



Ron Richmond, *Exchange No. 8*,  
Brigham Young University Museum of Art.



# JESUS' ATONEMENT FORETOLD THROUGH HIS BIRTH

---

*Lynne Hilton Wilson*



Easter is the zenith of all Christian doctrine and experience. Much scripture points to this great event. Even the chronicles of the Lord's birth prefigure Easter. In both plain and intricate ways, the events recorded in Matthew's and Luke's first two chapters masterfully foreshadow the Lord's rejection, Passion, Atonement, death, and Resurrection.<sup>1</sup> Their stories are filled with meaning and prophecy. They tell a story within a story. Wicked Herod and righteous Zacharias, the Virgin Mary and upright Joseph, the shepherds and wise men—all these individuals and their stories reveal a testimony of Jesus' divinity and Atonement. But our familiarity with the nativity narratives sometimes causes us to miss the deeper witness of the Atonement, of which the authors bear record. A typological

---

**Lynne Hilton Wilson** is a *PhD candidate in theology at Marquette University*  
and an *institute teacher at Stanford Institute of Religion*.

examination of the nativity accounts adds a deeper appreciation of Jesus' role as the atoning Savior and Redeemer. Connections between the beginning and ending of the Lord's life bear witness of his divine mission and are portrayed historically, linguistically, typologically, and prophetically. This paper offers examples of themes and words from the beginning of Matthew's and Luke's Gospels that reflect events associated with Jesus' atoning sacrifice.

### *KING OF KINGS VERSUS KINGS OF MEN*

The political setting of Jesus' birth contrasts the disparity between mortal rulers and the King of Kings. Luke identified by name Caesar Augustus (27 BC–AD 14), who ruled at the time of Jesus' birth. Augustus was known as the emperor who pacified the world. His victories put an end to the violent Roman wars, and he was labeled "Savior of the Whole World."<sup>2</sup> His birthday was embraced as the beginning of the New Year. In addition, his adopted father, Julius Caesar, had been posthumously proclaimed a god by the senate in 42 BC, so Augustus used the paradoxical title "son of god" as part of his official nomenclature on coins and inscriptions.<sup>3</sup> Luke 2:1 introduces Augustus and accentuates the ironies between the emperor's life and Jesus' nativity. It was not accidental that Luke's description of Jesus' birth, life, and death present a challenge to this imperial Roman propaganda. Luke's Gospel powerfully proclaims that Jesus, not Caesar, brought real peace to the world. In describing the first Christmas and Easter, Luke testifies that Jesus, not Caesar, is the "Son of God" (Luke 1:35; 22:70).

The title “king” is used by both Herods, at the beginning and end of Jesus’ life (see Matthew 2:1; Mark 6:22). Both Herods attack Jesus, who receives the same title—respectfully from the wise men and spitefully from the soldiers and Pilate (see Matthew 2:2; 27:29, 37). Right from the start of his Gospel, Matthew draws attention to this political irony with Herod the Great’s title, “King of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2). Josephus describes Herod the Great as pathologically jealous and preoccupied with usurpers.<sup>4</sup> Herod probably felt personally challenged by the wise men’s announcement of another “King of the Jews.” This scene in Matthew begins the political drama of Jesus’ mortal life. It is not complete until his Crucifixion, when Pilate writes the title “King of the Jews” for Jesus’ cross (see Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19).

Matthew begins his Gospel with a Jewish leader questioning Jesus’ title as “King of the Jews” and ends with other leaders questioning the same title: “The governor asked him, saying, Art thou the King of the Jews? . . . and they bowed the knee before him, and mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews!” (Matthew 27:11, 29; see also Matthew 27:42).

Matthew’s use of Jesus’ royal title in the nativity narrative is echoed in his Passion account. The wise men ask King Herod for information about the new “King of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2). Two verses later, King Herod uses a different royal title when he demands information from the chief priests and scribes about “where *Christ* should be born” (Matthew 2:4; emphasis added). The same two titles are interchanged in Matthew when the chief priest demands, “Tell us whether thou be the Christ” (Matthew 26:63). Yet the Romans crucify him as “King of the Jews” (Matthew 27:37). Further, the wise men worshipped the Christ child

as King of Kings: “When they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him” (Matthew 2:11). Both birth narratives and the Passion narrative witness of Jesus’ identity as a king.

### “BOOK OF THE GENESIS OF JESUS CHRIST”<sup>5</sup>

Both Matthew’s and Luke’s narratives use Joseph’s genealogy to testify of Jesus’ mission (see Matthew 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–38).<sup>6</sup> The former testifies of Jesus’ mission as the messianic son of David, and the latter, as the Son of God. Matthew uses Joseph’s genealogy to prove that “Jesus Christ [is] the son of David” (1:1) by organizing the names around the number fourteen (the numeric value of the Hebrew letters in David’s name, *dwd*).<sup>7</sup> With names and numbers, Matthew witnesses that Jesus is a descendant of King David and that he thus fulfilled the messianic prophecies (see Matthew 1:17; Genesis 49:10). In Matthew’s Gospel, two blind men, a woman from Canaan, and the multitude on Palm Sunday herald, “Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord” (Matthew 21:9; also see 9:27; 15:22; 20:30–31; 21:15). Matthew uses the title “Son of David” to connect Jesus’ birth and mission together by testifying of his role as the Davidic Messiah.

Luke’s genealogy is masterfully constructed around the number seven—symbolizing completeness or perfection.<sup>8</sup> The genealogy immediately follows Jesus’ baptism, where the voice of the Father proclaims, “Thou art my beloved Son,” and Luke then adds a second witness through genealogy to trace Jesus back as “a Son of God” (Luke 3:22, 38). Luke’s underlying message proclaims that Jesus came from the ultimate source of perfection,

“God”—the seventy-seventh name.<sup>9</sup> Luke’s Gospel leaves no question as to whose son Jesus was. The author even pauses in his introduction to assure his audience that Joseph was only the “supposed” paternity (Luke 3:23). The title “Son of God” is scattered through all the Gospels, which serves as a recurring testimony of Jesus’ divinity. Ironically it was the same title that would bring him his death sentence (John 19:7; Luke 22:70). Outside of Luke’s Gospel, the last voice to testify of this in Jesus’ mortality comes from the Gentile centurion at the foot of Jesus’ cross: “Truly this man was the Son of God” (Mark 15:39).

### *“THE ANGEL OF THE LORD CAME UPON THEM”*

Angelic visitations fill the infancy and Passion accounts.<sup>10</sup> In Matthew’s Gospel, Joseph has four dreams in which the “angel of the Lord” directs him.<sup>11</sup> This term reflects a Hebrew construct, *mal’ak yhwah* or “messenger of Jehovah.” The phrase “angel of the Lord” is not mentioned again in Matthew’s Gospel until the morning of the Lord’s Resurrection. “Behold there was a great earthquake: for the *angel of the Lord* descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it” (Matthew 28:2; emphasis added). And a few verses later, the same angel of the Lord speaks to the women at the tomb (see Matthew 28:5–7).

In Luke’s infancy narrative, the angel Gabriel visits Zacharias in the temple sanctuary (see Luke 1:11–20) and Mary in Nazareth (see Luke 1:26–38).<sup>12</sup> An unnamed angel visits the shepherds in the fields followed by a heavenly host proclaiming, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace” (Luke 2:14). Luke seems to draw this angelic herald together with the

disciples' testimony thirty-three years later on Palm Sunday: "Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest" (Luke 19:38). Outside of the infancy chapters, Luke records only one other appearance of an angel, thus suggesting a link between the birth and Passion narratives; while Jesus was suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane, "there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:43–44). At the Annunciation, birth of Christ, suffering in Gethsemane, and rising from the tomb, angels are reported as watching, protecting, and preparing the way for Jesus to fulfill his mission as our Savior and King.

### "BEHOLD THE HANDMAID OF THE LORD"

The theme of obedient submissive service in Mary's and Simeon's lives is magnified to a divine degree in the life of Mary's Son. In the first chapter of Luke, Mary acquiesces herself to the angel Gabriel as "the handmaid of the Lord" (Luke 1:38). The Greek word *doulê* means both slave and servant.<sup>13</sup> Submissiveness was well understood in the Roman world, where one-third of the population was slaves. The word carried a powerful message. Luke chooses a masculine form of the word *doulos* a chapter later when Simeon identifies himself as a servant of the Lord: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace" (Luke 2:29; emphasis added). Simeon's poem foretells of Jesus' submitting to the role of the Suffering Servant, forming another link between the birth and death accounts (see Luke 2:34–35).<sup>14</sup> Jesus identified himself as a servant during his last week of life while preaching at the temple: "He that is greatest among you shall be your

servant” (Matthew 23:11). The word used by Matthew is *diakonos*, meaning “servant of a king.”<sup>15</sup> Jesus fully served his Father: “I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me” (John 5:30). At the Last Supper, he acknowledges, “I have kept my Father’s commandments” (John 15:10); and in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Father, . . . not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42; also Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:36). The theme of submissiveness is introduced in the birth narratives and reflected at the close of Jesus’ life.

### “THE SON OF THE HIGHEST”

Jesus is identified unequivocally as having a divine Father in the nativity and death accounts. In the birth chapters, it is stated boldly and without question (see Matthew 1:20–25; 2:2; Luke 1:32, 35, 42–45; 2:11). It is also one of the few points that Matthew and Luke share in their birth accounts. Jesus was not Joseph’s literal son but the Son of God. Matthew records the angel of the Lord appearing to his main character and saying, “Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 1:20). Likewise in Luke, the angel appears to Mary, Luke’s principal character, and says, “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35).<sup>16</sup> The witnesses of Jesus’ divine birth did not fully comprehend his mission, however. In Luke’s Passion narrative, Jesus’ claim as the Son of God did not escape the fury of Jewish leaders, who indicted him for making this blasphemous assertion (see Luke 22:70–71).



Jesus consistently referred to God as his Father. For example, in Gethsemane he prayed, “Abba, Father, . . . take away this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine be done” (Joseph Smith Translation, Mark 14:36).<sup>17</sup> During Jesus’ trial, the chief priests ask him, “‘Are you then the Son of God?’ He replied, ‘You are right in saying I am’” (New International Version, Luke 22:70). Jesus’ acknowledgment provides enough evidence for the Jewish leaders to seek the death sentence. From Matthew 27:50, Jesus’ last words uttered in mortality testify of his relationship as the Only Begotten Son: “Father, it is finished, thy will is done” (JST). Thus both the birth and death accounts of Jesus testify that he is the Son of God.

### *“THE HOLY GHOST SHALL COME UPON THEE”*

A key to identifying Jesus as the promised Messiah, at his birth and death, is his association with the Holy Ghost. John the Baptist makes this clear when he claims that the Messiah will follow him baptizing by fire (see Matthew 3:11). In the birth narrative, Luke mentions the Holy Ghost or Spirit six times; three from chapter 1 in conjunction with Zacharias (see Luke 1:15, 17, 41) and three connected to Simeon at the temple (see Luke 2:25–27). After the nativity narratives—except for the baptism, temptations, and one reference in Matthew—the Holy Ghost is not mentioned again in the New Testament until the Last Supper, when Jesus promises the Comforter.<sup>18</sup> Finally, after his Resurrection the disciples receive the gift of the Holy Ghost as Jesus “breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost” (John 20:22). The Holy Ghost actively testified

of the birth of the promised Messiah and then testified of his Resurrection.

*"EMMANUEL, OR GOD WITH US"*

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, he uses structure to add meaning to his message. Matthew crafts his nativity narratives around five Old Testament citations as evidence that Jesus fulfilled Messianic prophecy.<sup>19</sup> His first quotation reference is Isaiah 7:14, "Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us" (Matthew 1:23). The verse is the only time that the Hebrew name Emmanuel is used in the entire New Testament. Matthew not only gives the name but also translates it. Matthew's account builds a correlation between the name at birth and the role at the Resurrection, when Jesus' disciples realized that God had been with them. The child Jesus is Emmanuel, "God with us," and after his Resurrection, Jesus states, "I am with you always" (Matthew 1:23; 28:20). The key element is Jesus is God—the babe in the manger, the boy in Galilee, and the man in Gethsemane. In the Passion narrative, we see Jesus as God overcoming the sins of the world and overcoming death. Jesus was a God speaking to a God as he pled, "O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done" (Matthew 26:42). This was an appointment from a God to a God, and it was fulfilled as a God.

## "SIGNS IN THE HEAVENS"

Both the birth and death accounts contain great signs that bear witness to important events. Luke's second chapter expounds on the shepherds' vision of angels: "The glory of the Lord shone" (Luke 2:9). Matthew reports that the unique star, which the wise men saw at its rising or "in the east," later reappeared as a guide from Jerusalem to Bethlehem (compare Matthew 2:2 with 2:9).<sup>20</sup> In addition to Matthew's new star and Luke's heavenly angels, the Western Hemisphere had "no darkness in all that night, but it was as light as though it was mid-day" on the night of the Savior's birth (3 Nephi 1:19). Samuel the Lamanite had foretold that "great lights" and many signs and wonders in the heavens would precede Jesus' birth (see Helaman 14:2–6). One of those great lights described in the Book of Mormon sounds similar to the wise men's star, "such an one as ye never have beheld" (Helaman 14:5).

In contrast to all this glorious light at Jesus' birth, no star shone in the Western Hemisphere at his death, "neither the sun, nor the moon . . . for the space of three days that there was no light seen" (3 Nephi 8:22, 23). In Jerusalem, Matthew explains that at Jesus' death, "darkness fell over the whole land, which lasted until three in the afternoon" (New English Bible, Matthew 27:45). The natural calamities personified the "gross darkness" of the people who "sat in darkness" (Isaiah 60:2; Matthew 4:16). In the Western Hemisphere, spiritual and physical darkness was made worse by "a great storm, such an one as never had been known in all the land" (3 Nephi 8:5). In Jerusalem, "the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent" (Matthew 27:51).

These tumultuous signs in the heavens at Jesus' death, together with the heavenly displays at his birth, mutually witness, in contrasting ways, to the eternal mission of him who created them.

### *"GOLD, AND FRANKINCENSE, AND MYRRH"*

The Magi offered the Christ child the gifts traditionally given to a king.<sup>21</sup> Early Christians thought the wise men's gifts foreshadowed Jesus' mission. Gold was interpreted as a gift for a king, thus setting the stage for Jesus to become King of Kings.<sup>22</sup> Frankincense depicted the divinity of Jesus.<sup>23</sup> In the ancient world, myrrh was used for embalming; therefore the gift was seen as preparation of Jesus' death, burial, and Resurrection.<sup>24</sup> After Jesus' death, John—the only Apostle at Jesus' cross—says that Nicodemus brought “a mixture of myrrh and aloes” for Jesus' burial (John 19:39).

In Matthew's nativity account, the Magi do not return to Jerusalem. King Herod realizes that “he was mocked of the wise men” (Matthew 2:16). The Greek verb *empaizō* (“mock”) has a tone of ridicule. This strong language used by Matthew is employed again when Jesus is mocked and derided as a king during Matthew's Passion narrative: “When they had platted a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand: and they bowed the knee before him, and mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews!” (Matthew 27:29; see also vv. 31, 41). This use of *empaizō* is another point of contact between the birth and death narratives. In addition to the word itself, the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth are amplified in his death and draw a connection between the two witnesses.

## LEADERS “SEEK THE YOUNG CHILD TO DESTROY HIM”

The parallels between Jesus’ birth and death continue in Matthew’s text as they testify of his atoning sacrifice. When the angel returns to assure Joseph that the threat to Jesus’ life is gone, the angel uses the plural: “*They* are dead which sought the young child’s life” (Matthew 2:20; emphasis added). As we look back in the text to find the plural, we find Jewish leaders also mentioned. King Herod consults the “chief priests and scribes of the people” for information on the location of the new king that resulted in the killing the children around Bethlehem (see Matthew 2:4, 16). The phrase “chief priests and scribes” (Matthew 2:4) is not found again in Matthew’s Gospel until Jesus’ last week, when the “chief priests and scribes . . . were sore displeased” (Matthew 21:15) and plotted Jesus’ death. In like manner, at the end of Jesus’ life it is a group of leaders who try to kill Jesus, and “the chief priests and elders of the people” deliver Jesus to Pilate (see Matthew 27:1–2). From Jesus’ birth, several were involved in plotting his death—whether directly like Herod or indirectly as accomplices.

In Matthew 2:13 we are told that Herod wished to “destroy” Jesus. In his Passion narrative, Matthew emphasizes the same word again: “But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the multitude that they should ask Barabbas, and *destroy* Jesus” (Matthew 27:20; emphasis added). Both threats against Jesus’ life came at night (see Matthew 2:14; 26:47–56). The last link connects those babes slaughtered in Bethlehem for Jesus’ sake with Jesus, who was killed for the sake all of God’s children.<sup>25</sup>

## ATONEMENT PROPHECIES IN THE BIRTH NARRATIVES

Up to this point, we have been drawing parallels between the nativity, Passion, and Resurrection accounts. These connections have been historical, natural, symbolic, and literary. An additional connection between the nativity story and the Atonement is through direct prophecy. As lucid as any other prophecies in the New Testament, Matthew's and Luke's birth accounts emphatically testify of the Lord as our Redeemer, Savior, sign of the Suffering Servant, solution to the Fall, and source of the Resurrection.

*Redeemer.* In Luke's narrative, the first words Zacharias speaks after his nine-month silence prophesy of salvation provided by the Redeemer: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and *redeemed* his people, and hath raised up an horn of *salvation* for us in the house of his servant David" (Luke 1:68–69; emphasis added). The only other time Luke uses the word "redeemed" in his writings is just after Jesus' Resurrection on the road to Emmaus: "We trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel" (Luke 24:21). The author carefully chose and placed his words to draw attention to the prophecy given at Jesus' birth and fulfilled in his atoning sacrifice and Resurrection. Zacharias also uses the word *salvation* (meaning the saving of our eternal souls) in the same prophecy. The word is not used again until after Jesus' Resurrection (see Acts 4:12; 13:26).

*Savior.* Early in Matthew's infancy chapters, Joseph's first angelic messenger prophesies that the Lord Jesus will "*save* his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21; emphasis added). The

Greek *sōzō* can infer a general “rescue from danger or destruction” and more specifically a messianic deliverance or judgment.<sup>26</sup> All these meanings can be applied when the author repeats this word three times as Jesus is taunted in the cross: “Save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross. . . . He saved others; himself he cannot save” (Matthew 27:40, 42). The profane scoffers did not understand that not only would the Savior save himself in three days but also he would someday save them. A related word, *Savior*, is also found exclusively in Luke’s nativity narratives. First, we find it in Mary’s *Magnificat*, “My spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour” (Luke 1:47), and then in another angelic prophecy that the shepherds hear: “A Saviour, which is Christ the Lord” is born (Luke 2:11). The next time Luke uses the word Savior is after Jesus’ Resurrection: “God exalted with his right hand . . . a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins (Acts 5:31).

*Set for the Fall and Resurrection.* Another prophecy that Luke records came at the temple forty days after Jesus’ birth when Simeon holds the infant Christ in his arms and foretells, “This child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel” (Luke 2:34).<sup>27</sup> The Greek word *anastasis*, “rising,” was translated by Tyndale as “resurrection” (see also Luke 20:27, 33). This alternative translation fits perfectly in the context with the verse: “This child is set for the fall and *resurrection* of many in Israel” (see Luke 2:34). This child was foreordained to save mankind from the fall (*ptosis*, meaning downfall, loss of salvation) and to provide a physical resurrection. Even though the birth accounts announce the arrival of the Messiah and King of Kings, it is not until Jesus’ death and Resurrection that his disciples grasp that his kingdom was not of this world.

*Sign of suffering.* Simeon's Atonement prophecy at the temple continues, "Behold, this child is set for . . . a *sign* which shall be spoken against" (Luke 2:34; emphasis added). The literal translation of *sign* reads "a rejected (or opposed) symbol," referring to the rejection Jesus would experience during his mortality.<sup>28</sup> This reinforces Isaiah's prophecy seven hundred years previous regarding the Suffering Servant: "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). Isaiah identified the sign—"I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands" (49:16). At the end of his life, the day before the Last Supper, Jesus identified himself as this rejected sign. The synoptic Gospels report Jesus' entreaty, "What is this then that is written, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner?" (Luke 20:17; compare Mark 12:10; Matthew 21:42). The underlying significance of this prophecy was anticipated at his birth, but it was not fulfilled until his death. "With loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed" (NIV, Luke 23:23, see also Matthew 27:21–23; Mark 15:12–14). Simeon's prophecy at birth was fulfilled as Christ became the Suffering Servant in his Passion and death.

## CONCLUSION

Truly the nativity accounts are wonderful and beautiful. We love their simplicity, their forthright telling of the birth of Jesus. On closer inspection, the story of the Christ child's birth foretells what is to come during the events surrounding Easter. In addition to sharing the same season, the two accounts of Christ's birth and death share a similar message of suffering



and redemption. From the first nativity passages, Matthew and Luke use their structure and stories to point to the great atoning sacrifice of Jesus as the Savior of the World. In this aspect, the Gospels share God's vantage point expressed in Moses 6:63: "All things are created and made to bear record of me, both things which are temporal, and things which are spiritual; things which are in the heavens above, and things which are on the earth, and things which are in the earth, and things which are under the earth, both above and beneath: all things bear record of me" (see also Moses 5:7; 2 Nephi 11:4; Mosiah 13:31; Hosea 12:10; Hebrews 8:5).

## NOTES

1. Only Matthew and Luke share details of Jesus' birth in their accounts, and they were probably the last sections written in their Gospels. Fitzmyer and other Bible scholars deduce that the first things written were accounts of Jesus' death and Resurrection, then the Gospels were formed, leaving the birth accounts for last (Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, The Anchor Bible [New York: Doubleday, 1981], 305). Never do the rest of the four Gospels refer back to the unique information supplied by the infancy narratives. It is doubtful that the infancy traditions were widely known during the Savior's ministry, as is attested in various stories throughout the Gospels. It was assumed Jesus' literal father was Joseph: "Whence hath this man this wisdom? . . . Is not this the carpenter's son?" (Matthew 13:54–55). It was assumed he was born in Nazareth: "Some said, Shall Christ come out of Galilee? Hath not the scripture said, That Christ cometh of the seed of David, and out of the town of Bethlehem, where David was?" (John 7:41–42). Also, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46; see also Mark 1:9). It was assumed he was human: "And they were all amazed, and spake among themselves, saying, What word is this! for with authority and power

JESUS' ATONEMENT FORETOLD THROUGH HIS BIRTH

he commandeth” (see Luke 4:33–37). With the helpful perspective of time, the infancy narratives were fashioned to testify boldly not only of Jesus’ birth but also of his mission, death, and Resurrection.

2. Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1993), 415. Brown also tells us that “savior” was a frequent title for subsequent emperors. Josephus recounts how the Palestinian city of Tiberius opened its gates to Vespasian and received him as “savior” (Josephus, *War*, 3.8.459).
3. Michael D. Coogan, *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 522.
4. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 14.15.14, 16.4; 15.1.2, 8.4–5; 16.9.3–4, 10.1–2.
5. Literally Matthew 1:1 reads, “Book of the genesis” or “genealogy” of Jesus. Matthew chose to reflect the Pentateuch by opening his Gospel with the same title as the book of Genesis. This same word is also used at the beginning of his first scene in Matthew 1:18, but it is translated in English as “birth.” By using the same Greek word *genesis* two times, Matthew strongly signals a connection with the Torah. Furthermore, this key word is used to form a relationship with the two sections and also the motif for the entire genealogy.
6. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 81, 84–85; Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah: The First Coming of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 471; *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973), 1:94; Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Doctrine and Covenants*, 2:274; Ellis T. Rasmussen, *A Latter-day Saint Commentary on the Old Testament*, 260; Hoyt W. Brewster, *Doctrine and Covenants Encyclopedia*, 255; and others suggest that Luke’s genealogy was actually Mary’s lineage. They purport this to rectify the conflicting names and problem with Jesus being Davidic while only receiving Mary’s bloodline. They assert that the genealogies in Matthew and Luke are actually Joseph’s and Mary’s lineages. This is contrary to what the scriptures say, though. Both genealogies in Matthew and Luke state they are of Joseph, not of Mary (see Matthew 1:16; Luke

*TO SAVE THE LOST: AN EASTER CELEBRATION*

3:23). Their proposal is also inconsistent with Judaic customs at the time, which honored only the father's genealogy as valid (usually women's genealogy was not kept, unless she was Aaronic). Having both from Joseph should not be a problem for Jesus being Davidic. During the Greco-Roman time period, when a Jewish man named a child, he legally adopted the infant. Modern readers may have a problem in identifying Jesus as "the son of David" without knowing if Mary was Davidic, but this was not a problem in the ancient world. Furthermore, Joseph's genealogy in Matthew included Ruth, who was adopted into the house of Israel and became David's grandmother. The assumption that Mary and Joseph were cousins is based on the possibility that Joseph's grandfather, mentioned in Luke 3:25 as "Mattathias" and as "Matthan" in Matthew 1:15, was actually the same person and grandfather for both Mary and Joseph. This theory is not based on the scriptural record, but it may be feasible. In the ancient Jewish world, marriages with cousins were common. Luke gives the only scriptural lineage of Mary when he states her kinship to Elisabeth, who was a direct descendant of Aaron (see Luke 1:5). Mary could be both Aaronic and Davidic, but the later is not recorded in the New Testament or the Joseph Smith Translation (JST).

7. Matthew carefully listed Joseph's ancestry to show the fulfillment of the Davidic prophecy. Matthew 1:17 demonstrates that the author tried to emphasize the number 14. He has organized the genealogy list to fit a formula. The spans of time covered by the three sections are too great to have contained only fourteen generations each. From Abraham to David there were approximately 750 years, from David to the Babylonian exile 400 years, and from the Babylonian exile to Jesus 600 years. One reason why Matthew used 14 is found in the Hebrew practice of finding numeric values for names. The numerical value of David's name, *dwd*, was 14, which is achieved when numeric values are assigned to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in order:  $d = 4$ ,  $w = 6$ ,  $d = 4$ ; hence  $4 + 6 + 4 = 14$ . From the fifth century BC, the accepted numeric value of David's name was 14 (Brown, *Birth*, 75). Therefore, with both names and numbers, Matthew shows that Jesus is a descendant of King David.

*JESUS' ATONEMENT FORETOLD THROUGH HIS BIRTH*

The number 14 is seen again as Matthew builds his gospel around fourteen Old Testament citations that testify Jesus was the promised Messiah.

8. Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Gospel Symbolism* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft 1985), 199. Luke's record may be both plausible and unpretentious because he traces Joseph's lineage through Nathan rather than through the ruling kings.
9. Raymond Brown finds it significant that the most important names in Luke's genealogy often come as multiples of seven: David 42, Abraham 56, Enoch 70 and even God as 77 (*Birth*, 92–93). Richard D. Draper explains, "Biblical people squared a number to amplify its symbolic meaning" (*Opening the Seven Seals: The Visions of John the Revelator* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003], 83). Thus seventy-seven would mean completely perfect.
10. The only other reference to an angelic visitation outside of the birth and Passion narratives occurs after Jesus' temptation. Matthew 4:11 describes, "angels came and ministered unto him."
11. Matthew's infancy account includes a total of five dreams; three specify an angel's presence (2:13, 19), and two mention warnings from God (2:12, 22). Four of the dreams are messages to Joseph and one to the Magi.
12. The angel Gabriel was identified by Joseph Smith as Noah (Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* [Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980], 8). Gabriel also visited the prophet Daniel (Dan 8:16; 9:21). Gabriel's annunciation to Mary and Elisabeth is very similar to angelic annunciations in the Old and New Testaments (see Matthew 1:20–21; Luke 1:11–20, 26–37; Genesis 16:7–12; 17:1–18:12; Judges 13:3–23). Brown isolates five steps they share: (1) appearance of an angel, (2) fear, (3) divine message is given, (4) objection by the visionary, (5) reassuring sign given (*Birth*, 259–69).
13. Luke uses *doulê* ("handmaid") twice in a voluntary, positive position (more like a servant). The second usage is in Acts 2:18: "And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out . . . my Spirit; and they shall prophesy."

TO SAVE THE LOST: AN EASTER CELEBRATION

14. Isaiah 53:3 and 49:3, 15–16 are referred to as “Servant Songs.”
15. This is the primary definition. It can also be translated, “a deacon, one who, by virtue of the office assigned to him by the church, cares for the poor and has charge of and distributes the money collected for their use; and a waiter, one who serves food and drink.”
16. At the time of the angel Gabriel’s annunciation, Mary was already “espoused” to Joseph. Jewish marriages took place at an extremely early age. Usually girls were betrothed between twelve and twelve and a half (Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem at the Time of Jesus* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989], 365). The ideal age for a young Jewish man to marry was eighteen (Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: New Translation* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988], Abot 5:21).
17. Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 353.
18. Jesus asks, “If I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you” (Matthew 12:28). Biblical readers often credit Peter’s testimony to the Spirit, but the text credits the Father: “Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 16:17). Any other references in the Gospels are to the future coming of the Holy Ghost. The word *pneuma* is also used for an “unclean spirit” and human spirit frequently.
19. Each of Matthew’s five citations is preceded by the phrase “That it might be fulfilled.” See Matthew 1:23 (Isaiah 7:14); 2:6 (Micah 5:2); 2:15 (Hosea 11:1); 2:18 (Jeremiah 31:15); 2:23 (Judges 16:17). In addition to citing five Old Testament scriptures that are fulfilled in his nativity, Matthew also has five dreams, five scenes, and mentions the word, “Christ” five times. Raymond Brown suggests that Matthew organized his nativity narrative to show a *new* law and then goes one step further to demonstrate how the old law is succeeded in the new law by quoting a “mini-Pentateuch” of five Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled in Jesus’ life (*Birth*, 48). The rest of Matthew’s Gospel, chapters 3–25, includes five long sermons and is also organized around five “books,” each ending with

JESUS' ATONEMENT FORETOLD THROUGH HIS BIRTH

- the refrain, "when Jesus had ended these sayings" (Matthew 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Brown continues, "These five books have been seen to constitute a Christian Pentateuch based on a typology between Christ and Moses (*Birth*, 48).
20. The Greeks and Romans believed that the appearance and disappearance of heavenly bodies symbolized the births and deaths of great men. The idea was so broadly entrenched by the first century AD that Pliny felt the need to include a lengthy rebuttal in his *Natural History*. He combats the popular opinion that each person has a star that begins to give light when he is born and fades out when he dies (Pliny, *Natural History*, 2.5.26–6.28). This thesis was widely accepted for the births and deaths of great men. A late Jewish legend ascribed a star at Abraham's birth (W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew*, The Anchor Bible [New York: Doubleday, 1971], 14). The rising of a star or planet just before dawn was significant for Greco-Roman interpretation of certain incidents relating to prominent people (Ernest Martin, *The Birth of Christ Recalculated*, 2nd ed. [Pasadena, CA: Foundation for Biblical Research], 13).
  21. The number of Magi that visited the holy family has sparked interest throughout Christian history. Augustine and Chrysostom say that there were twelve (David Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Belief: A Reference Guide to More than 700 Topics Discussed by the Early Church Fathers* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998], 69). Others hold to a symbolic three because of the triple gifts. The apocryphal literature gives them names and countries and personal appearances. The Venerable Bede tells us "Melchior was an old man with white hair and long beard; Caspar, a ruddy and beardless youth; Balthasar, swarthy and in the prime of life" (F. W. Farrar, *The Life of Christ* [London: Cassell, Petter, Galpin, n.d.], 21–22). Some traditions maintain that Melchior was a descendant of Shem, Caspar of Ham, and Balthasar of Japheth. Thus they are representatives of the three periods of life and the three divisions of the globe. The gifts that the Magi offer are from Arabia. At the time, frankincense trees only grew in one place in the Arabian Peninsula. Gold and frankincense are gifts that Isaiah 60:6 and Psalm 72:10, 15 associate with the desert camel trains coming from Midian and Sheba (northwest and

*TO SAVE THE LOST: AN EASTER CELEBRATION*

southwest Arabia). The earliest traditions from the Christian fathers suggest the Magi came from Arabia. In AD 160 Justin wrote, “Magi came from Arabia and worshipped him” (Bercot, *Early Christian Belief*, 69). Forty years later, Tertullian deduced that the gifts were from Damascus and Arabia (Bercot, *Early Christian Belief*, 412). As early as AD 96, Clement of Rome associated frankincense and myrrh with “the East, i.e. the districts near Arabia” (Brown, *Birth*, 169). Palestine had close interactions with Arabia. From 120 BC to the sixth century AD, the kings of Yemen professed the Jewish faith (Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 3rd ed. [McLean, VA: MacDonald], 203). In the Old Testament, the “people of the east” are desert relatives of Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 29:1). Men from the east had a reputation of being wise, and in 1 Kings 4:30–31 their wisdom is compared to Solomon’s: “Solomon’s wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country.”

22. By the time Matthew wrote his Gospel, the interpretation of *zahab* or gold as a metal was accepted (see Brown, *Birth*, 176). Gold is the precious metal most often named in the Bible (385 times). In the Old Testament, it was imported from Uphaz (see Jeremiah 10:9), Raamah (see Ezekiel 27:22), Sheba (see 1 Kings 10:2), Havilah (see Genesis 2:11), and Ophir (see 1 Chronicles 29:4; 2 Chronicles 8:18). Occasionally gold was acquired as booty (see Exodus 12:35; Judges 8:24) but more often through commercial enterprises (see 1 Kings 10:14–24). In the New Testament gold is used as a symbol of spiritual wealth (see Revelation 3:18). In John the Revelator’s vision of heaven, the twenty-four elders were wearing golden crowns (see Revelation 4:4), and the New Jerusalem will be constructed of pure gold (see Revelation 21:18).
23. Frankincense is a fragrant gum resin exuded from the Boswellai tree. The tree grew on the Arabian Sea from at least 1500 BC (Lynn and Hope Hilton, *Discovering Lehi* [Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 1996], 115). Frankincense was imported to Judah by camel caravan from Sheba (see Isaiah 60:6; Jeremiah 6:20). The Old Testament mentions frankincense as a perfume, occasionally used for secular purposes but most often for religious ceremonies. Exodus 30:34–38 contains the

JESUS' ATONEMENT FORETOLD THROUGH HIS BIRTH

recipe for a frankincense-based incense dedicated for ritual use. No other incense was permitted on the altar of the temple (see Exodus 30:9), and secular use of the sacred recipe was absolutely forbidden (see Exodus 30:38). Offerings of frankincense were set before the Holy of Holies with the bread of the presence (see Leviticus 24:7). It was also stored in the temple for later use (see Nehemiah 13:5,9; 1 Chronicles 9:29). Frankincense also accompanied cereal offerings (see Leviticus 2:1–2, 14–16; 6:14–18). In Revelation 18:13, frankincense is listed as part of the cargo of the merchants who weep for the fallen city.

24. Myrrh is a yellowish brown to reddish brown aromatic gum or sap from trees that grow in Arabia, Abyssinia, East Africa, and India. It was highly prized from earliest times (see Genesis 37:25). It was used for incense and sacred anointing oil and as a perfume for garments (Exodus 30:23; Psalm 45:8). It was part of the cosmetic treatment used to purify young girls for the king's bed (Esther 2:12), and it was also used in Egyptian embalming (Mark 15:23; see David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary* [New York: Doubleday, 1992]).
25. Brown, *Birth*, 204. The baby boys killed in Bethlehem are known as proto-martyrs because they were slain for Jesus' sake. King Herod also slew infant boys two years and under before in Syria as well—one of whom was his own son. Josephus lists Herod's atrocities, but nothing about a Bethlehem massacre is mentioned (Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.11.2). It may have been too small a crime to be listed among Herod's mayhem. Because of the high infant mortality rate, the maximum number of male children in Bethlehem under three years of age would scarcely have been more than twenty (Albright and Mann, *Matthew*, 19). The low number adds credence to its validity. The tendency in later writing was to exaggerate the number slaughtered. The early church father Justin has Herod ordering the slaughter of all the boys without mention of an age limit. The Byzantine liturgy sets the number of "holy Children" at 14,000. Syrian calendars of saints set it at 64,000 (Brown, *Birth*, 204–5).



*TO SAVE THE LOST: AN EASTER CELEBRATION*

26. The authors of the Gospels use the word, “save,” *sōzō*, several times (Matthew fourteen times, Mark thirteen, Luke seventeen, and John six), which does not detract from Matthew’s tie at the beginning and ending of Jesus’ life.
27. The early Christian father Origen (c. AD 185–254) wrote his reflections of this verse: “For the falling of unbelievers and for the rising of believers. But only one who falls is he who had been standing. . . . For whose falling [did] the Savior come? . . . Perhaps the Savior came for the falling and rising of the same ones” (Origen, trans. Joseph Lienhard, *Homilies on Luke #17* [Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press], 71).
28. Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 429.