

# The Birth of

From Mary to the manger, how the Gospels mix faith and history to tell the Christmas story and make the case for Christ.

# Jesus

BY JON MEACHAM

**T**HE NEWS WAS UNWELCOME, baffling, frightening; nothing about it was expected or explicable. Roughly 2,000 years ago, according to the Gospel of Luke, in Nazareth of Galilee, a young woman found herself in the presence of Gabriel, the angelic messenger of the Lord whose name was known to Jews of the day as the mysterious figure who had granted Daniel his prophetic visions. The woman, Luke writes, was "a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David," and her name was Mary, Luke's Greek form of the Hebrew Miriam, the sister of Moses and the first great prophetess of Israel. "Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee," Gabriel said, "blessed art thou amongst women"—terrifying Mary, who "was troubled at his saying." Stunned and confused, Mary made no reply, her face apparently betray-

'THE ADORATION OF THE MAGI,' CENTRAL PANEL, BY ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN (1399-1464)

## ANNUNCIATION OF THE VIRGIN

And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great ... and of his kingdom there shall be no end. Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?

FROM THE GOSPEL ACCORDING  
TO LUKE 1:30-34

Gabriel's visitation to Mary is the fullest telling of how Jesus was, in the words of the Nicene Creed, 'incarnate of the Holy Ghost.' In Matthew, the only other Biblical account of Jesus' birth, the story is told from Joseph's point of view, with his learning his betrothed is 'with child of the Holy Ghost'—news that persuades him not to 'put her away.'



ing anxiety and awe. Sensing her confusion and fear, Gabriel was reassuring: "Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God."

Then the angel said: "And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest ... and of his kingdom there shall be no end." In other words, Mary was to bear the Messiah, the fabled and long-promised figure who, in the words of the prophet Jeremiah, would "reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." Mary was silent, then finally found her voice: "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?"

Gabriel's reply—that "the Holy Ghost shall come upon thee"—raised more questions than it answered, not only for Mary but for Joseph, for the early Christians and, two millennia later, for us. In Luke's account, Mary

'THE ANNUNCIATION,' OIL ON  
WOOD, BY CARLO  
BRACCESCO (1494)

absorbed the tidings of her child's miraculous origin and mission and "pondered them in her heart," still puzzled, still overwhelmed. In the Gospel of Matthew, Joseph, knowing nothing about Gabriel's appearance, is humiliated by the news that his future wife is preg-

nant, and "was minded to put her away privily." In later years Christians had to contend with charges that their Lord was illegitimate, perhaps the illicit offspring of Mary and a Roman soldier. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, some scholars treat the Christmas narratives as first-century inventions designed to strengthen the seemingly tenuous claim that Jesus was the Messiah.

And so the story of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth is, fittingly, as riven with complexity and controversy as Christianity itself. This month more than a billion Christians will commemorate their Lord's Nativity. Amid candlelight, carols and the commingled smells of cedar and incense, the old tale will unfold again: Gabriel's visitation, the journey to Bethlehem, the arrival of the baby in a stable, the glorious announcement to the shepherds in the night, the star in the East, the mission of the Magi.

Yet, as with so many other elements of faith, the Nativity narratives are the subject of ongoing scholarly debate over their historical accuracy, their theological meaning and whether some of the central images and words of the Christian religion owe as much to



## JOSEPH'S DILEMMA

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found [to be] with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily.

FROM MATTHEW 1:18-19

With Joseph, Matthew gave his listeners a regular man, indignant and humiliated. Then, in a device familiar to the audience accustomed to the Hebrew Bible, a dream transforms his views when an angel tells him that the father of Mary's child is God himself.

the pagan culture of the Roman Empire as they do to apostolic revelation.

The clash between literalism and a more historical view of faith is also playing out in theaters and bookstores. This year Mel Gibson's hugely successful movie "The Passion of the Christ" provoked a national conversation about Jesus' last days. With 9 million hardcover copies in print, Dan Brown's thriller "The Da Vinci Code," one of the most widely read books of our time, is partly built around the assertion that the early church covered up important facts about Jesus in order to manufacture Christian creeds. (A Ron Howard movie starring Tom Hanks is in the works.)

Like the Victorians, we live in an age of great belief and great doubt, and sometimes it seems as though we must choose between two extremes, the evangelical and the secular. "I don't want to be too simplistic, but our faith is somewhat childlike," says the Rev. H. B. London, a vice president of James Dobson's conservative Focus on the Family organization in Colorado Springs. "Though other people may question the historical validity of the virgin birth, and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we don't." London's view has vast public support. A NEWSWEEK Poll found that 84 percent of American adults consider themselves Christians, and 82 percent see Jesus as God or the son of God. Seventy-nine percent say they

'THE ADORATION OF  
THE MAGI' BY GENTILE DA  
FABRIANO (DETAIL, 1423)

believe in the virgin birth, and 67 percent think the Christmas story—from the angels' appearance to the Star of Bethlehem—is historically accurate.

Others, though perhaps fewer in number, are equally passionate about their critical understanding of the faith. The Jesus Seminar, a group of scholars devoted to recovering the Jesus of history, is a battalion in this long-running culture war. One of its members, Robert J. Miller, a professor of religion at Juniata College, wrote "Born Divine: Jesus and Other Sons of God," a 2003 book which argues that the Nativity narratives can be seen as Christian responses to the birth stories of pagan heroes like Alexander the Great and Caesar Augustus—literary efforts depicting Jesus as a divine figure in a way Greco-Roman listeners and readers would understand and appreciate.

To many minds conditioned by the Enlightenment, shaped by science and all too aware of the Crusades and corruptions of the church, Christmas is a fairy tale. But faith and reason need not be constantly at war; they are, John Paul II once wrote, "like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth"—and the spirit cannot take flight without both. This is why modern, grounded, discerning people do make leaps of faith, accepting that, as the Gospel of John put it, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Just how he became flesh is the business of Christmas. If we dis-

## Religion

sect the stories with care, we can see that the Nativity saga is neither fully fanciful nor fully factual but a layered narrative of early tradition and enduring theology, one whose meaning was captured in the words of the fourth-century Nicene Creed: that "for us men and for our salvation," Jesus "came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary and was made man."

For Jesus' contemporaries, the explosive story of his life and its cosmic significance did not begin with his birth but with his Passion and resurrection. Jesus of Nazareth was executed by Pontius Pilate at Passover in about A.D. 30 for the crime of sedition. After dying a terrible, humiliating death on Golgotha, Jesus, his followers believed, had risen from the dead, turning the world upside down. Working backward from the Easter miracle, the early Christians—almost all of whom were Jews and thought of themselves as such—told stories of their Lord's last days, of his ministry and, eventually, it seems, of his birth.

The first followers, we should always remember, believed that the Risen Lord was going to return and usher in a new apocalyptic age at any moment. "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power," Jesus tells his disciples in Mark, and in the Epistle to the Romans—a very early writing—Paul says: "The night is far spent, the day is at hand."

**A**S THE YEARS ROLLED BY AND THE WORLD endured, however, the Apostles and the first generations of church fathers realized they were not witnesses about to be swept up into heaven but earthly stewards of a message that had to be written down, explained and defended. The construction of Christianity, the early believers gradually discovered, required preserving the stories and sayings of Jesus, shaping that gospel ("good news" in Greek) and spreading it to fellow Jews and to Gentiles.

The evangelists believed the salvation of the world was in the balance. They strove to convince other Jews, to convert pagans and to control rival Christian factions whose views of Jesus differed from their own. To lose on any of these fronts would set back the cause, so when we read and hear the story now, we are reading and hearing some of the original Christian attempts to ensure the survival and success of a religion that began as little more than one sect within first-century Judaism, a milieu of great religious ferment.

To make their case in this congested theological universe, the Gospel writers collected traditions in circulation and told Jesus' story—not in a clinical way but, as John put it, so "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." The origins of the Nativity stories are much murkier than the accounts of Jesus' adulthood. Where did the details—of miraculous conception, of birth in Bethlehem, of stars in the sky, shepherds in the night and wise men on a journey—come from? Apparently not from Jesus. John P. Meier, a Roman Catholic priest and professor at Notre Dame, the author of a monumental series, "A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus," points out that there is no convincing evidence Jesus himself ever spoke of his birth, and neither Mary nor Joseph (who is not a figure in the years of Jesus' public life) appears to have been a direct source. "The traditions behind the Infancy Narratives," Meier writes, "differ essentially from those of the public ministry and the passion," which were the result of firsthand testimony.

The Gospel authors were thus confronted with a literary problem that had to be solved. They wanted to tell the story of Jesus' birth, but apparently had little to work with. Here, then, is

## ECHOES OF ABRAHAM

And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac.

FROM GENESIS 17

From Abraham's wife, Sarah, conceiving Isaac, to Hannah bearing Samuel, miraculous births have deep roots in Judaism. Mary's purity, however, is distinctive, for the other Biblical examples of God's granting children to the aged or the barren do not involve virgins but ordinary married women.

THE RAPE OF EUROPE  
ANONYMOUS (18TH C.)



## THE PAGAN TRADITION

Upon the Child now to be born, under whom the race of iron will cease and a golden race will spring up over the whole world ... smile favorably, for your own Apollo is now king.

FROM VIRGIL'S 'FOURTH ECLOGUE,' 40 B.C.

The myths surrounding Caesar Augustus, who reigned from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14, are not dissimilar to the imagery the Gospels use to describe the birth of Jesus—a sign that the writers were working in the same literary milieu of composing heroic biographies of great men.



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where tradition and theology came in. In 1965, the Second Vatican Council held that while the Scriptures are ultimately "true," they are not necessarily to be taken as accurate in the sense we might take an Associated Press wire report about what happened at a school-board meeting as accurate. The council focused on the importance of paying attention to "literary forms" in Scripture. The Gospels are such a "literary form," and the accounts of Jesus in the canon are not history or biography in the way we use the terms. Classical biography, however, was a different genre. Writers like Plutarch invented details or embellished traditions when they were reconstructing the lives of the famous, and the Christmas saga features miraculous births, supernatural signs and harbingers of ultimate greatness similar to those found in pagan works. If we examine the Nativity narratives as classical biography, then the evangelists' means and mission—to convey theological truths about salvation, not to record just-the-facts history—become much clearer.

The earliest and sparsest Gospel, Mark's (circa A.D. 60), begins at Jesus' baptism by John as an adult, skipping the Nativity altogether. The latest and most philosophical, John's (circa 90), links Jesus with God at the very birth of the universe ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and Word was God") with a grandeur and force that renders the details of Jesus' earthly arrival irrelevant. Though Paul writes that Jesus was "born of a woman, born under the Law," the rest of the New Testament is silent about the Nativity. So we are left with Matthew and Luke, Gospels composed between A.D. 60 and 90. The central events in both Nativity accounts are Mary's virginal conception, which renders her child a truly unique figure, and Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, which makes him the long-expected Davidic Messiah.

Miraculous conceptions have deep roots in Jewish tradition: the aged Sarah bearing Isaac, the barren wife of Manoah bearing Samson, the barren Hannah bearing Samuel (and, according to Luke, Mary's kinswoman Elizabeth, both aged and barren, bearing John the Baptist just before Mary conceived Jesus). What is distinctive about Mary is the Gospels' emphasis on her sexual virtue. The other Biblical examples of God's granting children to the aged or the barren do not involve virgins but ordinary married women living with their husbands.

This is no small difference. By asserting Mary's virginity, Matthew and Luke are taking the device of the miraculous conception farther than any other Jewish writer had before. Why? The simplest explanation is that it happened. As uncongenial as that opinion may be to modern audiences, Shakespeare was right when he had Hamlet say, "There are more things in heaven and earth ... than are dreamt of in your philosophy." The miraculous may strike some as fantastical, but countless people have believed, and believe now, that God intervened in the temporal world in just this way. If the virginal conception were

a historical fact, however, it is somewhat odd that there is no memory of it recorded in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry or in the Acts of the Apostles or in the rest of the New Testament. It is also striking that in parts of the Gospels Mary herself appears unaware of her son's provenance and destiny. (In Mark, when Jesus is casting out devils at the beginning of his ministry, "his friends"—the sense of the Greek is "family," or "household," which would presumably include his mother—thought he was mentally disturbed and tried to stop him, saying, "He is beside himself." If Mary had received Gabriel's message, then she should have known her son was not mad, but the Messiah. And even if she were not around in this story in Mark, had Jesus been born in such extraordinary circumstances, it is logical to assume that those closest to him would have

known at least something of it—enough, anyway, to see Jesus as someone with a special role or destiny of which the exorcisms were a likely part.)

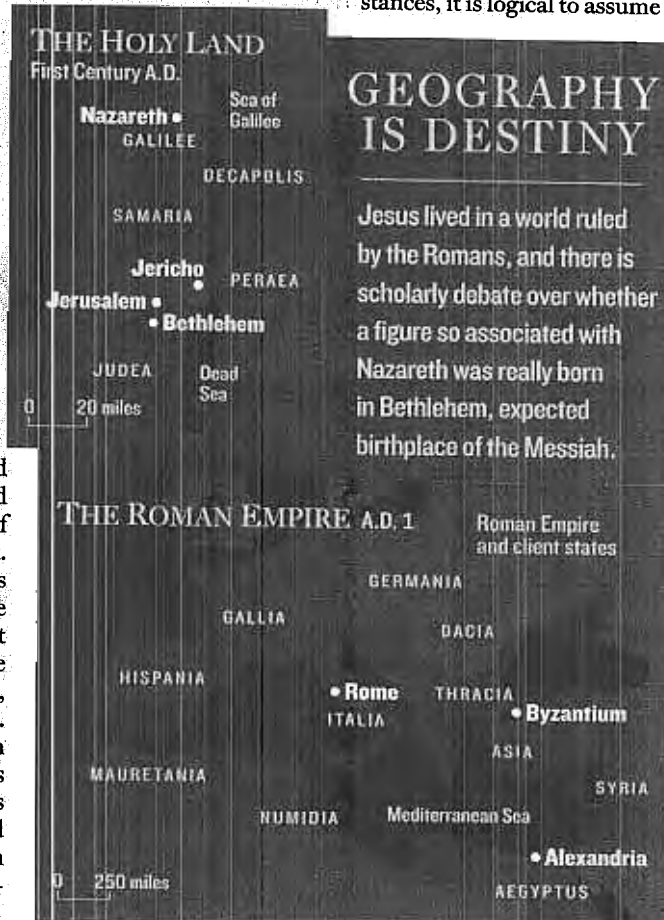
If we assume, for the sake of argument, that the virginal conception is not a fact but an article of faith, there are other explanations for Matthew's and Luke's Nativity accounts. Theology (that Jesus was not merely another prophet-king figure like Moses or David, but something more) and narrative symmetry both argued for a unique birth. "The early church insisted on the virginal conception as the logical beginning to a story that climaxed with the physical resurrection," says Deirdre Good, a professor of New Testament at the General Theological Seminary in New York. "The two separate miracles form a theologically perfect whole. It simply would not have been enough for Jesus to have been 'chosen' by God in his lifetime. Through divine intervention, Jesus was seen to be both divine and human from the start."

The virginity detail did not particularly help the cause early

on. To non-Christian Jews and pagans, the first Christians were superstitious and backward, a group of marginal people on the fringes of empire preaching an outlandish message. According to the Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan, Celsus, a fierce Platonic critic of Christianity who wrote between A.D. 175 and 180, attacked the idea that God had come into the world in "some corner of Judea somewhere," and one Roman emperor, Pelikan writes, dismissed the Jewish and Christian God as "essentially the deity of a primitive and uncivilized folk."

Defensive about such charges, educated Christians fought back. The apologist Origen of Alexandria answered Celsus, arguing that "we tell no incredible tales when we explain the doctrines about Jesus." The last thing the Christians wanted was to appear to be yet another mythological cult, worshiping some kind of demi-god; their deep Jewish faith in the commandment to have "no other gods before me" foreclosed that possibility. "Incredible tales" were for the idolatrous.

And there were scandalous tales in circulation, too: was the story



### GEOGRAPHY IS DESTINY

Jesus lived in a world ruled by the Romans, and there is scholarly debate over whether a figure so associated with Nazareth was really born in Bethlehem, expected birthplace of the Messiah.

SOURCES: ATLAS OF WORLD HISTORY, RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

of the virginal conception told to hide Jesus' illegitimacy? As startling as the allegation is for many, it dates from at least the second century, and maybe as early as Jesus' lifetime. "It was Jesus himself who fabricated the story that he had been born of a virgin," Celsus wrote in A.D. 180. "In fact, however, his mother was a poor country woman who earned her living by spinning. She had been driven out by her carpenter-husband when she was convicted of adultery with a soldier named Panthera. She then wandered about and secretly gave birth to Jesus. Later, because he was poor, he hired himself out in Egypt where he became adept in magical powers. Puffed up by these, he claimed for himself the title of God." Second- and third-century Christian writers alleged that some Jews also suggested Jesus' birth was illicit.

**P**ERHAPS THE MOST intriguing possible hint of illegitimacy in the New Testament comes in the Gospel of John, in an exchange between Jesus and the Temple priests. The back-and-forth is sharp, even brutal, with Jesus accusing the priests of failing to live up to the example of their common father, Abraham. Their reply: "We be not born of fornication; we have but one Father, God Himself." In his exploration of this passage, the late Raymond E. Brown, a distinguished scholar and Roman Catholic priest who taught at Union Theological Seminary, wrote: "The Jews may be saying, 'We were not born illegitimate, but you were.' The emphatic use of the Greek pronoun 'We' allows that interpretation."

If Jesus had been conceived by a human father before Joseph and Mary had begun their lives together as husband and wife (either by Joseph himself, a soldier or someone else), then the Holy Ghost would have provided a convenient cover story for the early church. Such speculation can be only that: speculation, and even contemplating it is interesting chiefly for the window it opens on the ferocity of early debates over Jesus. To the first believers the virginal conception was not a fiction to hide an embarrassing truth but a way of understanding their Lord's uniqueness. He was not a prophet or a god but the son of God who, in the words of the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, came to "share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all."

Jesus was such a revolutionary force that both Matthew and Luke sought to make him comprehensible in the context of established Jewish imagery and prophecy. In Luke, Mary's indelible 138-word reaction to the incarnation ("My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour") is a powerful echo of Hannah's 264-word prayer of thanksgiving in I Samuel when she learns she is pregnant ("My heart rejoiceth in the Lord ... I rejoice in thy salvation"). Jews hearing Mary's story were thus able to associate Jesus with past figures of deliverance.

Matthew makes an even more explicit connection with the Jewish

## THE SHEPHERDS

And there were ...  
shepherds abiding in the  
field, keeping watch over  
their flock by night ... And  
the angel said unto them,  
Fear not: for, behold,  
I bring you good tidings  
of great joy, which shall  
be to all people.

FROM LUKE 2:8-10

The angelic announcement to the shepherds helped Luke tie Jesus more closely to Bethlehem, which was associated in the popular mind with the pastoral.



'THE ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS' BY BARTOLOME ESTEBAN MURILLO (C. 1665)

and for the whole world—would come from Bethlehem, the village in which David had been born.

In the Gospels, some objected to the messianic claims made for Jesus by pointing out that he was a Nazarene. Matthew attacks that skepticism head-on, writing simply that Jesus was born "in Bethlehem of Judea" and that wise men from the East, guided by a star, went there in search of the baby who inspired this celestial sign. Could there have been such a star? Halley's comet is estimated to have made an appearance in 12 B.C., and Matthew may have appropriated the detail long afterward. He could also have been thinking of a line from the Book of Numbers: "There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel."

What is clearer is that the visit of the Magi came to be seen as a fulfillment of Psalm 72. "The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts," reads the Scripture. "Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations

past, stating outright that Jesus is answering ancient expectations. Citing Isaiah 7:14—"Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us"—the evangelist writes: "Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet."

A problem with this elegant passage from Isaiah is that it may have long been mistranslated and misinterpreted. In his magisterial work "The Birth of the Messiah," Raymond Brown calls the conflict over this single, consequential verse one of "the most famous debates" in the history of Biblical interpretation. He notes that the original Hebrew used by the prophet is more properly translated as "the young girl," not "the virgin," and the overall context of the Hebraic Isaiah passage "does not refer to a virginal conception in the distant future. The sign offered by the prophet was the imminent birth of a child, probably Davidic, but naturally conceived, who would illustrate God's providential care for his people." The Greek sense of the term—and Matthew was likely working from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible—suggests that "the virgin" will conceive, Brown writes, "by natural means, once she is united with her husband." It is one Biblical war without apparent end: in the early 1950s, when the translators of the Revised Standard Version rendered the King James "virgin" as "young woman"—a defensible textual decision—some literalist believers burned the new Bibles.

Geography, as Napoleon is said to have remarked, is destiny, hence the Gospels' emphasis on Jesus' birthplace. The expectation was that the Messiah—understood in the early first century as a David-like king who would end Roman occupation and rule over a new golden age for Israel



Join Jon Meacham for a discussion about history, faith and the Christmas story, Thursday, Dec. 9, at noon, ET, on [Newsweek.com](http://Newsweek.com) on MSNBC. Submit questions any time.