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# MATTHEW 2; LUKE 2

COME, FOLLOW ME: NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY

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## **Lk 2:1–7. Mary and Joseph Travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem**

Luke develops his message by using structure to compare the parallel accounts of John the Baptist's and Jesus's infancies. In every case, Jesus is shown superior.<sup>1</sup>

*Table 1. Luke's parallel accounts of John the Baptist's and Jesus's birth, circumcision, naming, and infancy*

<b>John</b>	<b>Jesus</b>
1. Notice of John's birth (1:57)	1. Jesus's birth <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>Census brings Joseph with Mary to Bethlehem (2:1–5)</li><li>Mary delivers Jesus and swaddles and lays Him in a manger (2:6–7)</li></ol>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>d. Joy over John’s birth (1:58)</li> <li>f. All are astonished (1:65–66)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>c. Angels declare Jesus’s destiny to the shepherds (2:8–14)</li> <li>d. Joy over Jesus’s birth (2:15–18)</li> <li>e. Mary treasured all this in her heart (2:19)</li> <li>f. Shepherds testify; all who hear are astonished (2:20)</li> </ul>
<p>2. Circumcision and naming (1:59–66)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Circumcised and named (1:59–64)</li> <li>c. Neighbors’ reaction (1:65–66)</li> <li>d. Zacharias’s prophecy (1:67–79)</li> </ul>	<p>2. Circumcision, naming, and presentation in temple (2:21–38)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Circumcised and named (2:21)</li> <li>b. Presentation in the temple (2:22–24)</li> <li>c. Simeon’s and Anna’s reactions (2:25–27, 36–37)</li> <li>d. Simeon’s prophecy (2:29–32)</li> <li>e. Anna’s prophetic testimony (2:38)</li> <li>f. Jesus teaches at the temple (2:41–50)</li> </ul>
<p>3. Conclusion: growth of child (1:80)</p>	<p>3. Conclusion: growth of child (2:40, 54)</p>

**2:1–2. “there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus.”** By citing Augustus’s empirical decree, Luke not only gives us this historical context but also sets up a great irony. In 42 BC, the Roman Senate posthumously proclaimed Julius Caesar a god. In 27 BC, when his great-nephew and adopted son, Octavius, became Caesar Augustus, he used the title “son of god” as part of his official nomenclature on coins and inscriptions throughout the empire. Augustus expanded the Roman Empire for forty years, until his death in AD 14. His victories put an end to the violent civil wars and brought a period of peace to the Roman world (known as the *Pax Romana*), thus, he was called a “prince of peace” and the “savior of the whole world.” Also, his birthday was adopted as the beginning of the new year. As a biblical scholar observed, “It can scarcely be accidental that Luke’s description of the birth of Jesus presents an implicit challenge to this imperial propaganda, not by denying the imperial ideals, but by claiming that the real peace of the world was brought about by Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

Luke uses the official Roman rhetoric for the empire: “all the world,” or “inhabited earth.”

**2:3. “taxed, every one into his own city.”** The text claims there was an enrollment or registration for taxation.<sup>3</sup> Although no census of the whole empire is known under Augustus, it sets the stage for the Savior of the world to count and redeem all the world.<sup>4</sup> King Herod acted as a client king in Palestine and paid tribute to Rome until his death in approximately AD 1.<sup>5</sup>

It was an old Hebrew practice to enroll by families in their ancestral districts. Women over twelve-and-half, including Mary, would be counted only in a poll tax. Even if Mary did not need to go, the trip provided a way to leave the small-town gossip and fulfill the well-known prophecy.

**2:4. “up from Galilee.”** Israelites always went up to Jerusalem and its vicinity. In the Old Testament the “city of David” refers to Jerusalem (2 Sam 5:7, 9). In the New Testament, “the city of David” always refers to David’s birthplace, Bethlehem (Lk 2:11). This is an interesting observation when taking into account the Book of Mormon prophecy that the Jesus “shall be born at Jerusalem which is the land of our forefathers” (Alm 7:10).

**2:5–6. “with Mary his espoused wife being great with child.”** The text emphasizes that Mary’s pregnancy fulfills Gabriel’s annunciation. A literal translation suggests that Mary and Joseph were at Bethlehem for some time before the child was born. Literally the text reads, “It happened, in their being there, (that) the days of her giving birth were (ful)filled.”<sup>6</sup> An apocryphal source has Jesus being delivered in a cave before Mary and Joseph reached Bethlehem.<sup>7</sup> The area is pockmarked with limestone caves (see Lk 2:7). The timing of the miracle adds to the miraculous event.

The Book of Mormon adds an extra detail to the story. The day before the Savior was born, a prophet Nephi received a revelation as recorded in 3 Ne 1:13: “The time is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given, and on the morrow come I into the world.” The voice is an example of divine investiture of authority for another to speak for God since Jesus’s spirit was in utero at that time.<sup>8</sup>

**2:7. “she brought forth her firstborn son.”** Interestingly, Luke—the only Gospel author to include Jesus’s birth—was known as the “beloved physician” (Col 4:14). In the ancient world, involvement in birthing was often limited to women.

**2:7. “wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger.”** Rather than describe the birth process, Luke focuses on how and where Mary laid the baby (and then repeats it three times in Lk 2:12 and 16, for emphasis). Being swaddled, or “wrapped . . . in strips of cloth” (2:7 NIV), was a sign of parental care (Ezk 16:4; Wisd of Sol 7:14).

The Greek word *phatne* (“manger”) can refer to a stall for tying up animals or a trough for feeding them. Troughs or mangers were either a low rock shelf in a cave or a moveable large rock with a section carved out for feed. The manger seems to fulfill Isa 1:3: “The ox knows its owner, and the donkey knows the [*phatne*] manger of its lord, but Israel has not known me” (LXX, translation by Raymond Brown). The manger also foreshadows Jesus’s mission: “The Son of Man hath not where to lay his head” (Mt 8:20). Where the Savior was born also hints at His last supper—which took place in a *katalyma*, “inn” or “guest room,” as well (Lk 22:11).

**2:7. “no room for them in the inn”** Lodging places for travelers in the ancient world were not comfortable or charming as they can be today. The Greek word *katalyma* referred to a place where one could put down their bundles or their animals’ harnesses for the night.<sup>9</sup> They were often low, generally one-story structures built of rough stone. They were usually square or rectangular enclosures built around an inner courtyard. Often they had an arched area with recessed cubicles or open rooms a step or two above the courtyard where travelers stayed on their own cots or mats. The floors were either compact dirt or paved with stones. If the inn had space, the travelers’ animals could be tied in the courtyard. But if travelers filled the covered area, the animals were kept outside or in a cave so that more people could roll out their mats in the safety of the enclosed courtyard.

In the hill area of central Palestine, the limestone rocks are dotted with caves that were used as barns, storage rooms, and even homes. Entire inns have been found in caves.<sup>10</sup> Early Christian writings describe Jesus's birth location as a cave. If they are correct, then Isa 33:16 can also be interpreted as a prophecy of the Lord's birth: "He will dwell in a high cave of strong rock" (LXX; the Greek Septuagint was the most used scripture at the time among the Jews).

Archeologists have found only one khan in the small ancient shepherding village of Bethlehem. Most likely, the innkeeper's problem was not insufficient space but finding a proper place. The courtyard probably could have fit another mat among the throngs. But Joseph and Mary's needs were different from those of most travelers seeking a place to lie down. Divine intervention prevailed in finding lodging away from the crowds for the baby's delivery. We see an ironic pattern that begins here and continues throughout Christ's ministry and beyond: so few find room in their hearts for Him.

## **Lk 2:8–14. Angels Visit the Shepherds**

**2:8. "shepherds abiding in the field."** The fields where the shepherds kept watch were approximately two miles from Bethlehem (also referred to as the "tower of the flock" or Migdal Eder; Gen 35:21; Mic 4:7, 5:2). The symbolism of the sacred sheep who will leave the shepherds' fields to be anointed and sacrificed in the temple is a poignant type of the Anointed One, who will also leave Bethlehem to become the "great and last sacrifice, yea . . . infinite and eternal" (Alm 34:10). Isaiah prophesied, "He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter" (Isa 53:7).

God chose to first announce the news of the birth of the promised Messiah to the lowly populace of the area, not to the political or religious leaders. Shepherds were often considered dishonest and outside the law. According to the early rabbis, herdsmen were ineligible to judge or act as witnesses because some grazed their flocks on other people's lands.<sup>11</sup> We are once again presented with a group of ostracized social outcasts, just like Elisabeth and Zacharias (ostracized for their barrenness) and Mary and Joseph (ostracized for the questionable conception of Jesus). Ironically, these shepherds are shown to be righteous, humble, devoted followers of God. Jesus Himself chose to adopt the symbol of the Good Shepherd.<sup>12</sup>

Sheep were out in the fields between March and November. The shepherds were "watching the watches of the night" to protect them and, during the lambing season, to help with the birthing process.<sup>13</sup> If that was the case, then these shepherds went from the birth of their lambs to the birth of the Lamb of God.

**2:9–10. "The angel of the Lord came upon them."** Angels in the Old Testament represent God's visible presence among humankind.<sup>14</sup> From the time of Moses, the glory of the Lord is known as the *shechinah*, or the cloud of protection (Ex 16:10; 24:16). It symbolizes the divine presence. In the New Testament, an angel is a messenger. Outside of the Nativity scenes, an angel of the Lord appears only in the Gospels during the Lord's Passion and at the empty tomb (Lk 22:43; Mt 28:2, 5). The angel terrified the shepherds—which is the standard reaction to angelic appearances in scripture.<sup>15</sup>

The angel's message to "all people" contrasts with Augustus's edict to "all the world" (Lk 2:1). The angel's announcement for "all people" is not an exaggeration but is for the entire human population, including the Gentiles and all the living and the dead.<sup>16</sup>

**2:11. "is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ."** The angel's announcement answers the messianic hope and promises a baby. "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace" (Isa 9:6). The author reemphasizes that Jesus's birth (not Augustus's) marks a new beginning of time. Luke uses the phrase "this day" (*semeron*) twenty times.

The angel also introduces two other titles: Savior and Christ the Lord. Christ is Greek for Messiah (which is Hebrew). This translates to "Anointed One" in English. The atmosphere and language of Luke's Nativity narrative speak of the promised Messiah.

**2:12. "this shall be a sign unto you."** As with the annunciation pattern, this angel also gives a customary sign (Lk 1:20, 35–36). The birth also fulfills the sign given to King Ahaz through Isaiah: "The Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive" (Isa 7:14). King Benjamin taught in Mosi 3:15 that God had showed "many signs, and wonders, and types, and shadows . . . unto them, concerning his coming; and also holy prophets spake unto them concerning his coming."

**2:13. "a multitude of the heavenly host praising God"** The scene climaxes as a numerous heavenly choir bursts into view. The glorious and profound benediction to the shepherds' vision fulfills Isa 6:3, which reads, "The whole earth is full of his glory." The shepherds hear angels praising God. Restored scripture echoes this truth starting with Lehi, who also "saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God" (1 Ne 1:8; see D&C 76:70–96).

**2:14. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."** Earlier the angel promises that the good tidings are for all people, so in this sense, God's favor toward humankind is universal and inclusive; all are deserving of His good favor. Elder James E. Talmage asked, "What a consummation to be wished—Peace on earth! But how can such come except through the maintenance of good will toward men?"<sup>17</sup>

Another way to analyze this beautiful couplet is as poetry. Each line contains three parallel elements: a noun, a location, and a directional phrase. The glory given to God is balanced with the peace given to man. Heaven and earth complement each other and become one in heralding Jesus's birth. "Glory" and "peace" are parallel; "in the highest" and "on earth" are parallel; and "to God" and "among men" (people whom He favors) are parallel.<sup>18</sup>

glory	in the highest	to God
peace	on earth	among men [humans with God's favor]

## **Lk 2:15–20. Shepherds Visit the Babe**

The first scene told of a promised baby born in Bethlehem, whom Mary wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in a manger. In the second scene angels tell the shepherds of the baby's birth and give a sign to find the baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger. Luke's account climaxes as the witnesses arrive at the manger. The shepherds' pilgrimage of a couple of miles led them up a terraced hill to a village perched on a craggy summit to the swaddled babe lying in an animal manger.

**2:15–17. “The shepherds . . . came with haste.”** Immediate obedience, motivated by spontaneous trust, reoccurs as a theme in the Nativity (see Lk 1:39). In contrast to the state of Israel that Isaiah described (“The ox knows his master, and the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand” [Isa 1:3 NIV]), here the shepherds of Israel symbolically come to know the manger of their Lord. This is the zenith not only of the shepherds' lives but also of world history up to that point.

The text claims the shepherds shared the good news, yet strangely, nowhere in the rest of the Gospels outside of these Nativity chapters can we find any references or hints to suggest Jesus had a miraculous birth or was born in Bethlehem.<sup>19</sup> The only overlap between the birth accounts and the rest of the Gospels is the presence of Mary and Jesus and reference to Joseph.<sup>20</sup>

**2:18. “They that heard it wondered.”** Again Luke develops a parallel phrase with John the Baptist's naming and circumcision from 1:66. Like those who wondered at Jesus's birth, the neighbors who witnessed John's birth had also “marveled” (Lk 1:21, 63; 2:33).

**2:19. “But Mary kept . . . and pondered.”** Mary's silence is amplified as she “kept, preserved, treasured” in her heart. The depth of her pondering contrasts to the shepherds, who “made known abroad” (Lk 2:17).

**2:20. “shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God.”** The shepherds become the first missionaries as they spread the message with their witness. Yet, they are only intermediaries. As the messengers, what they proclaim is far more important than they themselves are.

## **Lk 2:21. Jesus's Circumcision and Naming**

**2:21. “When the days were accomplished.”** Luke repeats this phrase three times: (1) at Jesus's birth in 2:6, (2) at Jesus's circumcision in this verse, and (3) at Mary's purification in 2:22. The repetition connects the three events. The law of Moses dictated circumcision customs (see Lev 12:2–3). For John the Baptist, circumcision is the center of the birth scene while for Jesus, the circumcision is almost a sidenote.

**2:21. “Eight days were accomplished for the circumcising.”** It is certainly viable to view John the Baptist as the last of the old-covenant prophets, which would explain giving his circumcision more importance as part of that covenant given to Abraham's seed. All that happened during John the Baptist's naming and circumcision adds importance to the old-covenant setting. On the other hand, with Christ

came the new covenant and a new definition of circumcision of the heart (Col 2:11; Gal 3:24). In *Paradise Lost*, the poet John Milton explained that Jesus's circumcision was symbolic of what was to come.

He who with all heaven's heraldry whilere [that is, formerly, or a while ago]  
Entered the world, now bleeds to give us ease.  
Alas! How soon our sin  
Sore doth begin  
His infancy to seize!<sup>21</sup>

**2:21.** *“his name was called JESUS, which was so named of the angel.”* In the parallel account of John the Baptist, Zacharias's naming the baby caused a stir among the people (Lk 1:59–66), while Luke only briefly reminds his audience of the fulfillment of Gabriel's prophesy and then moves quickly ahead to the temple.

### **Luke 2:22–40. At the Temple**

**2:22–23.** *“the days of her purification according to the law.”* Five references to the Mosaic law run through this scene (Lk 2:23, 24, 27, 39). The reference to Mary's forty-day purification period underscores the message that the future greatness of Jesus is made possible through obedience to the law of the Lord (compare Lev 12:3–4). The law required a sacrifice as part of the purification of the mother after childbirth, not for redemption of the firstborn as Luke mistakenly records.<sup>22</sup> After giving birth, women were ritually unclean for a time. If a son was born, the mother's impurity lasted for the seven days before the circumcision and the thirty-three days after; if a daughter was born, the purification period doubled to eighty days because Eve was created second. The number thirty-three immediately reminds us of the span of Christ's mortality, and seven is often used for being whole, complete or perfect. Forty symbolically represents the cleansing period.<sup>23</sup>

**2:24.** *“a sacrifice . . . two young pigeons”* Luke goes into some detail to explain the Jewish customs. His wording is from Lev 12:8 in the Septuagint. Luke's explanation of the sacrifices suggests that his audience was unfamiliar with the details of law of Moses. Rather than sacrificing a costly lamb, Joseph took the less expensive option for the purification sacrifice—a pair of turtledoves or pigeons (one was for a sin offering, the other for a burnt offering [Lev 12:8]).

Mary and Joseph would have passed through the Court of the Gentiles, around the three-cubit (or five-foot) stone partition that enclosed the sacred space, through the “the gate of the firstlings,” into the two-hundred-square-foot Court of Women. This courtyard was a common place of study and discussion, though the men and women were separated. Though they were not allowed any farther in the temple precincts, women and children were allowed to worship along a portion of the perimeter under a colonnade.

Against a wall were thirteen trumpet-shaped chests for charitable contributions.<sup>24</sup> This is where the young couple would have paid for their offering.

**2:25–27. “a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon.”** The Spirit’s inspiration directs Simeon to the temple courtyard. In this way, he represents all Spirit-filled Israelites who serve the Lord. Luke explains that Simeon happened to be in Jerusalem—in contrast with Zacharias, whose priestly duty brought him to the temple.<sup>25</sup>

One of the motifs of this scene is that both the Law and the Prophets are fulfilled in Jesus. Mal 3:1 prophesied, “The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple” (BSB). Luke’s parallelisms continue as Simeon and then Anna act as double witnesses of Jesus’s divinity.

### ***Simeon’s servant song***

**2:28–32. “took he him up in his arms, and blessed God.”** The scene includes the beautiful juxtaposition of Simeon at the end of his life holding a child that is just beginning life. Simeon’s prophecy has become famous in the Mass and is known by its first words in Latin: *Nunc dimittis*. The poem speaks of joy and peace. Simeon describes himself as a *doulon* (“servant”) just as Mary does in Lk 1:38 in calling herself a *doule* (“handmaiden, servant, slave”). As a devoted servant, Simeon addresses God as his mighty Master. Simeon’s message testifies of God’s foreknowledge and power in carrying out His plans. Simeon quotes portions of scripture, including Isa 52:10; 42:6; 46:13; and 60:1. He includes Gentiles as well as Israelites in his description of those who will be blessed because of this child’s life.

**2:33. “Joseph and his mother marveled.”** Mary and Joseph marvel that Jesus will save both Israel and the Gentiles. This is the third use of *marvel* in Luke (1:21, 63, 2:18).

**2:34–35 (NIV).**

***This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel,  
and to be a sign that will be spoken against,  
so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.  
And a sword will pierce your own soul too.***

Simeon blesses the parents and prophesies of Mary’s lot too. The four lines each have a theme of judgment. He predicts that a rebellious people are about to dissent. The *ptosis*, “fall or failure,” figuratively means “downfall or crash.” The foundations of hell will crash with this child’s life. Jesus was “set” or appointed to overcome the Fall of humankind. Simeon is referring to the embodied Jehovah, who was placed since the Fall for the rising of all humanity. This child, the Redeemer, will rule as King and Judge over the fallen of the earth. Simeon’s use of “fall” can also imply an individual downfall.

The word *anastasis*, “rising,” is often translated “resurrection from death, rising again,” or figuratively “a moral recovery (of spiritual truth).” Simeon testifies that the child has been prepared since the Fall to provide “a moral recovery of spiritual truth” and a physical resurrection.<sup>26</sup> Jesus will become a rejected sign (Isa 53:3).

**2:35.** There are several interpretations of what the sword that pierces refers to.<sup>27</sup> The JST clarifies this: “A sword shall pierce through *him to the wounding of thine own soul.*” It implies that Mary is not exempt from mortal pains or the sorrows of motherhood. From the Garden of Eden, the devil is allowed to have power to bruise the heel of Adam’s posterity, but God promised that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent, or Satan (Gen 3:15) Mary’s son, Jesus, is the only literal seed of woman who can crush Satan’s head.

### ***The prophetess Anna witnesses***

**2:36–38. “Anna, a prophetess.”** The second temple witness is a widow. Her name in Hebrew was Hannah, which means “grace, or favor.” She has several unique traits: she is one of the nine women referred to as a prophetess in the Bible, she is from the tribe of Asher, she is nearly one-hundred years old, and she testifies in the temple as a female witness. In the late second temple period, Jewish women were not allowed to speak as legal witnesses—but that is changed by Jesus.

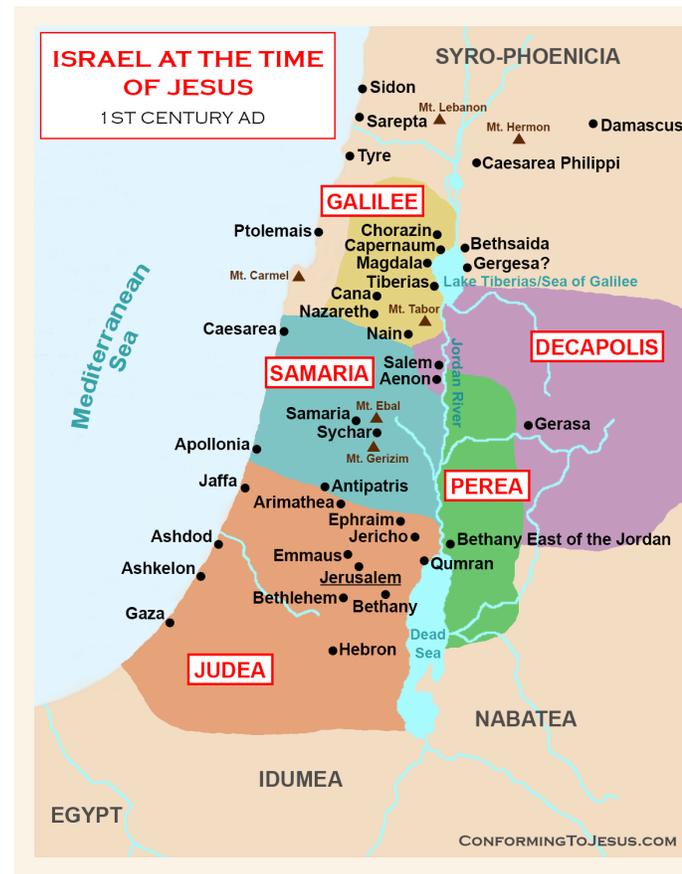
The birth accounts were written during the Apostolic church, when women also witnessed.<sup>28</sup> Luke includes three female witnesses of the birth narrative in contrast to the Pharisaic culture that did not allow women to bear a legal witness. Anna is the forerunner of the Jerusalem Christian Saints in her fasting and prayer in the temple setting (Act 2:17, 46).

Luke also uses numbers carefully and often bases his message around the number seven. In the birth narrative, he includes three double witnesses plus Mary, for a total of seven voices proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. These witnesses stand in for all devout believers waiting for the fulfillment of the covenants of Israel.

### ***Conclusion and return to Galilee***

**2:39. “they returned into Galilee.”** The full name of this northern geographic region in Palestine was Galilee of the Gentiles. Pious Jews from Jerusalem looked down on Galilee since those who lived there often encountered Gentiles (those not from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). Luke’s conclusion prepares the reader geographically and theologically to move from the infancy to the next stage of Jesus’s life. Luke follows the Holy Family from the purification at the temple back “to their own city Nazareth” (Lk 2:39). This appears to contradict Matthew’s Nativity agenda, which has the family living in a house in Bethlehem and then fleeing to Egypt before moving to Nazareth. However, if we read “all things according to the law” in this verse as a broad conditional, then Luke’s timing could include more (for example, the prophecies

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had to be fulfilled—“out of Egypt have I called my Son.”) The Law and the Prophets were all “a type of his coming” (Alm 25:15). Luke’s goal was to record what he thought was most important theologically, not a complete history. Furthermore, Luke may not have known the details from Mt 2. A possible timeline of these events from the scriptural account follows:

Table 2. Timetable of Nativity events

<b>Luke</b>	Shepherds come to Bethlehem	Circumcision eight days after birth	Mary’s purification forty days after birth			Return to Nazareth
<b>Matthew</b>	Star seen at its rising/east			Magi come	Flee to Egypt	Return to Nazareth

**2:40. “grew.”** Up until the word “spirit,” this verse parallels Lk 1:80, which describes John the Baptist.

*John:* And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit

*Jesus:* And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him

With each of Luke’s parallel accounts, Jesus receives an extra endowment of wisdom and grace from God. Luke witnesses that Jesus has superiority to all things—including the Prophets and law of Moses. Jesus’s being “favored by God” connects His infancy to His ministry.

## Mt 2:1–12. Scene 2: Arrival of the Magi

The second of five scenes in Matthew’s Nativity introduces the visit from the magi in parallel episodes:

Table 3. Magi’s visit in parallel episodes by location

<b>Jerusalem</b>	<b>Bethlehem</b>
1. Magi go to Jerusalem after seeing a sign by a star (2:2)	1b. Magi go to Bethlehem led by a star (2:9–10)
2. Herod asks scribes where Messiah will be born (2:3–6)	2b. Magi find Messiah and offer royal gifts (2:11)
3. Herod instructs magi to find the child and return (2:7–8)	3b. Dream directs magi not to return to Herod (2:12)

**2:1. “Jesus was born in Bethlehem.”** The name Bethlehem means “house of bread” in Hebrew—making it doubly relevant, as David’s hometown, for the birthplace of the Bread of Life. Bethlehem in Judea was a small agricultural town five miles south of Jerusalem and perched on a rocky outcropping 2,704 feet above sea level. At the time of Jesus’s birth, the population was about three hundred. Not too far away, on the highest hill just southeast of Bethlehem, King Herod built an imposing castle, the Herodium, that dominated the region. Bethlehem is mentioned forty-one times in the Old Testament. It is mentioned as the place (a) where Ruth and Boaz met, (b) where David’s ancestral home was, (c) where David was anointed by the prophet Samuel as king over God’s people, and (d) where Rachel’s tomb lay according to tradition.<sup>29</sup> It was well known from Micah’s prophecy as the birthplace of the promised Messiah: “Out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler of Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting” (Mic 5:2). In first-century Judaism, the scriptural relationship between Bethlehem and the Messiah was well known. It was not just Herod’s chief priests and scribes who knew of this scriptural reference to the Messiah’s birthplace. In Jn 7:42 the people of Jerusalem ask, “Has not the Scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?” (ESV). Rabbinical teaching unhesitatingly points toward Bethlehem as the birthplace of Messiah ben David.

### ***Herod the king***

**2:1. “in the days of Herod the king.”** Herod came from three Semitic races, two by birth (Edomite and Ishmaelite), and the third by his feigned allegiance to the law of Moses (Israelite). Nonetheless, his conceptions of governmental policy were completely Roman and his ideal of life and enjoyment were entirely Greek. At twenty-five, energetic and athletic, Herod became the governor of Galilee and subdued the unrest there.

In 40 BC he went to Rome, where Antony and Octavius appointed him King of Judea. However, the Jewish people did not welcome him as their king. He fought the Jews for three years and married Mariamne I, a princess from the Hasmonean family (only to kill her later when he realized that she and her children had more of a right to the throne than he did).

### ***Magi or wise men***

**2:1. “wise men from the east.”** Matthew uses the Greek word *magoi* (“magi, astrologers”), which may refer to traveling magi from Babylon, astrologers from Media and Persia, Zoroastrian priests, or any other Arabian group of wisdom seekers. The magi’s lack of scriptural knowledge of an otherwise well-known Jewish tradition in addition to the fact that they refer to “the King of *the Jews*,” not “*our* King,” are two of the reasons why most scholars think the magi are foreigners. Furthermore, Isaiah prophesied, “And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising” (Isa 60:3).

How many magi visited the child is unclear, and several traditions as to their number exist. Augustine and Chrysostom say that there were twelve. The tradition of three magi developed to represent the three known continents and the three gifts offered to the Lord. Apocryphal literature gives the magi names, countries of origin, and personal appearances. Practical logic tells us that such a journey through the deserts east of Judah would have required a large company for protecting the valuable gifts, food stuffs, and the animals that carried the tents for such a journey.

**2:2. “Herod . . . was troubled.”** Josephus describes King Herod as pathologically jealous. The magi’s entourage and suggestion of a new king was highly offensive and a personal challenge (even though Herod was on the verge of death). Furthermore, their assertion that “we have seen his star” (past tense) was a legitimate claim for the birth of a king in that era. The magi do not appear to know the prophecy foretelling where the new King should be born. We assume that the magi stopped at Herod’s palace for political decorum more than for directions, but the text does not say that. Matthew suggests that they do not know the Jewish scripture outlining the birthplace of the promised King of the Jews (see Mic 5:2).

### ***His star***

Following a star to a special location was a practice in the ancient world and adds historical probability to the story. Jews, like most ancients, believed in the influence of the planets on the destiny of humankind. The Greeks and Romans considered the appearance and disappearance of heavenly bodies to signify the births and deaths of great men.<sup>30</sup> After the astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) made careful astronomical studies of peculiar celestial phenomena in the decade before Jesus’s birth, studying possibilities of the star of Bethlehem has fascinated astronomers. The Adler Planetarium in Chicago presented the three most probable candidates for the star of Bethlehem:

1. A supernova. These are explosions of stars and give out a great deal of light for weeks.
2. A comet. Comets move in elliptical paths around the sun. They sometimes have tails and reappear later.
3. The planetary conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars that occurred in approximately 7 to 6 BC.<sup>31</sup>

The Old Testament prophesied of a special star as well: “I shall see him, but not now: . . . there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel” (Num 24:17). The Book of Mormon also verifies this tradition of many signs in the heavens. Samuel the Lamanite promised “great lights” and many signs and wonders in the heavens to precede Jesus’s birth (Hel 14:2–6).

**2:2. “in the east.”** The star was seen *anatole*, “at its rising, or a rising of light.” The English rendering “east” is only by implication. The star is often misinterpreted as one that led the magi, but the text does not describe a traveling star. When star appeared at its rising, the magi interpreted it as a sign of the birth of a new king of the Jews and thus traveled to Jerusalem.

**2:3. “the king . . . was troubled.”** Matthew uses the same word—*tarassó*, “troubled”—here and when the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water. (Other translations have rendered the word “frightened,” “agitated,” “perplexed,” and “terrified.”) The people of Jerusalem knew what would happen if Herod suspected a rival to his title and throne. This echoes the history of Pharaoh’s jealousy at Moses’s birth. We can see several other parallels between Moses’s and Jesus’s births.

*Table 4. Parallels between Jesus’s and Moses’s births*

1. Father received dream of the sacred mission of the unborn son (Mt 1:20–21; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 2.215–216)
2. Wicked leader forewarned by scribes of Hebrew birth that will be a threat (Mt 2:4–6; *Antiquities*, 2.205)
3. Wicked leader and people filled with dread at hearing of Hebrew deliverer’s birth (Mt 2:3; *Antiquities*, 2.206)
4. Wicked leader seeks to destroy the infant (Mt 2:13–14; Ex 1:16)
5. Lord commands to go to Egypt (Mt 2:13; Ex 4:19)
6. Wicked leader slaughters male children (Mt 2:16; Ex 1:22)
7. Leader dies (Mt 2:20; Ex 2:23)
8. Lord commands to return to Palestine (Mt 2:22–23; Ex 3:17)

**2:4. “he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes.”** The chief priests were the captains of the temple, appointed by Herod to do his bidding. The scribes—also known as lawyers (NEB) or teachers of the law (NIV)—codified the Mosaic and oral laws in detail and applied them to the circumstances of their time. They worked with the Sanhedrin, or leadership body of the Jews. At the time of Jesus’s birth, King Herod had reduced the Sanhedrin to a mere shadow of its former (and future) existence.

**2:4. “he demanded of them where Christ should be born.”** In Matthew we see an interesting interplay of Jesus’s titles. The magi have just asked for information about the new “King of the Jews.” Herod asks his people for information about the Messiah, or Christ. The same two titles are interchanged in Matthew’s Passion narrative when the chief priest demands, “Tell us whether thou be the Messiah?” yet the Romans crucify Him as “King of the Jews.”<sup>32</sup>

**2:5. “In Bethlehem.”** Matthew refers to the prophecy in Mic 5:2. We see a comparison wherein the Jewish leader who has access to the prophecy is not willing to travel five miles to see the newborn king while the magi are willing to make a long journey to find, believe, and worship. This verse is the second of fourteen fulfillment passages in Matthew.

Table 5. Matthew’s fulfillment passages in the Nativity narrative

Fulfillment passage	NT scripture	OT scripture
Mt 1:22 Now this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the prophet, saying.	Mt 1:23 Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel	Isa 7:14 Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.
Mt 2:5 For thus it is written by the prophet.	Mt 2:6 Thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.	Mic 5:2 Beth-lehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel.
Mt 2:15 That it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying.	Mt 2:15 Out of Egypt have I called my son.	Hos 11:1 When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt.
Mt 2:17 Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying.	Mt 2:18 In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.	Jer 31:15 A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not.
Mt 2:23 That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets.	Mt 2:23 He shall be called a Nazarene.	Possibly a lost scripture or Isaiah 11:1, 2–6; 60:21, referencing netser (“branch”).

**2:6. “for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.”** The KJV “rule” is also translated “to tend as a shepherd.”<sup>33</sup> This phrase is the same that appears in 2 Sam 5:2: “You

shall be shepherd of my people Israel” (RSV and NIV). So Matthew may have referenced the prophecies of both Micah and Samuel.

**2:7. “Inquired of them diligently what time”** In asking the magi when the star had appeared, Herod employs a technical term (*akriboun*, “inquired, ascertained the exact”) used in astronomical observations. Herod is specifically asking for the year, month, and day the star came up over the horizon. King Herod “secretly” inquired of the magi in preparation for his order in Mt 2:16 to massacre all the boys “of two years of age and under.”<sup>34</sup>

**2:8. “search diligently for the young child.”** Matthew refers to the baby Jesus eight times as *paidion*, “young child, half-grown boy or girl, or infant.” Matthew and Luke are focusing on different times in Jesus’s young life, and their word use verifies that. Luke uses *brephos*, “babe or infant,” for the eight- and forty-day-old infant at His circumcision and visit to the temple.

**2:9–10. “When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.”** The star that the magi saw at its rising reappeared and “stood over” the home where the toddler Jesus now lived in Bethlehem. It seems that the star had not led the magi over the past year or more but had been a temporary sign of the birth of a new king in Judea.

**2:11. “when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary.”** Matthew has the Holy Family living in a home in Bethlehem, with no reference to Nazareth yet. The text also does not reference the first months of Jesus’s life as Luke does.

**2:11. “fell down, and worshipped him.”** The magi’s worshipful behavior shows them to be sincere believers of the Messiah. God has allowed them to be special witnesses of His Son. No other witnesses mentioned in the Nativity narratives, except Mary and Joseph, sacrificed more than they did—all the time and resources it would take to travel to Bethlehem as well as the hardships of such a journey.

**2:11. “they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.”** The magi’s bringing gifts is foretold in Isa 60:6: “The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all they from Sheba shall come: they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall show forth the praises of the Lord.” Ps 72 may also be a dual prophecy relating to this event.

The gifts each have a symbolic message:

1. Gold (*zahab*) is the precious metal that early Christians saw as a gift for a king.
2. Frankincense is a fragrant gum resin exuded from *Boswellia* trees, at that time found only in southern Arabia, Ethiopia, Somaliland, and India. Frankincense was used for perfume, temple incense, and temple offerings.<sup>35</sup> Early Christians saw it as a symbol of Jesus’s divinity.
3. Myrrh is a valuable aromatic gum that grows in Arabia, Abyssinia, and India. It shared the uses of frankincense and was additionally used in embalming (Mk 15:23; Jn 19:39). Early Christians saw myrrh as representing the human nature of Jesus and lineage of Shem (Deu 4; 11; Num 15).

**2:12.** *“they departed. . . another way.”* The magi foil Herod by following the divine direction they had received. The text also suggests that the magi are all from the same country because it states that they return to “their own country” (singular).

### **Mt 2:13–15. Scene 3: The Flight to Egypt**

**2:13.** *“the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream.”* Another divine dream opens the next scene. Joseph will also foil Herod by following heavenly instructions to leave Bethlehem.

**2:13.** *“flee into Egypt.”* Joseph takes his family across the southern border of Judea into Egypt. The shared border of Egypt and Palestine was a line from the Mediterranean coast, just south of the city of Gaza, through Beersheba to the Dead Sea, just south of Masada. We are not told how far the family went into Egypt, but they may have had to walk only thirty-eight straight miles south from Bethlehem. The third of Matthew’s fourteen fulfillment citations refers to this event (see note to Mt 2:5).

**2:15.** *“that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet.”* Matthew highlights how Jesus’s young life fulfilled prophecy with three Old Testament citations. These closely placed quotations take up one-third of the content between verses 15 and 23. The first quotation may be from Hos 11:1 or Num 24:7–8. On the most fundamental level, the Hosea passage refers to the Exodus of Israel from Egypt.

### **Mt 2:16–18. Scene 4: Herod Slaughters Infants**

**2:16.** *“Herod, . . . mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth.”* Herod’s temper and jealousy is consistent with historical records, even if his slaughter of the babes around Bethlehem is not mentioned in other records.

**2:16.** *“slew all the children that were in Bethlehem.”* This massacre mirrors the time of Moses’s birth when all the Israelite baby boys were killed (Ex 1–2). Once again, the history of Israel portends Jesus’s life. Archeologists and historians assume the population of Bethlehem was only three hundred at this time, and the population of the surrounding region numbered about two thousand. This means that the annual birthrate in the region would be about thirty. Infant mortality was higher among boys and averaged 30 percent, so the maximum number of male children under two years of age would scarcely have been more than twenty. Those young boys are traditionally known as the first Christian martyrs.

**2:17–18.** *“Jeremy the prophet . . . weeping for her children.”* Again Matthew’s message is enhanced by his use of scripture. This scriptural prophecy belongs to Jer 31:15, which refers to scattered Israel in terms of Rachel weeping over her lost children. Nevertheless, as God ultimately broke the power of tyrants who persecuted Israel in Egypt and in the exile, so will He frustrate the power of this tyrant,

King Herod. Of all the Old Testament quotations in Matthew's infancy narrative, this is the most difficult to imagine being applied to Jesus in circumstances other than those described by Matthew.<sup>36</sup>

Matthew's last three Old Testament quotations (found at 2:6, 2:15, and 2:18) offer an overview of the history of Israel in geographical miniature. By mentioning Bethlehem as the city of David, Egypt as the land of the Exodus, and Ramah as the mourning place of the exile, Jesus's early life is summed up in the history of these prophetically significant places. "All things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of him" (2 Ne 11:4).

### **Mt 2:19–23. Scene 5: Relocation to Nazareth**

**2:19. "when Herod was dead."** The challenge of dating Herod's death has been debated for centuries as it relates to the timing of the Lord's birth. Josephus marks Herod's death shortly after an eclipse of the moon and before a Passover.<sup>37</sup> Scholars debate which eclipse it might have been between 6 BC and AD 6. Meteorologist Ernest Martin argues that the traditional date of the spring 4 BC eclipse contradicts Josephus's explanation. Working with Chicago's Adler Planetarium, he proposed another eclipse from 1 BC.<sup>38</sup> The Book of Mormon also offers a clue for dating Jesus's birth: "Six hundred years from the time that my father left Jerusalem, a prophet would the Lord God raise up among the Jews" (1 Ne 10:4).

Josephus describes King Herod's repulsive death at age seventy at his luxurious palace in Jericho:

Herod's distemper greatly increased . . . by God's judgment upon him for his sins; . . . it brought upon him a vehement appetite to eating, which he could not avoid to supply with one sort of food or other. His entrails were also exulcerated, and the chief violence of his pain lay on his colon; an aqueous and transparent liquor also had settled itself about his feet, and a like matter afflicted him at the bottom of his belly.<sup>39</sup>

Only five days before his death, Herod made a frantic attempt at suicide and ordered the execution of his eldest son, Antipater. Knowing that no one would lament his passing, Herod came up with a plan to make many weep. He commanded all principal men of the entire Jewish nation to come to Jericho under threat of death. When they arrived, he locked them in the hippodrome and secretly gave orders to his sister, Salome, to kill them at the moment of his death. To Salome's credit, she did not follow through with his orders but freed the men and allowed them to return home.

**2:19–20. "the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt."** The connection with the ancient patriarch Joseph, who received divine dreams in Egypt, is another link between the Old and New Testaments. But Jesus's life incorporates the entire history of Israel. He, like His name's sake, Joshua, returns to the promised land.

**2:20. "they are dead which sought the young child's life."** Matthew's passage is almost verbatim from the Septuagint record of the Lord's words to Moses after the pharaoh's death, in Ex 4:19: "For

all those who were seeking your life are dead.” Matthew included the plural “they” in reference to those seeking to kill Jesus. We see the same plural again at Jesus’s death when wicked people seek to kill Him. Just as the pharaoh’s death freed Moses to begin his mission of returning the children of Israel to the promised land, so the death of Herod enables the Holy Family to return from Egypt to the promised land, where Jesus will fulfill His mission.<sup>40</sup>

We continue to find patterns between the Lord’s birth and death narratives. Here the child returns from Egypt as “Emmanuel . . . God with us,” and the author describes Jesus’s return from the tomb with a similar message—“I am with you always” (Mt 1:23; 28:20 NIV).<sup>41</sup>

**2:22. “Archelaus did reign in Judaea.”** Less than a week before Herod died, he changed plans and divided his kingdom up between his three sons:

- Archelaus received Judea and Samaria, or Idumea (but he was so cruel that Rome deposed him in less than a decade)
- Herod Antipas received Galilee and Perea
- Philip received east and north of the Sea of Galilee<sup>42</sup>

Archelaus was even more brutal and dictatorial than his father. He began his reign by massacring three thousand people. Matthew’s mention of Joseph avoiding Judea correctly reflects political history. Matthew’s context implies that Joseph’s first thought was to return to Bethlehem of Judea (2:1), possibly because he and Mary had a house there (2:11). “Galilee of the Gentiles” was so named because Phoenicians and Arabs always inhabited Galilee. At the time of Jesus many Greeks lived in Galilee as well. Greek was spoken and understood there.

**2:23.** Mt2:20, 22, and 23 present three neatly balanced geographic phrases with a narrowing coverage: (1) “the land of Israel,” (2) “parts of Galilee,” and (3) “a city called Nazareth.” Joseph receives divine direction to all three locations.<sup>43</sup> Matthew introduced Bethlehem as the hometown of the Holy Family. Without Luke’s record, it sounds like the Holy Family were Judean. Matthew goes to great effort to explain why the family went to Nazareth.

**2:23. “dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.”** Matthew’s fifth fulfillment citation stems from the name nazoraios, “Nazarene.” We do not know exactly why Jesus was to be called a Nazarene, but scholars have given five possibilities:<sup>44</sup>

1. **Geography.** Nazarene is primarily applicable to Jesus because He dwelt at Nazareth. Jesus is referred to by the adjective four times in Mark and twice in Luke. In the dialect of Galilean Aramaic, it is quite defensible to derive Nazarene from Nazareth.

2. **Holy.** Calling Jesus a Nazarene could have something to do with Isa 4:3, “Shall be called holy,” or Jdg 16:17, “I have been a Nazarite unto God from my mother’s womb.” Yet Jesus was clearly not a Nazarite.
3. **Religious group.** “The sect of the Nazarenes” is used in Act 24:5 in reference to the rising number of Christians, or followers of Jesus.
4. **Vow.** Nazarene could be derived from *Nazir*, meaning “one consecrated or made holy to God by a vow.” Jesus does not fit the requirements for the vow of a Nazarite, yet He was consecrated to God’s service from the womb (Mt 1:21).
5. **Branch.** Nazarene could be derived from *netser*, “branch.” Jesus is the messianic branch of the house of David: “There shall come a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a *Branch* out of his roots” (Isa 11:1, emphasis added; also see 60:21). The word *netser* became synonymous with the Jewish hope of the Messiah.<sup>45</sup> Jeremiah also records the Lord saying, “I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment” (23:5). The Suffering Servant song of Isa 53:2 compares the servant (Christ) to a sapling and a root.<sup>46</sup>

Matthew’s first Old Testament quotation concerned the conception, birth, and identity of the prophesied child; the last citation concerns His mission and destiny. Matthew is now ready to leave the hallowed Nativity and move on to Jesus’s ordained mission and divine Passion.

## **Lk 2:41–52. The Boy Jesus at the Temple**

**2:41.** “*his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover.*” According to the law of Moses, “three times in a year shall all thy males appear before the Lord thy God” at the tabernacle or temple for three Jewish feasts (Deu 16:16). The most important of these pilgrimages was Passover, in the spring, which lasted a week. The first night of the celebration, Israelites retold the stories of the night when God slew the firstborn Egyptians but saved the Hebrews who sacrificed a lamb and spread the blood over their doorways. The rest of the week is referred to the Feast of Unleavened Bread because the children of Israel left in haste without time for their bread to rise.

Rabbis from the time of the New Testament debated who must travel to Jerusalem for Passover: “All are subject to the command to appear excepting a deaf-mute, an imbecile, a child, one of doubtful sex, one of double sex, women, slaves that have not been freed, a man that is lame or blind or sick or aged, and one that cannot go up on his feet.”<sup>47</sup>

Rabbi Hillel specified that among those who should travel were “toddler[s] who could walk up the Temple Mount themselves, holding their father’s hand.” Shammai even included baby boys who could ride on their fathers’ shoulders.<sup>48</sup> Women and girls could attend, but the Pharisees discouraged them from going outside in public settings.<sup>49</sup>

That Mary and her small children went to Jerusalem for Passover though it was unnecessary and uncommon for women and young children to make this journey speaks highly of them. The journey was a three- or four-day hike each way from Nazareth to Jerusalem. That Mary and her children went is made even more extraordinary by the realization that during the first twelve years of Mary's marriage, she carried, bore, and raised many children (she and Joseph had at least seven living children according to Mk 6:3).

**2:42. "he was twelve years old."** Less than half the children born during this time lived to age twelve.<sup>50</sup> In the ancient Jewish world, parents devoted their time to teaching and feeding their children. Mothers nursed their babies for at least eighteen months, usually twenty-four months, and sometimes double that time.<sup>51</sup> Boys were required to go to synagogue for study and worship. Looking back to this time of the late second temple period, later rabbis outline an ideal education for boys: "At five years of age the study of Scripture; at ten the study of Mishnah; at thirteen subject to the commandments; at fifteen the study of Talmud; At eighteen the bridal canopy; At twenty for pursuit [of livelihood]."<sup>52</sup> The advice continues on until age one hundred. Rabbis also gave fathers general directions for raising a son: "He must circumcise him, redeem him, teach him the *Torah*, take a wife unto him, and teach him a trade."<sup>53</sup> We assume Jesus followed his father's trade, which the KJV translates as "carpenter" but is more accurately translated as "builder," which most often in Palestine meant a stonemason.

On a child's twelfth birthday, they were no longer considered a minor. At twelve-and-a-half they were considered an adult and could be married legally (though some were married earlier).<sup>54</sup>

**2:43. "Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem; and Joseph and his mother knew not."** Travel from Galilee to Jerusalem for religious pilgrimages was often done in caravans. Safety was a concern, so the Jews preferred traveling in groups. With other small children to care for, it is understandable that Mary and Joseph would have assumed their responsible oldest child may have been with another relative or neighbor during the first day of their journey. The swarms of pilgrims in Jerusalem would have been very difficult to navigate through.

**2:46. "after three days they found him in the temple."** Some numbers are significant symbolically, and the number three is one of those in the New Testament. The fact that Jesus is missing for three days and then is found by His parents in the temple foreshadows another three days when He is gone and returns from doing His Father's work.

**2:46. "in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions."** At the temple, the Court of the Women held a place for men to gather and discuss the law. Even in His youth, Jesus is extraordinarily insightful and engaging with the leaders of the Jews. This pattern continued His whole life, though most of the leaders rejected Him and in the end killed Him for blasphemy.

**2:48. "Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing."** Luke's knowledge of this story, especially including Mary's tense conversation and brimming emotions, speak again to the fact that Luke probably interviewed Mary in preparation to record

his Gospel (see Lk 1:1–3). Jesus’s response, that He was moving forward with His Heavenly Father’s call, demonstrates how early He felt the responsibility of messiahship. But His earthly parents, in their emotionally stressed state, did not comprehend the full extent of Jesus’s duty to others. The misunderstanding was resolved, and we are told He returned to Nazareth with His family.

**2:51. “his mother kept all these sayings in her heart.”** Luke repeats this phrase from verse 19.

## The Book of Mormon and the Nativity

Without the Book of Mormon’s witness, biblical scholars have doubted Matthew’s and Luke’s Nativity stories because they discuss different ideas, contradict each other at times, and have no second source within the Bible. Yet we find references to Jesus’s Nativity narratives scattered throughout the Book of Mormon. This study guide highlights several details that confirm Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts, including 1 Ne 1:8; Mosi 3:15; Alm 7:10; 25:15; and 3 Ne 1:13. With the Book of Mormon as a second witness, the world has two prophetic voices confirming Jesus’s birth.

## Notes

1 Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives* (Harford, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

2 Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 415. The late Father Brown’s research is still the standing authoritative source on Jesus’s birth accounts in the Bible.

3 See the NASB, NIV, JB, RSV of Lk 2:3.

4 Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 395. Jews were exempt from military service, so a census of the Jews in Palestine was only for taxation information. The total taxation for the Jewish people was between 30 and 40 percent. Rome needed taxes to afford the luxury of magnificent buildings and panem et circenses, “bread and circuses,” for the people. An infamous census in the Old Testament is credited to King David, who “numbered the people of Israel” (2 Sam 24; 1 Chr 21:1). The census incurred the wrath of God in the form of a three-day pestilence. Ironically, the place in Jerusalem where the pestilence stopped became the spot for the building of the temple (2 Chr 3:1). By mentioning a census in Judea, Luke evokes the memory of the city of David and of the temple.

5 Ernest L. Martin, *The Birth of Christ Recalculated*, 2nd ed. (Pasadena, CA: Foundation for Biblical Research, 1980). Herod has a questionable death date as Martin elaborates. It is often estimated at 4 BC because Josephus said it followed an eclipse and preceded Passover. Many scholars fix the eclipse of March 12–13, 4 BC, as Herod’s death date. However, Martin rejects that date in favor of one of the other solar and lunar eclipses near that time: “(1) Night of 15–16 September, 5 B.C.; (2) Night of 12–13 March, 4 B.C.; (3) Night of 9–10 January 1 B.C.; and (4) Early evening of 29 December, 1 B.C.” See also S. Kent Brown, Wilfred Griggs, and H. Kimball Hansen, review of April Sixth, by John C. Lefgren, *BYU Studies Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1982): 376.

6 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 407.

7 *Protevangelium of James*, although it is not a trustworthy source on other accounts as it contradicts our scriptural records.

8 Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah*, vol. 1 of 6 (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1979), 349. The First Presidency under Joseph F. Smith said in a formal doctrinal statement, “The body of man enters upon its career as a tiny germ or embryo, which becomes an infant, quickened at a certain stage by the spirit whose tabernacle it is.”

9 Fitzmyer, *Luke I–IX*, 408. *Katalyma* is a compound of *kata*, “down,” and *lyein*, “loose.”

10 Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 400–401. The oldest Armenian version and apocryphal literature describe a cave as the birthplace, as do Justin the Apologist and Jerome. Origen, one of the early church fathers, lived in Palestine after AD 216 and wrote, “If anyone wants further proof to convince him that Jesus was born in Bethlehem . . . he may observe that in agreement with the story in the Gospel about Jesus’ birth, the cave at Bethlehem is shown where he was born, and the manger in the cave where he was wrapped in strips of cloth.”

11 Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem at the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1969), 374.

12 Jn 10:11, 14; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 5:4.

13 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 409. The four night watches were 6:00–9:00 p.m., 9:00 p.m.–12:00 a.m., 12:00–3:00 a.m., and 3:00–6:00 a.m.

14 Compare Gen 16:7, 13; 22:11, 14; Ex 3:2, 4; Jdg 6:12, 14; Hos 12:4, 5; Isa 63:9.

15 Lk 1:12–13, 29–30; Isa 60: 1, 5; and so forth.

16 F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 128.

17 James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret News, 1916), 79.

18 Fitzmyer, *Luke I–IX*, 411. Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 404–405.

19 Jn 1:45; 6:45; 7:41–2; Lk 3:23.

20 See Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3; Jn 2:1, 3, 5, 12; 6:42; 19:25–27.

21 John Milton, *The Complete Poems of John Milton* (New York, NY: Cosmo Classics 2010), 42.

22 Luke 2:23 refers to the redemption of the firstborn, which required the payment of five shekels and not the sacrifice of two doves or pigeons. That sacrifice, which is mentioned in verse 24, is part of the purification of the mother after childbirth. This conflation of the two practices is an example of Luke’s unfamiliarity with the details of the Old Testament and its laws and is another reason why many assume that Luke was not born and raised Jewish. See Ex 13:11–16; 22:29–30; Lev 27:26–27; Num 3:13; 18:17–18. Even after the Levites held full priesthood responsibility, the firstborn sons were still distinguished as particularly the Lord’s and had to be formally exempted from the Lord’s service by paying a redemption tax (Num 8:15–18; 18:15, 16).

23 Ex 24:18; Num 14:34; 2 Sam 5:4; Heb 3:17.

24 Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Christ* (1886; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 48. The poor used the third trumpet chest to pay for a sacrifice of two turtledoves. Nine of the trumpets were for required sacrifices, and three were for voluntary gifts. When worshippers heard a type of organ music in the temple courtyards, it meant that the incense was about to be rekindled on the golden altar, in the holy place. It signaled to them to present themselves on either side of the Nicanor Gate, looking into the bronze altar of sacrifice (see page 197).

25 See Lk 1:8–9. In the Old Testament, Simeon was one of the twelve sons of Jacob (Num 1:23). His name is a diminutive of “God has heard,” which was shortened to Simeon or, in Greek, Simon.

26 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 429.

27 Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 462.

28 *Encyclopedia Judaica*, ed. Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed. (Detroit, MI: MacMillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. “Women, Women and the Rabbis.” For Christian changes, see Lynne Hilton Wilson, *Christ’s Emancipation of Women in the New Testament* (Palo Alto, CA: Good Sound Publishing, 2015), 30–34.

29 See (a) Rth 1; 2:4; 4:11; (c) 1 Sam 16:1–13; 17:12, 15; 20:6, 28; (d) Gen 35:19; 48:7.

30 Josephus, *Jewish War*, 6.289, 310, 312, speaks of a star that stood over Jerusalem and of a comet that continued for a year at the time of the fall of the city. He says, “God has a care for men and by all kinds of premonitory signs shows His people the way of salvation,” and relates this to a Jewish belief that “someone from their country would become ruler of the world.” Virgil reports that a star guided Aeneas to the place where Rome should be founded. Finding meaning from constellations or heavenly signs was accepted practice. See Virgil, *Aeneid II*, ed. R. H. Jordan (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2002), footnote 694.

31 The research behind Chicago’s Adler Planetarium production “The Star of Bethlehem” was based in part on Ernest L. Martin, *The Birth of Christ Recalculated*, 2nd ed. (Pasadena, CA: Foundation for Biblical Research, 1980).

32 Mt 26:63; 27:37. Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 182.

33 NEB, JB, NASB, NIV.

34 See Mt 2:7 RSV, NASB, NIV.

35 Ex 30:34–38; Isa 43:23; 66:3; Jer 17:26; 41:5.

36 Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 223. Jer 31:16–17 describes Rachel receiving an answer from God that her children are going to come back from the land of the enemy. In Jeremiah, it is a message of joy and hope, none of which appears in Matthew. Later rabbinic writings gave Rachel credit for an intercessory role for her descendants. Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 206.

37 For a thorough look at possibilities tied to Josephus’s dates, see Ernest L. Martin, *The Birth of Christ Recalculated*, 2nd ed. (Pasadena, CA: Foundation for Biblical Research, 1980), 10–100.

38 See Martin, *Birth of Christ Recalculated*. Martin’s astrological estimates are based on historical astrophysics records and Josephus’s statements that claim Herod’s death and funeral followed an eclipse and preceded a Passover (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 17.164, 213). Josephus gives one more clue—Herod’s sons carried out an elaborate funeral and nationwide processional (estimated to have lasted at least a month). The whole funeral procession was finished prior to Passover. This detail negates the 4 BC date because the eclipse was too close to Passover that year. Martin argues in favor of one of the other solar and lunar eclipses near that time: either “(1) Night of 15–16 September, 5 B.C.; (2) Night of 12–13 March, 4 B.C.; (3) Night of 9–10 January 1 B.C.; and (4) Early evening of 29 December, 1 B.C.” See also S. Kent Brown, Wilfred Griggs, and H. Kimball Hansen, review of *April Sixth*, by John C. Lefgren, *BYU Studies Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1982): 356.

39 Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 17.168–169. The quotation continues, “Nay, further, his privy-member was putrefied, and produced worms; and when he sat upright, he had a difficulty of breathing, which was very loathsome, on account of the stench of his breath, and the quickness of its returns; he had also convulsions in all parts of his body, which increased his strength to an insufferable degree.”

40 Paul also saw the history of Israel leaving Egypt typifying Jesus’s life and mission. 1 Cor 10:1–6.

41 Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 214.

42 Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 17.188–189.

43 W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 22. Matthew’s Nativity account shows a traveling family (Bethlehem, Egypt, Nazareth), and again during His ministry Jesus travels around. “Whether Jesus traveled as a child with Mary and Joseph we do not know. . . . It is clear that when Jesus visited his own home territory (Matthew 13:53–58 and parallels) he had been away so long that he was almost unknown. John 7:5 represents members of his own family as being hostile to him.”

44 Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 208–213.

45 Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 3rd ed. (1883; repr., Mclean, VA: MacDonald, 1969), 723–724.

46 Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 212–219. Brown wrote, “The strongest positive indication lies in the fact that the branch which will blossom from the root of Jesse is the child Emmanuel whose forthcoming birth had been announced in Isaiah.”

47 Mishnah Hagigah 1:1.

48 Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Travel in Antiquity* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 379.

49 “Marketplaces and council-halls, law-courts and gatherings, and meetings where a large number of people are assembled, and open-air life with full scope for discussion and action—all these are suitable to men both in war and peace. The women are best suited to the indoor life which never strays from the house. . . . A woman then, should not be a busybody, meddling with matters outside her household concerns, but should seek a life of seclusion.” Judaeus Philo, *Special Laws III*, 7 vols. (London, UK: William Heinemann, 1967), 3:169, 171.

50 Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (Boston, MA: Brill Academic Publishers, 2003), 196. Approximately one-third of babies born died in the first year of life, and one-half of the survivors died by age ten.

51 Babylonian Talmud, Kethuboth 60a; Nedarim 2:1. See also Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 121.

52 Mishnah Avoth 5:21.

53 Talmud Kiddushin 29a.

54 Mishnah Kiddushin 2:1.