of the kingdom of God over God's people will be established under the Messianic person of Jesus, explicitly called the "Christ" [1.1,16]. He will bring in a kingdom that will have no end. The apex of the rule of David, the shepherd of his people will be brought to pass.

## 07-6 David as a pattern

David is seen as a type, or pattern, of the coming Messianic King who will rule. We have already had occasion to see Zacharias, John's father, speak of how God has "raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David."

"...Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham" [1.1] – makes a clear statement that the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ. It makes clear that He is the coming King, of which the Gospel will say considerable amount about his kingdom and the nature of his rule. And it points us back to the covenant given to Abraham, that God keeps his word to the patriarch. Salvation, such as the Messiah brings, is "from the Jews" who have returned from the exile; not the Samaritans, who had no promise concerning the kingdom. [ John 4.22].

*Father, thank You that You have sent us a shepherd, the director of our life who rules over us. Thank You He is a prince of Peace; has reconciled us to You and brought us home. We speak to you in the Name of the Son of David and Abraham. Amen.*

## nt 08 – Matthew 1.18-25

### The heavenly conception explained to Joseph

*08-1 Joseph's dilemma*

*08-2 Joseph addressed as "son of David"*

*08-3 The child is to be called Jesus*

*08-4 Joseph addressed about prophetic promises*

*08-5 Trinitarian issues*

*08-6 God only known through God - Immanuel*

*08-7 The coming of a vicarious man*

### 08-1 Joseph's dilemma

Matthew follows directly upon the genealogy that lists Joseph as the "husband of Mary" [1.16] by telling us that, as to the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, his mother was found to be pregnant before she had lived with her husband. The expression "before they came together" may refer to intercourse, which makes clear that Joseph is not the father of the Messiah by physical union with his wife. Matthew wants to have this clear. Certainly after marriage Matthew records that



they had no sexual intercourse until the birth of Jesus [1.25].

Or it may mean before they lived together, making one home and a family. If the latter, then, at this time, Mary is to be thought of, as the Jewish custom was, to be living at home with her parents, not handed over to Joseph as wife yet; but counted as a wife, because promised. This requires that Joseph must consider “divorce” [putting her away] for infidelity. Both meanings carry the same implications.

It is clear that Joseph had been informed and had concluded that Mary was unfaithful, for he had resolved on divorce. But, being a righteous man had concern for her shame, and decided to do it quietly. He was probably not informed by Mary, for if he had, she would not have admitted to unfaithfulness, but if she had explained, then her explanation, although true, would have sounded like he was being mocked. That God allowed him to draw a false conclusion and so to be considering divorce, meant that only the word of God to the man himself could have set him back on the way of going forward with the marriage. Joseph must hear it from God himself.

For us, as readers, we know that Joseph met the angel within a resolute course of action. He was not confused or beguiled by his fiancée – his mind was genuinely changed by an encounter with God. This would also mean that the secret of her conception was maintained until later, although it is certainly known to Zacharias and Elisabeth.

## 08-2 Joseph addressed as “son of David”

We see the mind of God declared for the man’s comfort. He is addressed as one who has a heritage in the promises of God. This would convey to him that he is being addressed in that capacity. Larger themes of God are in motion.

It is the issue of divorce that the angel resolves Joseph about – he should not fear to go ahead and marry. The conception is explained as being from the Holy Spirit. Joseph [the “you” is singular] is to call the son Mary bears Jesus.

## 08-3 The child is to be called Jesus

“Jesus”, which Calvin assures us is taken from the Hebrew meaning “to save”, is explained for the reader. It is expressly said that the reason for this name is that “he will save...from their sins”. The salvation this Messiah will bring, is for “his people”, for He is their Messiah. It will be a salvation from - a deliverance therefore, from the bondage of - their sins. Both in the sense of reconciliation with God - a dealing with guilt- and a freedom from the power of their sin to enslave them and so implying the inability to live to God.

## 08-4 Joseph addressed about prophetic promises

As the record shows Joseph is addressed so Matthew makes clear to us, that there is a word by the Lord through the prophet Isaiah [Isaiah 7.14] which is being fulfilled in the circumstances of the young woman, her conception and giving birth.

When king Ahaz, who was given encouragement to ask God for a sign, would not ask; then God said He would give a sign anyway. Matthew understands that, in the light of their unbelief at the time, God went forward in time and declared the circumstances of a young woman conceiving and that it would have the indications of God becoming present Himself among His people. And this would be a bodily presence – for the name of the child born is Immanuel – God with us.

This theme has already met us through Zachariah's prophecy. That God is "visiting" his people, raising up a "horn" of salvation for us, through the house of "David".

That Joseph could awaken, and then go about the commands of the angel with such clarity and ready obedience implies that all his disturbing question had been put to rest.

## 08-5 Trinitarian issues

We have already seen in the understanding of John's prologue to his Gospel that the Word of God becomes flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ. As such He can reveal the Father because, as the Son, He is not only with God He is God. The relation that exists between the Father and the Son, has already caused us to know of God as more than one Person. So, in considering the miraculous conception of Christ in the womb of his mother, we have been led to consider the third Person of the Trinity, who is the Spirit.

Through his Word and Spirit God has opened up to us his life in such a way that, in being reconciled to Him, we can know Him in a measure that allows us to have communion with Him in his life as Father, Son and Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity is not a way to *think about* God, it is really a statement about *the being* of God. We are to think of the revelation of God as the truth of God Himself as he comes to reconcile us. Who God is in His own eternal Being is the God who he is when He saves us and acts for us.

## 08-6 God only known through God - Immanuel

In this text we are confronted with the testimony of the Scriptures that God may only be known through God Himself. When we think of God being with us as the Christ child is born, we are not saying that God simply came into man.

Rather, we are saying that He made our human nature his own in such a way as he came among us as Man, without ceasing to be God.

We can think of the word of God as that message from God that comes to us through a man, say, as through a prophet. But we are not thinking of Jesus as a prophet in that way. It is not that He simply brings the word as a man, He is the Word of God as Man. He is the one who can say “you have heard that it was said of old...but I say unto you..” Here is the authority of Jesus which was recognisable [See **nt48-66**]. It has to do with Who He is. He is not a man empowered by God; He is God come to us as Man.

In this setting, Matthew wants us to know that God has drawn near to his people. That Christ may be called “Immanuel” = God with us, means that God has become one with us and also one of us. He will act on our behalf right in the historical life we have and meet the desperate need we have to be saved from our sins.

## 08-7 The coming of a vicarious man

The coming of God into the flesh in the birth of Mary’s son as the One who is called “Immanuel”, means that his life is one lived “for us”- that is, vicariously.

We can think of this vicarious life in two ways:

[a] he lives for us in the sense that He will do things for us which we cannot do for ourselves even if we should try. In this way we must trust that He does them for us so as to exclude us from ever doing them ourselves, as if we could. If He excludes us, then he is operating a vicarious life of a man who is a substitute. He does them and we do not. There are elements in the Gospels of this sort of action “for us”.

[b] he lives for us in the sense that He will do things throughout his historical time on the earth so that we will do as He has done. But this is only after we have been set right with God through his substitutionary work for us, and when we have received the Spirit of the Man so as to be in union with Him.

In this way His vicarious life is that of a representative Man. He draws us into his life, not to copy Him of our own ability, but to be re-born and indwelt by his Spirit so that we can live as He lived. It is the Gospels that show us these matters.

*Father of our Lord, Jesus, only You can reveal You. And You have chosen to reveal Yourself through your only Son. We praise You for this coming to us. Help us to trust the revelation of yourself made in here; thank You that it is not some thing about You, but a revelation of You as You are. Thank You it was “for us” that He came. Thank You that what He did in our name, allows us to pray to You in His name. Amen.*

## nt 09 – Luke 2.1-7

### The Birth of Jesus at Bethlehem, a city of David

*09-1 Construction of Luke 2*

*09-2 A decree of Caesar*

*09-3 No room at the inn [kataluma].*

*09-4 The exposure of the public journey*

*09-5 Bethlehem*

*09-6 A theology of history*

#### 09-1 Construction of Luke 2

Luke 2 covers a series of movements surrounding the birth of Jesus; the Shepherds and the angels, Jesus' circumcision, the return to Nazareth and the record of Jesus' at a young age in the Temple.

Our readings follow this order with the exception of a brief recourse to Matthew's record of the visit of the Wise Men to the infant Jesus.

#### 09-2 A decree of Caesar

The cause of the journey, and so the setting for the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, lies not in some choice of Joseph or Mary, but in the decree of Caesar Augustus. [See Luke 2.1, and also Acts 25.21,25]

Caesar Augustus was the first Roman emperor, and this title was given to him by the Senate when he attained supreme power. He was born Octavius in BC 63. He had a studious youth and came suddenly to the fore at the age of 19 at the death of Julius Caesar in BC 44 as his legally adopted son and heir. He was politically very able and he maintained his position carefully.

He occupied first place in the triumvirate, of Octavian, Mark Antony and Lepidus, but he removed his rivals gradually. With the defeat of Antony at Actium in BC 31 he was the undisputed master of the Roman world. In BC 29 he returned to Rome [aged 34] where he ruled autocratically until his death at an old age. At the end he was very morose and suspicious, being saddened by

family troubles. He had associated himself with Tiberius in government and he left him as his successor after him.

The Jews, being subject to Rome, came under Augustus as their supreme ruler. Following the battle at Actium, Herod who previously had been a supporter of Antony, switched sides to the victor, and was confirmed in his area by Augustus. Later, when visited by Augustus, when he came to Syria [BC 20] Augustus added to his territory.

In honour of the Emperor, Herod erected a marble temple at Pnias built the capital, Caesarea, [BC 10] and also rebuilt Samaria calling it Sebaste. After Herod's death, Augustus carried out his wishes in the division of his kingdom among his sons, but subsequently joined Judea and Samaria to the province of Syria, exiling their ruler Archelaus.

Jesus Christ was born in the reign of Augustus, and was about 18 years old when the Emperor died. Augustus ordered a more or less complete census to be taken on four occasions. They were in BC 26, BC 6, AD 4 and AD 14.

What this makes clear is that, notwithstanding his care for Mary, Joseph is required to make the journey. They are living together as a family. What caused the movement from Nazareth was a matter external to them both; but in the wisdom of God fulfils Micah 5.2 about the Messiah being born in Bethlehem [house of bread]. It is called the city of David for he was the son of Jesse who came from there [1Samuel 17.12].

Significantly then, it would be the town, not of David's ruling seat, that was elsewhere [Hebron at first, Jerusalem later] but was the place of his childhood and his father's house. The parallel of the occasion is clear.

### 09-3 No room at the inn [kataluma].

This word, translated "inn" is used of the guest chamber [Luke 22.11, Mark 14.14], where Jesus ate the Passover with his disciples. But Luke also uses another word [pandocheion] for an inn where there is an innkeeper [Luke 10.34]. Farrar [1884] thinks we should understand an open space with a roof, where there is no host, as such, to turn them away, but since the people were crowded into it there was no room. Certainly no private place, particularly so for a heavily pregnant woman, close to giving birth. There is a second century tradition which has Jesus born in a cave nearby.

We notice the town of Bethlehem here is not said to fulfil the Scripture, although it does [see **nt09-3** above]. We could imagine that Matthew might have made much of this. Luke however, later weaves it into the story line as the angel makes mention of the city of David to the shepherds; and they make clear what is meant is Bethlehem.

*Gracious Father, we acknowledge Your ways that set them time and place for this birth. Who arranges things as You can. Caesar Augustus may decree, but You fit Rome's governance into Your wonderful purposes and promises. Thank you for such a humble birth as You stoop to care for us all. Amen.*

## 09-4 The exposure of the public journey

The way Luke tells the story, Mary was unattended by women at the birth, although Joseph is there. She wrapped the new born in swaddling clothes and put him in a feeding box of an animal.

The humility of the Saviour's family, the lowly setting for the birth of this child, will now be sharply underscored by the next episode in the Lukan story, which is the worship of the shepherds – a despised class of people – who are summoned to worship someone born for them.

The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, at the direction of the occupying, ruling government, makes for a move from the domestic and familial setting of the immediate family of Mary, Joseph, Zacharias and Elisabeth into a strange, public, more open setting of the travellers, caught up in the crowding of Bethlehem and the inability to find a place to sleep, let alone to give birth. They are very much one their own; somewhat exposed, in the human scene, but overseen and cared for by their place in the astonishing purpose of God.

This public, more exposed position, opens to us the contact with shepherds, and wise man, and ultimately the notice of Herod. It will lead to a flight to Egypt, and position of political danger will have to be relieved before they return to Nazareth.

If the conception was private, quietly received in the family, and graciously covered from the public gaze by the marrying of Mary by Joseph at the clarification the angel brought to him; we are now drawn into a different setting. There is to be a sense that the boy who is born has a great significance. He is a Saviour, for Israel, in the first place, and then coming "from the Jews" and for the world.

Luke's narrative makes us aware of the family as doing what they must do, not self consciously, but just going along with the next responsibility to be met.

[ But we interrupt this next reading to take in the visit of the wise men, as it is

recorded by Matthew. So while we temporarily lose the flow of Luke's narrative, we see the balance and different emphasis of Matthew reminding us of royal visitors who are Gentile and graciously shown by God, and then directed to come and worship.]

## 09-5 Bethlehem

The issue of Joseph's lineage however, has a corollary. If he is of the house of David, then his own youth and birth are now a major reason why Bethlehem is where he must now come. Sure, to be registered for the annual taxation opportunity of Rome; but while that is the immediate, historical reason and cause for them being there, a greater than Caesar Augustus is at work here.

We are drawn into the astonishing promises of God to the Jewish people, first in taking them into covenant with Himself, rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, to govern them and train them, in a wilderness of his choosing, to be His people. When they later call for a king to fight their battles for them, and thus rejecting Him, He stays with them, raises up King David and makes a promise to them. Here is a Planner who works in longer arcs and wider ways, over longer times than any Roman Emperor. He is the One who can allow the Emperor to decree, and then in the fine detail of his own prophetic promise, bring about the synchronicity of a conception, a lineage, a near divorce, a caring couple who have a secret, a town, a crowded public shelter and a birth of his Messiah.

These matters, as Luke has called them, are the "things that have been so recently accomplished among us".

## 09-6 A theology of history

Prophecy has this amazing reach. Something that was said, in the context of the history of Israel, can have an immediate setting. This is true with Micah [see **nt09-3** above] when he spoke to the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BC about One coming from Bethlehem. But it can also have a "fulfilment" in such a way as the occasion and the way of it cannot be predicted, only the event can be recognised after it has come to pass. Such is the case here.

We are not, as God's people, to seek our understanding of history in the secular sense of the development of movements that simply draw together results. While we can see this here in the case of Caesar Augustus, he is not the meaning of the event, simply a contributor to the occasion. A theology of history is what we must consider. It gives us an understanding of events from God's perspective.



# nt 10 – Luke 2.8-20

## Shepherds are drawn to worship

*10-1 An order of reading*

*10-2 Shepherds on night shift*

*10-3 The shepherds find it so and believe*

*10-4 A saviour for ignorant sinners*

*10-5 The bringer of peace*

*10-6 What had been private to Mary is now public to all*

### 10-1 An order of reading

A rough sequence seems to be as follows:

1. Christ is born BC 6.

2. Shepherds worship “this night” - which is the night of the birth

[Lk]

8 days later, Jesus is circumcised [Lk]

3. The purification of Mary [40 days after the birth, during which time the mother would not have left her house] [Lk]

4. The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple at Jerusalem [6 miles from Bethlehem] [Lk]

5. Simeon and Anna speak [this takes us to Luke 2.38]

6. Magi enter Jerusalem and speak with Herod, expecting everyone to know [Matthew] Herod hears about Bethlehem [so he knows that this is the area, but not accurate place]

7. Magi worship [entering “the house”] and return another way. Leaving Herod uninformed. [Mtt]

8. Joseph informed by angel to flee [Mtt]

9. Family flees to Egypt for two years [maximum]

10. Young infants slaughtered in Bethlehem [somewhere between BC 6 and BC 4]

11. Herod the Great dies BC4 and his kingdom parcelled out to sons.

12. Family return to Israel and go direct to Galilee, avoiding Archelaus [Mtt] [Lk]

To explain the placement of the wise men’s visit to Jesus we need to allow

for the fact that Herod obviously thinks that, from the time when he first estimated the wise man knew of the arising of the star to when he acted to slay the young infants, a two year period would have sufficed to catch him in the net at Bethlehem.

It is unlikely that the wise men came on the night, because that would have them returning soon after, and it would hardly be appropriate for Herod to wait 2 years before he acted.

They may have come up to 40 days after, for Mary is confined at home [10-4 below] and she is in a “house” by the time the magi find the boy [ 10-8 below].

So we have delayed the reading of the Wise Men, as Matthew records it, until after the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple in Jerusalem as perhaps the best time to read it in continuity with the Lukan text.

## 10-2 Shepherds on night shift

Shepherds were out in the fields watching their flocks by night. It was their custom to drive the sheep into a fold [as we see Jesus describe in John 10] overnight to keep them safe from wild animals. Where no fold could be found, they worked in shifts, watching them throughout the night. This is the case here.

The angel of the Lord assures them not to fear, but to understand that it is good news for them that a Saviour is born to them. The general place is the city of David, which they at once identify among themselves as meaning Bethlehem [1.15]. The sign for them, so that they may know the truth of the statement, and also that they have found the right child, is the incongruous setting of finding him in a food stall for the animals. It is a sign also in the sense that it speaks of a lowly and humble arrival of their Saviour from God.

Further, there is a great number of angels praising God, the bringer of peace on earth to those men he is pleased to bring it to. The shepherds go and check it out.

## 10-3 The shepherds find it so and believe

What they find is Mary, Joseph and the boy. What they do is bear witness widely of what had happened to them on that night. They tell the story of the Saviour born for ordinary folks such as themselves. This is the first thing they do, and we must comprehend that they told Mary and Joseph their story as well.

They also return glorifying praising God for what they had seen and heard was as it had been told them by the angel of the Lord. By contrast, Mary does not broadcast it – she has even more now to think about - her heart is

pondering and registering these things along with all the other things she already knows about Jesus.

## 10-4 A saviour for ignorant sinners

Shepherds are a rum lot. Their wandering life and their constant work away from most ordinary folk serves to estrange them from others. They were notoriously light fingered, and their word was not admissible in court of law. They were not the highest citizens in the estimation of their countrymen.

And yet, the angelic message is that “to you” is born a Saviour. If, for the learned ones who informed Herod, when asked, they could out of their own education or learning know that Bethlehem is the place where the Christ was to be born. Here, the unlearned and low ones of society are directly informed anyway, of that which they might not know through education, and told exactly how to recognise the One who is born “to them”.

We cannot miss the inference – it is for sinners, clearly known, and for sinners, who were deceived about that matter themselves, that the Saviour came and His life and ministry will show this clearly. The shepherds are addressed here as representatives of Israel, for He is not born “to them” as shepherds, or as men, but as God’s people to whom the Messiah was promised. As it was said of Zaccheus, [see 204], another clear and rejected sinner, so it may be said of these shepherds, that they are also, “men of Israel.

## 10-5 The bringer of peace

The angelic world of heavenly hosts are praising God. They are praising God for what He is doing among men of the earth: He is bringing them peace. For the first time, on the earth there has come a boy, who as a true Man, will bring God much pleasure by the way He lives after God’s own heart. This representative Man is born “for them”, and He will make those who follow Him, and trust in His Person and Work, become like Him through the reception of His Spirit.

To this worship and glorifying of God of the angels is also the added the voices of the shepherds, after they have verified and seen for themselves the sign which the angel had given them to look for. The worship of heaven and earth is united over the “peace” which the Saviour will bring for men and women. The Revelation to John will later testify that the worship of humans and of angels unites now, at the presence of the Lamb in heaven [See Revelation chapters 4&5].

## 10-6 What had been private to Mary is now public to all

The broadcasting of the joyous message that the shepherds spread, no doubt chuffed by the fact that they are recipients of information and revelation, is for all to hear. There is a public message here, for the angels have spoken to a representative group; and that Luke makes clear.

But he also presents us a contrast with Mary. She too, is in possession of revelation which has exulted her in its coming to her. It has also shown her that she is a blessed woman, and this is, at this time, private to her. It is a matter treasured in her heart; she is assimilating it and the shepherds' report adds and confirms it to her.

We are reading it now, as folks to whom the full message of this boy's life has historically been unfolded. Luke has brought us in his Gospel, information of which Mary, or someone close to her, is the informant. Indeed, the details of Jesus' conception continued to be quietly hidden under the married life of Mary and Joseph until it was right for it to come out.

For we too, need to know of the things revealed by God privately, to those who needed to know, so as to respond in faith and serve God in the coming of this Child as a truly human Man. It confirms our faith now as well. For the quiet coming of the Saviour, His humble entry, was a major challenge to the lives of Mary, and then Joseph. Their place of faith with God was to receive the word of God and play their part. Later, like the people of Israel, they would need also to place their faith in the Saviour as sinners desperately in need of His Person and Work.

*Lord, as the prophets of old needed to carry the burden of the word of the Lord personally, long before it was delivered by them, so grant us to be private and careful about what it is that you show us personally that you are about to do. Help us to act in faith, and to ponder. Defend us from declaring things too early. On the other hand, help us to broadcast the Gospel to every person we know. For Your glory. Amen.*

# nt 11 – Luke 2.21-38

## Jesus circumcised and presented in the Temple.

*Read Genesis 17, Leviticus 12.2-4; 6-8 and especially Colossians 2.9-16*

*11-1 Joseph names and circumcises Jesus*

*11-2 The purification of Mary*

*11-3 Presentation is consecration*

*11-4 Simeon's speech*

*11-5 Anna prophesies*

*11-6 An Application of our Resurrected Saviour's Circumcision.*

### 11-1 Joseph names and circumcises Jesus

This little boy, born into Israel, took his place under the covenant of God to Abraham: [1] eight days after his birth, he was circumcised [2] he was called Jesus; [3] it was the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. He was named by God according to what He would do for Israel and all men and women.

Circumcision was the sign that accompanied the covenant between God and His people. It began with Abraham [Genesis 17] and indicates that as Joseph circumcises him [ for it was probably Joseph] Jesus stands within the covenant people of Israel, He representatively stands for his people as Messiah. This is where He comes from. He also opens, by a new covenant in His blood, a way of access to God for all people.

### 11-2 The purification of Mary

This was in obedience to the requirements of the Law under which she and Joseph lived [Leviticus 12.2-4; 6-8]. As with a normal period, the issue of blood that accompanied childbirth required a ceremonial cleansing for the woman. In the case of the male child it was 7 days of uncleanness, then the child is circumcised on the eighth day, and then she continues 33 days more = 40 days. This explains why the circumcision of the baby boy, the purification of his mother and the naming are all interweaved in one action. Leviticus makes clear that if the mother could not afford a lamb, which was specified, then two turtle doves would suffice. Hence we learn that Joseph and Mary are poor folks, and have no

alternative but to resort to the gracious provision of the law in this case.

### 11-3 Presentation is consecration

The consecration of the firstborn [the first to open the womb] is that he is the Lord's. Exodus 13.2, 11-16; 22.29a; 34.19. Numbers 3.11-13 teaches that the Levites were taken as the Lord's in lieu of the firstborn, nevertheless it was still required to redeem the first born, [18.15-16], at a price of 5 shekels of silver.

This consecration of the first-born is what Luke calls "to present him to the Lord". It is a clear obligation of Joseph and Mary to do this as Hebrew people; but it re-inforces for us, the readers of the Gospel, that this child is the Lord's. He is the source of his life; he has come by the Lord's own initiative to "take flesh"; He has a mission of salvation and redemption for His people.

### 11-4 Simeon's speech

Simeon, with the Spirit of God upon him speaks first to his "Lord God" [25-32] and second to Mary [28-32]. He was an old man, and lived under the promise that he would not die until he had seen the "Lord's Christ" = the anointed Messiah of God.

He was looking for the consolation [paraklhsin] of Israel [Jacob uses the expression "salvation" of God which he is waiting for, Genesis 49.18; Isaiah 40.1; 49.23]. Taking up Jesus in his arms.

To the Lord, he says that He may now let him die in peace for he has seen the Lord's "salvation" in seeing this boy. The Lord's word to him has come to pass. He sees that God has openly prepared this salvation, and that it is especially a light to the gentiles, as it will be the glory of God's people Israel. Here is a testimony which Luke has set down which anticipates the impact of the work of Jesus on the nations beyond Israel.

To Mary, Simeon warns that this child is put in place as an instrument who will raise many up and bring many down. So He is an instrument of judgment in God's purposes. He is also put in place as a sign which will be opposed and spoken against; in this response of people to Him their own hearts will be revealed. Mary will also find that deep sorrow of heart will come to her concerning this child.

### 11-5 Anna prophecies

Anna, a prophetess, like Deborah, Miriam, and Huldah before her, she adds her words of thanksgiving to God, speaking of Jesus as a sign to all looking for the redemption of Israel.

*Father, all these people! Folks to whom You have spoken to beforehand, holding your word in their hearts until the time the Spirit gave them to speak. How we praise You for their faithfulness; and Your provision of your word to them. Amen.*

## 11-6 An Application of our Resurrected Saviour's Circumcision.

*See Colossians 2.9-16; Galatians 2.20*

As we move over to the period of the Spirit that follows the Ascension of Jesus, we understand that, in receiving the Spirit of Jesus, we have his life in union with us. All that He has done "for us", both as a substitute and a representative Man, now can enter into our living through the union.

[1] Paul sees two stages [Romans 1.3-4] in the open showing of the Son of God: the first, in which He is shown "according to the flesh" as a descendant of David – this is what we are reading of in the Gospels. The second, where He is shown as "Son of God in power" and this is "according to the Spirit". The place this is seen is the Resurrection of Christ from the dead. This is what we are reading applied by the apostles in the Epistles. The first stresses the fellowship the disciples had with Christ as they lived and walked together. The second, seen as a new creation, stresses the union of our life with Christ. Paul calls our life "in the Spirit" as being "in Christ".

[2] "In Christ" is a way of saying that we are dependant on Christ; that we are identified with Him in His life; and that we are determined by Christ over the whole of our personal being. Another way of putting this, from the other side, is to say that Christ lives in us. There is a blending together of our personalities, but only known and operated by faith. Our faith is the link between the redeemed and the Redeemer. [Galatians 2.20]

[3] In Colossians 2.9-16 Paul has a wonderful allusion to the circumcision of Christ. After explaining that the whole fullness of the deity bodily dwelt in Christ; he tells us that we have come to fullness of life "in Him".

"In Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands" – here Paul uses the union we have with Christ as a basis to trust that as He underwent circumcision, so do we, in Him.

He says that, when we were "dead in our trespasses in the uncircumcision of our flesh " God made us alive with Christ, forgave us and cancelled the debt of our trespasses...

So, Paul is stating that our life, before we were knowingly in union with Christ, was dominated by the "flesh" – the drives and desires that controlled us



through our bodies.

He has drawn a picture for us. When Christ was circumcised some of his flesh was removed from around the foreskin and this was cast off, as a sign that he was God's person, covenantally cared for and in relation to God as the Jews were.

[4] Paul instructs us to regard our baptism in water as an entry into Christ's death and burial. It signifies to us our personal participation, in such a way that we rise to a new life in Christ.

Paul now makes clear that, in union with Christ, we might, by faith, think of a "circumcision" done by God [not with human hands] on our life whereby we have had the power of the flesh cut off through Christ's coming for us and dying for us. He has broken the power of the flesh in his humanity for us. We are being encouraged, by this powerful image, to think of our own fleshly life as circumcised away, in this united life we have with Christ.

*Father, we praise for our Representative Man. Thank You for sending Him to us. Thank you that He saves us by his life, death, burial and resurrection. Thank you for His circumcision – and for the apostle's picture of this for us. Give us faith in this union we have with Christ. Help us to apply it for your glory. In Jesus Name. Amen.*

## nt 12 – Matthew 2.1-12

### Eastern wise men worship the infant King of the Jews

*12-1 the arrival of the magi and their public questions [verses 1-6]*

*12-2 a secret meeting between Herod and the magi [verses 7-8]*

*12-3 the magi pay homage to Jesus and depart [verse 9-12]*

*12-4 Dark forces become aware of an infant king*

## 12-1 the arrival of the magi and their public questions

## [verses 1-6

We have already seen, that Herod reigned from BC36/7 to BC 4. So this places the time of Jesus' birth, and of this visit of the magi at around BC 6.

The visitors to Jerusalem are called "magi". It is a title given to wise men and astrologers, among the Chaldeans and the Persian people. It does not say in the text that there were three of them. That is a later tradition constructed upon the fact that they had three gifts to bring. But the gifts are offered together as a joint offering, and they are simply the sort of representative gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh that Persians would bring as fit for a king.

They say that they have seen the "star" in the east, they have followed it, and they may have been journeying for about 4-6 weeks before the birth; or, if they understand the star to indicate the birth, then they are arriving 4-6 weeks after the birth of Jesus. Perhaps because they enter a "house" [verse 11], and because they ask "where is he..." implying that they think of the child as being born already, it may be the latter

They are coming because there is a birth of a "King of the Jews" to celebrate and mark. It is not their understanding that he is God. Indeed, although Persians may often think of their kings as deified, it is not the presentation of Matthew here. They are searching for a "royal" whom they assume the locals would be welcoming, and so would know of and could direct them. They are here to honour the kingdom, and so the local people, as much as the king.

Herod is troubled because here is his first knowledge of a competitor. All Jerusalem is troubled with him. Either because they have missed a very significant event; or they fear Herod's well-known, personal reactions to such news.

Herod is not ignorant of the Jewish hopes, nor of the value of their prophetic scripture. His assembly of the Jewish, learned representatives brings forth the testimony of Micah 5.2, which we have seen before. It is also well known to the locals. A leader will arise from Bethlehem, he would shepherd [= govern] God's people Israel. They know of this Leader, but they are ignorant that He has arrived.

So, the testimony of the learned people in the Old Testament scriptures is added to Matthew's presentation out of the mouths of those who will later show themselves, generally, to be the enemies of Jesus, and, in collusion with Roman authority, will bring about his death.

## 12-2 a secret meeting between Herod and the magi [verses 7-8]

Herod attempts to take into his service those whom God has graciously

gifted with information of His doings among His people. Herod is particularly interested in the timing of the star and the birth. Does he learn that the star has been visible for two years? Is this the information that later informs his slaughter of the children [Matthew 1.16]? Or is the two years simply his ruthless “window” of time that he considers will catch his competitor?

## 12-3 the magi pay homage to Jesus and depart [verse 9-12]

The magi, having learned that the locals are ignorant, have recourse to their star. With joy they see it again. Whatever the reason, the event is hidden from the locals; but they can follow what they are given to know. They worship, offer their gifts and depart another way. They are prevented by a dream from being of aid to the local opposition.

## 12-4 Dark forces become aware of an infant king

Matthew 1 has introduced Jesus as son of David. The king, long promised, is declared to have arrived in Jesus of Nazareth, who was born in Bethlehem [John 7.41-43]. Any reading of Matthew 2 must draw the conclusion that, while Matthew declares Joseph's care for his wife; we are immediately introduced to a sinister hostile backdrop for the coming of the King. Kings have enemies, and young kings must be protected and cared for until they come of age to assert their kingship.

The humility of the wise men, in obediently following their God-given and God-interpreted star is evident. They innocently expect that the locals of the kingdom will rejoice. As visitors to a kingdom, with good manners they arrive and seek out the authoritative people. They encounter a people ignorant of their king's presence among them. They are steered through such an encounter; brought by God to accomplish their mission, and then saved from embroilment in the local hostility to Jesus, and return. Their witness is accomplished.

Matthew's account drives us to consider the mounting hostility – something is awakened which necessitates God's care of his Son from the violence of the enemies of the young King. As is shown later in the hostile, early recognition of the demons to the adult ministry of Jesus, so here the arrival of the Child, at a certain birth place, anticipated by prestigious visitors from a far country, arouses in the local authorities, civil and religious, an awakening of interest. An interest that, for each group, will be fed by their own desire to shore up their positions of influence with the people of the young king. They will find that they are seeking to usurp what is his.

# nt 13 – Matthew 2.13-18

## Protective flight to Egypt: and the murder of local children

Read Exodus 4.21-23; Hosea 11.1; Jeremiah 31.15

*13-1 Joseph has care of God's family*

*13-2 God's firstborn Son*

*13-3 Herod's murder of the children.*

### 13-1 Joseph has care of God's family

The perspective of the heavenly angel, who brings the foreknowledge of God to our ears, is that Herod is about to seek for Jesus so as to destroy Him. The construction in Greek is clear that Herod is about to begin, but that he hasn't begun as yet. Once again, the awareness of heaven concerning these matters is registered for us as readers.

Joseph is to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt until spoken to by the angel again. This last statement would surely have the effect of encouraging Joseph; the care for his family is attended to by God himself. He does not have to be constantly worrying about the dark forces that seem to be attending the birth and growth of his charge.

The infancy narratives of Luke and Matthew, give a time of the Saviour's life when He must be in the care of senior people who look after Him. What is stressed is that God is content in sending His Son to have him undergo and share in the weakness and protection that is consistent with his wonderful work. This King has a kingdom not of this world. So, it is not a worldly, politically savvy, set of people that surrounds the nurture of Jesus. It is a faithful man and his wife, who are listening to the directions of God that this is the time to flee. There will come a time to go up to Jerusalem and engage, but that is later and is the work of the Man.

### 13-2 God's firstborn Son

Exodus 4.21-23 records that, at the time of the instructions of the Lord to Moses, He spoke of Israel as his first born son. [= the son with the full share

of his inheritance]. What Moses was to say to Pharaoh, in the name of the Lord was, "Let my son go that he may serve me" RSV.

Hosea 11.1 repeats this understanding of Exodus. "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." But Hosea, correcting the wickedness of the 8th century Israel; goes on to say, "The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and burning incense to idols."

So we are to picture Egypt as a prison, out of which God called his people. And they came out as a whole people. For them, the calling delivers them out from that in which they were enslaved. What we have here is that Jesus, in whom all of Israel [to say nothing of all mankind] is being carried, is also being called out of Egypt. Except that for Him, it is a calling out from Egypt to a mature work which will save his people.

This greater redemption is found in calling Jesus from a place of God's temporary provision for Him; but it is a place that is traditionally a place of deep oppression for Israel. The impact is clear. God has provided for Jesus a place of his own careful choosing at this time of weakness and vulnerability. In calling Him out from there, back into Israel and to live and grow and come to mature Manhood, he will effect the salvation of His people in the full strength of his faith in God. Here we understand the calling "to" this saving work for Jesus. God would have called his people out of slavery, through this man.

### 13-3 Herod's murder of the children.

Jeremiah, in describing [31.15] the slaughter of the tribe of Benjamin in his day, registers the grief in the name of Rachel [Genesis 35.16-20], Benjamin's mother. What Matthew is speaking of is that the slaughter taking place in Benjamin's borders. The grief that the early Benjaminites experienced is being renewed. The salvation this Child will bring is not without its powerful costs and ructions as the enemies of the kingdom of God do their worst to prevent it's coming.

# nt 14 – Matthew 2.19-23

## Return from Egypt and the Settlement in Nazareth

*See Luke 2.29-40*

*Read Revelation 12.1-19; Psalm 2.7-9; Acts 13.30-35*

*14-1 Dangerous times, when the kingdom of God open to violence*

*14-2 Joseph: kept by God, keeps His Son*

*14-3 The public ministry of the mature man still waits*

*14-4 Settlement in Nazareth*

### 14-1 Dangerous times, when the kingdom of God open to violence

The coming forward of the forces of darkness at the time of the birth of Christ is a clear theme of Matthew's presentation – particularly this 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter. Revelation 12 provides for us a sharp overview of the whole of the incarnate life of Jesus, telescoped as the period between His Birth and the Ascension.

The scene opens with the great "portent" [= sign] of a woman. She is Israel, described as a conglomerate picture of Joseph's mother, Eve, and stands for Israel who gives birth to the Christ [Psalm 2.7-9 referring to the Resurrection/ Ascension Acts 13.30-35].

The red dragon, who is later identified for us as Satan [12.19], is seen at the time of the birth of Jesus as standing before the woman, as she is about to give birth. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, it was customary for a woman to give birth on a small birthstool, and the midwife attending would catch the child as it was born. This picture of Satan, standing before the woman about to give birth, we are told by Revelation 12.4 is to devour the child the minute it was born.

That the Child is Jesus is identified for us as the one who will rule the nations with a rod of iron [Psalm 2]; that is, he will have total, masterful control over the nations - a sphere of control Satan thought was his very own [Matthew 4.8]. So the child is seen as a competitor to the rule of the nations of the world. Satan is not successful, for the Child is caught up to God's throne and escapes.

This clarifies the period of Jesus' life upon the earth, from the perspective of a vulnerability to his enemies. For the time from Birth to Ascension, when viewed from this heavenly perspective, was a dangerous period for Him. It is a time when the kingdom of God suffers violence. It has to do with the fact that the Ascension was a going to the throne of God into a place of safety from the dragon.

Now, this perspective informs us what it is that Matthew has caught hold of as he lays out for us the first 2 chapters of his Gospel. It was a time of dangerous vulnerability for the great Saviour. In his infancy there were enemies who, even while they thought they might be serving their own interests, were in fact, serving the Devil and the enemies of God in the heavenly places. We would not be wrong, I suspect, to think of Herod the Great as such an agent.

### 14-2 Joseph: kept by God, keeps His Son

All this puts a new light on the protective work of Joseph. Just as we have seen, it is not for him to sire the Child, he can make no claim to fatherhood; nor did he seek to do so. As Joseph covers Mary in his cloak of marriage to her, nevertheless the child is always the Child of God and son of Mary. Neither is it for Joseph to claim the ultimate protection of the child. He has concerns; but Matthew has made it clear to us, as he records the works of the angel, that God is at work, overseeing the care and protection of the Child, while He is a child.

### 14-3 The public ministry of the mature man still waits

Later, as we shall see, after His Baptism, He begins to engage the demonic powers and comes to a place of Temptation, face to face with the Devil. Then, the Saviour stands with authority of a true man and resists. He does this for us and for our sakes.

Even later still, we are to see that the heavenly call leads Him steadfastly to go up to Jerusalem and there to come to a place when his enemies, both earthly and heavenly, seem to overwhelm the Son of Man - as He is man in his weakness - such as Ezekiel portrays. But later, after the Resurrection, we see the Son of Man - man in his heavenly power - such as Daniel describes; is received up to heaven in the Ascension. He is "caught up" to God's throne. Satan is defeated, cast out of heaven to the earth. A judgment that hands him over to what he desired.

It is helpful for us to see this broader perspective of the New Testament; for it lends a light to the Gospel narrative that allows us to see what to look for, not as something we impose onto the text, but as an interpretive matrix that interpenetrates the whole New Testament. The powerful, picturesque usage of the



Old Testament images that John uses in the book of the Revelation are certainly different from the bald narrative that Matthew brings us - but the meaning is clear, consistent and integrated.

*Father, You sent your Son to us. You oversaw His life. Your cost was not in protecting Him, but in that deep place where He would protect us from the impact of our sins as they stood between you and us. The victory over the creature, Satan, who held us, was never in doubt. Reconciliation with You was the decisive matter. How we praise You and give you thanks. Amen.*

## 14-4 Settlement in Nazareth

The angel said he would speak again when it was time. He does so. The time for speech to Joseph is the death of Herod the Great. Insofar as men and women can be the active agents of the enemies of God's kingdom, they can only act as long as they are granted time on the earth to do so. Insofar that the enemies of God's rule on the earth [or in heaven] are spiritual the fight goes on. The breaking of that spiritual rebellion, and its origin, is not the work of Joseph, but it will be the work of the Son of his wife, who is also the Son of God. The immediate danger is over, those seeking the life of Jesus are dead.

**Herod 1, the Great**, was the king of Judea under the Romans. He founded the Herodian dynasty. He ruled over Judea from 38 BC to 4 BC.

He was born in BC 73 in southern Palestine. His father, Antipater, was an Edomite of Arab extraction, and he married the daughter of a nobleman from Petra, the capital of the rising Nabatean kingdom. Although he was a practicing Jew, Herod was Arabian both on his mother and father's sides. Herod was to benefit from his father's support of Pompey's invasion of Palestine in 63 BC. Julius Caesar favoured Antipater, making him governor of Judea in 47 BC granting him Roman citizenship which, of course, passed to Herod. Herod's father made him the governor of Galilee. Six years after this, his friend Mark Antony, a lifelong friend of Herod since 57 BC, made Herod tetrarch of Galilee.

In 40 BC, as the Parthians invaded his area, Herod fled to Rome and was made, at the age of 36, the ruler of Judea. He maintained this for 32 years, until his death. He cemented his power there by divorcing his wife Doris, banishing her and her son from court. He married Mariame, the daughter of a Hasmonean prince. He really

loved Mariame, even though it was a politically useful marriage.

At the death of Julius Caesar, the two remaining of the threesome, Mark Antony and Octavian, scrambled for power. Mark Antony was defeated at the battle of Actium in 31 BC. Herod had supported Mark Antony at the time, even though Cleopatra, Antony's mistress, had taken over much of Herod's kingdom. He confessed this to Octavian, who knowing him to be the man to rule in Judea, confirmed him in that role. Restoring his full lands to him, Octavian – who became Caesar Augustus – later extended Herod's territory [22-20 BC] to include Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, and gave him half share in the copper mines of Cyprus. Herod maintained an extensive building programme all through his reign.

Herod's cruelty grew as he aged, and it was not helped by the intrigues of his sister Salome, who, aided by her mother, set out to destroy his relationship with Mariame. In mental instability, Herod murdered Mariame, her two sons, her grandfather and her mother.

In his last years, in great pain, and suffering from atherosclerosis, suppressing a revolt in Nabatea, he lost the favour of Augustus. He altered his will, disinherited and murdered his firstborn son Antipater. Slaying the children in Bethlehem fits in at this time of his life. Failing at an attempted suicide, he died shortly afterwards in Jericho at the end of March or the beginning of April in 4 BC. His final will, subject to Augustus' agreement, was that Archelaus should rule Judea and Samaria, and Antipas and Philip sharing the remainder as tetrarchs.

Joseph obeys. But he now has to deal with successors of Herod. He is bothered about Archelaus; he has the temperament of his father, and he is in charge of Judea and Idumea. Again, the angel comes and ministers to Joseph in his dreams. They should go to Galilee. It is not ruled by Archelaus, but by his brother Antipas. A man of much milder spirit.

Notice that here the advice of the angel is working in tandem with what we register are the issues which are coming up in Joseph's mind. Joseph maintains a care and a responsibility for his wife and child, but he is aided in the command of the angel. His obedience to God's direction through the angel in no way removes from him serious considerations concerning them.

Nazareth was, in these days, a small, secluded village. It was not on any main highway, although it was near Sepphoris, an important city just south of the

main road that linked Tiberias to Ptlemais.

Matthew links the town of Nazareth, with the idea of the Nazarite. We have seen the consecrated nature of the Nazarite already applied to John the Baptist.

*Father, we thank You for the way you interweave your guidance and word into the cares and concerns of our daily life. As we see for Joseph, we thank You for your meeting with us. Thank you that it in no way negates our significance, but rather enhances it as an obedience to You. Amen.*

## nt 15 – Luke 2.41-52

### Passover visit to the Temple, aged 12.

*Read Exodus 23.15-17; 34.23ff; Deuteronomy 16.1-16*

15-1 Passover [AD 12]

15-2 In His Father's house

15-3 Subject to parents - an 'advance' in wisdom

15-4 the Father's Son

#### 15-1 Passover [AD 12]

Within Israel's communal life there were three major annual feasts which required every male to attend, they were Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. [Exodus 23.15-17; 34.23ff; Deuteronomy 16.1-16]. By this time, only the Passover was regularly observed. It was also customary that women could attend; Rabbi Hillel [c. 50BC-25AD] had encouraged that. Joseph and Mary customarily attended the Feast of the Passover every year. They would have traveled from Nazareth with their relatives and friends.

The age of twelve was an important time, it was the preparation year before 13, when a boy took his formal standing within the Jewish community.

"when the days were ended" [verse 43] implies that the two parts of the Feast, the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, were completed. This would have occupied seven days in all. Jesus remained behind.

## 15-2 In His Father's house

The rabbis normally taught in the temple or in synagogues close by. The custom was that the listeners would sit around them. The nature of the exchange was question and answer – so we should understand that there is, in this way of teaching, opportunity for the teachers to hear the answers of the young ones, and to get some measure of their understanding.

It is this setting which gives us the best understanding of the astonishment of the older men at Jesus. They would be listening to his exchanges with them. We are not to think of some precocious youngster here presuming to teach the older men. Jesus' wisdom and understanding was registered, but with no sense of hostility. It is in the midst of such exchanges that Mary and Joseph arrive. Mary's expression, "...your father and I have been looking..." is the only way she can refer to Joseph in respect of Jesus in such a context.

They had gone out from Jerusalem a full days journey, realized he was not with their relatives, and returned. On the third day they found Him. Their feelings are clear, they are stressed, and Jesus' reply to them contains some rebuke, although softly administered.

Jesus is surprised that they had to search, implying that they would have surely known Him well enough to know where He would be. The expression Jesus uses may be translated in two ways: [a] "that I must be about my father's business" [= the things of my father]; or "that I must be in my father's house". The second is traditionally accepted, the emphasis falling on the location where he was found.

The answer of Jesus makes a clear distinction for the ears of his parents. It is that there is an earthly 'father' here, whose house he is not in at the moment so that He may be in his true Father's house. There is a hierarchy within the mind of Jesus which sets Him to beat to the drum of his heavenly Father; and yet, at the same time, that heavenly Father would bid Him to be submissive to his parents, under whom He has been set to live.

Luke records that the parents did not understand this reply. But that there can be no misunderstanding of Jesus' attitude and disposition, verse 51 makes clear that he went back to Nazareth with them and was subject to them.

What Mary does not understand with her mind she nevertheless treasures in her heart. We need to appreciate that Mary is the person who has had revelation given to her over the duration of the events so far. And there is more to happen yet! She is the cumulative witness, the one who is beside Jesus, storing away all these things that are happening. Some of it puzzled her at the time – but she waited for further light.

### 15-3 Subject to parents - an 'advance' in wisdom

Luke concludes the birth and youth of Jesus with the summary of 2.52. "Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man". Athanasius points out that we should understand "increasing" [proekopten] in the sense of an internal advance; something that is taking place in his person; not as an advance in the sense of promotion by men and women. In this way we are to understand that, in the life He lived for us, Jesus "grows - for us.

Each of us has been set within the boundaries of our relations. None of us chose our parents, uncles, cousins etc. They are "givens"; coming into our awareness at birth as we enter into our life "in time". As we have been following the birth of the child Jesus and his growth as a young boy, we are drawn into the way the Word of God has taken flesh, coming among us in humility for our sakes. This involves for us understanding that the Saviour saves us "to" the life which He lives "for us". We enter into the power of that life by receiving his Spirit.

Jesus is here making clear that there is a relationship He has with his heavenly Father. He is speaking as the Word made flesh. He is making clear that the obedience to God that we see operating in Him, speaks of the Father and the Son in a mutual relationship where each is the "glory" of the other.

However, the growth of the boy also implies the submission to Joseph and Mary, for the word made flesh is a true Man. He is true Man "for our sakes", and this portion of his incarnate life requires that He is faithful to the honouring of his parents as He is to the first commandment. Indeed, He can only be properly for them as He is first for God, His Father.

In the light of this wonderful life lived for us, the apostles always exhort us to live the life we have as Christians, not in order to become a Christian, but because we are already in possession of the risen life of Christ through His Spirit. It is a life to be lived "by faith", - that trusts this very basis - and we are exhorted as children "to obey our parents" [Colossians 3.20; Ephesians 6.1].

Indeed, in being "subject one to another", a way of life exemplified within the holy Trinity, we recognise was first done by the Lord and done in the flesh from a place of deep humility. It is because it was done there that we find that this may only be done by us as we are "in Christ".

### 15-4 the Father's Son

When Jesus calls God "my Father" – as we see constantly in the Gospel of John – we need to recognize that He is speaking as the Son of God. In another place in the Gospel of John, when addressing the disciples, He can speak of his

ascension as going to “my Father and your Father”. He implies that there are **two sets of relations** being spoken about that must be distinguished.

[1] His Sonship is that of One with an eternal relation to the Father in the Godhead of the Trinity. When we call God “our Father” it is as disciples of His Son, through Whom and by the Spirit we have come to have access to God so as to call Him “our Father”. Our sonship is creaturely, His is not. Our sonship is derived from His ministry and mediation “for us”; His is not. Our sonship is a collective which accrues to the many “in Him”; His is His alone as to His Person.

In the deliberate way that the text here in Luke has Mary speaking to Jesus about “your father and I”; we have introduced at the same time the understanding the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as meaning plainly God, spoken as in relation to His Son.

[2] When we call God “our Father” we are not using the image of our earthly father as the meaning behind the word, we are thinking of God as Father because He is the “God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ” [Ephesians 1.3]. As such, we are using the word “Father” of His relationship to God as a Son, and therefore of ours to that same Person because of His – with all the differences listed above as understood.

Athanasius, [298-373AD] in his four discourses “Against the Arians” found himself explaining the “advance” which Luke speaks of in regard to the boy, Jesus. The Arians had implied that Jesus could not be God because God cannot said to “advance” - in the sense of ‘to grow up’ - as it is meant here. Athanasius makes clear that this is something that is said not of the eternal Word of God but of the human nature of the Lord.

“To men then belongs advance; but the Son of God, since He could not advance, being perfect in the Father, humbled Himself for us, that in His humbling we on the other hand might be able to increase....It was not then the Word, considered as the Word, who advanced;...but humanly is He said here to advance, since advance belongs to man.” Athanasius, Against the Arians Discourse 3.52