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HOLY SPIRIT

THE VIRGIN BIRTH IN
SCRIPTURE *and* THEOLOGY

RHYNE R. PUTMAN

“Putman’s book is a biblical, theological, and practical exploration of the Christmas story as presented in Matthew and Luke’s Gospel. His goal is simple: to help Christians gain a better understanding of Jesus and his work on the cross from the biblical nativity stories. Putman succeeds splendidly. Pastors, scholars, and students alike will benefit from this clear, well-organized, solidly biblical, theological, and practical treatment of the subject of the virgin birth of Christ. A worthy addition to your library.”

—**David Allen**, distinguished professor of practical theology, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary

“The narratives of Jesus’s conception and birth continue to fascinate Christians and interpreters. But over the years, some modern readers have challenged these stories and have failed to reckon with both the biblical text and biblical theology. In *Conceived by the Holy Spirit*, Rhyne Putman guides the reader in matters of exegesis, theology, and history. He leads us to think clearly in light of Christian orthodoxy, and he prepares us with answers to objections we may face. Our redeemer is the virgin-born King whose coming was foretold in ancient days and whose incarnation is the wonder that makes angels and saints sing with joy.”

—**Mitch Chase**, associate professor of biblical studies, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“More than an adorable myth attached to the Christmas story, the virgin birth of Jesus Christ is an essential and exciting Christian doctrine. In this new and important volume, Rhyne Putman tells us why—through Scripture and Christian history—this beautiful truth has animated the church’s gospel witness. Long an underemphasized, under-covered aspect of the incarnation, Putman helps recover this doctrine for a new generation. Written with clarity and conviction, *Conceived by the Holy Spirit* is an essential book for every pastor’s library.”

—**Daniel Darling**, director of the Land Center for Cultural Engagement, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“The virgin birth of Jesus is a theological bedrock for the Christian faith. Only the virgin-born, sinless Son of God could have died as an atoning sacrifice to pay the penalty for the sins of mankind. And Jesus

alone fits that description. I am grateful for this book because it sets forth both the beauty and necessity of Jesus's virgin birth in a refreshing, compelling manner."

—**Steve Gaines**, senior pastor, Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, Tennessee

"In *Conceived by the Spirit*, Dr. Putman shows how the incarnation put Jesus's divine nature on display for all to see. His thorough and accessible walkthrough of the virginal conception teaches us that this event was much more than fodder for Christmas carols. In the Son of God's conception by the Spirit, Jesus is revealed as God and as the fulfiller of all Old Testament messianic promises. Further, in an age of deconstruction, Putman shows us the importance of theological retrieval of central Christian truths. May we, like our brothers and sisters before us, praise Jesus as 'born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.'"

—**Tony Merida**, pastor of preaching and vision, Imago Dei Church, Raleigh, North Carolina

"Rhyne Putman's *Conceived by the Holy Spirit* offers a robust and compelling exposition of the crucial, yet often overlooked, doctrine of the virgin birth. Putman uses his skill as a scholar and seasoned churchman to walk readers through a biblical, theological, historical, and missional treatment of this neglected doctrine. As they walk the road to Bethlehem with him, Putman shows not only biblical-theological foundation for the virgin conception, but also leads readers to marvel at their virgin-born King—the Son of God who became man."

—**Christine E. Thornton**, assistant professor of Christian thought, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

"Rhyne Putman has delivered a biblical and theological work on the significance of the virgin birth of Jesus that is simultaneously substantive and accessible. His careful treatment of the nativity texts and the history of the church's theological interpretation makes this a marvelous resource for anyone wishing to deepen their understanding of the incarnation."

—**Trevin Wax**, vice president for research and resource development, North American Mission Board

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SCRIPTURE *and* THEOLOGY

RHYNE R. PUTMAN

BH
ACADEMIC
BRENTWOOD, TENNESSEE

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Introduction

Reading the Christmas Story Like Jesus

I believe . . . in Christ Jesus . . . who was born of
the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.

—THE OLD ROMAN SYMBOL (C. AD 200)

Every Christmas season, people from every walk of life—true followers of Jesus, nominal Christians, agnostics, pagans, and even some atheists—openly celebrate the symbols and key components of the gospel story. However, many who celebrate Christmas have forgotten (or never really learned) the profound significance of this story. Through their songs and traditions, many unwittingly pronounce the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity, his fulfillment of the law and God’s promises, God’s zealous desire for the nations, Christ’s saving death in the place of sinners, his resurrection from the dead, his glorious second coming, and his eternal reign from the throne of David.

The theological meaning of Christmas may be largely forgotten in our secular age, but the widespread celebration of this event is still

a type of common grace. The name of Christ is uttered frequently by those who do not yet know its saving power. The hymns and carols of the season may fall on spiritually deaf ears, but they openly pronounce the humble means by which God the Son entered our world of time and space. Nativity scenes in the public square are visual reminders that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. To borrow an expression from Flannery O'Connor, Christmas, as celebrated by Western culture, "is hardly Christ-centered" but "is most certainly Christ-haunted."¹

This study is a biblical, historical, theological, and practical exploration of the Christmas story. My aim is to help Christian disciples reflect on the various ways the biblical nativity stories shape our understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the virgin-born king. These accounts reveal Jesus of Nazareth as

Israel's long-awaited Messiah,
 the seed of Abraham,
 the eternal heir of David's throne,
 the dawn from on high,
 Immanuel,
 the Son of God,
 the Lord of all creation,
 the Savior of his people,
 the Word made flesh,
 truly God,
 truly human,
 conceived by the Holy Spirit,
 and born of the virgin Mary.

Contemplation on these aspects of Jesus's identity should be more than an intellectual exercise. I remain convinced that thoughtful engagement

¹ Flannery O'Connor, "Southern Fiction," in *Mysteries and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1957), 44.

with these stories and their impact on the Christian tradition will also grow us in our obedience, maturity, and devotion to Christ.

Nativity Stories and the Virginal Conception

We usually associate the word *nativity*, from a Latin term meaning “born” or “native,” with the birth of Christ. (The familiar French word *noël* translates the same Latin term.) Nativity or infancy stories, then, are accounts of the events surrounding Jesus’s conception, birth, and early childhood. The New Testament (NT) only includes two such accounts: those told in the first two chapters of Matthew (Matt 1:18–2:23) and the first two chapters of Luke (Luke 1:5–2:52).

These Gospels present two distinct but complementary accounts of Christ’s nativity. Matthew and Luke recall separate events leading up to and following Jesus’s birth. Matthew’s story focuses on Joseph’s response to God’s announcement. Luke’s account tells the of story of Mary’s humble obedience. Matthew and Luke place different theological emphases on the events that unfold. Despite all their differences, both authors share a common conviction that Jesus Christ entered the world through a virgin’s womb to be our Savior. Both authors are convinced that God has come near to us in Christ. Both believe God desires to rescue Jews and Gentiles through Christ.

Although we often use the shorthand term “virgin birth” to describe the miraculous event that occurred in the incarnation of Jesus, this term is, strictly speaking, imprecise. Neither Matthew nor Luke says anything unusual about Jesus’s birth. It appears that his birth was completely natural, especially in a time before c-sections or epidurals.

The real spectacle of Jesus’s entry into the world was the way Mary conceived Jesus in her womb without a human father. We call this miracle Jesus’s “virginal conception” (not to be confused with the Roman Catholic doctrine of Mary’s “immaculate conception”). Jesus was, as Scripture and the creeds profess, “conceived by the Holy Spirit” and “born of the virgin

Mary.” Through the miracle of his virginal conception, Christ revealed *God to us* and initiated his mission of reconciling us to God.

The NT does not explicitly mention the virginal conception outside Matthew and Luke’s first few chapters. Other texts describe Jesus as coming into the world, being born of a woman, taking the form of a servant, etc. But after Matthew and Luke, nothing else is said about how Jesus came to reside with us. This has led many skeptics to suggest that this doctrine was a later fabrication, not part of the original gospel witness. Yet the pieces of the puzzle that Matthew and Luke leave behind fit together with other pieces crafted by Mark, John, Paul, and the other writers of the NT. When snapped together, these fragments form a cohesive picture of Christ, the virgin-born Messiah, the crucified one, and the risen Lord.

How the Nativity Stories Have Been Understood

Throughout history, believers from every Christian tradition have celebrated this virginal conception as the outward “sign” of Jesus’s uniqueness as the Son of God, the Word made flesh, and the second person of the Trinity. The virgin birth did not *cause* Jesus to become God—the Son is God in eternity—but the virgin birth did put his divine nature on display for all to see. His conception also signaled that God was about to fulfill his promises and bring salvation to his people.

The doctrine of the virginal conception met with widespread approval in the early Christian church. The first Christian theologians vigorously defended this doctrine against its vocal opponents. These theologians considered this doctrine to be part of the “rule of faith,” the one true body of Christian teaching handed down by the earliest followers of Jesus. We know that by the end of the second century, Christians were required to affirm the virgin birth (along with other key doctrines like the resurrection) before they could be baptized as followers of Jesus.² The major

² Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 21.

creeds and confessions of the church professed that Jesus was “born of the virgin Mary.”

Medieval Christians used stories about Jesus’s conception to promote the virtues of virginity and chastity. For many medieval Christians, the virgin birth served an important purpose in their doctrines of original sin and the atonement. Along the way, this doctrine also became the basis for devotion to the Virgin Mary in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and other “high church” traditions.

Yet the doctrine of the virgin birth has always had its detractors. Some heretical groups claimed Jesus was the natural-born son of Joseph, whereas others claimed he was not born a human being at all. Other anti-Christian writings from the second century accused Christians of making up a story about the virgin birth to cover up an illicit affair between Mary and a Roman soldier.

Following the so-called Enlightenment, many critical biblical scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reinterpreted the virgin birth as a pagan or Jewish myth from a pre-modern, pre-scientific era. In the first “quest of the historical Jesus,” scholars sought to separate the “Jesus of history” from the “Christ of faith.”³ They proposed that NT miracle stories, including accounts of Christ’s virginal conception and resurrection, said more about the faith of early Christians than what happened in the life of the man Jesus of Nazareth. Some of these scholars were Deists who rejected supernatural religion and revelation. Others simply presumed a form of atheism.

The virginal conception also played a pivotal role in the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy of the early twentieth century. For the modernists or liberal Protestants enthralled with new “higher critical” approaches to the Bible, this doctrine was an optional article of faith likely based on a corruption of earlier and purer forms of the gospel

³ See Hermann Samuel Reimarus, *Reimarus Fragments*, ed. Charles H. Talbert, trans. Ralph S. Fraser (London: SCM, 1970); David F. Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu*, 2 vols. (Tübingen, 1835).

message.⁴ For the fundamentalists, the predecessors of modern evangelicals, the virgin birth served as a litmus test for evaluating one's views on the inspiration, authority, and inerrancy of the Bible. The virginal conception was deemed to be one of the five "fundamentals" of the faith that every orthodox Christian should affirm.⁵ Many of the great evangelical texts about the virgin birth from the early twentieth century were primarily apologetic defenses of biblical authority, not true theological explorations of the nativity stories themselves.⁶

The influence of modernity waned over the next century. The sexual revolution that gripped the West in the 1950s and 1960s caused many inside and outside the church to rethink their positions regarding sex, marriage, gender roles, and children. The postmodern heirs of liberal Protestantism have expressed some appreciation for the biblical nativity stories, especially in their efforts to recast Mary as a feminist icon. But like their modernist ancestors, they still question the historical and theological value of these texts. Many progressive theologians see themselves as liberators of a Christian tradition rooted in patriarchy and sexual oppression.

Like our twentieth-century forerunners, contemporary evangelicals must defend the truthfulness and historical value of the biblical nativity stories. But our exploration of these texts must be more than a defense of their truthfulness. That is only the first step. These stories are first and foremost Christological texts that reveal who Jesus is (the person of Christ) and what he has done and will do (the work of Christ). To give the virginal conception of Jesus the proper consideration it merits in Christology, we must recover its place in the whole biblical story, its

⁴ The clearest declaration of this liberal Protestant position on the virgin birth came in Harry Emerson Fosdick's 1922 sermon "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?"

⁵ See General Assembly of the Presbyterian Churches U.S.A., "The Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910."

⁶ See James Orr, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907); J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1930).

relationship to the creeds and confessions of the church, and its connection to other Christian doctrines.

Reading the Christmas Stories Like Jesus

Matthew and Luke give us a unique picture of Christ as the virgin-born king. The rest of the NT may be silent about how Jesus was conceived, but these accounts have massive implications for how we read the entire apostolic witness to Christ. Like a tsunami after an earthquake, the after-effects of the Christmas story reverberate throughout the entire Bible.

Followers of Jesus must read the biblical nativity stories differently than their skeptical counterparts. Our approach to Scripture is shaped and formed by Christ himself in Luke 24:13–49. Though they did not know it at the time, the Emmaus disciples were enrolled in a master class in biblical interpretation taught by the primary subject matter of Scripture, the resurrected Lord. “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets,” Jesus “interpreted for them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27).

The risen Lord began class with a strongly worded rebuke: “How foolish you are!” (Luke 24:25). Jesus confronted these disciples for their mindless inattention to Scripture and his teaching. Like many of their contemporaries, they were still waiting for an earthly messiah to send their Roman military occupants packing. But had they been paying closer attention, they would have recognized that Jesus came to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, not an earthly kingdom.

Jesus’s message had not changed after the resurrection. Jesus had always called students of Scripture to pay closer attention to biblical texts. “Have you never read in the Scriptures?” (Matt 21:42). “You are mistaken, because you don’t know the Scriptures or the power of God” (Matt 22:29). He told his disciples that “many prophets and kings wanted to see the things you see but didn’t see them; to hear the things you hear but didn’t hear them” (Luke 10:24). He repeatedly said that “the Scriptures must be fulfilled” (Mark 14:49). Jesus had even harsher words for the unbelieving

biblical scholars of his day: “You pore over the Scriptures because you think you have eternal life in them, and yet they testify about me” (John 5:39). From Jesus’s instruction on the Emmaus road, we can draw out four implications for our study of the Christmas story in the NT.

First, we desire to read the nativity stories from the same worldview as the authors who wrote them. We do not read these texts simply to understand what ancient people believed about God, as if we were simply studying museum relics from a bygone era. We read these texts to know the God of whom they spoke! Faithful interpretation involves closely listening and submitting to the voices of Spirit-inspired authors in Israel and in the early church.

In the case of the nativity stories, we listen carefully to the Evangelists and ask what they want us to take away from these stories about Jesus’s birth. We aren’t attempting to discredit them or disregard what they present as gospel truth. Instead, we are asking questions like these: What were the Evangelists trying to do with their words? What do these stories teach us about who God is? How do these texts invite us to know Christ more? We read the nativity stories in submission to the God who inspired them, wanting to hear his voice and obey.

Second, we recognize that the triune God is behind every word of Scripture—including the nativity stories. All Scripture was “inspired” or “breathed out” by God (2 Tim 3:16). This one God exists as three distinct eternal persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Through what we call *progressive revelation*, God gradually revealed himself in different ways at different stages in the history of Israel and the church. We call this revelation “progressive” because we know more about God at the end of Rev 22:21 than we do in Gen 1:1.

But the unfolding progress of God’s self-disclosure does not entail any change in his essence. The same God who revealed himself to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the NT was also Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the Old Testament (OT). The God who is three-in-one promised to bless Abraham and make him the father of many nations. The triune God spoke to Moses from a burning bush and freed the people

of Israel from bondage in Egypt.⁷ The same triune God gave David victory over his enemies and spoke through Israel's prophets. The triune God caused a virgin to become pregnant with Israel's Messiah. Even if the people of Israel did not yet know God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the unchanging God who spoke to them and through them was an undivided unity of three persons carrying out an inseparable work and mission.⁸

Third, we understand that the Bible tells one big, cohesive story that culminates in Christ. In the era of Marvel and *Star Wars* films, audiences have grown accustomed to complex "cinematic universes" in which the characters of one story share an inhabited world with characters from other stories set in the same fictional universe. The small details in one story can have ripple effects and callbacks in other stories. Although this can be an exciting feature in contemporary fiction, it is not an original literary idea. It originates in the real-world universe depicted in Scripture.

The biblical canon, written over a 1500-year period by dozens of authors, describes the same "universe" under the same central character: the triune God. The Bible is a library of sixty-six books written in different genres: history, law, prophecy, music, letters, wise sayings, and more. But for all its diversity, the Bible tells one cohesive, overarching, and true story. This story culminates in the story of Jesus of Nazareth.

Old Testament prophets "inquired into what time or what circumstances the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating when he testified in advance to the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" (1 Pet 1:11). With their respective nativity stories, Matthew and Luke highlight Jesus's role in fulfilling these prophetic promises. Matthew quotes the OT more than any other Evangelist because he is trying to

⁷ The Bible makes the same kinds of claims. Jude, for instance, asserts that "Jesus saved a people out of Egypt and later destroyed those who did not believe" (Jude 1:5).

⁸ Scott R. Swain provides seven helpful axioms to guide how we read the Bible through a trinitarian lens in *The Trinity and the Bible: On Theological Interpretation* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2021).

demonstrate to his original Jewish audience that Jesus is the Messiah they have been waiting for. Luke's use of the OT is more subtle. Rather than quoting the OT at length, Luke employs the literary and historical features of the Hebrew Bible to show readers that Jesus's story is the continuation of Israel's story.⁹ Luke's nativity story reads like a series of events from the OT, in part because he is trying to demonstrate that the same God at work in Israel was still at work in the life of Jesus.

Finally, we believe that the aim of faithful biblical interpretation is to know and experience Christ. This is true whether we are reading the law of Moses or the Gospels, Proverbs or Paul, the Prophets, or the Psalms. In the words of John Calvin (1509–1564),

This is what we should in short seek in the whole of Scripture: truly to know Jesus Christ, and the infinite riches that are comprised in him and are offered to us by him from God the Father. If one were to sift thoroughly the Law and the Prophets, he would not find a single word which would not draw and bring us to him.¹⁰

The encounter with the risen Lord changed the Emmaus disciples forever. When they realized that they had been speaking with Jesus the whole time, their confusion and doubt turned into exuberant joy. “Weren’t our hearts burning within us while he was talking with us on the road and explaining the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32) This is the kind of “heart-burn” followers of Jesus gladly welcome. We study these texts because we want to encounter our Lord.

This book has two parts: “The Virgin-Born King in the Biblical Story” and “The Virgin-Born King in Christian Theology and Practice.”

⁹ See Nils Dahl, *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 84; Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 191–95; C. Kavin Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 32–34.

¹⁰ John Calvin, “Preface to Olivetan’s New Testament,” in *Calvin: Commentaries*, ed. Joseph Haroutunian (Louisville: WJK, 1958), 70.

Part one offers a biblical-theological assessment of Matthew's and Luke's nativity stories and explores their connection to the rest of the NT. The study of these texts takes a "horizontal" approach to these narratives—laying them side by side in an attempt to present them in a chronological sequence. Part two explores the development of the virgin birth tradition and its larger impact on the church's teaching about the person and work of Christ, the Trinity, creation, salvation, and last things.

We want to grasp what Matthew and Luke were trying to do with their respective stories about Christ's conception, birth, and childhood. We desire to see how these narratives "fit" with the message of the whole Bible. But more than this—we want to receive these stories like the angels gave them to the shepherds—as "good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10). We want to explore the unique contribution the nativity stories make to our overall picture of Jesus, the virgin-born king and risen Lord.

—— Part One ——

The Virgin-Born King
in the Biblical Story

1

That You May Know with Certainty

Luke 1:1–4

“We have learned . . . the plan of our salvation . . . from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they . . . by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith.”

—IRENAEUS OF LYONS (C. AD 130–202)¹

There is a scene in the original *Back to the Future* film where “Doc” Emmett Brown tried to explain to Marty McFly how his time-traveling DeLorean worked. Doc told Marty that if he wanted to witness an important moment in history, all he needed to do was to turn on the time circuits and punch in the date and time he wanted to visit.

¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1.

Doc Brown used the birth of Christ as an example of how the machine could work and punched in the numbers “12 - 25 - 0000” to show Marty how to get there.

This blink-and-you’ll-miss-it sight gag reminds us that Jesus (probably) was not born on December 25 and that there was no year zero on the Gregorian calendar we still use today (After all, the man who invented a time machine was a physicist, not a biblical scholar or a historian). But who would not want to take Doc Brown up on his offer? Who would not want to travel to that familiar manger scene and witness Jesus for himself?

At the heart of the Christian faith is the belief that God became a man and dwelt among us as a historical figure at a real moment in human history. If Jesus did not actually say and do the things ascribed to him in the NT and he is not the person the authors of the NT claim him to be, then those of us who “have put our hope in Christ . . . should be pitied more than anyone” (1 Cor 15:19).

But many skeptics contend that the Jesus whom Christians confess in their creeds and praise in their hymns is a legendary figure who never truly existed, at least in the way that the NT presents him. Critical scholars often claim that the Gospels tell us more about theology than history, more about what early Christians believed than what actually happened in the life of Jesus. This is nowhere more apparent than in their treatments of the nativity stories of Matthew and Luke. Even some scholars who affirm the resurrection of Jesus cast serious doubt on the truthfulness of these stories, charging them with being later additions to the gospel traditions.

But how can we know what happened two millennia ago? What reasons do we have to be confident that Jesus is who Christians claim him to be?

Although we cannot hop in a DeLorean and travel back in time to the moment Jesus was born, the four Gospels give us the best tool any

historian can have for learning about past events like Jesus's birth: eyewitness accounts.

We have many good reasons to take Luke and Matthew at their word when they tell us about Jesus's life and childhood. Despite what modern skeptics may claim, they did not invent these stories or steal all their ideas from pagan mythology.

In the introduction to his Gospel, Luke does something truly unique among the four Gospels of the New Testament. He writes an opening statement, like a letter, to his recipient, Theophilus. He explains why he wrote a Gospel and how he went about writing it. Luke faithfully reported what was told to him as a historian. He then carefully crafted his arrangement of these accounts as a master storyteller. As a theologian, Luke connected the dots between Jesus's early life and Israel's God. Finally, as a pastoral leader, Luke wanted believers to follow the faithful example of men and women like Mary, Joseph, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, and Anna, whose lives were characterized by their obedience to the God revealed in Christ.

Though the experience of Luke would have been different from Matthew or John, who followed Jesus during his ministry, Luke's opening statement gives us a window into the way each gospel account took shape. What Luke reveals applies to all four Gospels: these are credible witnesses to and reports of the life of Jesus.

The Evangelists who wrote the Gospels had another, not-so-secret agenda. They wanted their readers to believe that "Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God" and "have life in his name" (John 20:31). Despite what some skeptics might claim, the missionary purpose of the Evangelists does not rob them of their ability to inform us about the historical Jesus. After all, all human histories are interpretations of events written with the purpose of informing and persuading. The Gospels just happen to tell the story of the man their authors believe to be the hope of humanity. They staked their lives on the truthfulness of these accounts and asked us to do the same.

Why Luke Wrote a Gospel

Many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed them down to us. So it also seemed good to me, since I have carefully investigated everything from the very first, to write to you in an orderly sequence, most honorable Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed. (Luke 1:1–4)

Though the Evangelist who wrote the Third Gospel does not identify himself by name, all the evidence points to “Luke, the dearly loved physician” (Col 4:14) who traveled with Paul on his later missionary journeys. Though Luke never names himself in his Gospel or the book of Acts, Paul names him on multiple occasions throughout his letters (2 Tim 4:11; Phlm 24). Luke left his fingerprints all over the books he wrote. In Acts 16, the language describing Paul’s missionary team suddenly shifts from the third person (“they”) to the first person (“we”): “We stayed in that city for several days. . . . We went outside . . . we expected to find a place of prayer” (16:12b–13). Whoever wrote the books of Luke and Acts was with Paul on his last missionary journey.²

Luke addressed both of his books to Theophilus, whose name (or alias) means “friend of God” or “God-lover.” Theophilus may have been the wealthy patron who footed the bill for Luke’s travels and writing ministry. He may have been a code name for a group of believers. Perhaps Theophilus was a Roman official whom Luke was trying to convert. On this side of heaven, we will likely never know.

The precise identity of the Gospel’s author and audience is less important than his plainly stated objective. The Evangelist aims to write an organized account of Jesus’s life and ministry that will strengthen

² See also Acts 20:6, 8, 13–16; 21:1–25; 27:1–8, 13–44; 28:1–16. Second-century sources like Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 3.14.1) and the Muratorian Fragment also identify Luke as the author of the Gospel and the book of Acts.

the faith of his readers. The word Luke uses for “account” (*diēgēsis*) is not “just a tale or a story,” but a “*technical term* for the well-ordered, polished product of *the historian’s work*: the narrative of the events in the form in which the historian who writes no chronicle, nor rough notes, wants to give it to his readers for the special purpose he has set himself.”³ The author of Luke’s Gospel is convinced that he is doing the work of a true historian.

How Luke Acquired the Nativity Story

Luke walks his readers through his process as a researcher and a writer. If the apostles Matthew and John really wrote the Gospels associated with their names, their writing process would have been somewhat different from Luke’s because they followed Jesus during his adult ministry. Tradition tells us that John Mark (see Acts 12:12, 25) wrote down Peter’s experiences with Jesus in the Gospel of Mark.⁴ But Luke was a second-generation follower of Jesus who apparently became a believer at some point during Paul’s ministry.

*Luke admits that he depended on information “handed down” by “eyewitnesses” and “servants of the word” (Luke 1:2). When he tells us that “many have undertaken to draw up an account,” he simply means other Gospels have already been written. Most biblical scholars agree that Luke probably had a copy of Mark’s Gospel at his disposal when he was writing his own. Luke also has a lot of material in common with Matthew’s Gospel that is not found in Mark, so it is possible that Luke knew about Matthew’s gospel or at least shared a common source with Matthew.*⁵

³ W. C. van Unnik, “Once More St. Luke’s Prologue,” *Neotestamentica* 7 (1973): 14–15 (italics mine).

⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1; Eusebius, *Church History* 3.39.15.

⁵ We do not know if that was a written source, an oral tradition, or a personal source. See James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 147–60.

Matthew and Luke may have written their nativity stories independently of one another, but these stories share important common details:⁶

1. When both stories began, Joseph and Mary were betrothed to one another but had not had sex or moved in together yet (Matt 1:18; Luke 1:27, 34).
2. Joseph was in the lineage of King David (Matt 1:16, 20; Luke 1:27, 32; 2:4).
3. An angel announced the birth of a child (Matt 1:20–21; Luke 1:30–35).
4. Mary would not conceive this child through sexual intercourse (Matt 1:20, 23, 25; Luke 1:34).
5. Mary conceived a son by the power of the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35).
6. The angel commanded the boy to be named Jesus (Matt 1:21; Luke 1:31).
7. Jesus, whose name means “the Lord saves,” would be the Savior (Matt 1:21; Luke 2:11).
8. Joseph and Mary were married before Jesus was born (Matt 1:24–25; Luke 2:5–6).
9. Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Matt 2:1; Luke 2:4–7).
10. Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great (Matt 2:1; Luke 1:5).
11. Jesus was raised in Nazareth (Matt 2:23; Luke 2:39).

Although there is significant overlap in their details, these stories are independent of one another. Luke’s Gospel emphasizes events from Mary’s life whereas Matthew’s account highlights Joseph’s role in the nativity story. Luke’s story begins before the conception of John and Jesus. Matthew’s story begins when Joseph discovered Mary’s pregnancy.

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, rev. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 34–35.

Many scholars have also observed how much the first two chapters of Luke read like an OT story, with many Hebrew-like qualities in the Greek text. Some scholars have suggested that much of Luke 1–2 was originally written by an earlier Hebrew or Aramaic source and then later translated into Luke’s Greek.⁷ It’s even possible that Mary or one of Jesus’s siblings wrote the story down for Luke. Whether Luke wrote this section himself or it was “handed down” by “eyewitnesses” and “servants of the word” (Luke 1:2), the nativity story was not a later addition to the Gospel of Luke. All early manuscript evidence for this Gospel indicates that Luke 1–2 was an original part of the Gospel, uncorrupted and virtually unchanged in its transmission.⁸

Luke “carefully investigated everything from the very first [the beginning]” (Luke 1:3). Luke may have been a medical doctor by trade (Col 4:14), but he was also a historian. We can assume that much of the original material in Luke’s Gospel was a product of his research, including his version of the Christmas story. When investigating “everything from the beginning,” Luke traced the tradition back to a time before he was born. He then wrote these stories out in an orderly manner.

Luke (or the earlier source that was “handed down” to him) likely discovered the stories about John’s and Jesus’s births from interviews or correspondence with members of Jesus’s own family. Jesus’s mother and brothers were part of the Jerusalem church (Acts 1:14). Depending on how early we date this Gospel, Mary may have still been alive when it was composed. If she were alive, she herself could have been the direct source for these accounts in Luke. I am personally convinced that this Gospel was written no later than the mid-60s AD.⁹ Were Mary alive when the Gospel was composed, she probably would have been in her

⁷ Stephen C. Farris, “On Discerning Semitic Sources in Luke 1–2,” in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, ed. R. T. France and David Wenham (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 2:201–37.

⁸ See Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 62–168 (see introduction, n. 6).

⁹ See Jonathan Bernier, *Rethinking the Dates of the New Testament: The Evidence for Early Composition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2022), 54–66, 77–84.

eighties. Even if she had already died, Jesus's brothers and sisters could have relayed her experiences to Luke.¹⁰

Whether Luke acquired this information directly from Jesus's family or an older source, the account of Jesus's birth is shared from Mary's perspective. As the NT scholar Charles Quarles observes, the mother of Jesus is the common denominator in every episode of Luke's nativity story.¹¹

- Only Mary would know whether she had never been sexually involved with a man.
- Only Mary would have knowledge of a private visitation from Gabriel.
- If Mary spent three months with her cousin Elizabeth, she would have been very familiar with the circumstances surrounding John's birth.
- Although Mary was not present with the shepherds when the angels visited them, Luke explicitly tells us that the shepherds "reported the message they were told about this child" to Mary and Joseph (Luke 2:17).
- She was present when Simeon and Anna blessed the child in the temple.
- Like any other parent, Mary would remember the time when her child went missing in a large city.

Luke also tells us that she "was treasuring" all these things in her heart (Luke 2:19). Years after the incident with Jesus in Jerusalem, Jesus's mother still "kept all these things in her heart" (Luke 2:51). It is reasonable to conclude that the author knows what Mary "treasured" because

¹⁰ Raymond E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1973), 61.

¹¹ Charles L. Quarles, "Why Not 'Beginning from Bethlehem'?", in *Memories of Jesus: A Critical Appraisal of James D. G. Dunn's Jesus Remembered*, ed. Robert B. Stewart and Gary Habermas (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 175.

she still treasured these things all these years later when she reported the events herself.¹²

Answering Objections: The Virgin Birth Came from Pagan Mythology

Since the second century, critics of Christianity have claimed that the story of Jesus's virginal conception was borrowed from pagan mythology (see Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 67). Nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars affiliated with a movement known as "the history of religions school" obsessively sought out parallels between biblical stories and ancient pagan myths. Unsurprisingly, the doctrine of the virginal conception was one of their favorite targets. These religious scholars avowed that the Gospel authors derived their accounts of Jesus's virginal birth from similar stories of divine births in Babylonian, Buddhist, Greco-Roman, Hindu, and Zoroastrian myths. (George Lucas made a similar claim after he depicted Darth Vader as born of a virgin—conceived by midi-chlorians—in *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*.)

No serious biblical scholar today lends much credibility to this thesis. Even among those who reject the virginal birth of Jesus, there is consensus that the comparisons between the NT accounts and these pagan myths are superficial and far-fetched. The Gospels are thoroughly Jewish in character, not Greek (as the repeated references and allusions to OT Scripture in the nativity stories demonstrate). Unlike the Gospels, ancient myths did not usually involve real-world personalities, places, or events. Pagan myths about divine conceptions were usually sultry stories about the gods coming down to earth and

¹² See Brandon D. Crowe, "The Sources of Luke and Acts: Where Did Luke Get His Material (and Why Does it Matter)?" in *Issues in Luke-Acts: Selected Essays*, ed. Sean A. Adams and Michael W. Pahl (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2012), 73–95.

sleeping with human women. These myths certainly do not celebrate the modesty and personal holiness of the mothers within them.

These pagan myths and the biblical nativity stories are, as Thomas Boslooper put it, “as different as . . . monotheism is from polytheism . . . and as different as the polygamous and incestuous pagan society was from the Christian teaching on morals and marriage” (Boslooper, *The Virgin Birth*, 186). The authors of the NT Gospels intend to provide us with an entirely different kind of storytelling—not based on heroic archetypes or pagan myths. They report eyewitness accounts of a Jewish man who purportedly did otherworldly things in the opening decades of the first century just as the Hebrew Scriptures had prophesied. These accounts are ripe with historical details that correspond to what we know about first-century Israel and the Roman Empire.

See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008), 255–70; Thomas Boslooper, *The Virgin Birth* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 135–86; Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 317–79.

The Meaning of Luke’s Nativity Story

The nativity stories recorded in Matthew and Luke are noticeably different from the material that follows in the rest of the Gospels. Throughout most of the Gospels, Jesus is the primary figure speaking and acting in the story. But the nativity stories are built around his supporting cast: his nuclear and extended family, angelic messengers, shepherds, wise men, people waiting on God’s redemption, and a jealous tyrant. The nativity stories contain no sermons or parables (though Luke’s nativity story includes four songs of praise).¹³ But these nativity stories simply chronicle

¹³ See Luke 1:46–55 (Mary’s *Magnificat*); 1:67–79 (Zechariah’s *Benedictus*); 2:14 (the heavenly army’s *Gloria in excelsis Deo*); and 2:28–32 (Simeon’s *Nunc dimittis*).

the unusual circumstances and means through which God brought his Son into the world.

In some ways, Luke's nativity story resembles OT history books more than the rest of the Gospel and the book of Acts. His nativity serves as a "continuation" of Israel's history. Luke wants to convince his readers that the same God who is at work in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the prophets was still at work in Israel in his day. This story has reached its dramatic climax in the life of Israel's virgin-born Lord.

When Luke says these events have been "fulfilled among us" (Luke 1:1), he means that Jesus has fulfilled promises God made to Israel in their recent history. This statement foreshadows the way Luke will use the OT in his own writing, especially in the nativity story. After Luke 1–2, the Evangelist quotes from and alludes to the OT over thirty times, culminating in what Jesus said on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13–49. But unlike Matthew's nativity story, Luke does not quote directly from the OT as often as he discerns patterns and echoes from OT stories in the life of Jesus. Luke alludes to OT texts in ways those immersed in the texts would easily detect.

Luke's story may borrow richly from the storytelling features of the OT, but he also looks ahead to the life and ministry of Jesus as the new stage in God's redemptive plan for humanity. The Third Gospel presents a remarkably consistent view of Christ's identity and mission, from the nativity to the ascension.¹⁴ Luke builds on the promises made to Israel but also anticipates the eventual inclusion of the Gentiles among the people of God (something that would have been important to him as a Gentile follower of Jesus). Even when Luke tells stories from the time of Jesus's infancy, he is preparing readers for the Christian mission to the Gentiles recorded in the book of Acts. In describing Jesus as the ruler of an eternal kingdom (Luke 1:33), Luke's nativity story also lays the

¹⁴ See Paul S. Minear, "Luke's Use of the Birth Stories," in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 111–30.

groundwork for the emphasis he places on Jesus's teaching about "the kingdom of God."¹⁵

We Can Have Confidence in the Christmas Story

In a postmodern age where individuals will frequently demand their right to live out their "own truth," the idea of a true story that makes demands on all our lives is often met with hostility and aggression: "It's fine if you want to tell me that *you* believe in Jesus, but don't tell me what I should believe!"

The early church met similar resistance in the first-century Roman Empire. In their world of live-and-let-live religion, Roman polytheists hardly batted an eye at new religious groups who followed a new god. But these early Christians really stirred the pot when they claimed there was only one true God and that this God became a baby in a virgin's womb, was building his kingdom, was crucified, and was raised from the dead on the third day. Early Christians made a pointed political statement when they declared "Christ . . . is Lord of all" (Acts 10:36). If Christ is Lord, Caesar is not. If these audacious claims about Jesus were true, then everything else Romans believed about the world was false.

New Testament authors had to answer the same kinds of objections Christians get today. As Peter wrote, "We did not follow cleverly contrived myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ; instead, we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Pet 1:16). The stories about Jesus the earliest Christian communities shared and eventually wrote down into the Gospels were not fabricated myths but true accounts for which early Christians were prepared to die.

The authors of these books staked everything on the truthfulness of their claims. The apostle Paul went on to say that if Jesus has not really been raised from the dead, then our entire way of life is beyond worthless.

¹⁵ See Luke 4:43; 6:20; 8:1, 10; 9:2, 11, 27, 60; 10:11; 12:32; 16:16; 18:24; 21:31.

If Jesus is not alive, Paul asserted, people should look on us with pity for being duped (see 1 Cor 15:12–19). The same could be said of the unique way the Gospels tell us Jesus came into the world. If Christ was not conceived of a virgin as the Scriptures have asserted to us, then the records we have about Jesus lose credibility and reliability as accurate sources for his life and ministry.

But Luke here provides us with good reasons to take these stories seriously. Despite what modern skeptics and critics may claim about his Gospel, Luke never implies that the stories of Jesus's birth, miracles, resurrection, and ascension were mere legends created to prove a theological point. Instead, Luke wanted Theophilus to know things about Jesus's life with "certainty" (1:4). Luke expresses his commitment to getting the facts right. Either he was telling Theophilus and his other readers the truth about Jesus, or he was being intentionally deceitful and malicious. Luke does not leave us the option of believing that this story was merely a pious fiction written with the best of intentions.

IS THE VIRGIN BIRTH A HISTORICAL FACT OR A SACRED MYTH?

In *Conceived by the Holy Spirit: The Virgin Birth in Scripture and Theology*, Rhyne R. Putman leads readers through biblical texts on a captivating journey, meticulously examining the significance of the virgin birth. Along the way, he tackles traditional objections and confronts contemporary challenges to offer a robust defense grounded in Scripture and theology. Putman demonstrates the essential role of the virgin birth and its profound implications for the very core of Christian faith.

“Rhyne Putman has delivered a biblical and theological work on the significance of the virgin birth of Jesus that is simultaneously substantive and accessible. His careful treatment of the nativity texts and the history of the church’s theological interpretation makes this a marvelous resource for those wishing to deepen their understanding of the incarnation.”

—TREVIN WAX, vice president for research and resource development, North American Mission Board

“In *Conceived by the Holy Spirit*, Dr. Putman shows how the incarnation put Jesus’s divine nature on display for all to see. His thorough and accessible walkthrough of the virginal conception teaches us this event was much more than fodder for Christmas carols. In an age of deconstruction, Putman shows us the importance of theological retrieval of central Christian truths. May we, like our brothers and sisters before us, praise Jesus as ‘born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.’”

—TONY MERIDA, pastor of preaching and vision, Imago Dei Church, Raleigh, North Carolina

“More than an adorable myth attached to the Christmas story, the virgin birth of Jesus Christ is an essential and exciting Christian doctrine. In this new and important volume, Rhyne Putman tells us why—through Scripture and Christian history—this beautiful truth has animated the church’s gospel witness. Putman helps recover this doctrine for a new generation. This book is essential for every pastor’s library.”

—DANIEL DARLING, director of the Land Center for Cultural Engagement, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

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