

## The Infancy Narrative

*The first part of the infancy narrative is a presentation of Jesus' "family tree." Then at 1:18 the genealogy becomes narrative as Matthew describes Jesus' miraculous birth. Chapter 2 tells of the "troubled" Herod and the visit of the magi, followed by an angel's advice in a dream to Joseph that the family take flight into Egypt. A second such dream, again to Joseph, takes them back to Judea, where Herod's son Archelaus is ruling; and a third warns them to go to Nazareth in Galilee, where Jesus will spend his youth and young manhood, of which nothing is reported.*

Tell all the truth but tell it slant.  
—Emily Dickinson

The Christian Bible begins with Matthew's version of Genesis, as if he were commencing a new version of Scripture and a new era in human history. Like Luke, he includes a genealogy and an infancy narrative, and although the two evangelists differ in their choice of forebears and events (they do seem to agree on the dual sonship of Jesus and his virgin birth), they both want to satisfy converts' understandable curiosity regarding Jesus' background, both personal and familial. They also want to demonstrate that his status as the long-awaited Messiah—and, indeed, as the Son of God—was assured at and before his birth, not conferred at some point in his ministry or acquired after his death (since Paul's Epistles might give the impression that it was his death, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension that alone confirmed Jesus' divinity).

Matthew's genealogy cannot be harmonized with Luke's, and for those rationalists, ancient and modern, who regarded contradiction as the unforgivable sin, the Gospels lost their credibility in the first lines of Matthew. Today they are generally accepted as theological constructs, with some characterizing Matthew's genealogy as "royal" (mentioning Solomon) and Luke's as "priestly" (mentioning Levi). What other information the first Christians had on the early Jesus and his forebears was undoubtedly fragmented and anecdotal, read back into his obscure beginnings from the known events of his later ministry and buttressed by "predictive" testimonies from the Old Testament. All of this Matthew uses, with the result that his gospel acquires a structural symmetry,

not only balancing Jesus' birth and death but also employing certain motifs—even words—associated with the nativity that will recur during his passion, as at both points of his life Jesus must confront the local Jewish and Roman leaders.

There are difficulties in assessing the sources and the historical validity of these two infancy stories, since there could have been few eyewitnesses to their events, and certainly not the gospel composers or the apostles before them. There was a Christian tradition that made Joseph the source for Matthew, Mary for Luke; and there were precedents in antiquity for ascribing wondrous qualities to the births and childhood activities of great figures. So all is not lost, and the Bible's readers should remember that only significant events generate legends and that legendary traditions, particularly those as moving as the Christmas stories, can often provide as much material for theological and spiritual reflection as the spare facts of history. Thus, Matthew prefaces his infancy narrative (most of which the KJV translators took directly from Tyndale) with a genealogical outline of Israel's legendary history. Unlike Luke, he begins with "begats"—thirty-nine of them. By commencing Jesus' lineage with Abraham and David, father and king, Matthew emphasizes his historical position, Jewish identity, and royal descent, even though the bloodline comes through Joseph, who was not really Jesus' father (hence the switch to Mary at v. 16).

Since an orderly and prestigious lineage mattered deeply to the inherited monarchies of medieval rulers, Matthew's "Tree of Jesse," David's father, was reproduced in illuminated manuscripts and in the stained glass "Jesse" windows of Gothic cathedrals, notably the great western front window of Chartres (1145). The proof text was Isaiah 11:1: "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots," recalled in the fourth stanza of the popular Christmas carol "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!" Illustrations generally showed a tree growing out of Jesse's loins, with Matthew's figures pictured among its branches and Christ at its crown. It helped too that the Latin Vulgate's word for "rod," *virga*, so closely resembled *virgo*, "virgin," though Protestants have preferred to see the "rod" as Jesse himself. Hence, these figures are also represented among the antecedents of Jesus in the decorative statuary of Gothic cathedrals, notably at Chartres, Reims, and Amiens.

Matthew also likes triads, so his lineage presents three groups of fourteen generations each (and in Hebrew number lore, the value of the three consonants in "David" is fourteen). The first is from Abraham to David, the second from Solomon to the Babylonian deportations of the sixth century, and the third (actually with only thirteen generations) ending with verse 17 and the birth of Jesus, here given the messianic title "the Christ." Since this is also the beginning of what would be a fourth group, it suggests that at this point a sig-

nificant event is occurring, that this is in fact both the climax of Jewish history and a new beginning.

On the first page of the first Bible translation printed in English (1525), Tyndale glossed the genealogy: "Saynct mathew leveh out certeyne generations," an acknowledgement that these verses may be of Matthew's devising, freely and selectively adapted from 1 Chronicles 2-3 and contrasting with Luke's genealogy (3:23-38), which traces Jesus beyond Abraham to Adam himself.<sup>1</sup> On the female side the unnamed Bathsheba, married to the Hittite Uriah, joins Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth as somewhat notorious women. The reason for their presence is unclear (where are Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel?), but they were also quasi-foreigners, an early indication of the inclusiveness of Jesus' ministry; and the fact that they had unusual marital relationships also foreshadows the union of Mary and Joseph. Matthew's figures were represented in the now-fragmentary mosaics (13th century) on the south wall of Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity; and today visitors to the Sistine Chapel in Rome can see Michelangelo's versions of the genealogy's figures, now colorfully restored, in lunettes above the windows along the upper walls, their names on tablets at the peak of each lunette. Just as the genealogy establishes a past continuity for Jesus, its counterpart at the end of the gospel, the Great Commission of chapter 28, offers the future prospect of a continuing community. Thus, Matthew's view of salvation history is both transitional and universal, moving from Abraham to the Gentiles, and from Israel to "all nations" (28:19).

But why was Jesus born at this particular juncture? Some early Christians looked to the six days of Creation (Gen. 2:2) and to Psalm 90:4 ("For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday") to estimate that the world would last six thousand years, which might make Jesus' death part of the beginning of the end time. This dread event is eloquently foretold by John the Baptist at 3:2, and chapter 27 recounts the three hours of darkness, the rending of the temple veil, the opening of graves, and the resurrection of the dead, all phenomena associated with the last days. For the first Christians, a preoccupation with the world's ending—or at least with a violent change in their own situation—is understandable, since throughout history there seems to be a persistent obsession among groups that are small, marginalized, and persecuted that soon they will experience a general cataclysm in which their troubles will end, their foes will be routed, and they will be gloriously vindicated. So it must have appeared to some of his followers that Jesus' birth was ordained to usher in history's grand climax and that he would return soon after his resurrection. But it did not happen, and with the delay of the Parousia (Greek for "presence," the technical term for Jesus' second coming) much of the scriptural record had to be spiritualized, and end time events had to be allegorized as referring to aspects of Jesus' ministry or legacy, not to the end of the space-time universe. There is some evidence that Christians were disappointed by their

baffled expectations, but they seemed to feel little need to revise or reject those verses in the Gospels—and there are many—that appeared to foretell an imminent Parousia. Even today the most notorious example of apocalyptic writing, Revelation, continues to intrigue and inspire the Bible's readers.

The forty-two generations of Matthew's genealogy also equal six "sevens" or weeks, which again recalls the days of Creation, though fanciful interpretations saw the three groups as replicating the waxing, waning, and waxing of the moon or as foreshadowing the Trinity; and the fourteen generations as equaling the Ten Commandments plus the four gospels. It may be hard to imagine that such fancies could contribute to a philosophy of history, but the fact that each generation lasted thirty years helped a Cistercian monk and visionary named Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202) decide that in the thirteenth century the "Age of Christ" would end and yield to the "Age of the Holy Spirit." He had devised a historical scenario, based on the Trinity, that was optimistic, even utopian, whereby a Gospel of the Holy Spirit was about to succeed the Gospel of the Father or the Law (OT) and the Gospel of the Son or Grace (NT). Hence, he moved beyond Matthew's method of using the Old Testament as predictive of the New Testament to see both as predictive of future history, with the Christology of the New Testament to be followed by the "pneumatology" of the Holy Spirit, as human history divided into three successive—and progressive—stages in a scheme that expanded the familiar sequence of Old and New Testaments. These stages were symbolized by the family (the Father's creation of Adam and Eve), the clergy (the Son's creation of the church and the priesthood), and the recently founded monastic orders (the Holy Spirit empowering the monks). Hence, the laws of the Old Testament and the faith of the New Testament would evolve—after the appearance and defeat of the antichrist, who would end the second age—into a third age of general joy, freedom, and love so spiritually enlightened, so morally perfected, that it would have no need of a church with its hierarchy, sacraments, and all-too-worldly institutions.

Joachim was always respected as a faithful Catholic, and Dante put him in his *Paradiso* (13.140) as a prophet. But his revolutionary theories, revived after his death and sometimes called the "Everlasting Gospel" (Rev. 14:6), of how the Trinity provided a pattern for history, were condemned by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and by Pope Alexander IV in 1256. Still, the notion of ushering in the "Age of the Spirit" in direct communion with the Holy Spirit has been an unending inspiration for religious visionaries, reformers—and, yes, crackpots. Joachim has had other descendants in those ideologues who have seen in the modern world a "third" period that would in effect put an end to history (Communism, that would succeed feudalism and capitalism; even Hitler's Third Reich).<sup>2</sup>

The real beginning of the first gospel is at 1:16-18, and *Christi . . . generatio* ("birth of Christ") at verse 18 provided one of the most elaborately illuminated pages (the "*Chi-rho* page") in the magnificent Book of Kells (800; now in the Trinity College Library, Dublin), with *CHRI* in ornately stylized Greek letters. When the "begats" stop, Matthew turns to Mary, who, we are told, "was found with child of the Holy Ghost." Again, the life-giving action of the Holy Spirit recalls the activity of the "Spirit of God" in Genesis 1:2: a new world is beginning. (Unfortunately, the shift in the popular meaning of *ghost* from "life" and "spirit" to a sort of ectoplasmic spook undermined its seriousness, and the substitution of Holy Spirit for Holy Ghost was the most striking change in the Revised Standard Version of 1881–85 and the American Standard Version of 1901.)

Matthew sees Joseph as Jesus' adoptive father, though he is never called "father." One Jewish story had Jesus fathered by a Roman soldier called Panthera, a common name and oddly close to the Greek *parthenos*, "virgin." It appears in the Hebrew legal commentary, the Talmud, and it was earlier invoked by Celsus, a second-century Platonist who was one of Christianity's earliest critics (1.32). Since it diluted Jesus' Jewishness, it was revived by those German Nazis who claimed to be Christians.<sup>3</sup> Luke 3:23, another proof text for the virgin birth, refers to Jesus as the "supposed" son of Joseph; and Mark 6:3 omits Joseph entirely and calls Jesus only "the son of Mary." But Mark's gospel might have had, and lost, an infancy narrative of its own.

The KJV's "virgin" (23) is a direct translation of the Greek *parthenos* that Matthew found in the Isaiah (7:14) of the Septuagint, a third-century Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. It is more specific than the Hebrew "young woman" and is paralleled by Luke 2:7 ("And she brought forth her first-born son"). In a second-century "debate" between the Latin father Justin Martyr (100–65) and his opponent, a Jew he called Trypho, the latter charged Christians with a deliberate mistranslation—and the meaning of this word is still a sensitive issue for NT commentators.<sup>4</sup> Though it is nowhere mentioned apart from the two infancy narratives, Jesus' virgin birth, as specified in 1:23-25, has always been a Christian tradition, presumably originating from Mary herself. It was enshrined in the Apostles' Creed, established as dogma at the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), and accepted by Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli. (Actually, it should more accurately be called "virginal conception," since virgin birth refers to Jesus' emergence from Mary's closed womb and nothing is said of her subsequent virginity.)

In the cited passage, Isaiah, who had no developed conception of a royal messiah, seems to have been explicitly referring to a son of the Judean King Ahaz (ca. 735–15), not to his mother, so Matthew's allusion must be taken as a controversial "secondary interpretation," "creative misreading," or with But-

ler's *Analogy*, a "further completion."<sup>5</sup> Here, as often, he is less interested in the quotation's original context than in its applicability to the present circumstance, and as usual, he assumes that OT prophecies are really predictions. There is no evidence that the Jews expected that a virgin would bear their messiah, and the "till" of verse 25 has been at the basis of a long—and probably unresolvable—controversy regarding Mary's virginity. Was it perpetual (traditionally the Catholic position and accepted by Luther and John Wesley), or did Joseph subsequently resume relations with Mary? Some copyists, concerned to preserve the orthodox position, omitted "her firstborn" from their manuscripts.

The doctrines of Jesus' virginal conception and birth have often been dismissed as "mythical," but although Greek mythology has examples of strange but divine impregnations (Danaë by Zeus in a shower of gold, Leda by Zeus disguised as a swan, Alcmena by Zeus impersonating her husband) and unusual births (Dionysus from Zeus's thigh, Athena from his head), all the women had sexual relations of a sort, and their stories were not important for their children's subsequent careers. Although it was reported that Apollo was Plato's father and that Alexander the Great was conceived before his parents consummated their marriage, these Hellenistic tales were not part of Matthew's culture, and it is hard to imagine that first-century Christians, whether Jewish or Gentile, would adapt minor pagan legends to the birth of Jesus. But the existence of these legendary parallels has also been seen, paradoxically, as an argument for the authenticity of the virgin birth. For according to a unique sort of plagiarism, Greek thought, both mythical and philosophical, was originally derived from Moses, who while he was in Egypt, may somehow have happened to meet Homer. Or else Plato on his visit to Egypt in the fourth century found a copy of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. For the apologist Justin Martyr, the pagan mythmakers were led astray by demons, and "hearing what was said by the prophets they did not necessarily understand it."<sup>6</sup> Thus, Orpheus, the mythic musician who enchanted forests and animals and brought Eurydice back from the dead, prefigures Jesus, who "alone has tamed man, the most intractable of animals" and the music of whose words revives souls deadened by sin.<sup>7</sup> In addition there was the "Egyptian gold" argument, based on Exodus 12:35, recounting how the escaping Israelites took gold and silver vessels from the Egyptians, and interpreted as also justifying the taking of pagan wisdom from the Greek and Roman classics.<sup>8</sup> Hence, there are two scriptures in God's unified revelation, the supernatural revealed to the Hebrew people and a second indirectly revealed to pagans, a useful if less exalted version and one that brought them to Christ as surely as the law did for Jews. They often garbled and misunderstood what they had been given, but at their best they enjoyed a preview of Christian truth, and

their myths of wondrous impregnations were God's way of preparing the world for the greater mystery of the virgin birth.

So Jesus' virgin birth became the miraculous event at the beginning of his life, one that has its counterpart in the miraculous resurrection at the end. In Christian art, it is sometimes symbolized by a window in Mary's room, representing the image of Jesus emerging from her womb like light through a glass. Another image likened the baby's birth to the shedding of rays from the sun; another, recalling the words spoken by the angel in Luke 1:28-33 (the "Annunciation"), saw Jesus conceived through Mary's ear. But the American patriot Thomas Paine (1737-1809), who was a deist (believing that after God created the world, He took no further part in its workings) and an eloquent and influential critic of biblical Christianity, preferred to sneer, "What is it the Testament teaches us?—to believe that the Almighty committed debauchery with a woman engaged to be married: and the belief of this debauchery is called faith."<sup>9</sup>

Although there is no OT episode prefiguring Joseph's situation, he does have a counterpart in the Joseph whose story ends Genesis, and like him he goes into Egypt, provides an example of chastity under pressure, and is similarly receptive to cautionary dreams, a narrative device found only in Matthew. He is also a kind of Moses, who was ordered by the Lord at Exodus 4:19 to take his wife and sons to Egypt. But since he was neither martyr nor saint and says not a word in the Gospels, he was given little attention by the church fathers, and John Chrysostom took the absence of "to you" after "bring forth a son" (21) as a proof text that Jesus was not Joseph's natural son.<sup>10</sup> His anomalous position—he will quickly disappear from the gospel story, perhaps through an early death—has led to the inevitable (and anachronistic) speculations. Here he is a "just" man (1:19; a term Matthew likes), but the apocryphal gospels *Protevangelium of James* (8-13), from the second century, and *Pseudo-Matthew* (10-11), from the eighth or ninth century, were the basis for the tradition of the "Doubting" or "Troubled" Joseph, the aged cuckold who appears as an almost comic or pitiable character in the medieval English mystery plays ("I am beguiled—how, wot I not, / My young wife is with child full great").<sup>11</sup> However, it is to Joseph's credit in Matthew that he is so impressed by Mary's goodness that he does not want her pregnancy to expose her to public humiliation and punishment. He is usually pictured in art as an older man—according to the apocryphal tradition he was a widower—sometimes with a crutch suggesting advanced years or even impotence; and a body of legends grew up around him. The influential *Golden Legend*, a thirteenth-century collection of saints' lives and legends by an Italian Dominican, Jacobus de Voragine (1229-98), popularized the tradition that he was chosen as Mary's spouse after a heavenly voice had ordered suitable candidates to "bring a

branch to the altar." Because Joseph's branch sprouted a flower and a dove alighted on it, typologists connected this branch with the "rod" that came "out of the stem of Jesse" in one of Christianity's favorite Messianic passages (Isa. 11:1).<sup>12</sup> In his great painting *The Marriage of the Virgin* (1504, Milan), Raphael gave prominence to a young suitor so disappointed that his rod did not flower that he is shown breaking it over his knee. Eventually Joseph was canonized, and devotion to St. Joseph was revived in the sixteenth century. In 1624 he was named patron saint of Canada (rising above the slopes of Mount Royal in Montreal is an impressive church dedicated to him); and in 1870 Pope Pius IX, honoring Joseph as the protector of Jesus and Mary, declared him "Patron of the Universal Church." His feast days are March 29 (the day the swallows traditionally return to Capistrano) and May 1 ("St. Joseph the Worker").

Before Jesus is born an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and announces that his name will be Jesus (1:20-21). *Nomen est omen*, and Christians saw in his name and titles indications of his nature and purpose. Like Joseph and John, Jesus was a fairly common name. In the Septuagint it is the rendering of "Yeshua," as he was called in his lifetime, or "Joshua" ("Yahweh helps," later understood as "Yahweh saves"). Matthew added "from their sins" from Psalm 30:8, and although here he does not say how this will be effected, the words "unto remission of sins" will recur at the Last Supper (26:28) and will play a crucial role in Christian theology. *Christos*, Greek for "anointed," was added to render "Messiah," first as a title (16:20, 26:63: "the Christ"), then gradually becoming a second name, as it appears in the gospel's first line. In one of the earliest pagan notices of Jesus, the Roman writer Suetonius (69-140) misunderstood this as "Chrestus," a common name for slaves. There is also Emmanuel ("God with us"), reprinted on countless Christmas cards and immortalized in the familiar carol, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!" (a hymn more about the second coming than the nativity), and foreshadowing Jesus' final words, promising always to be "with" his disciples. The name itself is from Isaiah (7:14), the prophet most favored by Matthew and the church because of what they saw as passages predicting the messiahship of Christ; and in the "Jesse window" of Chartres Cathedral, Matthew is seated on Isaiah's shoulders. Its assurance of God's presence will recur at the very end of the gospel (28:20: "I am with you always").

In addition to his name(s), Matthew uses significant formulas to characterize Jesus. As Mark is interested in Jesus' miraculous exercise of his messianic powers, Matthew, writing for a Jewish audience and seeing Jesus' life against the background of Jewish history, is interested in his fulfillment of messianic promises. Hence, Matthew calls Jesus "son of David" nine times; Mark only three; and Luke not at all. But it remains an odd fact that although Jesus' name

occurs some one hundred and fifty times in Matthew, none of the human characters uses it in addressing him.

The "JC" of Jesus Christ has become a favorite indicator for modern writers creating characters modeled after Jesus. Examples are Hans (Johann) Castorp, the young hero of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*; Jim Conklin, the "tall soldier" in Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* who dies with a wound in his side; Jim Casy, the ex-preacher turned labor agitator in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* who "sacrifices" himself to save Tom Joad, the novel's ex-convict hero; and Joe Christmas, the illegitimate son of a black father and white mother in William Faulkner's *Light in August*.

### The Incarnation

When you care enough  
to send the very best.  
—Joyce Clyde Hall

It testifies to Matthew's art that his infancy narrative, like an operatic overture, touches on themes that characterize his gospel: a full revelation of Jesus' divine identity, and the responses of acceptance and rejection that it evoked. Theologically, it is one scriptural authority for the later doctrine of the incarnation (for another, see 9:6), that is, that not only was Jesus the "Word made Flesh," but he was both "true God and true man," two distinct natures joined in "hypostatic union."<sup>13</sup> This was a difficult formulation (unthinkable in Judaism, and in Islam considered beneath God's dignity), since the early church fathers in often acrimonious debates had to balance the gospel narratives of Jesus acting like a man, particularly in his suffering and death, with those where he performed the miracles and proclaimed the message of a god. One serious problem arose when Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople (428-31), argued that the "young child" of 2:13 constituted a proof text that Mary was the mother only of Jesus' humanity, and that the human and divine natures in Jesus were separate and only conjoined, with God living within Jesus as in a temple. His argument was that Mary could hardly have conceived in time a being who had existed from all eternity, and that she was therefore *Theodochos*, the "Receiver of God," not *Theotokos*, the "Bearer of God" (another of those theological disputes that centered on one or two letters). In opposition, Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) argued for the full humanity (and divinity) of Jesus, defending what became the orthodox position: that Mary "bore God," not a man onto whom divinity had somehow been grafted, and that God and man are united "hypostatically" in Jesus' one nature. Cyril had an influential sup-

porter in Pulcheria, the powerful sister of the Emperor Theodosius II, who regarded herself as a champion of Mary; and with her help and the support of an entourage of fifty bishops from Egypt, his views were confirmed as orthodox at the tumultuous Third Ecumenical Council held at Ephesus in 431 and published in 433 as the "Formula of Union." Cyril was acclaimed, while Nestorius was vilified as a new Judas, deposed, and exiled into Egypt. But Nestorianism did not die at Ephesus; it became a dogma of the church in Persia and lives on in the small "Assyrian Church of the East." Today tourists to Ephesus in Turkey can visit the remains of the church where the council met, and in Rome they can see a monument to Cyril's victory, for in 432 Pope Sixtus III celebrated Mary's status by beginning construction there of the great basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore ("St. Mary the Greater").

Finally, the last of the church's creeds (the Reformers preferred to call them "confessions") was formulated at a council held in 451 at Chalcedon, a town on the Bosphorus opposite Constantinople. It affirmed that Jesus was "truly God and truly man," and "Chalcedon" or "two natures in one person" has since designated the church's definition of christological orthodoxy, though it is complicated by the theory of "anhypostasia"—that Jesus took on human nature but not a human personality—not a doctrine congenial to those fascinated by the Jesus of the Gospels.

The non-Chalcedonians, that is, those who later rejected the 451 "Formula of Reunion" on the grounds that it overvalued Jesus' humanity, are the "Oriental Orthodox Church." But the controversies persisted, and orthodoxy ("Dyophysitism" or "two natures") also had to overcome the competing theories—later heresies—of Docetism (that Jesus was a divine spirit, only seeming to be human and hence not really suffering and dying), Adoptionism (that at one point in his life God chose Jesus as His son and granted him divine powers), Apollinarianism (that Jesus was human in body and soul but divine in intellect), Sabellianism (that God temporarily manifested himself as Jesus and as the Holy Spirit), Eutychianism (that Jesus had only one nature, which was divine), Monothelitism (that Jesus had two natures but only one will), Monarchianism (that Jesus was one mode of God), Nestorianism (that in Jesus human and divine were only conjoined, like husband and wife), and Arianism (that Jesus was not co-eternal with God). Theories claiming that Jesus' human nature was absorbed by his divine nature were generally called "monophysite" ("one nature"), and its adherents were—and still are—particularly numerous in the Christian churches of Egypt, Syria, and Armenia. So it remains a nice question whether these theories, varieties of which have periodically recurred in church history, were the aberrant products of Christianity's fringe elements, destined to wither and die, or alternative theologies unfairly suppressed by the orthodox establishment. Celsus noted these divisions among the faithful who had once been united but in his time had little more in common than the

name "Christian." Origen, who recorded Celsus's criticisms, agreed, adding that the gospels showed that they were not united even in Jesus' lifetime, but, he went on, no more divided than were the members of the Greek philosophical schools.<sup>14</sup>

But it was Gnosticism (that Jesus was a divine messenger and guide who took on human form to bring enlightenment and salvation to a fallen world), or varieties of gnostic beliefs, both Jewish and Christian, that most troubled the church early and later; and for the church historian Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), "the Catholic church had its origin in the struggle with Gnosticism."<sup>15</sup> The gnostics were dualists and hence had the advantage of basing their theories on the obvious antinomies of ordinary experience, such as dark and light, matter and spirit, body and soul, earth and heaven; whereas Christians had to deal with the elusive categories of sin and grace, hope and faith. And they were spiritualists, which meant that they did not have to deal with the stubborn facts of history. Theorizing that material creation was the work, not of a good God, but of a rebellious angel called the Demiurge, they could "solve" the problem of evil by positing a God so transcendent that He was not responsible for this sorry world. Fortunately, the gnostics' "good" God provided a secret but saving "knowledge" (*gnosis* in Greek) whereby individuals could become enlightened and illumine the divine spark within. This would enable them to transcend their earthbound selves and achieve, in stages, personal salvation, the blessedness from which they had once "fallen." For Christian gnostics the agent of their redemption was Jesus Christ, whom they regarded as a pure spirit who only *appeared* to take on human flesh. Hence, basic to all forms of Gnosticism were a dualistic cosmology and a theology of individual redemption from the confinements of nature. Christianity's response was to insist on both the goodness of God and the goodness of the world He alone had created. It was not esoteric or speculative insights that would lead to salvation but faith in God through the atoning ministry of Jesus Christ, personal behavior, and participation in the sacramental life of the Church. Orthodoxy was based, not on secret or hidden doctrines, but on a public record derived from the apostles, contained in the Scriptures and accessible to all.

Gnosticism appealed to Greeks since it endorsed a quasi-Christianity that was philosophically oriented and was divorced from Judaism, with its Scriptures and laws, and from the historical Jesus, whom it came to regard not as a Redeemer but as a teacher or "revealer." For gnostics the "kingdom of God" was not to be found in any text, but was to be discovered within by each believer. These notions reappeared in nineteenth-century Theosophy, and the gnostics' alienation, individualism, elitism, and promise of "liberation" have given them some recent appeal. Speculations that the gnostics might have been more liberal and more sexually permissive than orthodox Christians, particu-

larly in their letting women serve as priests and prophets (though they seem to have had no religious institutions), have generated a good deal of interest; and some have found in New Age movements, with their emphasis on transformed consciousness and self-realization, contemporary counterparts of Gnosticism.

Interest in Gnosticism has been principally fueled by a Bedouin's accidental discovery in 1945 at Nag Hammadi, three hundred miles up the Nile from Cairo, of a small library of fourth-century texts, thirteen papyrus codices containing fifty-two works. Some were only fragmentary, and the contents of others were already known, but some forty were new. These were fourth-century translations of earlier works from Greek into a Coptic that was written in Greek letters and were of unknown origin or purpose. The most controversial among them is the "secret" *Gospel of Thomas*, a nonnarrative collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus, supposedly collected by one Judas Thomas. Some parallel Jesus' sentiments in the canonical gospels, others rehash gnostic theology, and many are obscure, esoteric, or bizarre. Before this find at Nag Hammadi, information about Gnosticism came largely from church polemicists, particularly Irenaeus, made Bishop of Lyons in 177, who attacked them in a five-book tract, *Adversus Haereses* ("Against Heresies"). Such defenses of the faith had the meritorious effect of causing the early church to define and explain its own doctrines of God and man, good and evil, body and soul, faith and knowledge.

Many Christians have had difficulty conceiving of a being who is simple in substance but double in nature, both divine and human. With the increasing skepticism regarding the factual reliability of the Gospels, some modern believers still revert to versions of these ancient heresies, preferring to see the historical Jesus as a "manifestation" of God's power and love; others want to see in Jesus a man who enjoyed a unique and exemplary relationship with God, rather like the Jewish prophets, or else as a sage, rather like the Buddha, offering enlightenment and inspiration. These and other reservations were first voiced in antiquity by Celsus and by Porphyry (233–304), who anticipated many of the great historical objections to the Christian message.<sup>16</sup> Celsus, for example, found it hard to reconcile the Christians' human God, who was born and matured, with their divine God, who was supposed to be one and unchanging (4.14); or to understand why, if God wanted to reform humanity, he chose to descend and live on earth; or how his brief presence in Jerusalem could benefit all the millions of people who lived elsewhere in the world or who had lived and died before his incarnation (4.2–8).

There was also an analogy between the incarnation and Scripture, and in his 1943 encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* ("Under the Inspiration of the Holy Spirit") that did so much to encourage biblical studies and ecumenism among Catholic scholars, Pope Pius XII pointed out that both "words" are simultaneously divine and human, with the human element, flesh and text, veil-

ing the divine, God and His message. "For as the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things, 'except sin,' so the words of God, expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect, except error."<sup>17</sup> This relation can be illustrated by medieval and Renaissance paintings of the annunciation, where Mary holds an open book (usually Isaiah) as the angel Gabriel announces that she shall "bring forth a son" (Luke 1:31). Analogously, this also alludes to the ancient theory of "condescension," first formulated by Chrysostom, that God often had to resort to the imperfect words of men to render His ineffable truths. Hence, biblical narratives might not be factual in the literal sense, but they were God's way to communicate, and their occasional naivete is a divine accommodation to the limited understanding of Scripture's listeners and readers.

The incarnation can also serve as a precedent and justification for Christian art, for as God became flesh in Jesus, so divine truths can be materialized in painting and sculpture. At 13:16, Matthew added another proof text for the legitimacy of Christian icons ("But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear"), though iconoclasm never became for the Western church the divisive issue it was for the Eastern, where it divided Orthodoxy from 752 to 842 and caused a wholesale destruction of icons. Orthodoxy still gives their holy icons, with their flat and stylized figures in richly colored vestments, a quasi-sacramental status, whereas it rejects naturalistic paintings as well as statues and crucifixes.

The early church historian Eusebius put Christ's birth in the year 5200 after the Creation, but its exact time is still unknown. The "death of Herod" (Matt. 2:15) in 4 BC or 750 AUC (*Ab Urbe Condita*, "From the Founding of Rome") fixes Jesus' birth in that year or shortly before—which means that Christ was born "Before Christ." The tradition of dating subsequent events as AD (*Anno Domini*, "In the Year of the Lord") began with Dionysius Exiguus ("Denny the Dwarf"), who around 533 devised a liturgical calendar that put Jesus' birth 753 years after the founding of Rome; and an adjustment in 1582 by Pope Gregory created our "Gregorian" calendar. BC ("Before Christ") for previous dates was the work of Isidore of Seville (570–636), but it did not become widespread until the seventeenth century.

The Western church's date of December 25 for the birth of Jesus was a fourth-century arrangement whereby the Nativity would offset the Roman Saturnalia festival and the "birth of the unconquered Sun." This was the date of the winter solstice as set by the solar calendar introduced by Julius Caesar in 46 BC and was a holiday established in 275 by the Emperor Aurelian (270–75), a monarch who liked to associate himself with the power and brilliance of the sun. The cult of the sun was continued by Emperor Diocletian (284–305) and the early Constantine (324–37), and its vague monotheism

represented one of the last gasps of Olympianism. It even infected Christianity (surviving in English in the “son-sun” pun). A mosaic in a mausoleum on Vatican Hill shows Christ as a sun god in his chariot, recalling the pagan deities Apollo and Helios. The winter date (which Chrysostom called “the birth of the Sun of Justice”), combined with a springtime Easter, also had the merit of harmonizing the church year with the rhythm of the seasons—at least in the Northern Hemisphere. It was also nine months from March 25, said to be the Day of Creation, and it was given its own “Lenten” preparation period, the forty days of Advent (“Coming” of Christ). The medieval historian Otto, Bishop of Freising, was among those who found a special appropriateness—even inevitability—in the timing of Jesus’ birth. Earlier, he would have been too close to the descendants of our sinful first parents, and so God first provided the Mosaic law, then the power of Rome to unite the world, and finally the wisdom of the pagan philosophers so that “the minds of men were suited to grasp more lofty precepts about right living.”<sup>18</sup>

Still, Christmas (“Christ’s Mass”) was a minor part of church life until 1223, when for midnight Mass at Greccio, St. Francis of Assisi received church permission to set up a manger surrounded by Matthew’s magi, Luke’s shepherds, and the animals—St. Francis’s were live—from *Pseudo-Matthew*. The animals also recall Isaiah 1:3 (“The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel doth not know”), words foreshadowing Jesus’ rejection, although their immediate purpose was to warm the newborn baby with their breath. With this crèche, St. Francis humanized the incarnation and created the emotional, even sentimental associations that make December 25, especially as described in the Lukan account, the high point of the liturgical year for most Christians (Calvinists were an important exception) and the subject of our fondest celebrations and best-loved hymns. Yet to be added was Santa Claus from St. Nicholas (with the title “Santa” oddly feminine), candy canes in the shape of his bishop’s staff, and the evergreen Christmas tree, its candles or lights said to be Luther’s innovation when he saw the stars shining through the branches of a tree while he was out for a walk on Christmas Eve. Finally, for a truly “Victorian Christmas” British Druids supplied the mistletoe, suggesting new life, while the red holly berries foreshadow Jesus’ blood and their sharp leaves his crown of thorns. Readers who wanted a nativity story in all its picturesque, if imagined details first found it in the late-thirteenth-century *Meditations on the Life of Christ*. Said to be the work of the Franciscan St. Bonaventure, it is an immensely influential narrative that fills out the gospel stories with invented dialogues and edifying homilies.<sup>19</sup> So our Christmas, like other Christian commemorations, is a jumble of scriptural events and local customs, raising the question whether the tendency to assimilate these various traditions, legends, and usages is a sign of Christianity’s weakness or its strength.

Matthew and Luke agree that Jesus’ birthplace was Bethlehem, Joseph’s home and David’s, but Matthew’s house differs from Luke’s manger, which was actually a feed trough, or from the cave that is symbolized by the semi-dome over the apse behind the altar of many Catholic and Orthodox churches. The first mention of the traditional cave appears in the second century in the apocryphal infancy narrative called the *Protevangelium of James* (18.1) and in Justin Martyr (“a cave is shown in Bethlehem where he was born”); it also foreshadows the cave-tomb of his death.<sup>20</sup> Caves were often associated with pagan divinities in Judea, and there was one in a grove that once lay beneath Bethlehem’s Church of the Nativity, built by Constantine in 330 after his mother, St. Helena, had visited the Holy Land to locate the sacred places of her son’s adopted faith. Her church was rebuilt by the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century and was subsequently damaged, looted, and altered. But its outlines are still recognizable, and Christian hearts are invariably humbled as they stoop to negotiate the tiny entry, a low door originally meant to keep out mounted Muslims, that leads to the place of Jesus’ great entry. Another Bethlehem cave entered Bible history when St. Jerome moved there in 384 and under the patronage of St. Paula and her daughter Eustochium is said to have written his letters, tracts, and, especially, his Latin translation of the Bible in one of the local caves. This was the famous “Vulgate” Bible, declared “sacred and canonical” by the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century.

### Mary

Although the New Testament in general says little of Mary’s personal life or her relationship with Jesus, she is, in the simplicity of her faith and devotion, the incarnation’s human face; and it is her presence in Luke that gives his infancy narrative such charm and appeal. If Jesus is going to suffer on the cross, then Mary (an anglicized form of Miriam) will suffer under the cross—“There stood the sorrowing mother” being the first words of the famous Latin hymn “Stabat Mater.” Her obedience here contrasts with Eve’s disobedience in Genesis and foreshadows Jesus’ own acceptance of his Father’s will; and the virgin birth meant a fresh start for humanity after it had failed with the newly created Adam. On the other hand, Mary’s submissiveness and docility (at least as recorded in Scripture) as well as her exemption from sexuality and physical childbirth has alienated her from some feminists, who rather identify with the mother goddess of pre-Christian fertility cults.

Interest in Mary’s purity had begun with legends collected in the *Protevangelium of James*, which tells how she spent most of her childhood in the temple, where she spun the threads for the veil that would be rent at the crucifixion (27:51). It was there that a messenger from the Lord announced her

betrothal to the aged and widowed Joseph, whereupon the narrative concludes with a retelling, from Matthew, of the virgin birth, the magi, and the massacre of the innocents. It is almost universally observed that the Latin "Ave" of "Ave Maria" ("Hail Mary") was the reversal of "Eva." Later writers could multiply the paradoxes—Mary as "Virgin and mother, daughter of thine own son" (Dante, *Paradiso*, 33.1), and "Thy Makers maker, and thy Fathers mother" (Donne, "Annunciation")—as they explored those uncharted territories suggested by her place in Jesus' life but meagerly represented in Scripture.

Mary also has a significant role in the Koran, where she is mentioned more often than in the New Testament.<sup>21</sup> In its version of Jesus' birth, she is told by God (or by His emissary) that despite her virginity she will conceive and bear a child who will be a prophet and "a sign to mankind." The birth occurs "in a distant place" under a palm tree that drops ripe dates to nourish her, an event that seems derived from the flight into Egypt as recorded in the *Pseudo-Matthew*. The details of the annunciation are from Luke, not Matthew; and that Mary is called the "sister of Aaron" suggests that her name is confused with that of the OT Miriam. The Koran also charges that Jesus regarded Mary as divine, a status Muslims reject along with the divinity of Jesus (5.114).

Although she was also celebrated, paradoxically, as the Bride of Christ, Mary's virginity served as a model of Christian asceticism (some argued that she did not even menstruate); but more important theologically was her maternal importance in underscoring Jesus' human nature. The notion evolved that in the scheme of salvation her position in heaven was next to Jesus, where she came to function as a mediatrix, an intercessor for sinners, her mercy leavening his divine justice. By the fourth century, the cult of Mary ("Mariology," or, for its opponents, "Mariolatry") was ready to become one of the great cultural phenomena of Western civilization ("Symbol or energy," wrote Henry Adams, "the Virgin acted as the greatest force the Western world had ever felt"<sup>22</sup>) and as a counterweight to Christianity's occasional fulminations against the "daughters of Eve" or women in general ("the devil's gateway," according to Tertullian). In assimilating Mary to the celestial woman of Revelation 12:1-6, who was seen as incarnating the church and giving birth to a "man child who was to rule all nations," it created cathedrals ("Notre Dame de" Chartres, Paris, Reims, Amiens) and inspired artworks and devotions. Her prayer, the "Ave Maria" ("Hail Mary"), ranked with the Lord's Prayer; Saturday was her day, since she believed in Jesus' divinity before he was resurrected; and since it was believed her body was assumed into heaven, she has no special shrine. Instead, she is everywhere, universally honored in the rosary and appearing in visions, usually to people of pure and simple faith. Indeed, she seems sometimes to usurp the role of the Holy Spirit in Catholic experience. Her youth became the stuff of legends; and her relics, particularly vials of her "milk," were highly prized, preserved in reliquaries, and sent on tour in relics road shows.

That Mary's heavenly role as co-redemptress diluted the importance of Jesus as the one mediator between man and God troubled the Calvinist Reformers, who also noted that the materials of her cult, from rosaries to cathedrals, were all of human origin. James I of England (1603-25), a monarch who fancied himself a theologian, hoped that Mary had other things to do in heaven "than to hear every idle man's suit and busy herself in their errands, whiles requesting, whiles commanding her Son."<sup>23</sup> So with its charms and its excesses, its sanctities and its superstitions, its fervor and its fanaticism, Mariology exemplifies what separates the biblical record from popular piety, or, denominationally, Protestants from Catholics. What was imported arbitrarily from outside, what developed logically from within?

In the modern world, controversies have centered on the "immaculate conception," a dogma regularly confused in the secular world with the dogma of the virgin birth. According to this, Mary, "by a singular grace and privilege" was, like the first Eve, conceived without the taint of original sin. The immaculate conception was proclaimed as Catholic dogma in 1854 (and although Luther had accepted it before it became dogma, most Protestants maintained that it diminished Christ's share in sinful humanity and undercut the doctrine of his universal redemption). Controversial, too, was her "assumption," whereby at her death she was "assumed body and soul into heavenly glory," in part because she had in life enjoyed a unique "consortium" with her son and in part because she was exempted from the death that is the legacy of original sin. The assumption was proclaimed as dogma in 1950.<sup>24</sup>

### The Magi

The second of the three infancy sections (2:1-12) features the magi and a "star in the east." Matthew's is a story that, like two other dramatic masterpieces, Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, begins in the dark. Like the Greek tragedy, with its fiery signal announcing the fall of Troy, the good news is symbolized by light out of darkness—though both stories will lead to suffering and death, and when Jesus is crucified there will again be "darkness all over the land" (27:45). The star is purely Matthean, since there would be no room for the magi's visit in Luke's infancy narrative, where their place is taken by the shepherds. Astral wonders were often associated with the births and deaths of ancient leaders, most notably the spectacular daylight comet of 44 BC that appeared at Julius Caesar's funeral and was interpreted as a sign that he had been made a god. But here the "fulfillment" citation, which surprisingly Matthew does not quote, perhaps because he had doubts about the story's historicity, is Numbers 24:17 ("There shall come a Star out of Jacob"), a prophecy by Balsam, a seer-magician who foreshadows the magi. Its mem-

ory is preserved in Orthodoxy's liturgy, where the priest uses a star-shaped object with bent tips to cover but not touch a particle of the communion bread; and it has given its name to the Masonic Order of the Eastern Star.

There has also been a long tradition of attempts to verify the star story through astronomical data, whether they showed a conjunction of planets, a comet (since it seems to move), or a supernova.<sup>25</sup> This still leaves unexplained the odd fact that the always-suspicious Herod did not notice it, though it "stood over where the young child was" (2:9). This, in turn, raises the possibility that it was not a star but a sign that the magi—if they were astrologers—interpreted as presaging the birth of a messiah. Popular piety expanded these wonders: one legend had the star take on the appearance of a child's shining face with scepter and cross; another held that it showed the Greek designation for Christ, chi-rho (*XP*). From Ignatius of Antioch, early second century, the first churchman to quote Matthew, came the story that all the other stars, including the sun and moon, formed a ring around this star, only to be outshone by it so much that all magic, witchcraft, and diabolism ceased, for the power of death was about to be destroyed.<sup>26</sup> In satirizing the medieval obsession with relics in his *Decameron*, Boccaccio (1313–75) has one of his churchmen list those he was privileged to see while in Jerusalem: the finger of the Holy Spirit, a vial of the sweat of St. Michael shed while fighting the devil, some of the sound from the bells of Solomon's temple, and rays from the star that the magi saw in the east.<sup>27</sup>

Matthew's dramatic juxtaposition of "King of the Jews" (2:2), referring to Jesus, and "Herod the king" explains why the Romans' puppet ruler is "troubled," though it is unclear why "all Jerusalem" is troubled with him. This prefigures the "kingship" of Jesus that will recur during his confrontation with Pontius Pilate (27:11, 29, 37), who in AD 26 became the third prefect of Judea after the Romans' removal of Herod's ruthless son Archelaus in AD 6. As for the "little town of Bethlehem," the prophet Micah (5:2) foretold that out of it would come a "ruler in Israel," but its main significance for Matthew is that it was David's town, and he is fond of giving Jesus the messianic title "Son of David." Bethlehem is now almost a southern suburb of Jerusalem, and its Church of the Nativity has a crypt called the "Grotto of the Nativity," though there is great uncertainty as to the exact site of Jesus' birth, if in fact it took place in Bethlehem and not in Nazareth, as many scholars believe. Nazareth was of even less importance than Bethlehem, generally unmentioned outside the New Testament (John 1:46: "Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?"). Until excavations in 1955 proved otherwise, it was believed not to have existed before the fourth century BC. Its biblical remains are sparse and questionable: a crypt said to contain parts of Mary's house under the modern Church of the Annunciation; "Mary's Well," still in use; and St. Joseph's Church, over what is reputed to have been his house and workshop.

The magi are traditionally three in number, to correspond with their gifts, and have been given the exotic and melodious names Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. They are usually portrayed traveling by camel and wearing royal or priestly robes, often with conical "Phrygian caps" folded forward at the peak. Their exotic attire adds a picturesque effect to the rustic settings of so many "adoration of the magi" paintings, and Christmas card buyers reportedly prefer Matthew's magi to Luke's shepherds, though many artists include both contingents. They are occasionally said to be descended from Noah's three sons; hence, they can represent the three known continents (Balthasar is sometimes pictured as black) or the three stages of life. Their three gifts can symbolize Jesus' royalty (gold), divinity (frankincense used in worship, more commonly in the Eastern church and not until the fourth century—or for the more pedestrian purpose of masking the smells of the stable, though here they are in a house), and humanity or, ominously, death (since corpses were anointed with myrrh, a mixture of aromatic resins); and one story had them receiving Jesus' swaddling clothes as a return gift. Or, according to the *Golden Legend*, in terms of the givers, the gifts represent love, prayer (since incense in church services rises as a fragrant offering to God), and self-mortification (1.83). Dante in his political essay *De Monarchia* mentions—and disputes—another tradition, that frankincense and gold represent spiritual and temporal power, which Jesus would later pass on to Peter and to Peter's papal successors.<sup>28</sup> A sixth-century legend claimed that they were treasures brought by Adam from paradise and hidden by his sons in a cave, where they were found by the magi. But a cranky English deist, Thomas Woolston (1669–1733), objected to the gifts. "If they had brought sugar, soap and candles they had acted like wise men." And feminists have observed that if the "Three Wise Men" had been "Three Wise Women," they would have brought practical gifts and asked directions so that they could arrive in time to clean the stable and help deliver the baby. Still, each year the British monarch has two Gentleman Ushers present gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the Dean of the Chapel Royal in London, and the magi's offering of gold is a precedent for the sumptuous decoration of churches.

The popular hymn "We Three Kings" has it that they "from Orient are" (deriving from Isa. 60:3, 6 and Ps. 72:10), but the magi were probably thought of as Persian priests or Babylonian astrologers (Dan. 1:20, 2:27, and 5:15; hence "magic"), and the "star" that guides them may refer to their astrological findings. As both "wise men" (the KJV translation of *magoi* at 2:1) and Gentiles, the magi were important for the universality of Jesus' mission; and in 1894, as part of his reconciliation efforts with Orthodoxy, Pope Leo XIII cited their worship of the Christ child as the first example of "Eastern rites" in the Church.<sup>29</sup> They are pagans brought early to Jesus, though it may never be known whose envoys they were, why they would seek out a Jewish

messiah, why they did not go directly to Bethlehem, how they must have reacted on discovering that the future "king of the Jews" was a baby so humbly born, how a star could designate a single house (despite the artistic tradition, they do not kneel at the manger), or what they made of their experience. But their obeisance before the infant symbolically foreshadows the subjection of learning to revelation, of magic to miracle, of superstition to faith, of paganism to Christianity. Even though the church, which condemns astrology for its determinism and fatalism, was uncomfortable with the star's predictive function in this story (if it was not a special star), it is appropriate that the pagan magi be informed and inspired in terms of their own astral beliefs.

Tertullian (160–225) was the first to note that the magi were also considered kings, drawing on Isaiah 60:3 ("And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising"), both to magnify their importance and minimize their association with magic and to illustrate the subjection of temporal power to spiritual.<sup>30</sup> One legend had Mary and Joseph robbed of the gold by the thieves later crucified with Jesus, another that it was entrusted to Judas, who embezzled it. In attacking the Church of the Nativity in 614, the Persians were said to have spared the columns decorated with paintings of their three ancestors, the magi. Constantine's mother, Helena, reportedly brought back relics—if not the bodily remains—of the magi to Constantinople, from where they traveled to Milan and then with Frederick Barbarossa in 1164 to Cologne, where they would be visited by German kings after their coronation in Aachen. Visitors to the Cologne Cathedral can see the "Shrine of the Three Kings," a gold sarcophagus reputed to be the largest in Western Europe, though one such visitor, Martin Luther, denounced it as a fraud. Later Swinburne, in a letter to his mother, wrote: "The Priest removed a part of the head and showed me the three skulls crowned and the names written in rubies. The bare dark skulls looked strange, but not, I thought, ugly or out of place in the diadems of gold and pearls."<sup>31</sup> Marco Polo also claimed to have seen the magi's bodies at Saveh near Teheran in 1272, still intact and with hair and beards in place.<sup>32</sup> In medieval devotions the magi, who had been guided by God and saved from Herod, had a special place as protectors and intercessors.

Matthew's "Epiphany" (2:11) recalls the "revelation" ceremonies in paganism at which an image or symbol of the god was displayed to the people, and it has been variously associated with Jesus' birth, baptism, or appearance to the magi. Celebrated on January 6, it is regarded as Christmas in many Eastern churches since Jesus now appears to the wider world. It is then that the magi give children gifts, while in the West it is often the date for removing Christmas decorations. Epiphany is also known as the "Feast of the Twelve Days," since it completes the Christmas cycle begun on December 24, though Matthew does not mention Jesus' circumcision or Mary's purification (Luke 2:21–

22), which is surprising since he records Jesus' later assertion that he has come to fulfill every "jot" and "tittle" of the law (5:17–18).

But there is more to this verse (2:11): Matthew is preeminently the gospel of worship, and "fell down" also provides scriptural warrant, with Luke 5:8 (Peter "fell down at Jesus' knees"), for kneeling at prayer. The ancients generally thought kneeling was undignified, but for St. Basil it was a "way of showing by our actions that sin has cast us to the ground," and the longstanding prohibition of kneeling in Orthodox churches on Sunday and Easter is a sign "that our fall has been corrected through the resurrection of Christ on the third day."<sup>33</sup> In the early church the custom was to stand for collective prayer, kneel for private prayer; but for Catholic Christians one sits to listen, stands to sing, and kneels to pray. Most expressive of all is prostration, described here and again with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (26:39). Suggesting the veneration due a god, it is normally reserved for priests at their ordination.

Kneeling has always been a source of denominational disagreements, particularly when receiving the bread and wine of Communion, since Jesus' disciples were probably reclining when the Eucharist was instituted at the Last Supper. One dispute concerned the "Declaration on Kneeling," which Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556), Archbishop of Canterbury under Henry VIII, inserted at the last minute into the 1552 revision of the *Book of Common Prayer* (1549). It permitted communicants to kneel for the reception of the Eucharist, though specifying that this did not demonstrate a belief that Christ's "natural flesh and blood" was present in the host and that "no adoration is done, ought to be done" to the bread and wine. But it was omitted from the 1559 edition, then shortened and reintroduced in 1632, with "real and essential" changed to "corporal." In nineteenth-century editions of the *BCP*, it became known as the "Black Rubric" when it was printed in black instead of the red print used to indicate liturgical rubrics, or directions. Conversely, the Puritans rejected this "show of papistry," and with an allusion to 11:28b ("I will give you rest") favored sitting at their "Common Table," for thereby, they said, "we signify rest, that is a full finishing through Christ of all the ceremonial law, and a perfect work of redemption wrought that giveth rest forever."<sup>34</sup>

One story had the star leading the magi back home, another that they were later baptized by St. Thomas the Apostle on his way to evangelize India. But the fact that they went back by "another way," reportedly to avoid Herod, has become a Christian metaphor for the radical and unsettling change in "way of life" by those "pale unsatisfied ones" who have come to Christ and experienced "the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor" (Yeats, "The Magi").<sup>35</sup> Already in the late sixth century, Gregory the Great (540–604) noted that "having come to know Jesus, we are forbidden to return by the way we came." This

is also a theme of T. S. Eliot's poem, "Journey of the Magi," in which the speaker comments that "this Birth was / Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death. / We returned to our places, these kingdoms, / But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, / With an alien people clutching their gods."<sup>36</sup>

The next event is the "massacre of the innocents" (2:16-18), which Jesus escapes by the "flight into Egypt"—episodes that only Matthew records and that give his narrative a dark dimension missing from Luke's message of peace and joy. The prophecy thereby "fulfilled" is at Hosea 11:1, where it refers to the exodus, thus underlining a connection between Jesus and the Israelites fleeing from Egypt. Readers might wonder what Herod had to fear from a baby, or why he was unable to find Jesus in a house marked by a star and visited by three important foreigners, or why he would order the murder of two-year-olds if he wanted only to eliminate one newly born infant. The historian Josephus (37-100), who records the bloodthirstiness of Herod, does not mention this event that has been so vividly represented in Western painting, and it is unlikely that Herod's Roman masters would have tolerated such an outrage. Even those who take it as factual concede that it might have involved no more than twenty children, whereas one martyrology put it at fourteen thousand. Some prefer to see it as an elaboration of the historical fact that Herod put three of his sons to death, and Christian moralists could take comfort in the justice of a child-murderer being repaid with terrible children of his own. The *Golden Legend* also reports that among the massacre victims was one of Herod's infant sons, who had been entrusted to a nurse (1.58). It obviously reflects the common myth that gods and heroes suffer endangered births and often have to be taken into temporary exile. Still, a shoulder-blade from one of the "Holy Innocents" was listed among the relics owned by Peterborough Abbey in England in the twelfth century, and the skeleton of another was said to be in the vast collection of relics at Wittenberg, the cradle of the Reformation, the property of the local leader and protector of Luther, Frederick the Wise. And it is appropriate that the true "King of the Jews" (2:2) conflict with the man who only *thinks* he is king of the Jews.

According to the *Golden Legend*, the Holy Innocents, "in each of whom Christ was put to death" (2.33), were accorded instant sainthood as the church's first martyrs, even though they died before Jesus' redemptive work was accomplished (a similar exception was made for the seven Maccabee brothers who led the Hebrew revolt against Antiochus in the second century BC). Their martyrdom was celebrated by the early Christian poet Prudentius: "All hail, ye infant martyr flowers, / Cut off in life's first dawning hours."<sup>37</sup> Their slaughter is commemorated on December 28, "Holy Innocents' Day," when in medieval times children were allowed to take over the churches during the "Feast of the Boy Bishop," the innocence of children understood as mitigating any possible offense. Their fate reappeared in the notoriously anti-

Semitic legends of Christian children kidnapped by Jews and forced, often at Easter, to repeat the sufferings inflicted on Jesus. Most famous was "yonge Hugh of Lincoln," an eleven-year-old boy said to have been crucified on August 27, 1255, by wealthy Jews in that city, his fate recorded in Chaucer's *Prioresse's Tale* (232).

Verse 17 refers to Jeremiah 31:15, where Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, is pictured in Ramah "weeping for her children," the Israelites being deported to Babylon (just as Jesus had been "deported" into Egypt), but Calvin noted that the next two verses in Jeremiah point to hope and restoration. Thomas Paine, for whom all the "fulfillments" cited in the New Testament were not prophecies but "impositions" wrested out of context, wrote: "This verse, when separated from the verses before and after it, and which explain its application, might with equal propriety be applied to every case of wars, sieges, and other violences, such as Christians themselves have often done to the Jews, where mothers have lamented the loss of their children."<sup>38</sup>

That the king was "exceeding wroth" (v. 16) supplied the raging Herod of the medieval mystery cycles, as recalled in Hamlet's "it out-Herods Herod" (3.2.16). In the Wakefield pageant *Herod the Great*, the king fears that he will be deposed by an alliance of these three kings and the child destined to be a king. During one liturgical drama staged in the cathedral at Padua, the attendants of the angry Herod went around the church striking clerics and worshipers with inflated bladders. And in our own time, Herod has appeared as a disillusioned liberal in W. H. Auden's Christmas oratorio *For the Time Being* (1944). His rule, he insists, has been enlightened and progressive, but he is helpless in the face of what he sees as his subjects' irrational needs and hopes—so he must reluctantly resort to force. "O dear, why couldn't this wretched infant be born somewhere else? Why can't people be sensible? I don't want to be horrid."<sup>39</sup> And in his 1961 remake of Cecil B. DeMille's film *King of Kings*, director Nicholas Ray, presumably out of deference to American Jews, identified Herod as "an Arab of the Bedouin tribe."

These events look before and after, foreshadowing the passion, when "the chief priests and scribes" will again help another official to find and condemn Jesus. And they recall the unusual birth of a former leader and liberator, Moses, and the slaughter of the Hebrew babies (Ex. 1:22), just as Herod plays the role of the hard-hearted Pharaoh. Similarly, the Holy Family's return from Egypt repeats the exodus experience, and Jesus' name reproduces Joshua. Matthew's fondness for these OT connections, which are not in Luke's infancy narrative, casts further doubt on the historicity of the events.

The "Egyptian Connection" (vv. 19-22), important in associating Jesus with Moses, is elaborated in the *Pseudo-Matthew* (18-20), which has wild animals reverently escorting the Holy Family on its journey, palm trees lowering their branches to do the Christ child homage and to provide the family with

food, and the 365 idols in one city falling to pieces on their arrival. Although their stay there was brief, one story had Jesus working in Egypt, the traditional home of sorcerers, and learning the kinds of magical arts that would enable him on his return to Palestine to style himself as a "Son of God" (the allegation of Celsus [1.28]). Other legends are more complimentary, with Jesus helping Mary eke out a living as a spinner and seamstress while Joseph works as a carpenter, with various localities later claiming to have been their place of refuge. Scenes of the Holy Family resting on their flight into Egypt were popular with Reformation painters since they showed Mary as a normal woman, not the quasi-supernatural mediator that Luther had criticized. These countered the paintings of *Maria Lactans*, Mary nursing the Christ child, a favorite subject for those churches claiming to have among their relics vials of her milk, while theologically it presented the Catholic Mary as a source of grace. "Flight" paintings also enabled artists to add landscape settings, often classical or European (cf. Carracci, 1603–1604; Rome), and the presence of an ass and palm trees contrasted this scene of flight with Jesus' later—and triumphal—entry into Jerusalem (21:7–8). The event was parodied in the medieval "Feast of Asses," popular in France, where a young girl carrying a baby on an ass would ride into the church and braying sounds were inserted into the Latin of the liturgy. Visitors to Bethlehem can be shown the "Milk Grotto" just southeast of Manger Square, where Mary and Jesus were supposedly hidden before the flight. The sojourn in Egypt was also prophetic in taking Jesus early in his life to a land of the Gentiles; and Egypt as a place of refuge recalls the sojourn in Egypt of another Joseph (Gen. 39:2: "and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian").

The infancy narrative was amplified by a series of curious legends found in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (2c). The child Jesus, sometimes oddly obnoxious or pointlessly precocious, turns clay sparrows into live birds (a detail that found its way into the Koran [3.48]); he causes the death of one boy who bumps into him, then revives another who has fallen off a roof and died. He bewilders his teachers with arcane allegories, and he helps Joseph by lengthening boards to the right size. Mark Twain parodied these stories: "A young man who had been bewitched and turned into a mule, miraculously cured by the infant Savior being put on his back, and is married to the girl who had been cured of leprosy. Whereupon the bystanders praise God."<sup>40</sup>

The infancy narrative then concludes with the Holy Family returning, not to Bethlehem, but to Nazareth in Galilee, a fertile and densely populated area in northern Palestine. Their purpose was to avoid Archelaus, the worst of Herod's three sons, who appears only here (v. 22) in the New Testament. On his father's death, the Romans made him "ethnarch" of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea but deposed and banished him in favor of their own governors in AD 6 when his subjects protested his brutality. The source of this "fulfillment

citation" (v. 23), attributed vaguely to "prophets," is unknown, but the early Christians were called "Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5).

Legend has the actual house of Mary saved from the Arabs in 1291 and carried by angels from Nazareth to Dalmatia and then in 1294 to Loreto, Italy, where it was deposited in a laurel grove (hence the city's name) to become the *Santa Casa* ("Holy House"), a popular pilgrimage goal (Descartes visited it in 1623; Galileo, in 1618 and 1624). It is now inside the Sanctuary of the Holy House, begun in 1468, and is encased in walls by Bramante (1444–1514) that are faced with marble and richly decorated. It has no foundation, and its materials are said to be peculiar to Nazareth. But the Catholic Church, while acknowledging pious opinion, prefers to regard it only as a shrine to the house of the annunciation.

Strangely missing from the New Testament is any mention of Sepphoris, a city that Jesus must have known well since it was only three miles northwest of Nazareth, it had a multilingual population that may have reached 30,000, and it served in the first centuries before and after Christ as the capital of Galilee. Destroyed by the Romans after uprisings that followed the death of Herod in 4 BC, it was rebuilt by his son Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee, and adorned with shops, public buildings, and a theater. With a large Greek-speaking population, it could well have been where Matthew's gospel was composed. Those who prefer to see Jesus as a wise man rather than a divine redeemer are tempted to speculate that Joseph might have worked on the reconstruction of Sepphoris and that Jesus might have visited it, experiencing something of its Hellenistic cosmopolitanism, and that not all of his young manhood was spent in the remote and rural Nazareth of Christian tradition.