

Matthew 1 and 2 and the birth narrative in Luke

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July 26, 2026

The authors of Matthew and Luke both drew extensively from the Gospel of Mark. However, Mark contains no birth narrative. Sometime after the composition of Mark, it appears that within the emerging Christian community there arose a perceived need to explain how Jesus (who was widely known to be from Nazareth) could nevertheless be presented as having been born in Bethlehem. The authors of Matthew and Luke appear to have addressed this concern independently. There is no compelling evidence that either evangelist was aware of the other's work, and each therefore constructed a distinct account of Jesus's birth. Because these narratives were developed separately, they reflect different local traditions and theological emphases. In what follows, we will examine Matthew's birth narrative in detail. You will then be given an exercise: to analyze Luke's account and to compare and contrast the events each author includes.

Scope and method. What follows separates (i) a plain narrative summary of Matthew 1:18–2:23 from (ii) critical observations about the text's literary construction, intertextual borrowing, and historical plausibility. In the analytical sections, I describe common scholarly interpretations of Matthew's use of scripture and narrative motifs without assuming either the historicity or non-historicity of the events described.

1 Matthew

The story about the birth of Jesus begins at the end of Matthew 1, where the author describes the background and setting:

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son,

and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³“Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

Removing any theological interpretations, the events are as follows: From the passage itself, the following sequence of events is presented:

1. Mary is engaged to Joseph.
2. Mary is discovered to be pregnant before they live together.
3. Joseph, described as righteous, plans to separate from Mary quietly in order to avoid public disgrace.
4. Joseph experiences a dream in which an angel addresses him.
 - (a) The angel instructs Joseph not to fear taking Mary as his wife and explains the origin of the pregnancy.
 - (b) Joseph is told that Mary will bear a son and that Joseph is to name the child Jesus.
5. Joseph awakens and acts in accordance with the dream.
6. Joseph takes Mary as his wife, yet abstains from marital relations with Mary until after the child is born.
7. The child is born and Joseph names the child Jesus.

Intertextual note: Matthew introduces an immediate tension in his very first fulfillment citation. He quotes Book of [Isaiah 7:14](#) to assert that the child will be called Emmanuel (“El (God) is with us”), yet the narrative simultaneously states that Joseph names the child Jesus. These are not equivalent titles: Emmanuel expresses divine presence, while Jesus derives from the Aramaic *Yeshua*, itself a shortened form of the Hebrew *Yehoshua* (“Yahweh is salvation”). In other words, Jesus’s actual name is an Aramaic variant of Joshua, the figure who led Israel into the promised land. The resonance is deliberate: Matthew links Jesus not only to Isaiah’s language of divine presence but also, implicitly, to Joshua’s role as deliverer.

Yet Matthew never again refers to Jesus as Emmanuel anywhere in the Gospel. The name appears only inside the quotation itself and has no narrative afterlife. This reveals Matthew’s method in miniature. Isaiah’s verse is not applied in a literal sense (the child is not actually called Emmanuel); instead, a symbolic meaning (“El (God) is with us”) is extracted and

overlaid onto a different, independently motivated name (“Yahweh saves”). The result is conceptual rather than nominal fulfillment. Matthew preserves Jesus’s given Aramaic name while appropriating Isaiah’s wording for theological emphasis, even though the prophecy’s stated outcome (the child being called Emmanuel) does not occur. This early example already illustrates how Matthew treats scripture: specific textual details may be set aside while broader theological resonances are retained, reinforcing that fulfillment in this narrative operates by reinterpretation rather than by direct correspondence.

The story continues in Chapter 2:

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. . .

Historical note: First, this indicates that Jesus was born during the reign of King Herod ([Herod the Great](#)). We are sure that this is King Herod, because his son Herod Archelaus is subsequently stated to have ruled Judea following the death of King Herod, and Herod Archelaus died in approximately 18 CE. Herod Archelaus also was never given the title “king” (βασιλεύς or *basileus*), and is instead referred to as the ruler of an ethnicity or “ethnarch” (ἐθνάρχης or *ethnarchēs*). King Herod is known to have died in 4 BCE, and therefore Jesus must have been born in or before that year.

Analytical note: Next, the narrative provides no indication that Joseph or Mary resided elsewhere prior to Jesus’s birth, nor does it introduce any extraordinary circumstances explaining Mary’s presence in Bethlehem. No journey, displacement, or administrative requirement is mentioned. On a straightforward reading of the text, Bethlehem appears simply as their place of residence. Matthew provides no explicit prior residence and no narrated journey to Bethlehem; taken in isolation, the text can be read as treating Bethlehem as their current location at the time of the birth, though Matthew does not make this point explicitly.

The narrative continues:

¹...magi from the east came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.”

In this short passage, it indicates that magi arrive in Jerusalem from the east and they:

1. Ask where the child has been born who is “king of the Jews.”
2. Explain that they have observed a star, which they interpret as announcing this birth.
3. State that their purpose is to pay homage to the child.

Intertextual note: The magi’s interest in a star is best understood against Jewish scriptural and interpretive traditions rather than as mere astrology. Most scholars connect Matthew’s imagery to Book of [Numbers 24:17](#) (“a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel”), a passage long read in late Second Temple Judaism as referring to a future ruler. By Matthew’s time, this verse had acquired explicitly messianic significance: the “star” symbolized the appearance of a divinely sanctioned king. The narrative therefore presumes that these magi were familiar with Jewish expectations, either directly through the Tanakh or indirectly through contemporary Jewish interpretive traditions circulating in the eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamian worlds. Their question about the “king of the Jews” shows that they are not merely reporting an astronomical observation; they are applying a specific prophetic framework to it. In other words, the star matters to them because it is read as a scriptural sign of royal messiahship, not simply as a celestial curiosity.

In the Tanakh, the verse about the star appears in an oracle attributed to Balaam in the Book of Numbers ([Numbers 24](#)). The famous line “A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel” is immediately followed by explicit military imagery: this ruler is said to crush Moab, subdue Edom and Seir¹, destroy survivors in Ir, and bring ruin upon [Amalek](#), the [Kenites](#), Asshur, and Eber, culminating in a vision of distant naval powers (“Kittim”) bringing devastation before all involved ultimately perish.

Read in context, this is not a generalized prediction of a spiritual redeemer. It is a nationalist conquest oracle: a future Israelite ruler who expands territorial control and annihilates neighboring peoples. The “scepter” denotes literal political and military dominance. Nothing in the Gospel narratives attributes such actions to Jesus. Jesus does not wage war on Moab, Edom, Amalek, or Asshur; he does not establish territorial rule; he does not destroy cities or crush foreign nations.

Moreover, by the first century, several of these groups no longer existed as identifiable political entities. Assyria (Asshur) had fallen centuries earlier. Amalek had long ceased to

¹Edom (by then known as Idumaea) was subdued and incorporated into the Hasmonean kingdom around 125 BCE under John Hyrcanus, who compelled its inhabitants to adopt Jewish law and customs.

exist as a distinct people.² Moab likewise had disappeared as an independent nation³ well before the Roman period and posed no contemporary threat. The passage explicitly states that “Edom will become a possession”, yet Edom had been absorbed into Judea in the late second century BCE, when the Hasmonean rulers conquered Idumea and compelled its inhabitants to adopt Jewish law. By Matthew’s time, Edom was not an external enemy but an integrated region of Judea itself. Ironically, the reigning dynasty was Idumean in origin: King Herod was ethnically Idumean. The geopolitical landscape presupposed by [Numbers 24](#) thus reflects Iron Age rivalries, not the realities of Roman-period Levant.

What the author of Matthew appears to do, therefore, is select a single salient image (“star”) and reuses it apart from the oracle’s surrounding military imagery, consistent with a typological or allusive mode of interpretation. The magi’s star is detached from Balaam’s conquest narrative and repurposed as a sign of messianic birth. This reinterpretation depends on later Jewish messianic expectation, in which the “star” had come to function as shorthand for an anointed ruler, while the oracle’s original emphasis on violent subjugation and territorial expansion is not carried forward into the Matthean scene, while the “star” image is foregrounded as a royal sign. In this sense, Matthew is not applying [Numbers 24](#) in its original historical meaning, but drawing upon a later interpretive tradition that had already transformed a specific military prophecy into a generalized symbol of messiahship.

Speculation: At this point it is also worth considering what “magi from the east” would likely have implied in practical terms. Such travelers would not have arrived as two or three solitary figures. Although Matthew does not specify numbers, long-distance travel while transporting high-value goods would typically require pack animals, attendants, and some form of protection; on that basis, one might infer a small caravan involving more than a few individuals rather than three solitary travelers. Their arrival in Jerusalem would have been conspicuous, both because of their foreign origin and because of the visible wealth they carried. This helps explain why their inquiry unsettles the city and draws royal attention: what Matthew introduces simply as “magi” would, in practice, have appeared as a substantial and well-resourced eastern delegation rather than a small devotional party.

Later artistic and devotional traditions often reduce this scene to three individuals riding three camels, a portrayal derived solely from the three gifts rather than from the text itself. Matthew never specifies the number of magi. Given the distance involved and the high value of the goods being transported, it is far more plausible that this was a sizable caravan rather than a small trio of travelers. The familiar nativity image therefore reflects later symbolic convention, not historical or logistical expectation. In practical terms, the magi’s arrival would have resembled a foreign delegation accompanied by animals, servants, and guards,

²The Amalekites disappear from historical record as a distinct people by the late seventh to early sixth century BCE (roughly 600–550 BCE), likely following successive Assyrian and Babylonian campaigns that dismantled small Transjordanian polities and led to their absorption into surrounding populations.

³The Moabites lost political independence under the campaigns of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and were subsequently finished as a distinct people under the Neo-Babylonian Empire, with the last clear references to Moab as a separate culture dating to the late seventh–early sixth century BCE (roughly 600–550 BCE), after which their remaining population was gradually absorbed into later regional societies.

making their presence in Jerusalem highly visible and politically significant.

Speculation: It may also be worth noting, cautiously and explicitly as speculation, that a substantial Jewish diaspora existed in Mesopotamia following the Babylonian exile. Many Jewish communities remained in the east even after the Persian period allowed returns to Judea, preserving knowledge of the Torah and prophetic traditions outside Palestine. Against this background, Matthew’s image of learned figures arriving “from the east” may reflect an imaginative linkage between foreign wisdom and Jewish scriptural expectation. While the magi themselves are not presented as Jews, their eastern origin would have resonated with audiences aware that Jewish life and scholarship persisted in Mesopotamia long after the exile. Framed this way, the episode symbolically combines Gentile inquiry with eastern Jewish scriptural memory, offering one possible reason Matthew situates revelation beyond Judea’s borders. This remains conjectural, but it underscores how the narrative consistently locates insight at the margins rather than at the center.

The narrative gives King Herod's reaction:

³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him,
⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired
of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of
Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.' "

King Herod, alarmed by the magi's inquiry, consults the chief priests and scribes, who inform him (on the basis of scripture) that the Messiah is expected to be born in Bethlehem.

Intertextual note: The passage Matthew invokes derives from [Micah 5:2](#), situated within a continuous prophetic unit spanning [Micah 4](#) and [5](#) in the Tanakh. Together, these chapters address an immediate political crisis in eighth-century BCE Judah. Micah is writing against the backdrop of Assyrian expansion, with Jerusalem under threat of siege and the Davidic monarchy facing collapse. [Chapter 4](#) opens with images of Zion's humiliation, exile, and suffering, followed by promises of restoration; [chapter 5](#) then specifies the means of that restoration through the rise of a new ruler associated with Bethlehem.

In Micah's original context, Bethlehem is mentioned not as a mystical birthplace but as the ancestral town of David. The prophet anticipates the emergence of a renewed Davidic ruler who will restore stability and security to Israel. The surrounding verses make this explicit: Assyria is portrayed as the invading power that tramples the land and besieges its cities, while the coming ruler will "stand and shepherd his flock", raise military leaders, and deliver Israel by striking back at Assyria and driving the invader from Jewish territory. Peace is to be achieved not through spiritual transformation but through organized resistance and political strength. The focus throughout Micah 4–5 is national survival and regional power, not individual salvation.

The broader unit continues with concrete geopolitical expectations: Israel will be rescued from foreign domination, its enemies will be subdued, and its territory secured. As with Numbers 24, this is a restoration oracle rooted firmly in Iron Age realities. It envisions a future king who repels invaders and reestablishes Israel's sovereignty.

By the time of Jesus, however, this entire historical framework had long since vanished. The Assyrians themselves no longer existed as a political power, having been conquered first by the Neo-Babylonian (Chaldean) empire and subsequently by the Persians. It was the Persian conquest of Babylonia that ultimately permitted Judean exiles to return and rebuild their community. Thus, the central antagonist of Micah's prophecy (Assyria) had disappeared centuries before Matthew was written, and the cycle of conquest Micah addresses had already passed through multiple empires.

Matthew's use of Micah therefore abstracts a single element (Bethlehem as the origin of a ruler) while omitting the surrounding framework of invasion, military deliverance, and territorial defense found in Micah 4–5. Moreover, in Micah's original context, Bethlehem does not function primarily as a literal birthplace requirement. Rather, it signifies Davidic lineage: Bethlehem is invoked because it is the ancestral town of David, and the oracle anticipates the rise of a renewed Davidic ruler. The emphasis is on dynastic continuity ("from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origins are from of old"), not on the geographical circumstances of that ruler's birth.

The Gospel reframes this dynastic expectation into a concrete claim about nativity, transforming a prophecy about royal lineage and national restoration into a prediction of messianic birth location. In doing so, Matthew detaches the verse from its historical setting (where it addresses Assyrian aggression and the collapse of Judah's monarchy) and repurposes it within a later theological narrative centered on identity rather than statehood. What Micah presents as the reemergence of Davidic kingship in response to foreign invasion is recast as evidence for Jesus's messianic status through birthplace alone.

Next, the narrative continues with King Herod's reaction:

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

King Herod privately summons the magi to determine when the star first appeared, then sends them to Bethlehem and instructs them to report back after locating the child, presenting this request as a desire to pay homage.

Analytical note: The detail that Herod acts "secretly" is significant. It marks a shift from public consultation with religious authorities to covert action, signaling to the reader that his stated intent is deceptive. By obtaining the timing in private, Herod alone possesses the information that later determines his response, isolating responsibility with him. Matthew uses this secrecy as dramatic irony and foreshadowing: although Herod claims he wishes to worship the child, the private meeting cues the reader that his true purpose differs from his words, preparing for the hostile actions that follow.

Herod's inquiry about the exact time the star first appeared serves a clear narrative function beyond mere curiosity. By establishing this timeline privately with the magi, King Herod gains an approximate measure of the child's age. This detail has no immediate effect in the scene itself, but it is planted deliberately for what follows: it equips Herod with a temporal framework rather than a precise location, allowing him to act broadly instead of surgically. Matthew thus introduces the chronology here as anticipatory logic, ensuring that Herod's later response is presented as calculated rather than impulsive. The timing of the star becomes a proxy for Jesus's age, transforming an astronomical observation into actionable intelligence within the narrative.

Analytical note: At this point, the narrative also raises an obvious historical question: how would the author of Matthew (or the tradition behind this account) have had access to the contents of a private conversation between King Herod and foreign visitors? No disciple is present, no intermediary is identified, and the magi themselves leave Judea without returning. Matthew nevertheless reports Herod's motives, strategy, and timing with confidence. This does not invalidate the story as literature, but it underscores that we are no longer dealing with publicly observable events. Instead, the account presupposes either later theological reconstruction or narrative omniscience, reinforcing the impression that Matthew is composing a coherent dramatic sequence rather than preserving independently verifiable recollections.

The magi then continue in their search for Jesus:

⁹When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

After receiving instructions from King Herod, the magi depart for Bethlehem. The star they had previously observed reappears and goes ahead of them, eventually stopping over the place where the child is located. Seeing this, the magi experience great joy.

Analytical note: Several narrative difficulties emerge at this point. Earlier, the magi state only that they “saw his star in the east”, implying a sign interpreted retrospectively rather than a continuously guiding object. If the star were already functioning as a directional guide, it is unclear why they would interrupt their journey in Jerusalem to consult Herod at all. After all, Bethlehem is only six miles to the south and within eyesight of Jerusalem.⁴ The story implicitly requires either that the star was not guiding them initially, or that its guidance was intermittent, ambiguous, or absent for a period; none of which the text explains.

More significantly, the star’s role changes. It is no longer merely an observed celestial sign associated with a royal birth; it now behaves as a localized guide, moving “ahead of them” and then “stopping” over a specific dwelling. This shifts the star from astronomical phenomenon to narrative device. Ordinary stars, fixed at immense distances, cannot indicate individual houses, nor can they meaningfully be said to pause over a particular location. Matthew has therefore transformed the star from a symbolic sign (as in the earlier reference) into an active, almost animated guide.

This transition highlights a broader pattern in the narrative: astronomical language gives way to theological storytelling. The star is no longer something interpreted through scripture or tradition; it becomes an instrument that directly leads the magi to Jesus. The text offers no naturalistic mechanism for this, and none is expected. Instead, the episode marks a movement from symbolic prophecy to miraculous guidance, reinforcing the evangelist’s theological aims while leaving unresolved the practical question already noted: if the star could guide them so precisely here, why did it not do so from the beginning?

Analytical note: King Herod’s instruction that the magi return and report the child’s location also becomes difficult to reconcile with the practical circumstances implied by the story. King Herod ruled from Jerusalem, and with Bethlehem being only about six miles to the south, it would have been a journey of roughly two hours on foot, and perhaps three or four hours for a caravan. Given this short distance, it is not clear why King Herod would

⁴Bethlehem is situated on the the same central hill ridge as Jerusalem, with no major topographic barriers between them. From elevated locations within Jerusalem itself (especially on its eastern heights) Bethlehem or its ridge would likely been visible by day under clear conditions, even without going out to the Mount of Olives.

rely on their voluntary return for information rather than simply having them discreetly followed. A foreign caravan departing Jerusalem toward Bethlehem would have been highly visible and easy to track. The narrative's plausibility here depends heavily on later popular imagery that reduces the magi to three inconspicuous individuals on camels and a general lack of knowledge regarding the geography of Judea; once they are understood instead as a substantial eastern delegation, King Herod's passive strategy appears artificial. The episode thus functions more as a literary device (allowing the magi to act independently and setting up their subsequent warning dream) than as a realistic account of how a paranoid client king, already described as fearful, would have managed such a situation.

Analytical note: A further difficulty is that no surviving astronomical records from neighboring advanced civilizations describe anything resembling this phenomenon. Babylonian, Chinese, and Greco-Roman sources carefully document comets, novae, planetary conjunctions, and unusual celestial events, yet none report a luminous body that travels at walking pace, alters its trajectory to follow a road, and then localizes itself over a particular house. Even planets, which do exhibit apparent retrograde motion, do so over weeks or months against the background of fixed stars, not in a manner that could guide a caravan south from Jerusalem and then halt above a single residence. This absence does not merely complicate naturalistic explanations; it underscores that Matthew is no longer describing an astronomical occurrence in any conventional sense.

Here again, the narrative prioritizes theological choreography over physical description, consistent with Matthew's broader pattern of divine direction overriding ordinary causality.

The magi thus present their gifts to Jesus:

¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

They “prostrate” (προσκυνέω or *proskyneō*) themselves before the child in an act of submission and present royal gifts.

Intertextual note: This scene does more than simply emphasize the magi’s admiration; Matthew is drawing on established scriptural motifs concerning tribute to a royal figure. Most scholars see clear echoes of the Book of Isaiah (especially [Isaiah 60](#)) and the Book of Psalms (notably [Psalm 72](#)). Isaiah 60 envisions nations coming to Zion bearing wealth, explicitly mentioning gold and frankincense, while Psalm 72 portrays foreign kings bringing gifts to the ideal Davidic ruler. In both cases, tribute functions as recognition of legitimate kingship.

Against this background, Matthew’s list of gifts is not accidental. Gold represents conventional royal tribute; frankincense is associated with temple worship; and myrrh with costly perfumes and burial preparations. Taken together, these offerings align Jesus simultaneously with kingship and sacred significance. Matthew does not quote either passage directly, but the imagery would have been recognizable to readers familiar with Jewish scripture.

At the same time, Matthew does not explicitly interpret the gifts symbolically within the narrative itself. Their meaning is supplied implicitly through scriptural resonance rather than direct explanation. In the story, the gifts function primarily as acts of homage: foreign dignitaries acknowledge Jesus as king through material tribute. Later Christian tradition elaborated detailed theological symbolism (gold for kingship, frankincense for divinity, myrrh for death), but Matthew himself does not articulate this framework.

Thus the episode operates on two levels. Narratively, it demonstrates how highly the magi regard the child, treating him as a king worthy of costly offerings. Intertextually, it evokes Isaiah and the Psalms, situating Jesus within a scriptural pattern in which foreign peoples bring wealth to Israel’s anointed ruler. The gifts therefore serve not merely as personal gestures of admiration, but as literary signals that Matthew is presenting Jesus as the recipient of the international tribute envisioned in Israel’s royal and restoration traditions.

Having given their gifts, they do not return to King Herod:

¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

After offering their gifts, the magi are warned in a dream not to return to King Herod, and they depart for their own country by another route. On the narrative level, this immediately frustrates Herod's plan: the information he sought is never delivered, and his attempt to locate the child through the magi fails.

Analytical note: This episode also reinforces a pattern already established earlier in the chapter. As with Joseph, divine communication occurs through dreams, directing events and overriding royal authority. The magi, though foreign outsiders, respond obediently to this divine warning, while Herod is left acting in isolation. Matthew thus contrasts receptivity to divine guidance with political calculation.

Analytical note: From a structural perspective, the dream resolves the tension created by Herod's request that the magi report back. Their altered route explains why Herod lacks precise information about the child's whereabouts, forcing him later to rely only on the approximate age derived from the timing of the star. At the same time, the detail that they return "by another road" carries symbolic weight: having encountered the child, the magi do not simply retrace their steps but exit the story transformed, physically and narratively separated from Herod's sphere of control. The episode closes with divine intervention rather than human strategy determining the outcome, underscoring Matthew's theme that earthly power is ultimately subordinated to divine direction.

The narrative continues:

¹³Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”

¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt
¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

After the magi depart, Joseph receives another dream in which an angel instructs him to take Mary and the child and flee to Egypt, warning that King Herod intends to search for the child in order to kill him. Joseph immediately complies, leaving by night with Mary and Jesus and traveling to Egypt, where they remain until Herod’s death. The narrator then states that this sojourn fulfills a prophetic statement: “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

Intertextual note: Matthew explicitly frames this episode as the fulfillment of scripture, citing [Hosea 11:1](#). In its original context, however, Hosea is not predicting a future messianic event. The verse refers retrospectively to Israel’s past: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” The “son” in Hosea is the nation of Israel itself, recalling the Exodus. Matthew therefore does not apply the passage in its historical sense; instead, he reinterprets it typologically, transferring language originally used of Israel as a people onto Jesus as an individual.

This move fits a broader pattern in the chapter: Matthew repeatedly extracts phrases from Israel’s scriptures and repurposes them within his narrative. Here, the effect is to present Jesus as recapitulating Israel’s foundational story. Just as Israel once fled oppression and emerged from Egypt, so Jesus is preserved through exile and later returns. This typology is strengthened by the surrounding narrative: a hostile ruler seeks to kill a child; the child is rescued through flight; and deliverance comes after the tyrant’s death. The parallels with the story of Moses are unmistakable. As Pharaoh sought to destroy Hebrew infants while Moses was spared and later led Israel out of Egypt, so Herod seeks Jesus’s life while Jesus is preserved and symbolically “called out” of Egypt.

Importantly, this is not presented as historical causation but as theological patterning. Matthew is not arguing that Hosea foresaw Jesus’s flight to Egypt. Rather, he is reshaping Israel’s collective memory into a narrative about Jesus, portraying him as embodying Israel’s identity and destiny. Jesus becomes, in Matthew’s construction, the representative Israel: where Israel once passed through Egypt, so does Jesus; where Israel was delivered, so is Jesus. The episode thus serves less to establish chronology than to advance Matthew’s larger theological aim of presenting Jesus as the fulfillment and personification of Israel’s sacred history.

The narrative continues:

¹⁶When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. ¹⁷Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

¹⁸“A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

When King Herod realizes that the magi have not returned, he becomes enraged. Acting on the timing information he previously obtained from them, he orders the killing of all male children in and around Bethlehem who are two years old or younger. The narrator then declares that this event fulfills a passage from the Tanakh, quoting a lament about Rachel weeping for her children.

Analytical note: The reference to children “two years old or under” introduces an important chronological implication: Herod’s order is explicitly calibrated to the time when the star first appeared. This strongly suggests that the magi did not arrive shortly after Jesus’s birth, but potentially many months later, perhaps approaching two years. Within Matthew’s own narrative logic, the star marks the beginning of the timeline, and Herod’s response indicates that Jesus was no longer a newborn when the magi found him. This stands in quiet tension with later nativity traditions that collapse all events into a single night.

Analytical note: Matthew again frames the episode as scriptural fulfillment, citing [Jeremiah 31:15](#). In its original context, however, this verse is not a prediction of future infanticide. Jeremiah is lamenting the Babylonian deportations of the sixth century BCE, poetically portraying Rachel (the matriarch associated with Benjamin and Ephraim) as mourning the loss of her descendants as they are led into exile. Crucially, in Jeremiah the lament is immediately followed by reassurance and restoration: the children will return from the land of the enemy, and Israel will be renewed. Matthew extracts only the verse of grief, detaching it from its historical setting and from its promise of return. As with earlier citations, the passage is repurposed typologically rather than applied in its original meaning.

Analytical note: The episode also raises serious historical difficulties. The narrative depicts an Idumean client king ordering the slaughter of Jewish children in and around Bethlehem. Such an act (state-sponsored killing of infants) would represent an extraordinary atrocity, particularly in a small, tightly connected society. Yet there is no independent record of this event. No contemporary Jewish source mentions it. Most notably, Josephus (who documents Herod’s reign in great detail and portrays him as cruel, paranoid, and violent)

records numerous executions, including those of Herod's own sons, but says nothing about a massacre of children in Bethlehem. Nor is the episode preserved in later Jewish tradition or in Pharisaic memory.

This silence is striking. While Herod was certainly capable of brutality, the complete absence of corroboration for such a dramatic and symbolically charged act suggests that Matthew's account functions primarily within his theological narrative. The scene completes the Moses typology already underway: just as Pharaoh orders the death of Hebrew infants while Moses is spared, so Herod orders the death of Judean children while Jesus escapes. The massacre thus serves a literary and theological purpose (casting Jesus as a new Moses) rather than providing a securely attested historical episode. As elsewhere in the chapter, Matthew shapes Israel's earlier trauma into a framework for interpreting Jesus's life, even when this requires detaching scriptural language from its original context and introducing events unattested outside the Gospel itself.

At the same time, the argument from silence has limits: Josephus is primarily concerned with elite politics, and small-scale rural violence could go unrecorded; the difficulty is not merely silence, however, but how perfectly the episode functions as an Exodus-pattern narrative device within Matthew's broader typology.

Analytical note: Matthew's narrative provides two temporal anchors: Jesus is born during the reign of King Herod, and Herod later orders the killing of children two years old or younger based on the time when the star first appeared. Since Herod is known to have died in 4 BCE, Matthew's own logic places Jesus's birth no later than that year. Moreover, because Herod's decree targets children up to two years of age, the story implies that Jesus may have been close to that upper limit at the time of the massacre. Taken at face value, this suggests a birth perhaps around 6 BCE, allowing time for the appearance of the star, the magi's journey, and the subsequent events.

It is important, however, to note how celestial signs were understood in antiquity. In Greco-Roman and Near Eastern astrological traditions, a star or planetary configuration associated with a person was typically expected to coincide closely with that person's birth. Such signs were not usually interpreted as appearing long in advance; rather, they marked the moment of arrival or its immediate vicinity. Within Matthew's narrative framework, therefore, the most natural assumption is that the star's appearance and Jesus's birth were roughly contemporaneous. Herod's use of a two-year window does not require that the star predated the birth by years; it simply reflects his lack of precise information and his decision to act broadly on the basis of an approximate timeline.

Analytical note: On this reading, Matthew presents Herod as extrapolating from incomplete data rather than responding to a long-delayed sign. The two-year range functions narratively to justify the scope of Herod's order, not to imply a significant gap between the star and the birth. Consequently, if one follows Matthew's internal chronology while assuming contemporaneity between celestial sign and birth (as ancient audiences likely would

have), Jesus's birth most plausibly falls in the final years of Herod's reign, commonly estimated around 6 BCE. The imprecision arises not from the star's timing but from Herod's uncertainty and the narrative need to accommodate Jesus's survival prior to Herod's death.

Speculation: As for whether such an event would have been demographically significant, the resident population of Jerusalem during the reign of King Herod is generally estimated at roughly 40,000 to 80,000, while Bethlehem was a small village of perhaps 300–1,000 inhabitants. Using a typical premodern crude birth rate of about 40 to 60 births per 1,000 people per year, Bethlehem would have seen roughly 12 to 60 births annually, depending on where it falls within that population range. Extending this across two years and accounting for high infant and toddler mortality yields an estimated surviving cohort of approximately 16–100 children aged two and under at any given time, about half of whom would be male. This implies that, even including nearby hamlets (“in and around Bethlehem”), the number of boys affected would plausibly fall in the range of roughly 10 to 50. Killing even a few dozen children in a tightly knit rural community would almost certainly have been remembered and reported far and wide, particularly given Bethlehem's close proximity to Jerusalem and its integration into Judea's social and religious networks.

The narrative continues:

¹⁹When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰“Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” ²¹Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

After the death of King Herod, Joseph receives another dream in Egypt in which an angel instructs him to take Mary and the child and return to the land of Israel, explaining that those who sought the child’s life are now dead. Joseph again responds immediately, taking his family back from Egypt to Israel.

Intertextual note: At this point, the narrative largely completes the pattern already established. Divine guidance continues to be mediated through dreams, and Joseph remains consistently obedient, moving only when instructed. The phrasing “those who were seeking the child’s life are dead” is noteworthy: although Herod has been the primary antagonist, the plural form subtly broadens responsibility beyond a single individual, echoing language used in the Exodus tradition and reinforcing the Moses typology already in place.

Analytical note: Structurally, this episode functions as resolution rather than development. The threat has ended, exile gives way to return, and the child is restored to Israel. No new theological motif is introduced here; instead, Matthew closes the Egypt cycle by completing the sequence of danger, flight, protection, and restoration. The passage serves primarily to transition the story back into Judea and prepare for the next stage of Jesus’s life rather than to advance additional symbolic themes.

The narrative continues:

²²But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there...

Upon returning from Egypt, Joseph learns that Herod Archelaus is ruling Judea in place of his father, King Herod. Fearing Herod Archelaus, Joseph does not settle in Judea. After receiving further guidance in a dream, he instead withdraws to Galilee, avoiding Herod Archelaus's territory.

Analytical note: Within the narrative, Joseph's fear of Herod Archelaus is presented as a reasonable response to political reality. Historically, Archelaus already had a reputation for brutality even before formally assuming power, and this reputation explains why he was never granted the title of king by Caesar Augustus, receiving instead the lesser designation of ethnarch. Matthew's brief notice therefore aligns with what is known independently: Archelaus was widely regarded as volatile and cruel.

That reputation soon proved warranted. Herod Archelaus's governance was marked by violence and incompetence, provoking repeated complaints from his subjects. Ultimately, it was precisely his character and misrule that led Rome to depose him in 6 CE, at which point his territories were placed under direct Roman administration as the Province of Iudaea. Matthew's depiction thus anticipates historical developments: Joseph's reluctance to settle under Herod Archelaus mirrors the broader judgment later reached by Roman authorities themselves.

Analytical note: Literarily, this episode serves a practical function (explaining why Jesus grows up outside Judea) while remaining consistent with external history. Unlike several earlier fulfillment citations, this moment does not depend on typology or reinterpreted prophecy. Instead, it rests on a historically plausible political calculation: avoiding a ruler whose instability was already evident and whose removal by Rome would soon confirm that assessment.

The narrative continues:

²²... And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee.

After learning that Herod Archelaus rules Judea, Joseph receives yet another warning in a dream and withdraws with his family to Galilee. The destination is not specified at this stage; only the region is named. Galilee is governed by Herod Antipas, whose rule was markedly less violent and unstable than that of Herod Archelaus.

Analytical note: Matthew's wording is significant. In [Matthew 2:22](#), Joseph is said to ἀνεχώρησεν εἰς τὰ μέρη τῆς Γαλιλαίας; literally, “he withdrew into the regions of Galilee.” The verb ἀναχωρέω (“to withdraw, depart, retreat”) is the same term Matthew repeatedly uses for flight or strategic relocation earlier in the chapter (for example, the flight to Egypt). The preposition εἰς with the accusative indicates motion *toward* a destination, not return to a former home. Moreover, τὰ μέρη (“the regions”) emphasizes Galilee as a general territory rather than a specific town. At this point in Matthew's narrative, Joseph is not returning anywhere in particular; he is relocating into Galilee as a safer jurisdiction.

This contrasts with the language used elsewhere in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus later goes to Nazareth. In [Matthew 13:54](#), Jesus ἐλθὼν εἰς τὴν πατρίδα αὐτοῦ: “having come into his homeland.” Here Matthew uses the participle ἐλθὼν (from ἔρχομαι, “to come”) together with εἰς τὴν πατρίδα αὐτοῦ (“into his homeland”), explicitly framing Nazareth as Jesus's established place of origin. Unlike the earlier use of ἀναχωρέω (“to withdraw”) for Joseph's movement into Galilee, this later passage presents Jesus's arrival in Nazareth simply as a return to his home territory, not as flight or relocation prompted by danger.

The distinction matters. Matthew carefully avoids language of return at this stage. Joseph is depicted as withdrawing *into* Galilee without any implication that it had previously been their home. Only in the following verse does Matthew explain that they settle in Nazareth. Later in the Gospel, however, Matthew explicitly refers to Nazareth as Jesus's homeland, presupposing it as his established place of origin. Linguistically, Matthew therefore distinguishes between an initial movement into Galilee as a place of refuge and a later presentation of Nazareth as home. In the birth narrative, Galilee is not portrayed as a return destination but as a region selected in response to political danger, with Nazareth only subsequently becoming Jesus's hometown within the story.

The narrative ends:

²³There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazarene.”

Joseph brings his family to a town called Nazareth and establishes residence there. The narrator then states that this occurs in order to fulfill what had been spoken “through the prophets,” namely, that Jesus would be called a Nazarene.

Analytical note: Matthew’s Greek is again precise. In Matthew 2:23, Joseph is said to *κατώκησεν εἰς πόλιν λεγομένην Ναζαρέτ*; literally, “he settled in a town called Nazareth.” The verb *κατοικέω* means “to settle,” “to dwell,” or “to establish residence.” It does not imply return. Matthew does not present Nazareth as Joseph’s prior home; rather, Joseph actively makes Nazareth his home. Linguistically, this completes the trajectory already established: Joseph first withdraws into Galilee, then subsequently settles in Nazareth as a practical outcome of that relocation. Nazareth is portrayed not as a place of origin rediscovered, but as a place newly chosen and inhabited.

Intertextual note: Matthew then introduces one final fulfillment formula: “so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called a Nazarene.’” Unlike earlier citations, however, this saying does not correspond to any identifiable verse in the Tanakh. There is no direct prophecy stating that the Messiah would be called a Nazarene. Matthew therefore appears to be drawing on wordplay rather than quotation.

Most scholars understand this to be an allusive connection to the Hebrew word *netzer*, meaning “branch,” found for example in Isaiah 11:1, where a shoot or branch arises from the stump of Jesse, symbolizing renewed Davidic kingship. By associating “Nazareth” and “Nazarene” with *netzer*, Matthew links Jesus to the prophetic image of a Davidic “branch.” This also explains why Matthew speaks vaguely of “the prophets” in the plural rather than citing a specific text: he is appealing to a broader thematic tradition of messianic renewal imagery rather than to a single verse.

Once again, the technique mirrors Matthew’s earlier interpretive moves. A concrete historical circumstance (settling in Nazareth) is retroactively aligned with scripture through linguistic association. The geography does not fulfill a prophecy in any straightforward sense; rather, Matthew reframes the outcome as divinely intended by invoking the “branch” motif. Nazareth becomes significant not because it was predicted, but because its name can be connected, through sound and meaning, to established prophetic symbolism. The final scene thus completes Matthew’s birth narrative by transforming an apparently contingent settlement into theological necessity, closing the sequence of flight, relocation, and reinterpretation that has characterized the chapter throughout.

Summary and analysis of Matthew

Here is a summary of the events in Matthew:

1. Mary (mother of Jesus) is engaged to Joseph (husband of Mary).
2. Mary is found to be pregnant before they live together.
3. Joseph plans to separate quietly.
4. Joseph receives a dream instructing him to take Mary as his wife.
5. Joseph does so and names the child Jesus after the birth.
6. Jesus is born in Bethlehem during the reign of King Herod.
7. Approximately two years later, magi arrive in Jerusalem from the east asking about a newborn “king of the Jews.”
8. At some later time, magi arrive in Jerusalem from the east asking about a newborn “king of the Jews.”
9. Herod consults chief priests and scribes, who identify Bethlehem as the expected location.
10. Herod privately questions the magi about when the star appeared.
11. Herod sends the magi to Bethlehem and asks them to report back.
12. The magi travel to Bethlehem, find Jesus with Mary, and offer gifts.
13. The magi are warned in a dream not to return to Herod and depart by another route.
14. Joseph receives a dream instructing him to flee with Mary and Jesus to Egypt.
15. The family leaves by night and remains in Egypt until Herod’s death.
16. Herod orders the killing of children in and around Bethlehem aged two and under.
17. After Herod dies, Joseph is instructed in a dream to return to Israel.
18. Joseph learns that Herod Archelaus rules Judea and avoids settling there.
19. After another warning dream, Joseph relocates the family to Galilee.
20. Joseph settles in Nazareth, where the family makes their home.

Looking through these events in Matthew, six patterns emerge:

1. every episode is structured around retrospective fulfillment of scripture,
2. every major action is directed through divine intervention mediated by dreams,
3. the mood rapidly darkens and remains so throughout the narrative,
4. the Judean authorities do not recognize the events while outsiders do,
5. the narrative is mediated almost entirely through Joseph, emphasizing legal lineage and paternal agency rather than maternal perspective, and
6. an absence of any community.

Each of these will now be examined in turn.

Narrative construction through scriptural fulfillment

Every event recorded in the birth narrative of the Gospel of Matthew serves either to assert the fulfillment of an alleged prophecy from the Tanakh or to position the story so that such a fulfillment can be claimed. Birth in Bethlehem, flight to Egypt, settlement in Nazareth, and even the massacre of the children are each immediately followed by explicit fulfillment formulas or framed so that a later citation becomes possible. The narrative does not unfold as a neutral sequence of remembered events; rather, it is organized around retrospective scriptural interpretation. Historical movement (Bethlehem, Egypt, Galilee) is repeatedly subordinated to textual necessity.

This also explains Matthew's selectivity. Episodes appear only where they can be anchored to scripture. By contrast, details that cannot easily be mapped onto prophetic texts are omitted. There is no account of shepherds watching their flocks by night, because such a scene does not correspond to any Tanakh passage that Matthew could plausibly reinterpret as prophecy. Likewise, Matthew shows little interest in domestic or social detail unless it advances his fulfillment framework. The birth narrative is therefore not primarily concerned with portraying everyday life surrounding Jesus's birth; it is concerned with demonstrating continuity with Israel's scriptures.

More broadly, Matthew's method is cumulative. Individual verses are not merely quoted; they are recontextualized, condensed, blended, or abstracted (as with Micah, Hosea, Jeremiah, and the "Nazarene" wordplay) in order to construct a coherent theological arc. Israel's collective history (exile, deliverance, kingship, and restoration) is compressed into the experience of a single child. Jesus is presented as recapitulating Israel itself: called out of Egypt, threatened by a tyrant, preserved through flight, and finally settled in the land. In this way, Matthew transforms disparate scriptural memories into a unified narrative of fulfillment.

The result is that Matthew's opening chapters function less as biography and more as theological composition. Events are selected, shaped, and arranged to satisfy prior interpretive

commitments. The story moves from prophecy to circumstance, rather than from circumstance to interpretation. Seen in this light, Matthew 1–2 reads not as an attempt to preserve independent traditions about Jesus’s early life, but as a carefully constructed scriptural argument expressed in narrative form. Next, we will provide an overview of Luke 1. You will then proceed to examine Luke 2, identify the sequence of events recorded there, and consider how those events align (or fail to align) with the narrative presented in Matthew.

Divine direction through dreams and the removal of human agency

Closely intertwined with Matthew’s fulfillment framework is a second organizing principle: nearly every major movement in the narrative is explicitly directed by God through dreams rather than initiated by human choice. The magi do not set out on their own initiative; they are prompted by a divinely supplied sign in the heavens and later redirected through a dream. Joseph does not resolve Mary’s pregnancy dilemma independently; he is instructed in a dream not to set her aside. He does not decide when to flee Judea; he is told to escape to Egypt in another dream. The magi do not simply reconsider their travel plans; they are warned in a dream not to return to King Herod. Joseph does not choose the moment of return from Egypt; he is summoned back only after divine instruction conveyed in a dream, even though this coincides with King Herod’s death. The narrative explicitly insists that Jesus cannot leave Egypt by ordinary human judgment, because God must first “call” him out. Finally, Joseph does not select Galilee as a preferred destination; he is again redirected through divine warning in a dream.

The cumulative effect is striking. Joseph and Mary are never portrayed as strategic planners or autonomous decision-makers. They respond, repeatedly and exclusively, to external divine direction mediated through dreams. Geography is not shaped by convenience or preference but by command. Each relocation (Bethlehem, Egypt, Israel, Galilee) is presented as the result of nocturnal revelation rather than circumstance. Even apparent coincidences, such as King Herod’s death, are subordinated to theological necessity: events occur when they do because scripture must be fulfilled and because God must issue permission for movement.

This pattern reinforces the larger literary construction already observed. Just as Matthew arranges events to correspond with prophetic texts, he also removes agency from the human characters in order to foreground divine orchestration. Dreams function as the narrative mechanism by which God governs history directly, bypassing institutions and political authority alike. The magi, Joseph, and Mary become instruments through which a preconfigured script is enacted. The birth narrative thus operates simultaneously as a chain of fulfillments and as a demonstration that everything is choreographed by God, with dreams serving as the narrative mechanism by which divine intent overrides human initiative and political authority alike: nothing unfolds organically, and nothing proceeds without explicit authorization.

Darkening tone, fear, and narrative tension

Against this backdrop of total divine direction, the emotional atmosphere of Matthew's account takes on added weight. Once King Herod enters the narrative, the register shifts decisively from guided movement to threatened survival. What began as divinely managed relocation becomes divinely managed escape. Joseph still acts only in response to revelation, but those revelations now carry urgency: flee, avoid, withdraw, relocate. The same mechanism that previously enabled fulfillment now becomes the means of preservation, and the story darkens accordingly.

From this point forward, Joseph and Mary inhabit a world defined by danger rather than destination. Journeys are undertaken by night, plans are repeatedly revised, and even return from exile is provisional. Although King Herod's death removes one threat, fear persists under Archelaus, forcing yet another change of course. Nazareth emerges not as a recovered home but as the endpoint of a sequence of defensive withdrawals. Matthew never allows stability to settle in; divine guidance continues, but it operates within an environment of political volatility and latent violence.

This sustained tension shapes the reader's experience. The same divine control that structures the plot also heightens suspense, because every movement depends on timely intervention. King Herod's secrecy, the delayed warning to the magi, the flight to Egypt, and the massacre of the children accumulate into a narrative of constant vulnerability. Joseph's silence and obedience amplify this effect: he does not debate, explain, or reflect; he simply acts. The result is a birth narrative marked less by wonder than by apprehension, in which deliverance is repeatedly achieved only at the last moment.

Literarily, this prepares the ground for the Gospel as a whole. Matthew introduces Jesus not into a world of calm reception but into one of immediate hostility. Authority figures threaten, families flee, and safety is always temporary. By embedding fear and displacement into Jesus's earliest story, Matthew establishes a tone that will persist throughout the Gospel: opposition is present from the beginning, and faithfulness unfolds under pressure. Divine direction governs every step, but it does so within a landscape of danger, drawing the reader into a story where fulfillment is inseparable from flight, and providence is experienced through survival.

Failure of Judean authority and recognition by outsiders

A further pattern emerges alongside fulfillment, divine direction, and darkening tone: Judean authority consistently fails, while recognition comes from outsiders. Political power is portrayed as hostile or inert. King Herod responds to the report of a rival king with fear and violence. His son and successor, Herod Archelaus, likewise inspires fear in Joseph. At no point does official leadership provide protection or guidance. The authorities appear paranoid and destructive, oriented toward self-preservation rather than toward recognizing what God has set in motion.

This failure extends beyond the Herodian rulers to Jerusalem's religious establishment. When Herod consults the chief priests and scribes, they correctly identify Bethlehem as the expected birthplace of the "king of the Jews". Yet this knowledge produces no action on their part. They neither investigate nor accompany the magi; they offer no warning to Mary and Joseph; they take no interest in verifying their own interpretation. Scriptural competence is present, but it remains inert. The religious authorities can quote prophecy, but they do not respond to it. In Matthew's construction, insider knowledge does not translate into insight or engagement.

By contrast, recognition comes from outside Judea. The magi (foreign visitors with no institutional connection to Jerusalem) undertake the journey, seek the child, and offer homage. Matthew thus inverts expectations: outsiders act on revelation, while Israel's political and religious leaders either resist or ignore it. This anticipates a broader trajectory within the Gospel of Matthew itself, where marginalized figures repeatedly respond with trust while established authorities respond with skepticism or hostility. The birth narrative already prefigures later scenes in which Roman officials, women, and social outsiders perceive significance that scribes and priests fail to acknowledge.

Literarily, this pattern reinforces Matthew's portrayal of authority as misaligned with divine purpose. Kings threaten, experts remain passive, and salvation advances through unexpected channels. Recognition is decoupled from status. This prepares the reader for later confrontations between Jesus and Jerusalem's leadership, and for Matthew's recurring emphasis that proximity to scripture or power does not guarantee responsiveness to its implications.

Joseph-centered narration and paternal mediation

A striking feature of the birth narrative in the Gospel of Matthew is how completely it is mediated through Joseph. Every decisive moment is filtered through Joseph's experience: the initial response to Mary's pregnancy, the acceptance of Mary as his wife, the naming of the child, the flight to Egypt, the return to Israel, and the final settlement in Nazareth. Each divine communication is addressed to Joseph alone, always through dreams. Joseph receives instruction, evaluates danger, and carries out every relocation. He functions as the narrative's sole agent.

By contrast, Mary remains almost entirely silent and passive within Matthew's account. She receives no annunciation, speaks no recorded words, and initiates no action. Her role is limited to bearing the child and accompanying Joseph through the successive movements dictated by divine warning. Matthew offers no access to her interior life, no hymns, and no reflective moments. She appears only insofar as she is required by the plot. The emotional and practical burden of decision-making rests exclusively with Joseph.

This narrative choice is not accidental. Matthew's opening genealogy traces Jesus's descent through Joseph back to King David, establishing legal lineage through the male line. Although Matthew affirms that Joseph is not Jesus's biological father, it is Joseph who confers Davidic status by naming the child and incorporating him into his household. In Matthew's

construction, legitimacy flows through paternal recognition rather than maternal experience. Joseph's obedience is therefore not merely personal; it is juridical. Through him, Jesus is positioned within Israel's royal ancestry.

Literarily, this reinforces Matthew's broader priorities. The narrative emphasizes legality, continuity, and inheritance rather than embodiment or domestic life. God does not address Mary directly; divine intent is mediated through the father. Authority, movement, and protection are centralized in Joseph, aligning the story with Matthew's concern for dynastic fulfillment and scriptural continuity. In Matthew, Jesus's origins are framed almost entirely through paternal agency, underscoring that the Gospel's opening chapters are less concerned with maternal experience than with legal descent and covenantal placement.

Isolation and the absence of communal life

Another striking feature of Matthew's birth narrative is the near-total absence of community. There are no neighbors, no extended family, no midwives, no local witnesses, and no scenes of shared celebration. Jesus's birth occurs without public acknowledgment, and his early life unfolds in isolation rather than within a recognizable social network. Recognition comes only from distant foreigners, while those geographically closest remain uninvolved. The story is populated almost exclusively by rulers, strangers, and a single nuclear family constantly in motion.

This stands in sharp contrast to what one would expect in a traditional birth account, particularly in an ancient village context where childbirth was ordinarily embedded in communal support. Matthew offers none of this. There are no shepherds, no gathered crowds, no Temple congregation, and no neighborhood response. Even Jerusalem, though geographically nearby, functions only as a center of threat and consultation, not as a place of welcome. The narrative repeatedly bypasses ordinary social structures, presenting Jesus's origins as unfolding outside communal life altogether.

This isolation reinforces Matthew's broader themes. It complements the darkening tone, the emphasis on divine direction, and the failure of Judean authority. Safety is not found in society, institutions, or kinship networks, but only through divine warning and withdrawal. The family survives not by integrating into community, but by avoiding it: fleeing cities, traveling by night, and settling on the margins. Jesus's earliest story is thus marked by displacement rather than belonging.

Literarily, this absence of community heightens the sense of vulnerability and precarity that pervades the narrative. Jesus enters the world not amid collective joy but amid secrecy, fear, and flight. Matthew presents a beginning shaped by danger rather than celebration, where divine purpose advances without human accompaniment. This prepares the reader for a Gospel in which misunderstanding, opposition, and marginalization are present from the outset. Jesus does not emerge from a supportive social fabric; he emerges from isolation, carried forward by obedience and protected only through divine intervention.

This is not to say that the narrative lacks any social reverberation (Matthew notes that "all

Jerusalem” is troubled (2:3)) but communal presence remains abstract: the city reacts as a collective mood, not as a network of named relationships supporting the family.

Looking towards Luke

Having identified the governing patterns in Matthew, we now turn to Luke to test whether the same narrative strategies are present or whether Luke constructs a different kind of birth narrative. We have worked carefully through each verse of Matthew’s birth narrative and identified its governing patterns: retrospective fulfillment of scripture, divine direction through dreams, a darkening atmosphere of fear, the consistent failure of Judean authority alongside recognition by outsiders, the continual focus on Joseph, and the isolation of the family. With this framework in place, we now turn to Luke 1–2.

For readers primarily interested in chronological comparison with Matthew, Luke 1 can be summarized efficiently because its main function is to establish parallel annunciations and family relationships; the sequence of movements and public events that drive the comparison begins in Luke 2. Luke 1 primarily functions as preparation for the birth narrative proper. It is comparatively verbose, consisting largely of annunciations, hymns, and extended scenes establishing the familial relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist. For a lay reader, Luke 1 can feel repetitive and structurally slow: much of it is devoted to parallel announcements, poetic speeches, and theological exposition rather than to advancing events. Its purpose is not historical momentum but doctrinal framing: clarifying identities, relationships, and divine intention. For this reason, we will summarize Luke 1 together rather than analyze it verse by verse.

Luke 1 does, however, contribute something Matthew does not: it situates Jesus within a broader family and social context, presenting domestic scenes, kinship ties, and communal responses. Even here, the narrative remains primarily theological, with each episode serving to articulate belief rather than to preserve independent recollection. Unlike Matthew, however, Luke does not structure this opening chapter around explicit fulfillment of prophecy.

You will then proceed to examine Luke 2 in detail. As you do so, pay attention to whether the patterns identified in Matthew reappear: the fulfillment of prophecy, divine guidance, narrative tension, the behavior of political and religious authorities, and the overall emotional tone. Consider in particular how Luke motivates movement, how recognition is distributed, and whether the same contrasts between insiders and outsiders (or the same atmosphere of danger) are present.

2 Luke

Having completed [Matthew 1](#) and [2](#), we now turn to the birth narrative in the Gospel of Luke. [Luke 1](#) focuses primarily on family and conception rather than birth. It presents Mary as already living in Nazareth and introduces an additional relationship absent from Matthew: Mary and Elizabeth are portrayed as relatives, linking Jesus genealogically to John the Baptist, the son of Elizabeth. This familial connection is unique to Luke and serves a literary purpose, intertwining the destinies of the two figures from the outset. Luke develops parallel annunciation scenes (first for John, then for Jesus), emphasizing divine orchestration through symmetry and repetition rather than through fulfillment citations, as Matthew does.

Your exercise now begins with [Luke 2](#). According to Luke 1, Mary learns of her pregnancy in Nazareth, and Nazareth is presented as the couple's place of residence. As you proceed into Luke 2, pay close attention to how Luke explains their movement to Bethlehem, contrasting this with the narrative in Matthew.

At this stage it is useful to clarify Herod's political position. Judea under King Herod functioned as a client kingdom of Rome rather than as a direct imperial province. Herod ruled locally according to his own administrative practices and cultural traditions, exercising personal control over governance, security, and taxation, while remaining ultimately accountable to Rome. He paid tribute to Augustus, but the methods by which that revenue was raised were largely left to Herod himself: assessment, collection, and internal distribution were matters of royal policy rather than Roman bureaucracy. This arrangement differed fundamentally from direct Roman rule. In imperial provinces, governors appointed by Augustus conducted censuses to register land and assets, imposed taxation directly on the population, and oversaw revenue streams in which part of the proceeds funded local administration while the remainder was remitted to Rome. Under Herod, Judea retained internal autonomy in daily administration even as it acknowledged Roman supremacy. This distinction matters for the birth narratives: Matthew situates Jesus's birth within a client-kingdom framework shaped by Herod's personal authority, whereas Luke later presupposes conditions characteristic of direct Roman administration. The two settings reflect different political realities, and recognizing this helps explain why Herod's actions in Matthew arise from dynastic control and personal paranoia, while Luke's census belongs to a later phase in which Judea had been absorbed into the Roman provincial system.

After Herod's death, Judea did not immediately become a Roman province. Instead, his kingdom was divided among his sons, each ruling as a Roman client. Herod Archelaus received Judea, Samaria, and Idumaea, but significantly he was not granted the title of king, ruling instead as ethnarch. Galilee and Perea were assigned to Herod Antipas, while the northeastern territories were governed by Philip the Tetrarch. All three regions functioned as client states of Rome, each administered locally but ultimately subordinate to imperial authority. Archelaus's misrule soon led to his removal in 6 CE, at which point his territory alone was converted into the Roman Province of Judea and placed under direct governance. This intermediate arrangement explains why Matthew still depicts local dynastic rulers after

Herod's death, while Luke later presupposes the administrative mechanisms of direct Roman control.

Luke introduces an empire-wide census conducted allegedly while [Quirinius](#) governed [Syria](#). Historically, Quirinius was a capable Roman administrator and a close associate of [Augustus](#). He was appointed governor of Syria in 6 CE with the specific task of incorporating Judea into direct Roman administration following the removal of Herod Archelaus. This transition marked the creation of the Roman [Province of Iudaea](#). As part of this process, Quirinius instituted a local census in Judea for taxation purposes. Censuses in the Roman world were not symbolic exercises; they were administrative tools used to assess property and levy taxes.

This local census provoked open resistance in Judea, since Jewish law forbade such enumerations and because Roman registration signaled the loss of remaining political autonomy. The resulting unrest is well attested in historical sources, with rebellion breaking out precisely because Rome was asserting direct fiscal control. Most notably, [Judas of Galilee](#) led an uprising in 6 CE (together with his followers and family), rejecting Roman taxation and advocating that God alone was Israel's ruler. This movement became foundational for what later developed into Zealot resistance. Consequently, if Luke's account refers to Quirinius's census, the events he describes cannot predate 6 CE, the very year this rebellion erupted in response to Rome's administrative takeover.

Luke's framework instead aligns Jesus's birth with the administrative reorganization of Judea roughly a decade after the death of King Herod. The difficulty is sharpened further by Augustus's own record⁵: he states that he conducted empire-wide censuses in 28 BCE, 8 BCE, and 14 CE. These, however, were censuses of Roman citizens and property holders, not registrations of provincial peasants in client kingdoms. Judea would not have been subject to such enrollment under Herod. By contrast, the census carried out under Quirinius in 6 CE was a provincial taxation census, instituted precisely because Judea had been placed under direct Roman rule. None of these administrative events align naturally with Herod's reign, Quirinius's governorship, and what is generally understood to be the period of Jesus's birth.

Additionally, in Jewish law, the birth of a firstborn son initiated a sequence of ritual obligations laid out in the Book of Leviticus and the Book of Exodus. First, the male child was circumcised on the eighth day ([Leviticus 12:3](#)), marking his formal entry into the covenant community. This was followed by a longer period of maternal purification. According to Leviticus 12, after the birth of a son a woman was considered ritually unclean for seven days, then remained in a state of purification for an additional thirty-three days, for a total of forty days. Only after this period could she present herself at the Temple and offer the prescribed sacrifices. Luke's account of Mary and Joseph going to Jerusalem is structured precisely around this timetable.

In addition, the Book of Exodus requires that every firstborn male be "consecrated to the Lord", with human firstborn redeemed by an offering ([Exodus 13:2, 12-15](#)). This obligation, later known as the redemption of the firstborn, reflects Israel's collective memory of the

⁵He recorded this in his autobiographical inscription listing his public achievements and administrative acts, [Res Gestae Divi Augusti](#).

Exodus, when Israel's firstborn were spared. Alongside this, the Book of Leviticus ([Leviticus 12:6, 8](#)) prescribes a purification ritual for the mother following childbirth, culminating in sacrifice at the Temple:

“When the days of her purification are completed... she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. If she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons.”.

Thus, as you work through Luke 2, keep the following points in mind:

- The administrative purpose of Roman censuses: they were instruments of taxation and control, not symbolic population counts.
- The historically fixed date of Quirinius's appointment as governor of Syria (6 CE), which marks Judea's transition from client kingdom to direct Roman province.
- The role of the census in formally incorporating Judea into the Roman provincial system.
- The unrest that accompanied this transition, including open resistance to Roman registration and taxation.
- How these administrative realities relate to Luke's chronology, and how they diverge from Matthew's placement of Jesus's birth during the reign of King Herod.
- What role, if any, divine communication plays in Luke 1 and 2:
 - Are actions guided through dreams, as in Matthew?
 - If God intervenes, how is that intervention conveyed?
- Whether Luke structures events around fulfillment of prophecy in the same way Matthew does, or whether scripture functions differently in Luke's narrative.
- The emotional tone of Luke's birth narrative:
 - Is the atmosphere one of fear and flight, or of public celebration and reassurance?
 - How does this compare with Matthew's sustained tension?
- Whether human actions are primarily directed by divine command, or whether they arise as responses to political circumstances and social events.
- Does the focus continue to be on Joseph, or is there more emphasis on Mary. How is Joseph portrayed in Luke?
- How do Joseph and Mary interact with the community: their neighbours, their extended family, and others.
- In Matthew, Herod and Archelaus rule from Jerusalem, and the family is divinely guided to avoid the city. Does Luke also have the family avoid Jerusalem and its Temple?
- Matthew places the family's settlement in Nazareth roughly two years or more after Jesus's birth. What does Luke say about when the family returns to Nazareth, and how soon after the birth does this occur?
- Finally, observe how Judean religious figures respond in Luke:

- Do they respond with hostility or indifference, or do they recognize and celebrate Jesus at the Temple.
- How does this positive reception by Judean figures contrast with Matthew's portrayal of fearful rulers and passive authorities?

3 Harmonization

The three Synoptic Gospels (Gospel of Mark, Gospel of Matthew, and Gospel of Luke) share many common narrative units, often called pericopes. When the same episode appears across multiple Gospels, this is sometimes taken by readers as reinforcement that a genuine historical memory lies behind the account. In practice, however, literary dependence must also be considered. Most scholars agree that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a primary source, which explains why many passages are reproduced with striking similarity, occasionally with minor grammatical smoothing or added detail.

A clear example is the healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:1–12; Matthew 9:1–8; Luke 5:17–26). Across all three Gospels, the sequence of events is essentially identical: the paralytic is brought to Jesus, Jesus pronounces forgiveness of sins, critics object internally, Jesus responds by healing the man to demonstrate authority, and the crowd reacts with amazement. The structure, dialogue, and progression closely track one another, illustrating direct literary borrowing rather than independent recollection. Such cases show that similarity does not necessarily imply multiple eyewitness confirmations; it often reflects shared source material.

The interpretive difficulty arises when parallel accounts diverge in substantial ways. When two Gospels present the same episode with different chronology, geography, motivations, or outcomes, readers who assume that every detail of scripture must be simultaneously and literally true are faced with apparent contradictions. In response, a method known as harmonization is often employed. Harmonization attempts to preserve all versions by constructing composite narratives in which each account is treated as partial, with missing details supplied from the others. Apparent inconsistencies are resolved by proposing additional events, reordered timelines, or unmentioned intermediaries.

Here is one possible harmonization of the birth narratives.

1. Elizabeth, a relative of Mary, becomes pregnant in her old age.
2. In Elizabeth's sixth month of pregnancy, an angel visits Mary and tells her "you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Because Matthew does not explicitly state that Mary found out she was pregnant in Nazareth, while Luke does, this event must have occurred in Nazareth.
3. Mary immediately travels to visit Elizabeth. By the time she arrives, she is already pregnant, as evidenced by Elizabeth's declaration: *εὐλογημένος ὁ καρπὸς τῆς κοιλίας σου* ("Blessed is the fruit of your womb"), a perfect passive participle modifying a definite child at a present location.
4. Mary remains with Elizabeth for roughly three months, departing shortly before John's birth.

5. Joseph would have become aware of Mary's pregnancy prior to any journey to Bethlehem, because it says "He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child." Thus, he knew in Nazareth that she was pregnant and not with his child. Thus, it must have been in Nazareth that in a dream an angel said "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Because Matthew does not say that this event happened in Bethlehem, it must have happened in Nazareth.
6. While Mary is now several months pregnant, Caesar Augustus announces an empire-wide census in 8 BCE. As Matthew does not deny the need for Joseph registering for this census, this must have occurred. Quirinius, although historically becoming the governor in 6 CE, must therefore either have governed Syria twice or there may have been another governor by that same name.
7. Matthew states that Joseph following the dream "took Mary as his wife," while Luke still calls her his fiancée during travel. This is resolved by observing that Matthew did not say that he "immediately" took Mary as his wife, and thus, the two must have married after arriving in Bethlehem, but before Jesus's birth.
8. They arrive in Bethlehem, fail to find lodging, and apparently take up residence in a livestock enclosure. Although Matthew does not mention this, Joseph registers for the census; and although Luke does not mention it, they marry.
9. Jesus is born in Bethlehem, which therefore must have occurred in either 8 or 7 BCE.
10. A star appears in the sky, yet only eastern astrologers notice. They are sufficiently versed in the Tanakh to recognize this specific star as a sign of a Jewish king, so they prepare for a journey to Judea. Despite their deep understanding of the Tanakh, they were unaware of the prophecies of the location of this king birthplace.
11. Within the first week of Jesus's birth, an angel appears to some shepherds, who then go to Bethlehem to "see this thing that has taken place." They spread the news locally ("all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them") yet this information somehow fails to reach Jerusalem. The author of Matthew did not consider this story worth recording.
12. Despite being poor, they first remain in Bethlehem for well over a month, implying that Joseph must have found work there. Perhaps they anticipated the need to present Jesus at the Temple after forty days.
13. Eight days after his birth, Jesus is circumcised and simultaneously named Emmanuel and Jesus. Because the circumcision was required by Jewish law, Matthew did not bother recording it.
14. Forty days after his birth, the family walks six miles to Jerusalem to present Jesus at the Temple, offering the sacrifice of the poor (two birds). Matthew does not say they did not do this, so he does not deny that it happened.

15. At the Temple, Simeon (one who was righteous and devout) and Anna (a prophet who never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day) publicly proclaim the significance of the child. Apparently none of Jerusalem's priests noticed, and it seems that these two do not pursue the matter further.
16. It says in Luke that "When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth." However, many events described in Matthew required them to return to Bethlehem, so the flight to Egypt, the slaughter of the infants, and the return from Egypt must have all been required by "the law of the Lord".
17. Again, despite being poor and having a home and extended family in Nazareth, following the Temple visit, without any explanation, they return to Bethlehem. During this period, Joseph apparently earns enough to move the family from a livestock enclosure into some form of rented dwelling.
18. Within two years (or perhaps much less), the magi arrive in Jerusalem. The chief priests apparently did not notice the star (or, if they did, failed to recognize its significance) and they also appear unaware of the earlier proclamations by Simeon and Anna in the Temple. Yet they readily identify Bethlehem as the Messiah's birthplace. Despite the prophecies all pointing to a Davidic king (and despite Herod being an Idumean ruler installed by Caesar Augustus) they show no interest in investigating. King Herod is alarmed, yet inexplicably fails to dispatch assassins to accompany or discreetly follow the magi on their short six-mile journey to Bethlehem.
19. The magi visit Jesus in Bethlehem sometime between 8 and 5 BCE, providing the family with portable wealth. Despite Bethlehem lying only six miles from Jerusalem, no one else seems to observe the star hovering directly above it.
20. As Luke does not say that the family did not flee to Egypt, they must have fled there with Jesus. The gifts of the magi allowed them to finance this trip.
21. Similarly, Luke does not mention the slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem. In fact, Luke never mentions King Herod or Herod Archelaus.
22. They remain in Egypt until King Herod dies in 4 BCE, at which point Joseph receives another dream instructing him to return.
23. Attempting to return to Bethlehem, Joseph learns that Archelaus reigns, becomes afraid, receives yet another dream, and redirects the family to Nazareth in Galilee, and as they lived in Nazareth, this is where they went.

Of course, this still fails to explain why a poor manual laborer (the offering at the temple mentions two birds) such as Joseph would be required to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be registered, nor does it account for why an imperial census would be imposed on a client kingdom at all. Under this reconstruction, Jesus would have been either 34 or 35 years old when he began his ministry; an age that can be made to approximate the statement

in [Luke 3:23](#) that “Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work,” but only by generous rounding. All of this also fails to explain why, apart from the shared claim that Jesus was born in Bethlehem to a virgin mother, no event narrated in Matthew appears in Luke, and no event in Luke appears in Matthew, leaving two parallel stories that intersect only at their theological conclusions. Additionally, this reconstruction requires inventing multiple undocumented episodes; not merely unexplained details, but entire events that appear in neither Gospel. Most notably, it must posit a return to Bethlehem after the Temple visit, that Joseph found sustained work in Bethlehem while abandoning his established home (before any prospect of financial support from the magi), and that Joseph and Mary remained in Bethlehem for as long as two years before eventually returning to Nazareth by way of Egypt. None of these episodes appear in either Gospel.

A further difficulty is that this reconstruction pushes Jesus’s birth back to 7 BCE (or earlier), a date not supported by mainstream scholarship or Christian tradition. Serious historical and theological treatments typically place Jesus’s birth close to the death of Herod the Great in 4 BCE, or slightly thereafter. No major Christian tradition, and no modern critical scholar, argues for a birth as early as 7 BCE. The harmonization therefore requires adopting a chronology that is not merely speculative but effectively unattested, introduced solely to reconcile Luke’s census with Matthew’s Herodian setting.

Some apologists propose an otherwise unattested Roman census closer to the death of Herod the Great in order to harmonize Matthew and Luke. However, the only securely documented Judean census is that conducted under Publius Sulpicius Quirinius in 6 CE, roughly a decade after Herod’s death. No independent Roman, Jewish, or Near Eastern sources attest to an earlier empire-wide or Judean census at the end of Herod’s reign. As a result, this proposed earlier census is generally regarded by mainstream historians and New Testament scholars as speculative and unsupported by primary evidence, even though it continues to appear in some apologetic literature.

What survives harmonization is not coherence but accumulation: multiple journeys, erased returns, silent temples, unseen stars, undocumented relocations, and parallel theologies forced into a single timeline. Worse still, this synthesis cannot even be constructed without inventing entire episodes that appear in neither Gospel: extended residences, unexplained returns, interim employments, and additional migrations that exist solely to bridge gaps between incompatible accounts. The result is not reconciliation but fabrication: an invented narrative that neither Matthew nor Luke actually tells, and that can exist only by adding stories that both evangelists themselves chose not to include and that can exist only by supplying narrative material that neither evangelist ever records.

4 Further exercises

The following questions invite careful comparison of the Gospel narratives. In each case, consult the relevant passages directly and note both agreements and differences in detail.

1. After Jesus's baptism, Mark states that he was driven into the wilderness for forty days. Mark gives no description of specific temptations. By contrast, Matthew and Luke describe three temptations in detail. In what order do Matthew and Luke present these events? In particular, does Satan take Jesus first to the Temple and then to a high mountain, or first to the mountain and then to the Temple? How do these accounts compare with Mark's brief description?
2. Mark does not record the healing of the centurion's servant, whereas Matthew and Luke do. In the accounts that include this episode, does Jesus meet the centurion in person, or is the request conveyed through intermediaries? How do the narrative details differ between Matthew and Luke?
3. In the account of the raising of Jairus's daughter, compare the narratives in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. When Jairus first approaches Jesus, is his daughter still alive and near death, so that he is seeking a healing? If so, at what point is her death announced, and by whom? Or does Jairus speak as though his daughter is already dead at the time he makes his request, implying that he is seeking not a healing but a resurrection? How does each Gospel present Jairus's request, and what theological or narrative implications follow from the difference?
4. The earliest manuscripts of Mark conclude abruptly after the following:

But [the young man in a white robe] said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

In Mark, the women do not meet the risen Jesus, and the narrative ends with their fear and silence. By contrast, in Matthew, immediately following this scene, Jesus appears to the women and speaks with them. According to Matthew, where does Jesus instruct the women to tell the disciples to meet him? Where, in Matthew's account, do the disciples ultimately encounter Jesus?

In Luke, how many men in dazzling clothing tell the women that Jesus is not there? Do the women meet Jesus, and if not, where do the disciples first meet Jesus? Do any of the scenes following Jesus's resurrection occur anywhere away from Jerusalem, and what is the last command that Jesus gives to the disciples before he leads them to Bethany where he ascends into heaven?

In Luke's account of the resurrection, how many men in dazzling clothing appear at the tomb, and how are they described? What message do they deliver to the women? Do the women encounter the risen Jesus at the tomb, or do they only receive angelic testimony?

When the women report these events, how do the apostles respond? Who, if anyone, goes to the tomb to verify the report?

Where does the first appearance of the risen Jesus to the disciples occur in Luke? Does it take place in Galilee or in Jerusalem? What distinctive episode involving two disciples occurs on the same day, and how does Jesus reveal his identity to them?

In Luke, do any post-resurrection appearances occur outside the vicinity of Jerusalem? What instruction does Jesus give the disciples regarding their geographical location after the resurrection? Finally, what is the last command Jesus gives before leading them out toward Bethany, and how does Luke describe the ascension?