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Chapter 6

LUKE'S STORIES OF THE BIRTHS OF JOHN AND JESUS

Luke's Preface (Luke 1.1-4)

We have observed that there is some question about whether Matthew intended the first two words of his Gospel as a title for just the genealogy of Jesus in ch. 1 or for more of the Gospel. In contrast, Luke certainly intended his first four verses to be a formal preface to his whole Gospel and also for his second volume, the book of Acts. We know this for several reasons, but I mention only two. Notice, first of all, that the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are addressed to the same person, Theophilus. And notice also that Luke begins Acts by saying, 'In the first book, Theophilus' (Acts 1.1).

When Luke says that 'many have undertaken', his word translated as 'undertaken' (*epecheirēsan*; lit. 'taken in hand') may also be translated as 'attempted'. His word 'many' (*polys*; Mark 61 times; Matthew 60; Luke 60; Acts 67) surely is an exaggeration. Because of Luke's fascination with the word 'many', we do not know how many 'many' was. Goulder remarks that Luke 'was speaking of Mark, Matthew and their predecessors'. Since 'attempted' implies failure, we should use the neutral translation 'have taken in hand' out of consideration for Luke's respect for Mark and Matthew.¹ The word 'attempted' does imply that the authors did not succeed in their attempts. But apparently that is what Luke meant because in Acts 9.29 and 19.13 Luke uses the verb *epicheireō* with precisely that meaning.

At any rate, it appears that Luke was not satisfied with the work of his predecessors, so he decided 'to write accurately in order' (Lk. 1.3, Greek text). The word for 'in order' is *kathexēs*, one not used in the New Testament except by Luke (Lk. 1.3; 8.1; Acts 3.24; 11.4; 18.23),

1. Goulder, *Luke*, I, pp. 198-99.

where sometimes the meaning can be taken as 'in succession'. So if we take Luke's word *kathexēs* in that sense, perhaps Luke was saying that he was writing about events in Jesus' life in the order in which they occurred. This would coincide with his big word *anataxasthai*, meaning 'to put in order' or 'to arrange in order' (Lk. 1.1).

Perhaps Fitzmyer conveys Luke's meaning when he says that Luke intended to write 'a systematic presentation', or as he translates Luke's Greek: 'to put them systematically in writing for you, Theophilus'. However, the idea of 'in succession' seems to be confirmed in Acts. Luke begins Acts by writing: 'In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven' (Acts 1.1-2).

The word for 'accurately' is the adverb *akribōs*, used also in Acts 18.25 of Apollos who 'taught accurately the things concerning Jesus'. The noun *akribeia* and the adjective *akribēs* are used in Acts 22.3 and 26.5, where Paul is reportedly speaking about his strict Jewish religious observance. The comparative is used in Acts 18.26 and 24.22, also with reference to greater accuracy about religious matters.

The words mentioned in Acts have religious connotations and indicate that the words in Lk. 1.3 should be taken in the same way. They should not be taken to mean that Luke had done careful research. This is true in spite of the fact that he mentions 'eyewitnesses', because he adds 'and servants of the word', words loaded with theological implications. Moreover, the word translated in the NRSV as 'have been fulfilled' (*plērophoreō*) is a synonym for one used elsewhere by Luke for the fulfillment of Scripture (e.g. Lk. 4.21; 22.37). And the word translated as 'handed on' (*paradidōmi*) was regularly used among early Christians to refer to religious teaching or tradition passed on to others. For example, Paul commends the Christians in the church at Corinth because they 'maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you' (1 Cor. 11.2; see also 1 Cor. 15.3; Rom. 6.17; Acts 16.4). 'Truth' (*asphaleia*) in Lk. 1.4 originally meant 'physical safety', then 'security' or 'reliability'. Fitzmyer translates it as 'assurance'.² These observations indicate that 'the truth' Luke writes about (Lk. 1.4) is more in the nature of religious or theological assurance than historical fact.

2. Fitzmyer, *Gospel*, I, p. 300. He mentions the difficulty of translating *asphaleia* accurately and gives several other possibilities.

Having said only this much about Luke's preface, crucial questions for the historian must remain unanswered. Luke says that 'after investigating everything carefully from the very first', he wrote his account (Lk. 1.3). How could any ancient writer—or even a modern one—possibly investigate *everything*? What records of Jesus' birth were there to be investigated? How can we separate historical facts from interpretation in Luke's account? How did Luke investigate the miraculous incidents he reports? What methods would he have used to investigate them? How would we investigate something taken to be a miracle if we ourselves believed in the actual occurrence of the miracle? If we *believed* it to be a miracle, why would we even try to investigate it? If we thought we had to investigate it, would we actually believe it?

Background for Luke's Stories of Jesus' Birth

Luke's stories of the births of John and Jesus are saturated with knowledge of the Old Testament, and Luke shaped his stories after models taken from it. We have already talked about Luke's use of the Old Testament and observed that the story of Elkanah, Hannah and Samuel probably was the model for much of what Luke writes concerning John and Jesus.³ Now we consider several other background possibilities.

Story of Abraham and Sarah

There are close parallels between the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Rachel, and the parents of Samson and of Samuel and Luke's story of Zechariah, Elizabeth and John. The following are some examples from the story of Abraham and Sarah.

Abraham and Sarah were both very old (Gen. 17.1, 17); so were Zechariah and Elizabeth (Lk. 1.7, 18). The statement about age is repeated in both Genesis and Luke. Sarah was barren (Gen. 11.30), and so was Elizabeth (Lk. 1.7). Of Abraham it is written: 'He kept...my commandments and my regulations' (*tas entolas mou kai ta dikaiōmata mou*; Gen. 26.5). Both Zechariah and Elizabeth lived 'blamelessly (*amemptoi*) according to all the commandments and regulations (*tais entolais kai dikaiōmasin*) of the Lord' (Lk. 1.6). God said to Abraham, 'Be blameless' (*amemptos*; Gen. 17.1). Both Abraham and Zechariah

3. See Goulder, *Luke*, I, pp. 206-18 and parts of pp. 237-54.

want to 'know' some proof that what they hear is to come to pass (Gen. 15.8; Lk. 1.18). The Lord responds to Abraham while in 'a deep sleep' (dream or vision) and reassures him (Gen. 15.12-21). The angel reassures Zechariah while still having his vision (Lk. 1.19-20). When Sarah doubted because of her age, the Lord said to Abraham, 'Shall any word be impossible with God?' (*mē adynatei para tō theō rhēma*; LXX Gen. 18.14). The angel says to Mary concerning Elizabeth: 'No word shall be impossible with God' (*ouk adynatēsei para tou theou pan rhēma*; Lk. 1.37).

Here are some other verbal parallels between the Old Testament story and that of Luke: 'Your wife Sarah shall bear you a son' (Gen. 17.19) and 'Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son' (Lk. 1.13); 'You shall name him Isaac' (Gen. 17.19) and 'You will name him John' (Lk. 1.13); and 'The child grew' (Gen. 21.8) and 'the child grew' (Lk. 1.80).

Story of Samson

The following are some parallels between Luke's story of John (Lk. 1) and the story of Samson (Judg. 13): 'There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah' (Judg. 13.2) and 'There was a certain priest whose name was Zechariah, of the priestly order of Abijah' (Lk. 1.5; Greek); 'His wife was barren, having borne no children' (Judg. 13.2) and 'They had no children, because Elizabeth was barren' (Lk. 1.7); 'An angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her' (Judg. 13.3) and 'There appeared to him an angel of the Lord...the angel said to him' (Lk. 1.11, 13); 'Although you are barren...you shall conceive and bear a son' (Judg. 13.3) and 'Elizabeth was barren... Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son' (Lk. 1.3); 'Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink' (Judg. 13: 4) and 'He [John] must never drink wine or strong drink' (Lk. 1.15) and 'The boy [Samson] shall be a nazirite [one who abstains from wine and strong drink] to God from birth' (Judg. 13.5), Samson will 'begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines' (Judg. 13.5) and John 'will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God' (Lk. 1.16); 'The woman bore a son, and named him Samson' (Judg. 13.24) and 'His mother said... "he is to be called John"' (Lk. 1.60); 'The child grew, and the Lord blessed him' (Judg. 13.24) and 'The child grew and became strong in spirit' (Lk. 1.80); 'The spirit of the Lord began to stir him' (Judg. 13.25) and 'He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from the womb of his mother' (Lk. 1.15; Greek).

God's Promise to David

The passage in Lk. 1.32-33 has been modeled after the thought and language of several in the Old Testament. With Lk. 1.32-33 compare especially 2 Sam. 7.9-16, God's promise to David made through Nathan the prophet. It became the basis for later Jewish messianic expectation, as we now know from a passage in the Qumran Scrolls (4Q Florilegium 1.10-13). 2 Samuel 7.9-16 reads (Septuagint text):

I will make you to be named according to the name of the great ones upon the earth. And I will secure a place for my people, for Israel... I will establish his kingdom... I will establish his [David's] throne even forever. I will be to him for a father, and he shall be to me for a son... And his house shall be made sure, and his kingdom forever before me, and his throne shall be set up again forever.

Now look at Lk. 1.32-33 and observe the similarities in language and thought:

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor [Greek, 'father'] David. He will reign over the house of Jacob [Israel] forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

It seems certain that Luke was influenced by the passage from 2 Samuel (see also Pss. 2.7; 89.29; Isa. 9.6-7; recall the passage from the *Psalms of Solomon* quoted in Chapter 3). But Jesus the Messiah, according to Luke, is to be not only great, Son of the Most High, have David's throne, and reign over Israel forever in a kingdom without end, but he will also be holy and the Son of God (Lk. 1.32-35).

It is impossible to tell how much of the material in the stories of John and Jesus Luke received from earlier Christian tradition and how much he invented himself on the basis of Old Testament narratives. Perhaps, as some scholars have suggested, there was a longer pre-Lukan source, including Old Testament material, for the story of John from which Luke transferred some things to his story of Jesus. Goulder has suggested that Luke even got the names of Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary from the Old Testament.⁴ However that may be, we can be sure that Luke took bits of information and strands of tradition and wove them creatively into his own account to serve his literary style and theological purposes.

4. Goulder, *Luke*, I, pp. 213-18.

Luke's Literary Style

As with most creative writers, Luke has a literary style of his own. Without becoming too technical, we can observe several interesting things about it.

A special feature of Luke's style in both the Gospel and Acts is the repetition and variation of words and phrases. This is very evident also in the stories of John and Jesus. The passages below are examples of repetition and variation in those stories. Sometimes they occur within the same pericope and sometimes in one pericope and then in another (I translate the same Greek words the same way each time, because that brings out the similarities more accurately): 'Zechariah was troubled' (Lk. 1.12) and Mary 'was greatly troubled' (Lk. 1.29); 'he made signs' (Lk. 1.22) and 'they made signs' (Lk. 1.62); 'he will be called the Son of the Most High' (Lk. 1.32) and 'he will be called the Son of God' (Lk. 1.35); 'the time came for Elizabeth to be delivered' (Lk. 1.57) and 'the time came for her [Mary] to be delivered' (Lk. 2.6); 'her neighbors and relatives' (Lk. 1.58) and 'their neighbors' (Lk. 1.65); 'the neighbors and the relatives' (Lk. 1.58) and 'among their relatives and acquaintances' (Lk. 2.44); and 'they marveled at what was said' (Lk. 2.18) and 'they marveled at what was said' (Lk. 2.33).

Another special feature of Luke's literary style is the way he sometimes distributes and sometimes concentrates closely related words or phrases closely together. The following are some examples of words repeated closely together in Luke's stories of John and Jesus: 'the hill country' (Lk. 1.39, 65); 'redemption' (Lk. 1.68; 2.38); 'make known', (Lk. 2.15, 17); 'the law of the Lord' (Lk. 2.23, 24, 39); and 'rejoicing' (Lk. 1.14, 47, 58).

If you look up the references below, you will see that some repetitions and variations appear in the pericopes about John (Lk. 1.22, 62; 1.58, 65), some in the pericopes about Jesus (Lk. 1.32, 35; 2.15, 17-18; 2.23, 24, 33, 39) and some in the pericopes about John and Jesus (Lk. 1.12, 29; 1.57 and 2.6; 1.39, 65; 1.58 and 2.44; 1.68 and 2.38).

If such variations and repetitions and words and phrases repeated closely together occurred only in Luke's infancy narratives, we might use those stylistic features to argue that Luke used different sources for those narratives than for the rest of his writing. But the literary traits mentioned are characteristic of Luke's writing style in the rest of the Gospel and in Acts.

As with Matthew, favorite words and phrases are a part of Luke's writing style. Here are some examples. 'In the days' (Lk. 1.5, 7, 8) is a favorite phrase, which occurs many times elsewhere in Luke and several times in Acts. Luke likes to begin a sentence with the word *egeneto*, meaning 'it happened' or 'it came to pass', frequently left untranslated, as in the NRSV of Lk. 1.5, 8, for example. Luke prefers to add the word 'name' (*onoma*) with the given name of a person or place, as in Lk. 1.5, 26, 27; 2.25. Luke prefers either *eipon* or *eipen* for the verb 'say' instead of *legō*, Matthew's favorite. A special favorite of Luke's is *tis*, 'a certain', for example, 'a certain priest' (Lk. 1.5). It is left untranslated there and often elsewhere in the NRSV.

The word for until (*achri*) in Lk. 1.20 is a favorite, which occurs 4 times in Luke and 15 times in Acts but only once each in Mark and Matthew. Luke often writes about feelings of joy or happiness, as in Lk. 1.28 (*chairō*), 1.44 (*agalliasis*) and 2.10 (*chara*). The three words for joy are favorites. The first occurs 12 times in Luke, 2 in Mark, and 6 in Matthew; the second, twice in Luke, once in Acts, but nowhere in Mark or Matthew; the third, 12 times in Luke-Acts, once in Mark and 6 times in Matthew.⁵

These few statistics help to inform us about Luke's peculiar literary style. Earlier I mentioned a scholar by the name of (to use Luke's diction) John C. Hawkins. He lists 151 words and phrases characteristic of Luke's Gospel, and then he says that of them 'no less than 77, being more than half of them, occur once or more in chapters i, ii...and there are no less than 115 of them in Acts... We find here (as in the case of Matthew, but not to so large an extent) that such expressions are used more abundantly in the first two chapters than in the rest of the gospel.'⁶

This information indicates how Luke used his own peculiar literary style in writing the various pericopes of his stories about John and Jesus. Keeping in mind the stylistic features of Luke just illustrated, study carefully the table below on the annunciation and birth of John and of Jesus. You will observe some more of the kinds of examples I have listed. But it is important to observe that in spite of the many similarities between the stories of John and Jesus, there are also many subtle differences in the way Luke writes about his two protagonists. I shall say more about this point later.

5. For other Lukan special vocabulary see Goulder, *Luke*, I, pp. 218-20, 233-37, 244-46, 253-55, 261-64, 268-69, 272-73, 279-81, 290-91, *et al.*

6. Hawkins, *Horae Synopticae*, pp. 16-25.

Parallels in the Birth Stories

<i>John</i>	<i>Jesus</i>
Birth occurs in time of Herod	Birth occurs in time of Herod
Zechariah has wife whose name was Elizabeth	Mary engaged to a man whose name was Joseph
Conception of John miraculous	Conception of Jesus miraculous
Parents were old and Elizabeth was barren	Mary was a virgin and had not had sexual intercourse
Angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah	Angel Gabriel sent by God to the virgin
Zechariah was troubled at seeing angel	Mary was greatly troubled by Gabriel's words
Angel says, Do not be afraid, Zechariah	Angel says, Do not be afraid, Mary
Zechariah's prayer has been heard by God	Mary has found favor with God
Elizabeth will bear you a son	You will conceive and bear a a son
You will name him John	You will name him Jesus
His name is John	He was called Jesus
Zechariah said, How will I know this? For I am an old old man	Mary said, How can this be, since I do not know a man?
Zechariah will become mute, unable to speak	Joseph never utters a word
Conception was natural through human sexual relations	Conception was supernatural; Mary did not 'know' a man for sexual relations
Conception like those of special persons in the Old Testament	Conception unique: Holy Spirit will come upon Mary
Zechariah told: He will be great in the sight of the Lord; will be called the prophet of the Most High and filled with the Holy Spirit	Mary told: He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; will be called holy, the Son of God
He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God	The Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David
With the spirit and power of Elijah...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord	He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end
The Lord has ... looked favorably on me	The Lord has looked with favor on...his servant

<i>John</i>	<i>Jesus</i>
When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb	Mary greeted Elizabeth
Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit	The Holy Spirit will come upon you
Elizabeth said, Blessed are you among women	Mary said, From now on all generations will call me blessed
Elizabeth wonders why the mother of my Lord should come to me	Mary inspired to utter the Magnificat
Many will rejoice at his birth	My spirit rejoices in God my Savior
The time was fulfilled for Elizabeth to give birth	The days were fulfilled for her to give birth
And she bore a son	She gave birth to her son
At his birth the neighbors and relatives rejoiced with Elizabeth because the Lord had shown great mercy to her	At his birth an angel announced to the shepherds, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people
Her neighbors and relatives	Their relatives and friends
Zechariah said, The Lord God looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David	Angel said, To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord
That we would be saved from our enemies	My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples
You will go before the Lord to prepare his ways	
To give knowledge of salvation to his people	For the glory of your people Israel
To give light to those who sit in darkness	A light for revelation to the Gentiles
The child grew and became strong in spirit	The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him
John was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel	At 12 Jesus was in his Father's house manifesting his wisdom

We have observed earlier how Luke subtly blends material from the Old Testament in with his stories about John and Jesus. Now this table helps us to observe that Luke also interweaves material about the two characters John and Jesus together in separate pericopes about each of them.

Other Lukan Features in his Birth Stories

As we have already observed, 'Most High', a metonym for God found frequently in the Hebrew scriptures, occurs most often in Luke's writings. In addition to the birth stories see Lk. 6.35 and Acts 7.48. Luke uses 'Son of the Most High God' in Lk. 8.28 (from Mk 5.7, its only occurrence in Mark) and 'the Most High God' in Acts 16.17 (see also Acts 7.48). Matthew, certainly a Jewish writer, does not use 'Most High' for God at all.

In the infancy narratives there are several other phenomena characteristic of Lukan writings. First, in addition to those narratives Luke mentions the appearance of angels in the body of the Gospel (Lk. 22.43; 24.23) and frequently in Acts (e.g. Acts 5.19; 7.30, 35, 38; 8.26; 10.3, 7; 12.7; 27.23). Except for the infancy narratives, Matthew does not mention an appearance of an angel in the same way Luke does (see Mt. 28.2, 5). And Mark mentions such an appearance only in Mk 1.13.

One of Luke's special interests is the Spirit or the Holy Spirit. According to Luke in both his Gospel and Acts, the Spirit itself acts and motivates people to speak and act (e.g. Lk. 2.25-27; Acts 2.4; 8.29-30, 39; 11.12). Luke speaks of the Holy Spirit coming upon persons in Lk. 1.35 and Acts 1.8. And the expression 'filled with the Holy Spirit' is peculiar to Luke in the New Testament (Lk. 1.15, 41, 67; Acts 2.4; 4.8, 31; 9.17; 13.9). The Davidic Messiah in Lk. 1.32-33 becomes specifically the Christian Messiah through the power of the Holy Spirit that made it possible for Mary as a virgin to conceive Jesus (Lk. 1.35).

There is no parallel in the Old Testament to the concept of the Holy Spirit coming upon the person who is to give birth to the messianic ruler. However, 'the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon' the branch from the stump of Jesse (Isa. 11.1-2), that is, the messianic ruler himself. And 'whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy' at the time of 'the branch of the Lord', that is, the Messiah (Isa. 4.2-6). Compare 'the child [Jesus] to be born will be holy' (Lk. 1.35).

Summaries such as those in Lk. 1.80; 2.40; and 2.52 are a characteristic feature of Luke's literary style, not only in the infancy narratives but also in the Gospel and Acts. Luke 4.14-15, for example, gives a glowing summary of Jesus' work: 'Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by every one.'

The summary in Lk. 2.52—‘And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and humans’ (my trans.)—ties the last two sections of the infancy narratives in with what precedes and with the body of the Gospel that follows. The favor of Jesus with God has already been demonstrated by Luke, beginning with Jesus’ conception and continuing through his youth. Jesus’ favor with humans is demonstrated after he makes his first public speech: ‘All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth’ (Lk. 4.22; see also Lk. 4.37; 7.17; Acts 2.41-47; 4.32-35; 5.11-16; 6.7; 9.31; 12.24; 16.5; 19.20; 28.30-31).

Date of Jesus’ Birth

In the stories of Jesus’ birth neither Matthew nor Luke mentions the actual date Jesus was born, nor is a date for that event mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament. So how do we know when Jesus was born? We really do not know for sure, but if we want to determine the time of his birth as accurately as we can, we must try to fix that event at a time that coincides with contemporary events or persons whose dates are reasonably certain.

Jesus was a Jew, Christianity originated within Judaism, and for decades Christianity did not exist apart from Judaism. But Christianity eventually became separated from Judaism, and since then the two religions have existed simultaneously. For that reason some Jewish and Christian scholars today use the designation ‘the common era’ (Jewish-Christian) for time after the birth of Jesus. Therefore, instead of using BC (‘before Christ’) and AD (*anno Domini*, ‘in the year of the Lord’, or ‘after Christ’), those scholars use BCE (‘before the common era’) and CE (‘the common era’), particularly when referring to biblical events. In that way the Christian bias in using the designations BC and AD is avoided. From here on in this work I shall use the designations BCE and CE.

Christians did not become concerned about developing a calendar of their own until several centuries after the birth of Jesus. Then they first tried to fix dates for events in his life. First of all, they tried to establish a date for the last Passover of Jesus with his disciples (see Mk 14.12-25; Mt. 26.17-29; Lk. 22.7-23). They did this, of course, because they wanted to determine the date of Easter (the celebration of Jesus’ resurrection), which became the most important Christian festival.

As time went on, Christians also became interested in fixing the time of Jesus' birth, and to do that they tried to establish the date of Herod's death, since he died soon after Jesus was born. However, that was not an easy task for several reasons. First of all, Jews reckoned dates from the time of the creation of the world, which they thought occurred at a time that corresponds with our date of 3761 BCE. But Christians wanted to date their festivals from the time of Jesus' birth. Second, Christians did not have access to published and official calendars like those today. And third, Romans dated events from the time of the founding of the city of Rome (*ab urbe condita* [a.u.c.], 'from the founding of the city').

By the sixth century CE Christians began fixing dates for Jesus' birth and his resurrection. Perhaps it was the Roman monk Dionysius Exiguus (called 'Dennis the Little') who thought Herod the Great died in 754 a.u.c. Because there is no date zero BCE or CE, Herod's death would have occurred in the last year before Jesus was born or 1 BCE, as now designated. However, later someone else fixed the date of Herod's death at 750 a.u.c. which corresponds with 4 BCE. So, if we allow two years for Herod's decree for the death of 'all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under' (Mt. 2.16) to be effective, we have the time of 6–4 BCE as the most likely date of Jesus' birth.

Besides Herod the Great several other persons, whose chronological dates are reasonably certain, are mentioned in the stories of Jesus' birth or elsewhere in the Gospels. In his introduction to the preaching of John the Baptist Luke says, 'In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius...the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness' (Lk. 3.1-2). Tiberius was the second emperor of Rome and ruled from 14–37 CE. According to Luke, therefore, this would mean that John began his public work about 28–29 CE. Since Jesus was only six months younger than John (see Lk. 1.26), presumably Jesus also began his public life about the same time, or about 29–30 CE. This presumption is supported by Luke's statement that 'Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work' (Lk. 3.23).

According to the evidence just considered, Jesus would have been born about 1 BCE or 1 CE, because there is no theoretical zero year between the time reckoned BCE and CE. Since for about 15 centuries dates have been reckoned from the time of Jesus' birth, the usual belief is that Jesus was born about 1 CE. But if we consider further evidence, fixing the year Jesus was born becomes more complicated.

Both Matthew and Luke mention a Herod as king at the time of

Jesus' birth. Matthew says that the wise men came to see Jesus 'in the time of King Herod' (Mt. 2.1). And Luke writes: 'In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah' (Lk. 1.5). The Herod mentioned was Herod the Great, who ruled as King of Judea, the land of the Jews, for Rome from 37–34 BCE, the year of his death. If we had only that information, it would be simple to fix the date of Jesus' birth sometime close to 4 BCE, since Jesus was born shortly before Herod died. We know this because Herod's son Archelaus (4 BCE–6 CE) was already ruling in the place of Herod when Joseph brought the child Jesus back to Israel from Egypt (Mt. 2.21–22).

If Herod's decree for the death of 'all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under' (Mt. 2.16) was issued the year he died (4 BCE), it would mean that Jesus would surely be killed if born after 6 BCE. The date for the birth of Jesus would, then, be sometime between about 6–4 BCE. However, the problem becomes even more complicated when we take Luke's story into further account.

In Lk. 2.1 we read: 'A decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered...while Quirinius was governor of Syria'. Since Herod ruled from 37–34 BCE. and Augustus from 27 BCE–14 CE, Jesus' birth certainly fell within the timespan of their reigns. So there is no difficulty in reconciling the date of Jesus' birth with the reigns of Herod and Augustus. The problems arise with the registration, which included 'all the world', and its occurrence during the time of Quirinius of Syria.

Rome sometimes did take a census in certain parts of her empire. Such a census was always taken, though, for the purpose of taxation and never included 'all the world', that is, the whole Roman Empire. Josephus mentions a census taken at the deposition of Archelaus in 6 CE, but it was limited to Judea and, therefore, did not include Galilee, where the hometown of Joseph and Mary was located. Josephus writes: 'Quirinius went to Judea for the purpose of evaluating the possessions of the residents [including Jews, of course] and selling the property of Archelaus' (*Ant.* 18.1.1).

As with Augustus, Quirinius was a historical character whose existence is attested by persons other than Luke. However, the best evidence by far indicates that he became governor of Syria in 6 or 7 CE. Although it has been argued that Quirinius was governor of Syria about 3 BCE, as well as in 6 or 7 CE, the evidence for that calculation in order to make Luke's story historical is too dubious to consider.

There were Roman censuses at times other than the one during the time of Quirinius, but we cannot fit Luke's story in with any of them. We know of no census conducted in the way Luke describes it. Joseph would have been registered in his hometown Nazareth, not in the town where his ancestors had lived several hundred years earlier. Remember that Luke says Joseph and Mary 'returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth' (Lk. 2.39).

In sum, Matthew and Luke agree in fixing the time of Jesus' birth before the death of Herod in 4 BCE. Perhaps, then, Jesus was born sometime between 6–4 BCE. It seems quite likely, therefore, that Luke used the census by Quirinius and Joseph's trip to Bethlehem as literary devices to locate the place of Jesus' birth at Bethlehem in accordance with earlier Christian tradition.

According to Horsley, the census is more than 'a purely literary device' and more than the resolution of a christological problem. Luke thought of Jesus as opposing Roman taxation, which was a symbol of domination, subjection and exploitation. The juxtaposition of an imperial decree with Jesus' birth 'is the height of political-economic-religious conflict: the messiah now being born would lead the people's successful resistance against that false and intolerable lordship and subjection'.⁷ Here Horsley does not object to finding symbolism in what Luke says. In spite of that, his view is a credible alternative to the one of the census as a literary device. However, a good case can be made for Luke's Messiah as a bringer of peace, not military conquest (see below).

Before moving on to another subject we should note one fact, that is, that Luke does not always get his facts straight. He is mistaken about the date of the census by Quirinius by placing it at the time of Jesus' birth. In the same way, Luke places the uprising of Theudas in the time of the procurator Fadus (44–46 CE) before the census in the time of Judas the Galilean (6 CE; see Acts 5.36–37 and Josephus, *Ant.* 20.5.1).

It should be noted here also that Luke's reference to 'the city of David called Bethlehem', a phrase that occurs only in Lk. 2.4 (see also 'city of David' in Lk. 1.11) in the New Testament, is also in error. Although the phrase 'city of David' occurs in both the Hebrew and Greek Old Testament, it always refers to the city of Jerusalem, more specifically to the 'stronghold of Zion' (see, e.g., 2 Sam. 5.7, 9; 6.10,

7. Horsley, *Liberation*, pp. 34–38.

12, 16; 1 Kgs 8.1; 11.27). The word for 'city' in 'city of David' is always *polis*, not *kōmē*, 'village', as in Jn 7.42: 'the Messiah comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was from' (my trans.).

It appears that the author of the fourth Gospel was correcting Luke by changing *polis* to *kōmē* and saying 'Bethlehem where David was from'. This avoids Luke's incorrect terminology of Bethlehem as the 'city of David' by referring to Bethlehem only as the village where David resided. Jerusalem could not, then, be thought of as the place of the Messiah's birth, and the specifically Christian tradition that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem is upheld.

Goulder thinks that Luke's memory of the census in Galilee during the time of Judas the Galilean (Acts 5.37) gave Luke the idea for the one at the time of Jesus' birth. Luke knew that Roman officials 'did not tour every farm' but expected people to sign up at local towns. As a descendant of David, Joseph had to go to Bethlehem for the census, dignified by Luke into a worldwide one. Luke's error 'of a decade may seem a peccadillo'.⁸

Brown calls attention to various motives of Luke with respect to the census and the shifting of the scene for Jesus' birth from Galilee to Bethlehem. Brown opts for the census of Israel and Judah decreed by David in 2 Samuel 24 as the background for Luke's census.⁹

According to Matthew, the Bethlehem tradition arose from the motive of fulfilling Old Testament prophecy. I think that Luke's story of the census and the trip to Bethlehem is a literary device to get Mary to Bethlehem for the birth of her son in keeping with the legend of his birth there. Fitzmyer's neutral explanation avoids both the idea of a literary device and the problem of history for the census. According to Fitzmyer, Luke was not thinking in terms of 'historical detail. His purpose is to get Mary (who is with child) to Bethlehem in time for the birth of Jesus there.'¹⁰ But the mention of Bethlehem still leaves us with a historical problem precisely because it was not one for Luke.

8. Goulder, *Luke*, I, pp. 249-51.

9. Brown, *Birth*, pp. 412-18.

10. Fitzmyer, *Gospel*, I, p. 406.