



**The Oxford Handbook of Christmas**

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CHAPTER

## 7 The New Testament

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### Abstract

This chapter examines several distinct strands in the New Testament's reflection on Jesus' Nativity: from the mystery surrounding his origins in the earliest Gospel, Mark, to the respective infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, to John's mystical language of the Word's origins, and non-narrative conceptions of Jesus' coming into the world in Paul, other letter-writers, and Revelation. It argues that the slender ancient accounts of 'Jesus becoming Jesus' nonetheless offer a rich tapestry of insights on the Incarnation at the heart of Christmas. Brief engagement with the early reception of these texts in theology and apologetics, literary production and art, devotion and liturgy, lend significant support to this conclusion.

**Keywords:** [New Testament](#), [Gospels](#), [infancy narrative: Paul](#), [letters](#), [Revelation](#), [Incarnation](#), [reception](#)

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## Introduction: Christmas in the New Testament?

AN intercultural space tourist from the planet Alpha Centauri might be forgiven for wondering what the New Testament has to do with most of the themes that come to mind when discussing Christmas. Jesus of Nazareth was, it appears, a man of historical and religious consequence, so it stands to reason that his Nativity might prove to be of at least passing interest in the history of his cultural footprint. Hence, perhaps, the utility of studying the festival that celebrates his birth. And yet the slender ancient biblical accounts of that Nativity evoke virtually nothing of what Christmas has now meant to most people for well over a century. Scripture supplies no stable, donkey, three kings, or numerous other props of seasonal children's pageants—and certainly no hint of the implausibly hirsute and pot-bellied delivery driver and fluffy theme-park menagerie whose mythology services the insatiable appetite of a global consumer behemoth.

Perhaps there is little or nothing to be said about ‘Christmas’ and the New Testament? Quite apart from the contemporary connotations, our interstellar visitor might well conclude that even the Bible’s own interest in the birth of Jesus looks remarkably constrained.

Virtually all New Testament writers foreground the death and Resurrection of Jesus, while the Gospels additionally focus on his public ministry of teaching and healing. But only two of them—Matthew and Luke—care to narrate his birth. More puzzlingly still, even these two do so in disparate ways that are not easily reconciled. They conjure up his genealogical descent through different sons of David; with or without a connection to the priestly family of John the Baptist; either Bethlehem or Nazareth as the home of Mary and Joseph; either Mary or Joseph as the recipient of angelic instruction; either ↵ shepherds in the fields or astrologers from the East as the first visitors to worship the divine child; either Jerusalem or Egypt as the Holy Family’s first destination before eventually settling in Nazareth.

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Even in these two Gospels the opening story of Jesus’ birth seems almost entirely disconnected from the bulk of their account about his public life, death, and Resurrection: none of the events and protagonists around his birth and infancy plays any further part in the bulk of their narrative. In what sense, then, does Christmas really matter for the New Testament, and vice versa? This chapter aims to show that in fact it matters a great deal. We will find the narrative accounts of the Nativity to constitute just two of several important threads in a richly textured and colourful tapestry of reflection on the reality of ‘Jesus becoming Jesus’—or in more traditional terms, of how in Jesus, God became man.

The New Testament in its canonical order begins with Matthew, and thus with the origin and birth of Jesus. But the reader soon realizes that what Matthew and Luke narrate, Mark either ignores or presumes, and John engages instead in the soaring mystical language of his Prologue. We will begin our discussion of the four Gospels with Mark and end with John, before going on to consider the New Testament’s other non-narrative conceptions of Christmas. Our conclusion synthesizes these findings in relation to their reception among the earliest Christian readers.

## Mark

This earliest of the four Gospels opens on a strikingly taciturn and mysterious note regarding the origins of Jesus, with no opening reflection of any kind on his birth or background. Identified as ‘Messiah’ without any human descent, he appears out of nowhere to be baptized by John (1:1, 9), who suddenly emerges ‘in the wilderness’ with a message of repentance fulfilling Old Testament prophecy (1:1–4, quoting Mal. 3:1; Isa. 40:3). There is no mention of either Bethlehem or Nazareth as the place of Jesus’ birth, no genealogy of either parent, no virginal conception or Nativity, no childhood or youth. Mark’s striking silence on our subject of Christmas explains his historic absence from seasonal readings, carols, or pop tunes, Handel’s *Messiah*, or Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio*.

Although Mark nowhere mentions Bethlehem, he does feature the open scepticism of Nazareth, whose villagers object to implausible claims about a Jesus they have known all his life: a mere carpenter, with four well-known brothers and several sisters still living in the same place (6:3). Their words intend to insult or perhaps to patronize and co-opt, but Mark implies no doubt about their factual truthfulness.

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That said, one noteworthy feature of this encounter is that it identifies Jesus as the son not of Joseph but of Mary. Jesus has a *brother* called Joseph in this Gospel (6:3), but not a father—even if Jewish naming custom would leave the existence of a Joseph senior perfectly plausible (cf. Luke 1:59–61). Mark also envisages no continuing role for ↵ the mother of Jesus, who has by this point already been compared to his female disciples (3:31–5). Attempts to identify her with Mary the ‘mother of James and Joseph’ are implausible (15:40, 47; 16:1; cf. Marcus 2000; 2009: 1060).

Might 6:3 represent a jibe at Jesus' supposed bastard birth? That became a standard trope of subsequent anti-Christian polemic (e.g. in Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.32, 69) and is occasionally suspected already in the Gospel of John (8:41). But there is no evidence for such an accusation here, nor any attempt to address it.

One unexpected upshot of Mark's studied silence about any human father of Jesus is that it renders Mark's truncated account concordant with the other evangelists in two key respects. First, even Matthew and Luke feature Joseph only in passing at the beginning of the narrative before he completely disappears without further comment. Might this be, as early Christian tradition soon envisaged (e.g. in the *Protevangelium of James*), because he was a much older man, perhaps with children from a previous marriage, who died long before the public ministry of Jesus?

Secondly, even more clearly than Matthew and Luke, Mark nowhere pictures Jesus as the son of a man called Joseph; nor is there ever any human father figure on the scene. Indeed, this evangelist downplays even the significance of Davidic descent more than the other Gospels (12:35–7).

What accounts for this studied silence? True, it could in theory be a way of hush-hushing an illegitimate birth. But much more likely is the deliberate literary shrouding of human origins for a figure perceived throughout this Gospel as divine. Some ancient writers achieved this by narrating the circumstances of a divinely favoured birth. But certain Lives of Homer similarly capitalized on the poet's emergence from obscurity in order to assert his divine origins as the son, for example, of Apollo (cf. e.g. Ps.-Plutarch's *Life of Homer*; cf. also Collins 2007: 291).

What matters here is precisely the mystery surrounding the place from which, humanly speaking, Jesus 'has come' (1:14, 38; 2:17; 10:45; cf. controversially, Gathercole 2006). Thereby, Mark evokes a whole world of reflection on the heavenly origin—and unanticipated epiphany—of the one whose divine identity is revealed as empowered to forgive sin, Israel's bridegroom whom wind and waves obey and who is explicitly the Son of God (2:1–12, 18–22; 4:41; 14:61–2; cf. further Bauckham 2017b; Frey 2011; Geddert 2015).

## Matthew

p. 80 Readers familiar with the traditional Advent hymn, 'O come, o come, Emmanuel', have encountered already in the transliterated Hebrew of that carol's title one of the names that forms the central theological claim of Matthew's account of Jesus' birth: the infant's identity as 'God with us'. This extraordinary claim sits among Matthew's narration of scenes both commonplace (including details of biological descent and the vulnerability of a young family in the face of political stratagems) and unusual (including angelic visitations, supernatural dreams, and the appearance of a star that attracts foreign attention). Moreover, the claim is presented against a richly woven backdrop of citation and allusion to Jewish Scripture.

Matthew's Gospel introduces itself as a 'book of origin of Jesus the Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham' (1:1). This opening heading, 'book of origin'—echoing the only two other occurrences of the phrase in Scripture, at Gen. 2:4 (a narrative of creation) and Gen. 5:1 (an account of humanity descended from Adam)—positions Matthew's Gospel among these biblical antecedents as one that likewise records a cosmic narrative of origins, here that of Jesus the Messiah. Furthermore, it places Jesus himself within a specific Jewish lineage—he is 'son of David', key to establishing his Messianic identity, and more basically, 'son of Abraham', an ancestry he shares with the whole Jewish people. Matthew's genealogy in 1:2–17 fills in the details as he sees them, concluding with 'Joseph, the husband of Mary, by whom was begotten Jesus, who was called Christ'.

Portraying Jesus' genealogy through Joseph may seem an odd move for the evangelist to make—especially given Mark's previous disinterest in a human paternal figure, and Matthew's own clarity that Mary's

conception is ‘from the Holy Spirit’ and not Joseph himself. However, Joseph plays an important—albeit silent—role in Matthew’s infancy narrative as the recipient of divine revelation concerning the child’s identity, and enactor of divine instructions to protect the child from harm (1:20–5; 2:13–14, 19–23).

Having located his protagonist within a specific genealogical framework, Matthew proceeds to relate the circumstances surrounding his ‘origin’ or ‘birth’ in several scenes: the revelation to Joseph concerning Mary’s conception of Jesus through the Holy Spirit (1:18–25), the adoration of the Magi (2:1–12), and Herod’s pursuit of the child, the Holy Family’s flight to Egypt, and their eventual settlement in Nazareth (2:13–23). These scenes are punctuated by five ‘fulfilment quotations’—a distinctive exegetical feature of Matthew’s Gospel as a whole, but one that is especially concentrated in his infancy narrative (Soares Prabhu 1976). Through the invocation of prophetic texts from Jewish Scripture, Matthew makes sense of events in the life of the infant Jesus. Thus the angel, appearing to Joseph in a dream, famously cites Isaiah 7:14 to underscore Mary’s virginal conception and to link the child’s name, Jesus (‘for he will save his people from their sins’), to the name Emmanuel (‘God with us’). Similarly, Micah 5:1 and 2 Samuel 5:2 are invoked to prophesy the Messiah’s birth in Bethlehem when the Magi arrive at Herod’s court searching for the ‘king of the Jews’; Hosea 11:1 is fulfilled in the infant Jesus’ flight to Egypt, and subsequent journey out of it; Rachel’s weeping in Jeremiah 31:15 is linked to the massacre of the Innocents; and an ambiguous quotation from ‘the prophets’ serves to underline the Holy Family’s settling in Nazareth at the conclusion of the infancy narrative.

p. 81 These explicit appeals to Jewish Scripture to elucidate specific scenes are combined with a more subtle feature of Matthew’s text, in which the life of the infant Jesus parallels the life of Israel’s great leader and lawgiver, Moses, as recorded in the Hebrew Bible and in later midrashic traditions (e.g. both children are saved from the cruelty of a powerful king; see further examples in Davies and Allison 1988: 192–3). Even beyond the parallels with Moses, the infant Jesus’ flight to Egypt and return is depicted as repeating the experience of the nation of Israel more broadly—particularly through Matthew’s use of Hosea 11:1, which in its original context unambiguously refers to Israel as God’s son. For Matthew, the fate of Jesus is closely bound to the fate of his people.

At the same time, a key element of Matthew’s narrative indicates that the infant’s impact extends well beyond Israel’s borders. The ‘Magi from the east’ have captivated readers from antiquity; depictions of the Magi and the star that guides them are among the first to appear in early Christian art (cf. Jensen 2001). Interestingly, while interpreters have theorized Persia, Arabia, or perhaps Babylon as the Magi’s location of origin, and tradition has long presented them as a trio, Matthew’s text reveals neither of these pieces of information. Instead, the details that matter to Matthew are those that relate to their pilgrimage to the newborn ‘king’. The magi’s story is one of vision (‘we have seen his star at its rising’) and devotion (‘we have come to worship him’); juxtaposed with these elements are King Herod’s inability to find the child and disinterest in paying him homage. Interpreters of this passage have often noticed its irony: while foreign astrologers display a keen recognition of the child’s royal significance, others among Jesus’ own people lack this insight.

What does Matthew’s account offer to our picture of Christmas in the New Testament? On the literary level, it uniquely sketches details of Joseph’s experience surrounding Jesus’ birth, and provides the only New Testament account of the star, the Magi, and circumstances surrounding the flight to Egypt. Theologically, it constitutes the first scriptural attestation of a cornerstone of Christian faith—Mary’s virginal conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit—and in drawing attention to two names, Jesus and Emmanuel, provides key information about the child’s mission and identity. As noted previously, the notion of ‘God with us’ encompasses much of what Matthew accomplishes theologically in his infancy narrative. In his opening combination of Davidic genealogy and revelation of divine conception, Matthew begins to illuminate the mystery of God entering the drama of human history at his birth. Through illustrating Nativity scenes against a wider panorama of scriptural citation and allusion, the infant is shown to be in a close solidarity

with his people; at the same time, Matthew's account of the Magi hints that the child's identity as 'God with us' would hold far-reaching significance, even beyond Israel.

## Luke

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Luke's infancy narrative furnishes such familiar Christmas motifs as the swaddled baby Jesus in a manger, the 'Gloria' of singing angels, and shepherds watching their flocks by night. Yet within the profound literary and theological artistry of Luke's composition it is difficult to isolate a single line or motif that encompasses the whole. Perhaps the words of the angel to the shepherds on that holy night provide a fitting point of entry: 'Behold I bring you good news, a great joy for all people: for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger' (2:10–12). In a manner analogous to the angel's message, Luke's infancy narrative has spoken in a particularly compelling and intimate way to readers throughout history, inviting them into its evocative scenes to encounter the mystery of a child who is both Lord and lowly.

Luke accomplishes this in an account that in literary terms is remarkably different from Matthew's. He offers the perspective of Mary rather than Joseph; introduces characters who do not appear in Matthew (the angel Gabriel; John the Baptist and his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth; shepherds; Simeon and Anna); and does not mention others whom Matthew does feature (the Magi; King Herod). Theologically, however, Luke provides resonance with Matthew's account in several important ways. He affirms the virginal conception of Jesus through the Holy Spirit, and illustrates the child's inextricable connection to his native Judaism while simultaneously asserting his significance for 'all people.'

Luke begins his Gospel not with Jesus' genealogy (which he provides later, in 3:23–38), but with a short preface (1:1–4). Here he references previously written accounts of Jesus' life, and emphasizes the orderly and reliable nature of his own account, based on eyewitness testimony. Interpreters often wonder how far this claim extends to the infancy narrative: Did Luke have access to any eyewitness sources for the birth and childhood scenes that he relates? One older, yet nonetheless intriguing suggestion is that Mary herself was a key source; this is based on Luke's ambiguous references to Mary 'storing up' and 'pondering' events surrounding her son's Nativity (2:19, 51), as well as his featuring of her personal experience. More recently, many have doubted Luke's access to any such source (notably Brown 1993); others have raised the possibility of Lukan contact with someone from Jesus' family, even if not Mary herself (e.g. Bauckham 2017a). However, we may construe the redaction history of the infancy narrative, on the purely literary level, at least: Luke's preface sets a tone for its reception as biographically trustworthy.

Following the preface, Luke begins to intertwine the story of Jesus' birth with that of his relative, John the Baptist. The respective annunciations and births of the Messiah's forerunner, and the Messiah himself, are recounted in parallel. Thus the angel Gabriel announces John's birth to Zechariah (1:5–25) before announcing Jesus' birth to Mary (1:26–38); there is a joining of the two families as Mary visits Elizabeth (1:39–56); and Luke completes the parallel in the corresponding nativity of John (1:57–80) and nativity of Jesus (2:1–7). Following the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, several more scenes are narrated from his infancy and youth: the proclamation of angels and visit of shepherds (2:8–20); the circumcision and presentation of Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple, with Simeon and Anna as witnesses (2:21–40); and the finding of the 12-year-old Jesus in the Temple (2:41–52).

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Luke's account of Jesus' origins connects the child deeply and intimately with his native Judaism. In agreement with Matthew, Luke repeatedly affirms that Jesus is of Davidic lineage; furthermore, according to ancient interpretations of Luke 1:27, Jesus' connection to the 'house of David' is portrayed not only through Joseph, but even more substantially through his mother Mary (Bockmuehl 2011). The Temple in Jerusalem features in three of Luke's infancy scenes; details of its liturgical cult set the stage for the

priest Zechariah's encounter with Gabriel before the altar of incense. Mary and Joseph are shown to be faithfully observant of Jewish laws and customs, including circumcising their son, performing acts of purification, sacrifice, and consecration after childbirth (see further Kozitza 2020), and making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover feast.

While Luke does not employ Matthew's method of using 'fulfilment quotations', his infancy account similarly resounds with Jewish Scripture, and other Jewish modes of writing in the Second Temple period. This is perhaps most clearly exhibited in the four canticles interspersed throughout the infancy narrative: Mary's Magnificat (1:46–55), Zechariah's Benedictus (1:67–79), the angelic multitude's Gloria in Excelsis (2:14), and Simeon's Nunc Dimittis (2:29–32). These texts are strikingly evocative of the poetry we find in the Psalter, Isaiah, and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (Farris 1985), and even more contemporaneously with Luke, in some of the Dead Sea Scrolls (Brooke 2005: 272–81). In the Annunciation to Mary, we find further tantalizing resonance with Qumran; specifically, 4Q246, in its prophecy of a future royal figure, shares several parallels with Gabriel's announcement of Jesus' greatness, eternal kingdom, and divine sonship (Brooke 2005: 263–4). While claims about contact between the Lukan and Qumranic texts are likely taking things too far, the striking resemblances nevertheless invite the possibility that both texts arise out of a similar Jewish milieu of Messianic expectation.

Another important Christological aspect of the Annunciation echoes an assertion of Matthew's infancy narrative: Mary's conception of the child through the Holy Spirit. Luke elaborates on Matthew's somewhat sparser version, with Gabriel's answer to Mary's questioning: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and therefore the one born will be called holy, the son of God' (1:35). Other Christological details emerge in the responses of characters throughout the infancy narrative. Both Elizabeth and Zechariah refer to the son in Mary's womb as the 'Lord' (1:43, 76), terminology that overlaps with that of God himself (e.g. 1:68). The angel who appears to the shepherds adds two more titles: the child is 'a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord' (2:11). Later, the Holy Family encounters Simeon in Jerusalem, a man waiting for 'the consolation of Israel' (2:25), as well as to behold 'the Lord's Messiah' (2:26). When Simeon takes the infant Jesus in his arms, he addresses God in his canticle, the Nunc Dimittis: 'My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all peoples, light for the revelation of the nations and the glory of your people Israel' (2:30–2). At the age of 12, Jesus astonishes Jerusalem rabbis with his religious understanding, and Mary and Joseph with his devotion to the affairs of 'my Father' (2:49). Each of these details lends a layer of colour to Luke's portrait of the child's identity and mission. The various titles present a complex mix of salvific, Messianic, and divine attributes. ↪ Simeon's pronouncement on the significance of Jesus' birth strikes a balance between the child's importance within his native Judaism, and his impact on a more global scale. The final scene of Jesus' childhood gestures forward, toward his adult teaching ministry and his personal focus on a divinely appointed task understood by few.

Because of Luke's emphasis on Mary's role in the birth of Jesus, his narrative also contains seeds of Mariological reflection which continue to develop in later apocryphal narrative (especially the second century *Protevangelium of James*) and early doctrinal debates. Luke's portrait of Mary foregrounds her virginity (1:27, 34), and associates her with the 'grace' or 'favour' of the Lord (1:28, 30). The Annunciation is presented as a dialogue, in which Mary freely interrogates Gabriel's message before offering her consent: 'Behold, the handmaiden of the Lord; let it be for me according to your word' (1:38). During her pregnancy, Mary is hailed by Elizabeth as 'blessed among women' and 'the mother of my Lord' (1:42–3)—epithets that anticipate what Mary herself prophesies in her Magnificat: 'from now on all generations will call me blessed' (1:48).

Before concluding this section, it is perhaps worth noting that the book of Acts—another New Testament writing widely attributed to Luke, which recounts the early history of the apostles and Christian mission following the ascension of Jesus—is strikingly silent about how Christ came to be in the world. Mary 'the

mother of Jesus' and his siblings are mentioned briefly in 1:14, and Peter and Paul allude to Jesus' Davidic lineage in their speeches to Jewish audiences in 2:30 and 13:23, respectively. For the most part, the narrative of Jesus' life in Acts (notably in the Petrine Gospel summary of 10:34–43) looks more like that of Mark than that of Luke: beginning with his baptism, not birth. Still: on the substantive conviction that Jesus of Nazareth was both Son of David and Son of God, Acts is at one with the Gospels.

This puzzle in Acts notwithstanding, Luke's overall contribution to the celebration of Christmas cannot be overestimated. Uniquely within the New Testament he offers the extended perspective of Jesus' mother, Mary, as well as miniature portraits of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the manger in Bethlehem, angels and shepherds, Simeon at the presentation of the infant in the Temple, and finally Jesus at 12 years old. Theologically, his complex portrayal holds the exalted identity of the newborn child ('Lord', 'Messiah', 'Son of God'; etc.) together with the modest circumstances of his birth in the city of David. His account vividly highlights the child's Jewish identity, while hinting at his broader significance 'for all people'.

Readers of both infancy narratives have long been curious about historical questions surrounding the events they contain, as well as the process of their respective stories' composition. For modern readers, such questions have become more persistent, and answers more sceptical. How much of what Matthew and Luke relate really happened? How can we reconcile the two accounts historically, when they differ so strikingly? There remains a spectrum of scholarly reflections on these issues. For some, only the barest of overlapping details qualify as historical fact—Jesus' name, perhaps the names of his parents, Mary and Joseph—and the rest is pure invention. There are also a range of approaches to the distinction between historical fact and theological truth. For some, various scenes might express a theological truth while remaining unhistorical in terms of factual events (see, e.g. this approach in Brown 1993). Still others defend the historical value of additional details (e.g. Kozitza 2020 on the Jewish customs cited in Luke's presentation scene), or even of the narratives more broadly (e.g. the more popular, though intellectually thoughtful treatment of Benedict XVI 2012). However one might be inclined to approach such questions, if the infancy narratives are understood in the way described here—as accounts that seek to paint in words the paradox of the divine entering history—then the narratives themselves resist facile answers to issues of history and theology. Rather, their purpose is to invite each reader to grapple with these questions for herself.

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## John

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John, like Mark, lacks a narrative of the birth and the early life of Jesus to match those of Matthew and Luke. But whereas the theme of 'Christmas'—Jesus becoming Jesus—remains evocatively quiescent in Mark, it is keenly explicit and extravagantly spread all over this fourth Gospel.

Twentieth-century scholarship often regarded this evangelist as less interested in history and historical narrative. But this is to misunderstand a writer with a keen eye for historical detail, particularly of the passion story in Jerusalem, and who characteristically rolls history and significance into one. Where the other three Gospels unfold a cumulative picture of Christ that turns out to be more than the sum of its parts, the fourth Gospel's Christology bursts onto the scene fully fledged from the start—and each part already radiates and presupposes the whole. Beginning with the opening lines, we are in no doubt that in Jesus the Eternal Word, the light of humanity, came into the world, 'becoming flesh' and taking up residence among us to overcome the darkness (1:4, 5, 9, 14), thereby 'exegeting' who God is for us (1:18). His birth, although never narrated, marks the point at which, as one 'sent into the world' by the Father 'from above', he 'came down from heaven' (3:17; 6:41, 51; cf. 8:23; 10:36; 12:46; 17:18; 18:37, etc.). This daring assertion understandably meets with just the kind of incredulity (6:42) that Mark reports in Nazareth.

At one level, this heavenly origin patently downplays the question of Jesus' birth, and gives his life and purpose a timelessness that sets him apart from others, famously including Abraham: 'Before Abraham

was, I am' (8:58). And yet his birth is at the same time vital to his mission. Before Pilate he testifies about his own birth, 'I was *born and came into the world* to bear witness to the truth' (18:37).

What is more, that divine birth is vitally interwoven with the Gospel's affirmation that human salvation is quite concretely through union with Christ. This theme is fully developed in the discourse about the Bread of Life (6:35–58), the branches abiding in the vine (15:1–11), or in the so-called High-Priestly Prayer for the disciples (17:21, 23, 26). At the same time, his heavenly birth is instrumental to the notion that believers must be 'born from above', as followers of the Son of Man who descends and is born  $\hookleftarrow$  'from above...from heaven' precisely for this purpose: to save the world through him (3:3, 5, 7, 13, 17, 31; cf. 8:23).

## The Letters and Revelation

Space precludes a fuller consideration of Christmas in the non-narrative writings of the New Testament. But as Mark and John demonstrate and the Fathers from Ignatius to Athanasius and the Creeds amply illustrate, early Christian writers were often strikingly eloquent about the importance of Christmas—Jesus becoming Jesus—without requiring a birth narrative of their own.

Despite his claim to be an eyewitness of the risen Lord (1 Cor. 9:1), St Paul was not an apostolic eyewitness and tradition-bearer of Jesus' life and teaching. He receives and transmits authoritative tradition about the Last Supper and about Jesus' death and Resurrection (1 Cor. 7:10; 9:14; 11:23–5; 15:3–8), and most scholars accept his additional familiarity with some gospel teachings about the Parousia (e.g. 1 Thess. 4:15–17; 5:1–7) or the moral instruction and example of Jesus (e.g. Rom. 12:14–21; 13:7–10; 14:14). But Paul's theological and 'quasi-narrative' interest in Jesus is overwhelmingly focused on his death and Resurrection rather than on his birth and youth. He appears to know nothing of either Bethlehem or even Nazareth, and the only concession to the family of Jesus is his naming of James as 'the Lord's brother' (Gal. 1:19; cf. 2:9, 12; 1 Cor. 15:7).

Nevertheless, what Paul does say about the Incarnation is both clear and in key essentials remarkably consistent with the wider early Christian witness. Being in the form of God, in being born human Jesus made himself nothing, taking on a slave's form in humble obedience all the way to the cross (Phil. 2:6–8). Being rich, he deliberately became a pauper to make his people rich (2 Cor. 8:9). Despite Paul's overwhelmingly Gentile readership, he insists on Jesus' birth to a Jewish mother and Messianic mission to Israel (e.g. Gal. 4:4–5; Rom. 9:5), and at vital points affirms the Messiah's Davidic descent in terms reminiscent of the Lucan Paul's exposition to the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:23, cited earlier; cf. Rom. 1:3; 2 Tim. 2:8).

The later Pauline letters affirm that the fullness of God came to reside in Jesus, so that the 'Christmas event' of the Incarnation was the moment of his saving divine 'epiphany' when he was 'manifested in flesh' (Col. 1:19; 2 Tim. 1:10; Tit. 2:11; 3:4; 1 Tim. 3:16). A comparable reading of Christmas as theophany surfaces briefly in Hebrews (1:6; cf. 9:28), typically interpreted as Pauline from antiquity (including Origen: see Thomas 2019) to the King James Version.

This same conviction that Jesus was 'manifested' (1:20) at his Incarnation is undergirded in 1 Peter, as also in the famously anti-Docetic 1 John: being sent into the world as God's only Son, Jesus was the Word of Life 'made manifest' to take away our sins and to destroy the devil (4:9, 14; 1:2; 3:5, 8). That moment is his 'coming in the flesh' (1 John 4:2; 2 John 7).

p. 87 The Book of Revelation's singular focus is on Jesus Christ's revelation of 'what must soon take place' (1:1) rather than on his first coming at Christmas (while retaining some awareness e.g. of his Davidic descent: 3:7; 5:5; 22:16). Yet the entire message of this book is bracketed by the 'Advent' affirmation of his 'coming'

(1:7; 3:11, 20; 12:10; 16:15; 22:7, 12, 20) in judgment and redemption, which recapitulates and completes the New Testament's 'God with us' theme of Christmas: 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes' (21:3–4 NIV).

## The Earliest Readers

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The earliest readers of the New Testament reflected on various aspects of its witness to the origins of Jesus. Much of this early interest is of an apologetic nature, as ancient Christians sought to tease out the theological implications of their texts and to clarify their beliefs in the face of opposition and debate. For example, the *First Apology* of Justin Martyr (100–165 CE), and his *Dialogue with Trypho* defend the divine and human descent of Christ, contrasting the virgin birth with Graeco-Roman myths and drawing extensively from prophetic Scripture. Irenaeus of Lyons' (c. 130–220 CE) *Against Heresies* is another key text in early theological reflection on the Incarnation. Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–254 CE) takes on early polemics surrounding the circumstances of Jesus' birth in *Against Celsus*.

Furthermore, multiple traditions that historically have been associated with the Christmas narrative arose through ancient interpretations of the New Testament. Key examples are found in the second-century apocryphal *Protevangelium of James*—including Mary's riding of a donkey into Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus in a cave, and a bright light appearing inside it (see Bockmuehl 2018 for more examples). This and other ancient infancy gospels attempted to fill gaps in the New Testament birth narratives: the *Protevangelium* fills in details of Mary's biography from her childhood up to and including the events recorded in Matthew and Luke, while the similarly early *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* sketches a somewhat disconcerting account of Jesus' early childhood as a precocious and tyrannical young miracle worker. Other more well-known motifs—such as the ox and ass at Jesus' manger, and the Magi as a trio—begin to appear in early Christian art.

Finally, the New Testament infancy narratives held a strong devotional and liturgical appeal to readers in antiquity. An early tradition (attested both in the *Protevangelium* and Justin Martyr) located the Lukan 'manger' in a particular cave in Bethlehem—a site which attracted the devotion of pilgrims at least from the third century (cf. Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.51; as well as the pilgrim Egeria's *Itinerarium* 4.2; and Jerome, *Epistles* 4.6.11; 58.3; 108.10), and over which the Constantinian Basilica of the Nativity was built in the fourth century. The four canticles of Luke's infancy narrative were variously incorporated into the prayer of the Church at least from the fourth century, and three important ancient feasts—Epiphany, Candlemas, and of course, Christmas—aided early Christians in liturgical reflection and participation in these events.

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## Conclusion: The New Testament in Christmas

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This chapter has presented several distinct strands in the New Testament's tapestry of reflection on the nativity of Jesus—from the mystery surrounding his origins in Mark (and similarly in Acts), to the respective infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, to the assertion of the Word's heavenly origin that permeates John, and non-narrative conceptions of Jesus' coming into the world in the letters and Revelation.

We have endeavoured to show that the New Testament texts are vitally central to the celebration of Christmas; in doing so, we have observed that they contribute to our conception of Christmas—the event of 'Jesus becoming Jesus'—in sometimes surprising ways. Familiar motifs such as the Christmas star and baby's manger, for example, originate in two very different accounts of Jesus' birth, which nonetheless agree on several essential points: the infant's Davidic and divine descent, his Messianic mission to Israel,

and global significance. Even beyond the more recognizable infancy narratives, other layers in the New Testament's witness have been shown to have a significant bearing on our theme—as is partially illustrated by the fact that in ecclesial communities John's prologue is often read at Christmas alongside the infancy narratives, and that portions of Revelation are often read during the preceding season of Advent, which looks toward the coming of Christ. Even Mark's ambiguity surrounding human genealogy gestures meaningfully toward divine origins, and non-narrative statements in Paul and other letter writers contribute strokes in harmony with an overall picture that is complex, but strikingly consistent.

The New Testament may not appear to our opening paragraph's interstellar tourist to have much in common with contemporary connotations of Christmas. In fact, however, and as we have confirmed in its earliest reception, the New Testament bears strong and complex witness to an idea that has constituted the reason and the heart of this celebration for many throughout history: God came into the world as a man, born to a human mother, in solidarity with the human race and to save it.

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