

# The Incarnation



*"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.  
And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,  
and you shall call his name Jesus."*

*Luke 1: 30-31*

Chapter 18

# The Incarnation



**Read**

**Luke**  
1:26 - 2:52

**Matthew**  
2:1 - 23

**John**  
1:1 - 18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...  
And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld  
his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (Jn 1: 1, 14)

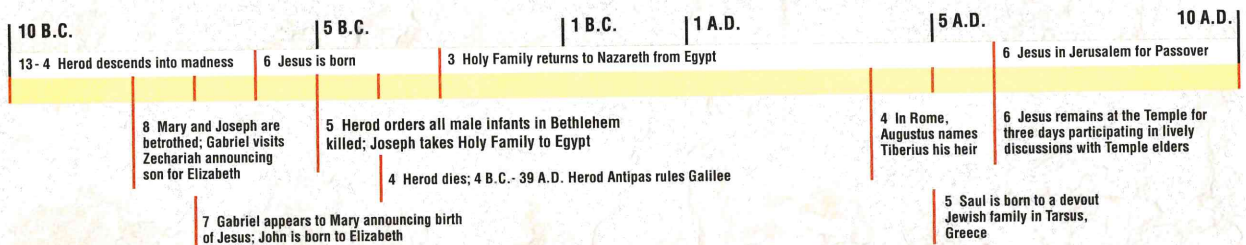
The Gospel according to John begins with an amazing truth: The Word of God, God the Son, who existed before creation and by which everything in the universe was created, became human and lived with us.

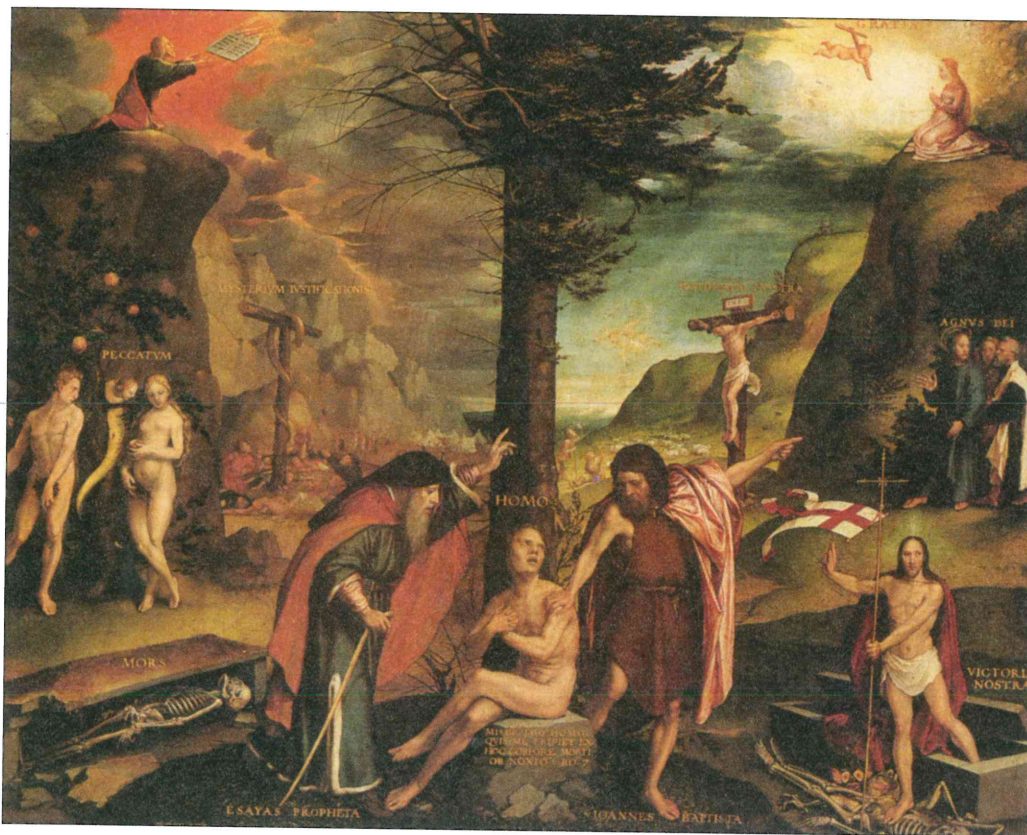
We find the same idea in St. Paul's letter to the Colossians:

... for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether  
thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him  
and for him. (Col 1:16-17)

God became flesh. That is literally the central event in history. We call it the Incarnation—from the Latin that simply means “becoming flesh”—and we date everything in history according to whether it happened before or after the Incarnation.

Jesus Christ was the Son of God, who had existed from eternity. But Jesus was also a man, born at a particular time in history and killed thirty-three or so years later outside Jerusalem in the Roman province of Judea. Jesus was both true God and true man.





Allegory of the Old and New Testaments

*“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only Son... has made him known.” (Jn 1: 17-18)*

Those two inseparable natures are the heart of the mystery of the Incarnation.

Taking up St. John’s expression, “The Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14), the Church calls “Incarnation” the fact that the Son of God assumed a human nature in order to accomplish our salvation in it. In a hymn cited by St. Paul, the Church sings the mystery of the Incarnation:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil 2: 5-8; cf. LH, Saturday, Canticle at Evening Prayer). (CCC 461)

The *Letter to the Hebrews* refers to the same mystery:

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Lo, I have come to do your will, O God’” (Heb 10: 5-7, citing Ps 40: 6-8 ([7-9] LXX)). (CCC 462)

Belief in the true Incarnation of the Son of God is the distinctive sign of Christian faith: “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God” (1 Jn 4:2). Such is the joyous conviction of the Church from her beginning whenever she sings “the mystery of our religion”: “He was manifested in the flesh” (1 Tm 3:16). (CCC 463)

## The Son Of David

- **The New Testament begins by showing how Jesus descended from David and Abraham.**
- **Matthew uses literary art to show that Jesus is the perfect Son of David.**
- **For Matthew, the Exile ends with the coming of Jesus.**

John emphasizes that Jesus was the Son of God, who existed at the beginning of creation. But the human nature of Jesus Christ is just as important. The whole New Testament begins with the genealogy of Jesus Christ, “the son of David, the son of Abraham.”

The genealogy in Matthew is more than just the reference material it appears to be. It is also a work of subtle literary art—an art that probably would have been much more striking to its original audience than it is to us.

Matthew introduces his genealogy with these words:

**The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ...<sup>1</sup>**

In the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament used everywhere in Matthew’s time—Genesis 5:1 begins its summary of Adam’s descendants with these words:

**This is the book of the genealogy of Adam.<sup>2</sup>**

Matthew is deliberately using *exactly the same words* to show that the story that begins with Adam (Greek, anthropon) ends with Jesus Christ.

If we compare Matthew’s list of names closely with the Old Testament, we discover that Matthew has sometimes compressed generations. Why? He is using his literary art to show us an important truth about Jesus. The genealogy itself shows us that Jesus descended from David. But Matthew makes it clear that Jesus is more than just any descendant of David: he is the *perfect* or ideal descendant of David.

**So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon were fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to Christ were fourteen generations.<sup>3</sup>**

Matthew has arranged the names in three groups of fourteen. Three, you remember, is a symbolically perfect number. And fourteen is twice seven. Seven is another symbolically perfect number, so fourteen is symbolically a *doubly* perfect number.

But Matthew’s choice of fourteen is even more deeply symbolic than that. Hebrew uses letters to represent numbers, just the way the Romans did. In Roman numerals, for example, V represents five and X represents ten. In Hebrew numerals the letter *daleth* (D) represented 4, and the letter *vav* (V) represented 6.

Because letters also represented numbers, you could add up the letters in a Hebrew name and get a number. And people often did that, seeing a mysterious symbolic value in the numbers that went with various names.

Since there were no vowels in Hebrew, the name David was spelled with the letters for DVD. Add up the letters in David’s name—**4 + 6 + 4**—and you get fourteen.

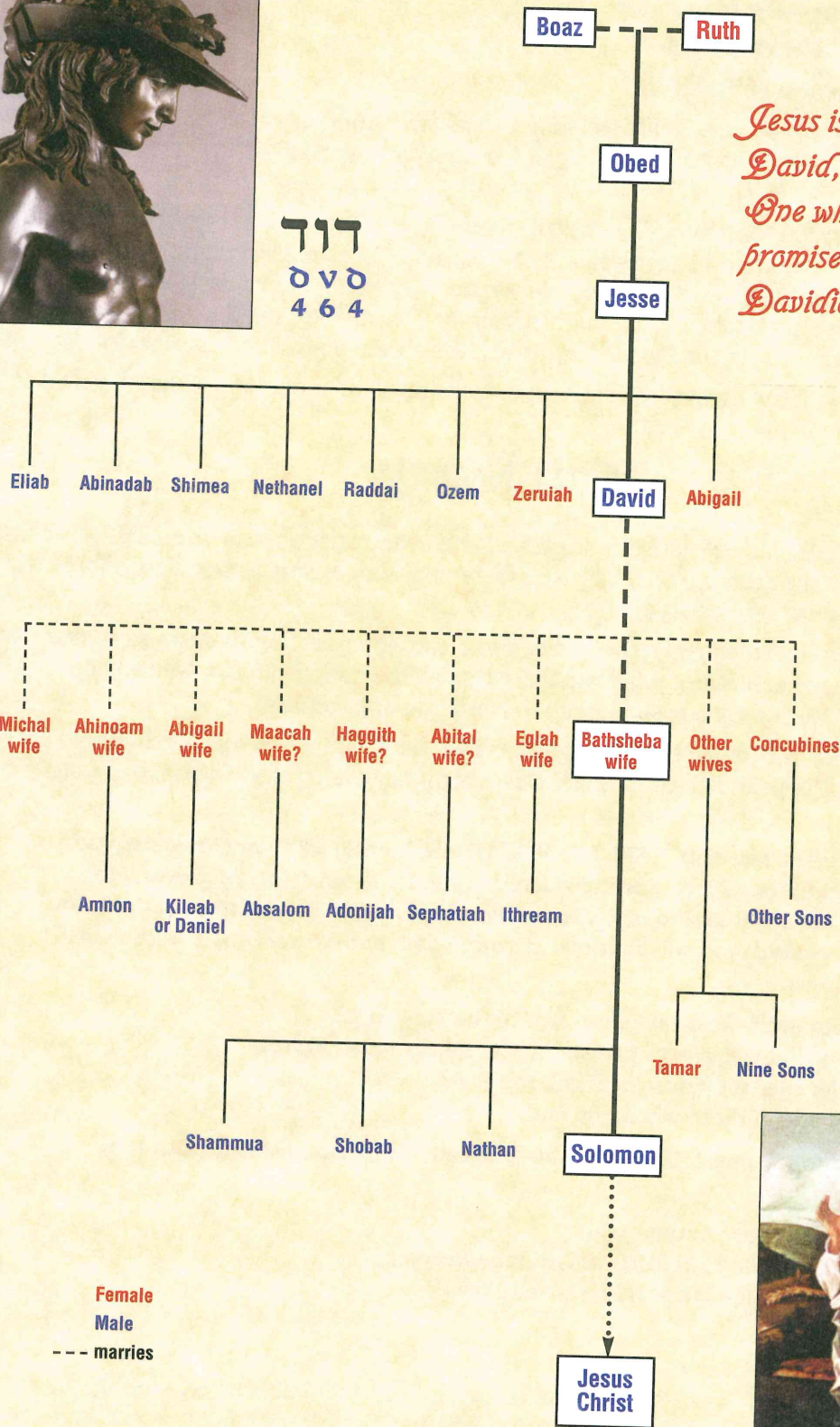
Fourteen, fourteen, fourteen: by repeating the number of David’s name a perfect three times, Matthew is showing us that Jesus is the ideal heir of David, the true Anointed One who inherits all the promises God made in the Davidic Covenant.

# Family Of David



דוד  
 ד ו ד  
 4 6 4

*Jesus is the ideal heir of David, the true Anointed One who inherits all the promises God made in the Davidic Covenant.*



Female  
 Male  
 --- marries



Now notice how Matthew divides the history of Israel. There are three important events that sum up history for Matthew:

1. **The covenant with Abraham;**
2. **The covenant with David;**
3. **The deportation to Babylon.**

The first two both involve promises that would not be fulfilled until Christ: all the people of the earth would be blessed through Abraham, and David's descendants would be set over all the kings of the earth.

The third, the deportation to Babylon, seemed to mean the end of the first two promises. Although a small remnant later returned to Jerusalem, the exile had never really ended. Many of the Jews stayed in Babylon, or in Egypt and other places where they had gone to escape Nebuchadnezzar. More important, there had never again been a king of David's line on the throne in Jerusalem. Except for a brief period under the Maccabees, Israel was always a province of some foreign empire. The exile ends only with the coming of Jesus, who draws all people together in the Kingdom of God.

## Hail Mary

Only St. Luke gives us the familiar stories of the Annunciation and the birth of Jesus. He probably heard the stories from Mary herself; he would have spent quite a bit of time with her when he was staying with the apostles.

Mary was a young woman engaged to be married to a carpenter. In Jewish custom, an engagement like that was considered equivalent to a marriage: although the couple did not live together until after the marriage ceremony, it took a legal divorce to break the engagement.

Mary first learned that she would be more than a carpenter's wife when the angel Gabriel appeared to her. As always, the appearance of an angel was a frightening thing, and Gabriel had to tell her not to be afraid.

*And he came to her and said, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name 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 father David,  
and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever;  
and of his kingdom there will be no end."*

*And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no husband?" And the angel said to her,*

*"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,  
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you;  
therefore the child to be born will be called holy,  
the Son of God...."*

*(Lk 1: 28-35)*

The word for "overshadow" is a very unusual one in Greek, one that is rarely used in the New Testament, when God's glory is revealed (e.g., the Transfiguration of Jesus). But it would have reminded Luke's Greek readers of a place in the Old Testament where the same word appears:



*“Just as the rising of the sun is foretold in the heavens by the morning star, so the incarnation of the Son of God, ... is preceded by the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary.”*

*—Prayer of the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II*

“The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin.” (CCC 491)

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting, because the cloud abode upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. (Ex 40: 34-35)

The word for “abode upon” is translated “overshadowed” in the Greek version that Luke knew. The Holy Spirit would “overshadow” Mary in the same way that the cloud “overshadowed” the Tabernacle once the Ark of the Covenant had been put in it.

Mary’s response is what makes her the model for all the faithful people of God:

**Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word. (Lk 1: 38)**

Mary's submission to God's will contrasts with Israel's long history of rebellion. As the mother of the Lord's Anointed, Mary had been kept "full of grace" from her birth, free from the taint of sin that caused Israel to wander so many times from the right path. She remained a virgin before, during, and after the birth of her Son.

To become the mother of the Savior, Mary "was enriched by God with gifts appropriate to such a role" (LG 56). The angel Gabriel at the moment of the annunciation salutes her as "full of grace" (Lk 1: 28). In fact, in order for Mary to be able to give the free assent of her faith to the announcement of her vocation, it was necessary that she be wholly borne by God's grace. (CCC 490)

Through the centuries the Church has become ever more aware that Mary, "full of grace" through God (Lk 1: 28), was redeemed from the moment of her conception. That is what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception confesses, as Pope Pius IX proclaimed in 1854:

↪ The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin (Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, 1854: DS 2803), (CCC 491)

The "splendor of an entirely unique holiness" by which Mary is "enriched from the first instant of her conception" comes wholly from Christ: she is "redeemed, in a more exalted fashion, by reason of the merits of her Son" (LG 53, 56). The Father blessed Mary more than any other created person "in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" and chose her "in Christ before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before him in love" (cf. Eph 1: 3-4). (CCC 492)



The Fathers of the Eastern tradition call the Mother of God "the All-Holy" (*Panagia*), and celebrate her as "free from any stain of sin, as though fashioned by the Holy Spirit and formed as a new creature" (LG 56). By the grace of God Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long. (CCC 493)

When Luke tells the story of Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth, who also was pregnant with a son who would be named John, he uses more suggestive language to point out Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant. The details Luke gives us remind us of David bringing the Ark of the Covenant up to Jerusalem.

David Brings The Ark	Mary Visits Elizabeth
"David arose and went" to bring up the ark. (2 Sm 6: 2)	"Mary arose and went" to visit Elizabeth. (Lk 1: 39)
David said, "How can the ark of the LORD come to me?" (2 Sm 6: 9)	Elizabeth said, "And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Lk 1: 43)
David was "leaping and dancing before the LORD." (2 Sm 6: 16)	"The babe in my womb leaped for joy." (Lk 1: 44)
"And the ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obedom the Gittite three months." (2 Sm 6: 11)	"And Mary remained with her about three months." (Lk 1: 56)





## The Birth Of Jesus

Luke is very careful to give us the exact historical setting for Jesus' birth.

- **It was in the reign of Caesar Augustus,**
- **when Quirinius was governor of Syria,**
- **Augustus decreed that "all the world should be enrolled."**

Since so much time has passed since then, modern historians are not sure exactly when those three things came together, or what being "enrolled" meant (it might have been a census for taxation or an oath of loyalty). But Luke's original audience would have known. It would have been a signal to them that Luke was being very careful to get the historical details right.

Joseph lived in Nazareth, but he had to go back to his native city of Bethlehem—the ancient town where David had been born—to be properly enrolled. Bethlehem was a small town, but it was ancient and famous as the birthplace of David the king. The prophet Micah had also suggested that it had a distinguished future ahead of it:

**But you, O Bethlehem Ephratha,  
who are little to be among the clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me  
one who is to be ruler in Israel,  
whose origin is from of old,  
from ancient days. (Mi 5: 2)**



The ancient city of Bethlehem today.

Even though Mary was almost ready to give birth, she and Joseph made the trip from Galilee down past Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Once they got there, they found that everyone else was making the same kind of trip. There was no room for them in the inn, and they had to be put up in a stable. When Mary's son was born, the only safe place to lay the baby down was in a feeding trough.

It must have seemed an ordinary event to all the people in Bethlehem. Most of them were probably too busy with enrollment business to notice a baby in a manger. But in the fields outside the town, a group of shepherds had an astonishing visit from an angel.

*And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (Lk 2: 8-11)*

By the titles the angels had used, the shepherds knew right away that the Messiah had been born. He was

- **a Savior, who would rescue his people from bondage**
- **the Christ, the Anointed One, the promised successor to David**
- **the Lord, the one who sits at God's right hand.**

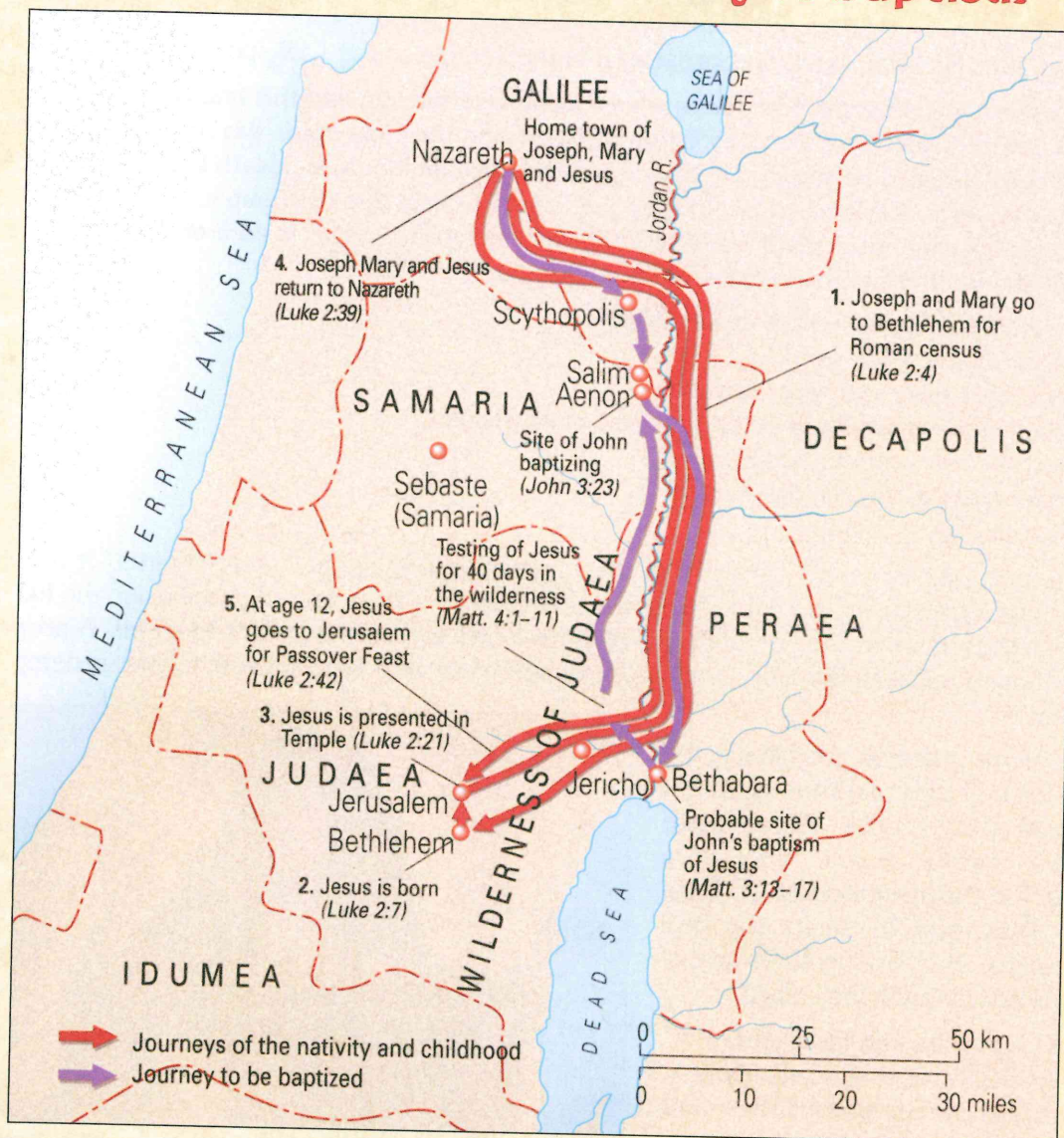
Anyone who knew the Scriptures would have known that the child who bore those titles was the long-expected Messiah.

Shepherds were more or less outcasts. Most religious Jews avoided them. But David himself had been a shepherd in those same fields outside Bethlehem. Now the arrival of the Son of David was announced first to shepherds.



*"And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." (Lk 2: 12)*

## The Journeys Of Jesus: Nativity To Baptism



The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem was originally built in the 4th century by Emperor Constantine to mark the birthplace of Jesus. It was destroyed in 529 A.D. and rebuilt by Justinian ca. 550. In 614 it was spared from destruction by Persians who had burned every church in Bethlehem. They recognized the images of their ancestors, the Magi, above the entrance and allowed the church to stand.



It is possible that a whole clan of the line of David from the exiled tribe of Judah returned from Babylon about 100 B.C. and established the town of Nazareth. Archaeological research suggests that at the time of Jesus, the population of Nazareth was about 120-150. Jesus described the citizens of Nazareth as being "... his own kin, and in his own house." (Mk 6: 4)

## Nunc Dimittis

Forty days after his birth, Jesus was presented in the Temple as the Law specified.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And inspired by the Spirit he came into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

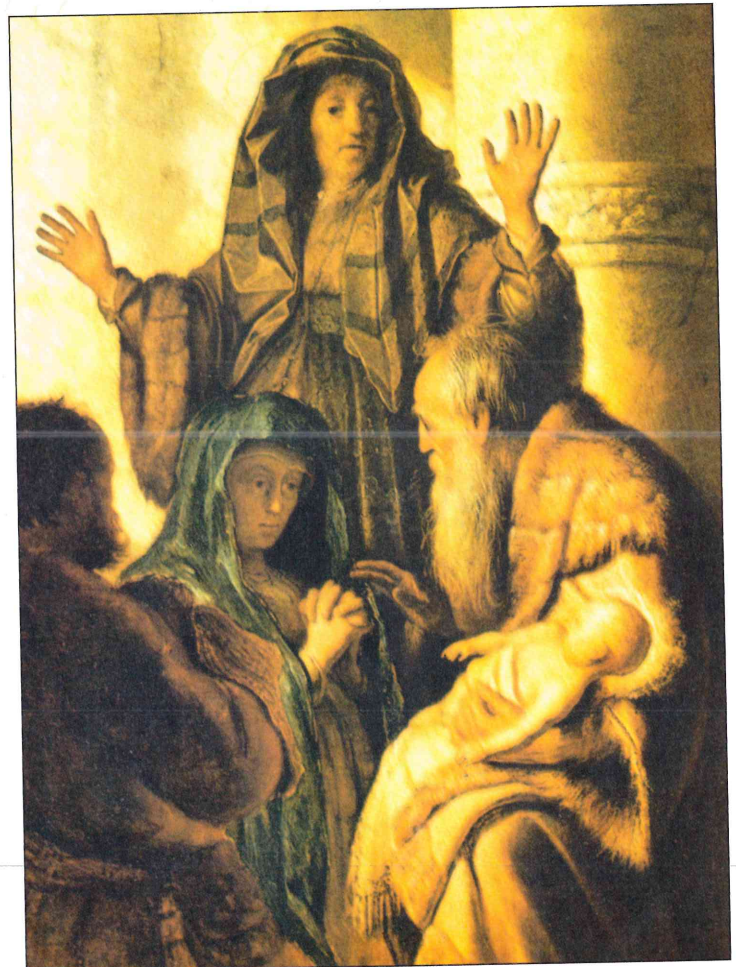
"Lord, now let your servant depart in peace,  
according to your word;  
for my eyes have seen your salvation  
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and for glory to your people Israel."  
(Lk 2: 25-32)

You may recognize Simeon's words from the Christian liturgy as the "nunc dimittis." It is Latin for "now dismiss". Inspired by the Spirit, Simeon recognized the Christ, and he prophesied the fulfillment of the promises made to the Son of David: glory to Israel, and salvation for all nations. A prophetess named Anna recognized him, too, "and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem."<sup>4</sup>

In spite of the material prosperity, the glorious new Temple, and the apparent restoration of Israel under Herod, there were still faithful people who were "looking for the redemption of Jerusalem." They saw in Jesus the real Anointed One. But Simeon also saw that his arrival would tear Israel in half.

And his father and his mother  
marveled at what was said about  
him; and Simeon blessed them and  
said to Mary his mother,

"Behold, this child is set for the fall  
and rising of many in Israel,  
and for a sign that is spoken  
against  
(and a sword will pierce through  
your own soul also),  
that thoughts of many hearts may  
be revealed."  
(Lk 2: 33-35)



*Simeon's Prophecy To Mary*  
by Rembrandt



## The Epiphany

One day Herod, the king, received some distinguished visitors: three wise men from the East. They may well have been astrologers from Persia. “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?” they asked. “For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.”

Can there be a new king of the Jews? Herod knew his Scriptures well enough to suspect the truth. He called the priests and scribes together and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They told him Bethlehem was the place, quoting Micah’s prophecy.

Herod, like any tyrant, was nervous about any new claimant to the throne. He was especially nervous about this one, perhaps because he remembered Balak’s prophecy that “a star shall come forth out of Jacob,” at which time “Edom shall be dispossessed.” Herod was an Edomite.

**Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, that I too may come and worship him.” (Mt 2: 7-8)**

Worship wasn’t really what was on Herod’s mind, but the wise men had the information they came for. They set off for Bethlehem, and the star led them straight to Jesus. They bowed before him and gave him their expensive gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold and frankincense, Isaiah had said, would be brought by all the nations to the God of Israel:

**And nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your rising...  
They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD. (Is 60: 3, 6)**

Myrrh is an aromatic spice added to the holy oil used to anoint the priests of Israel (Ex 30:23). Together, the gifts suggested that the child Jesus was God, king, and priest. Since myrrh was also used to anoint a dead body for burial, it also suggested Jesus' ultimate sacrifice on the cross.

The Epiphany is the manifestation of Jesus as Messiah of Israel, Son of God and Savior of the world. The great feast of Epiphany celebrates the adoration of Jesus by the wise men (*magi*) from the East, together with his baptism in the Jordan and the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee (Mt 2: 1; cf. LH, Epiphany, Evening Prayer II, Antiphon at the Canticle of Mary). In the magi, representatives of the neighboring pagan religions, the Gospel sees the first-fruits of the nations (cf. Mt 2: 2; Nm 24: 17-19; Rv 22: 16), who welcome the good news of salvation through the Incarnation. The magi's coming to Jerusalem in order to pay homage to the king of the Jews shows that they seek in Israel, in the messianic light of the star of David, the one who will be king of the nations. Their coming means that pagans can discover Jesus and worship him as Son of God and Savior of the world only by turning towards the Jews and receiving from them the messianic promise as contained in the Old Testament (cf. Jn 4: 22; Mt 2: 4-6). The Epiphany shows that "the full number of the nations" now takes its "place in the family of the patriarchs," and acquires *Israelitica dignitas* (St. Leo the Great, *Sermo 3 in epiphania Domini* 1-3, 5; PL 54, 242; LH, Epiphany, OR; Roman Missal, Easter Vigil 26, Prayer after the third reading) (are made "worthy of the heritage of Israel"). (CCC 528)

## The Holy Innocents

The three wise men didn't go back to Herod. A dream warned them not to see him again, so they left by a different route. By the time Herod figured out what had happened, they were long gone.

Joseph also had a dream.

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him." (Mt 2:13)

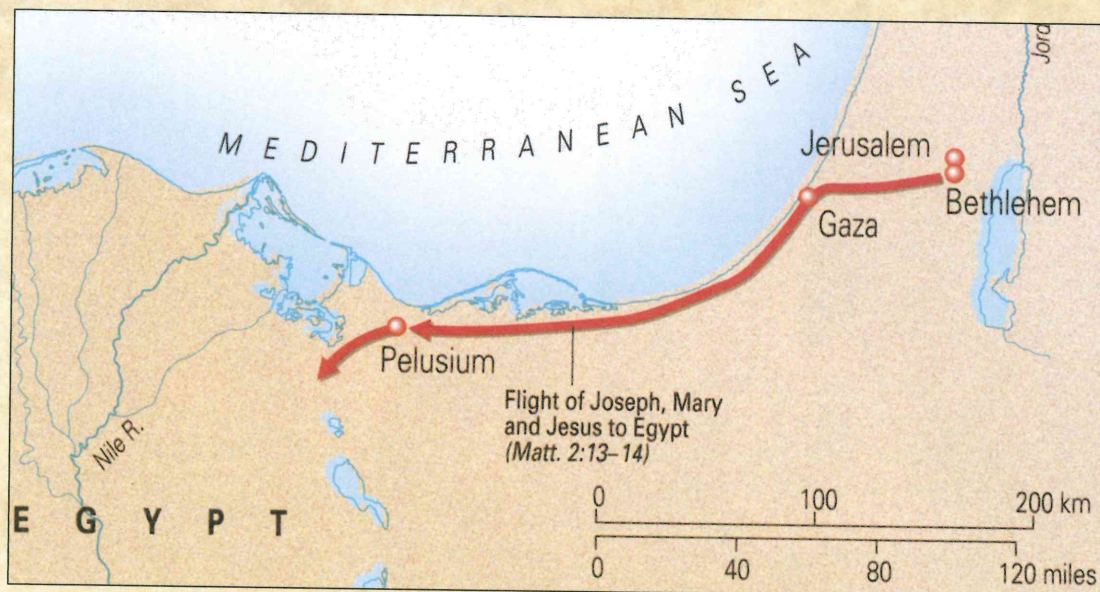
So Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Egypt. There were large Jewish populations in Alexandria and Elephantine and perhaps other Egyptian cities, and Egypt was also part of the same big Roman Empire. The travelers would not have attracted much attention. But they would be safe from the madness of Herod.

With no way to find the child he thought might be the Christ, Herod went into one of his towering rages. He could have had a search made, but that would take time and effort. He decided on a simpler strategy.

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men. (Mt 2:3)

By most standards it was a lunatic act of rage, but Herod had murdered three of his own sons, not to mention his wife—supposedly his favorite wife. Herod was used to murdering others to get his way. There was a certain insane logic to Herod's act, just as there had been a certain insane logic to Pharaoh's decision to kill all the Hebrew male children when Moses was born. Like Moses, Jesus had escaped wholesale slaughter of innocent children by a cruel but powerful tyrant. Matthew is beginning to show us that Jesus is a prophet like Moses.

## The Flight Into Egypt



## Teaching The Teachers

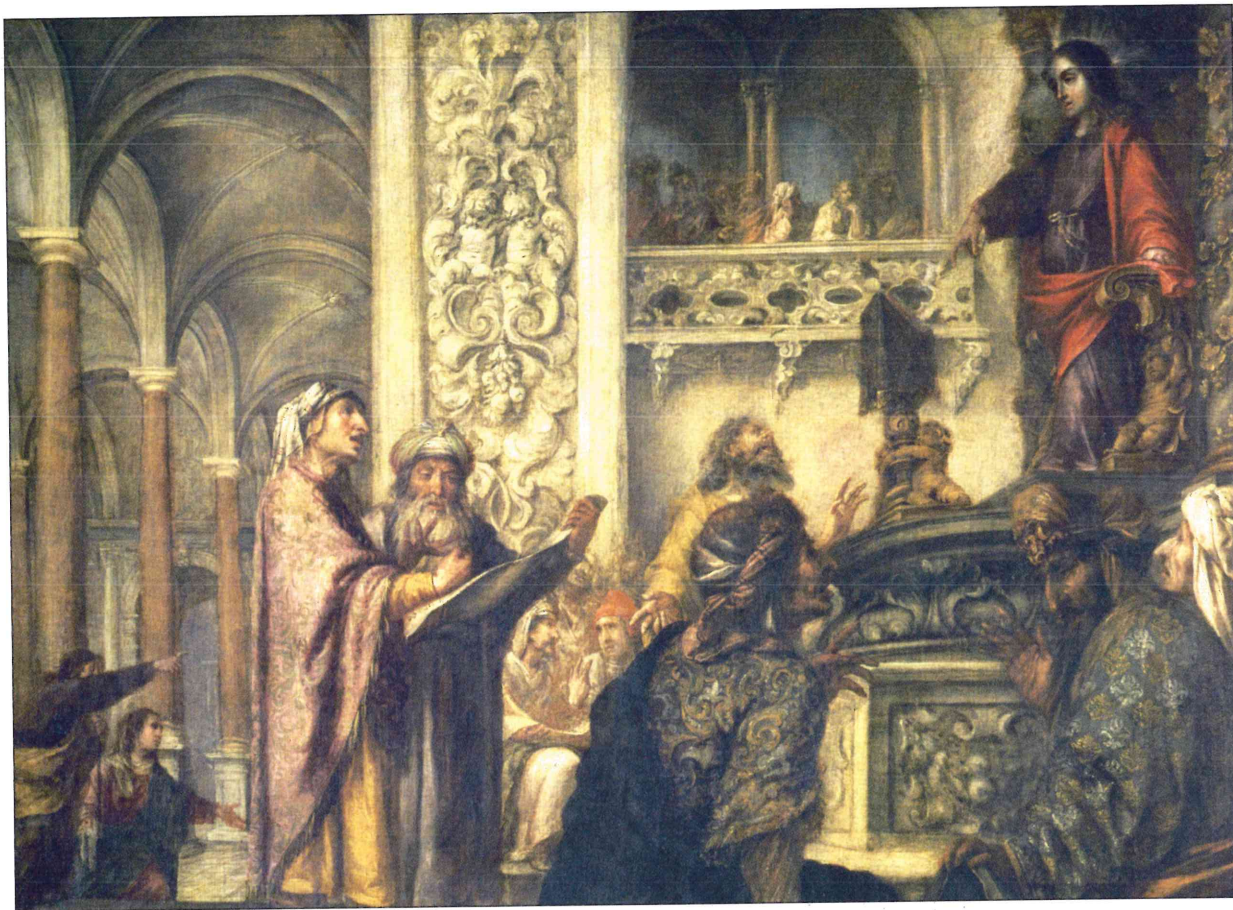
Not long afterward, Herod died, and Joseph and Mary were able to bring Jesus back to their home in Nazareth. From then on we know almost nothing about Jesus until he was an adult. All the Gospels skip from his infancy to the time when he was about thirty years old—all, that is, except Luke.

Luke has one isolated story from the time when Jesus was twelve years old. Because he tells it from Mary and Joseph's point of view, he probably heard it from Mary herself.

The whole family had gone with a big group of their friends and relatives to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. When they were going back to Nazareth, Mary and Joseph assumed Jesus was with some of the rest of the party; after all, they were all people he had grown up with, and it was natural for people in a small town like Nazareth to look after each other's children. But a day out of Jerusalem they finally discovered that Jesus was missing. They ran back to Jerusalem in a panic, and in the crowded city they looked everywhere for Jesus for three days.

*After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when they saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously." And he said to them, "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my father's house?" And they did not understand the saying which he spoke to them. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart. (Lk 2: 46-51)*

*The finding of Jesus in the temple is the only event that breaks the silence of the Gospels about the hidden years of Jesus (cf. Lk 2: 41-52). Here Jesus lets us catch a glimpse of the*



mystery of his total consecration to a mission that flows from his divine sonship: “Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s work?” (Lk 2: 49 alt.). Mary and Joseph did not understand these words, but they accepted them in faith. Mary “kept all these things in her heart” during the years Jesus remained hidden in the silence of an ordinary life. (CCC 534)

Even at twelve, Jesus was a master of the Scriptures, astonishing the world’s greatest Scripture scholars with his knowledge and wisdom. But he was also a human little boy who had worried his mother sick. For three days she thought she had lost him forever; only on the third day did she find him again, alive and well.

After that, Luke has only one thing more to say about the young Jesus:

**And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man. (Lk 2: 52)**

During the greater part of his life Jesus shared the condition of the vast majority of human beings: a daily life spent without evident greatness, a life of manual labor. His religious life was that of a Jew obedient to the law of God (cf. Gal 4: 4), a life in the community. From this whole period it is revealed to us that Jesus was “obedient” to his parents and that he “increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man” (Lk 2: 51-52). (CCC 531)

The obedience of Christ in the daily routine of his hidden life was already inaugurating his work of restoring what the disobedience of Adam had destroyed (cf. Rom 5: 19). (CCC 532)

That is a mystery of the Incarnation: God made flesh, Jesus the Christ, chose to go through all the stages of growth—physical and intellectual—that the rest of us pass through. He passed through childhood and adolescence before he finally became a man, fully human like us. But this man was also God.



## SUPPLEMENTARY READING

**John Paul II: *Redemptoris Mater***

7. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph 1: 3). These words of the Letter to the Ephesians reveal the eternal design of God the Father, his plan of man’s salvation in Christ. It is a universal plan, which concerns all men and women created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gn 1: 26). Just as all are included in the creative work of God “in the beginning,” so all are eternally included in the divine plan of salvation, which is to be completely revealed, in the “fullness of time,” with the final coming of Christ. In fact, the God who is the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”—these are the next words of the same Letter—“chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph 1: 4-7).

The divine plan of salvation—which was fully revealed to us with the coming of Christ—

is eternal. And according to the teaching contained in the Letter just quoted and in other Pauline Letters (cf. Col 1: 12-14; Rom 3: 24; Gal 3: 13; 2 Cor 5: 18-29), it is also eternally linked to Christ. It includes everyone, but it reserves a special place for the “woman” who is the Mother of him to whom the Father has entrusted the work of salvation. As the Second Vatican Council says, “she is already prophetically foreshadowed in that promise made to our first parents after their fall into sin”—according to the Book of Genesis (cf. 3: 15). “Likewise she is the Virgin who is to conceive and bear a son, whose name will be called Emmanuel”—according to the words of Isaiah (cf. 7: 14). In this way the Old Testament prepares that “fullness of time” when God “sent forth his Son, born of woman... so that we might receive adoption as sons.” The coming into the world of the Son of God is an event recorded in the first chapters of the Gospels according to Luke and Matthew.

8. Mary is definitively introduced into the mystery of Christ through this event: the Annunciation by the angel. This takes place at Nazareth, within the concrete circumstances of the history of Israel, the people which first received God’s promises.



*“Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!” (Lk 1: 28)*

VOCABULARY

**ANNA**

A prophetess who recognized the Messiah when Jesus was presented at the Temple.

**AUGUSTUS**

The first Roman emperor. After many years of civil war, he established peace throughout the Mediterranean.

**BETHLEHEM**

The city where Jesus Christ was born. It was the ancestral home of David, which is why Joseph being of the house of David had to go there to be "enrolled."

**CAESAR**

A title used by all the Roman emperors. When a New Testament writer mentions "Caesar," he means the emperor who was reigning at the time.

**EPIPHANY**

The manifestation of Jesus as the Christ. The feast of Epiphany celebrates the adoration of the Christ child by the royal visitors from the east.

**HAIL MARY**

The words with which the angel Gabriel greeted Mary at the Annunciation: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee."

**IMMACULATE CONCEPTION**

Mary was conceived without the stain of original sin.

**INCARNATION**

The coming of God in human form. Latin for "becoming flesh."

**JESUS CHRIST**

The long-promised Anointed One, God the Son in human form. Jesus was true God and true man. His human nature was not merely an appearance, but God on earth.

**SIMEON**

A priest who recognized the Christ child when Jesus was presented at the Temple.

**SON OF DAVID**

A title that belongs not only to Solomon but also to Jesus Christ as the promised heir of the Davidic kingdom.



*"And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt have I called my son.'" (Mt 2: 14-15)*

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean that Jesus was both true God and true man?
2. What truth is at the heart of the mystery of the Incarnation?
3. Why does Matthew's Gospel begin with a listing of the genealogy of Jesus?
4. What is Matthew demonstrating by compressing the genealogy of Jesus numerically?
5. What are the three important events that Matthew uses to sum up the history of Israel?
6. When does the Babylonian exile end?
7. How does the angel address Mary when he comes to announce that she will bear a child?
8. According to CCC 491, what is the teaching of the Immaculate Conception?
9. According to CCC 492, how is Mary blessed?
10. What was Bethlehem known for?
11. What three titles did the angels use to describe the child Jesus to the shepherds?
12. What did these titles indicate?
13. What prophet and what prophetess recognized Jesus as the Christ when he was presented in the Temple?
14. What did the gifts of the Magi indicate?
15. What does the feast of the Epiphany celebrate?
16. What does the coming of the Magi indicate?
17. Who were the Holy Innocents?
18. How did Jesus escape the massacre of the Holy Innocents?

## PRACTICAL EXERCISES

1. The Incarnation is a core mystery of the Christian faith. Why is it considered the central event of human history? How does the Incarnation relate to the sin of Adam and Eve? Why is the sacrifice of Christ on the cross of greater value than any Old Testament sacrifices?
2. What was Matthew's purpose in citing Old Testament prophecies regarding the Messiah? What connection does Jesus have to David and Abraham? Why is this important to Matthew's Jewish listeners?
3. What is Luke's purpose in drawing a parallel between the Ark of the Covenant and Mary's visit to Elizabeth? In what sense is Mary a tabernacle?



The Grotto of the Nativity has the greatest religious significance in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The marble altar was built over the traditional site of Jesus' birth. A fourteen-point silver star is embedded in the white marble. The fifteen silver lamps represent different Christian communities: six belong to Greek Orthodox, four to Catholics, and five to Armenian Orthodox.

FROM THE CATECHISM

**470** Because “human nature was assumed, not absorbed” (GS 22 § 2), in the mysterious union of the Incarnation, the Church was led over the course of centuries to confess the full reality of Christ’s human soul, with its operations of intellect and will, and of his human body. In parallel fashion, she had to recall on each occasion that Christ’s human nature belongs, as his own, to the divine person of the Son of God, who assumed it. Everything that Christ is and does in this nature derives from “one of the Trinity.” The Son of God therefore communicates to his humanity his own personal mode of existence in the Trinity. In his soul as in his body, Christ thus expresses humanly the divine ways of the Trinity (cf. Jn 14: 9-10):

The Son of God...worked with human hands; he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like to us in all things except sin (GS 22 § 2).

**488** “God sent forth his Son,” but to prepare a body for him (Gal 4: 4; Heb 10: 5), he wanted the free co-operation of a creature. For this, from all eternity God chose for the mother of his Son a daughter of Israel, a young Jewish woman of Nazareth in Galilee, “a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary” (Lk 1: 26-27):

The Father of mercies willed that the Incarnation should be preceded by assent on the part of the predestined mother, so that just as a woman had a share in the coming of death, so also should a woman contribute to the coming of life (LG 56; cf. *ibid.* 61).

**503** Mary’s virginity manifests God’s absolute initiative in the Incarnation. Jesus has only God as Father. “He was never estranged from the Father because of the human nature which he assumed... He is naturally Son of the Father as to his divinity and naturally son of his mother as to his humanity, but properly Son of the Father in both natures” (Council of Friuli (796): DS 619; cf. Lk 2: 48-49).

**606** The Son of God, who came down “from heaven, not to do [his] own will, but the will of him who sent [him]” (Jn 6: 38), said on coming into the world, “Lo, I have come to do your will, O God.” “And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10: 5-10). From the first moment of his Incarnation the Son embraces the Father’s plan of divine salvation in his redemptive mission: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work” (Jn 4: 34). The sacrifice of Jesus “for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn 2: 2) expresses his loving communion with the Father. “The Father loves me, because I lay down my life,” said the Lord, “[for] I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father” (Jn 10: 17; 14: 31).

**2674** Mary gave her consent in faith at the Annunciation and maintained it without hesitation at the foot of the Cross. Ever since, her motherhood has extended to the brothers and sisters of her Son “who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and difficulties” (LG 62). Jesus, the only mediator, is the way of our prayer; Mary, his mother and ours, is wholly transparent to him: she “shows the way” (*hodigitria*), and is herself “the Sign” of the way, according to the traditional iconography of East and West.

Endnotes

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| 1. Mt 1: 1. | 3. Mt 1: 17. |
| 2. Gn 5: 1. | 4. Lk 2: 38. |