

Day 287

The Old Testament Closes

1 Chronicles 2.24 – 9.34

The Old Testament is concluded with further genealogical material pertaining to the tribes of Israel. It has been noted already from the book of Ezra how key the proof of one's pedigree is to verify one's place in the people of the Lord, particularly for the Levites, priesthood and those who minister in the Temple.

1 Chronicles 4.24 – 43 Simeon's descendants are recorded here, including their conquests and settlements in Canaan, having uprooted the Amalekites.

1 Chron. 5.1-9, Reuben's lineage, the firstborn of Israel, is recorded next, but there is a reminder of Reuben's forfeiture of his birthright because of his sleeping with Bilhah, his father's concubine in Gen.35.22. Because of this, the double portion of the firstborn passed to Joseph, the beloved son, shared between his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh.

There is also a comment on Judah in 5.2, that the Kingship passed to him instead of to Reuben, because of his prevailing over his brothers when they wanted to kill Joseph in Gen.38, insisting that they did not shed Joseph's blood. Then, in Gen.44, when Benjamin is accused of theft from Joseph, Judah offers himself as a hostage for his youngest brother.

Reuben's lands and settlements are also listed.

5.11-17, Gad dwells next to Reuben in the north of the country, on the borders of Gilead and in Bashan, the fertile northern region.

1 Chron.6.1 Levi's sons are next chronicled, Levi being the one designated as the replacement for every first-born son in Israel.

1 Chron.6.2-15, Kohath to Aaron's descendants; listed here in v.2 and 3 are Amram, Moses' father and Moses and Aaron themselves, and unusually, Amram's daughter, the prophetess Miriam their sister also is recorded, then their line, down to Jehozadak who went into captivity under Nebuchadnezzar in v.15.

6.16-19a Levi's Sons and grandsons are then recapped.

6.19b-30 The Levite Clans, the Kohathites, Gerarites and the Gershonites are then given, who are divided up for various work of the tabernacle.

6.31-47 Next listed are the Temple Singers and Musicians, which David set in place for the Tabernacle and Temple.

6.48-53 The High Priests of Israel, from Aaron onward are recorded for posterity here.

6.54-81 In order to protect their rights of possession, the Levite cities are specified, those places given to the priesthood for their homes and also designated as cities of refuge for fugitives pending due process of law.

7.1-5 Issachar's descendants are given, and mention made of their valour and prowess.

7.6-12 Benjamin's sons and their achievements are similarly noted.

8.1-40 Diverting for a moment, the genealogy of Saul, son of Kish and a descendant of Benjamin is given here, the first King of Israel. His offspring, including Jonathan and Abinadab are also mentioned and commended, although Jonathan's son is called Meribba'al in this lineage; this must surely refer to Mephibosheth, whom David rescued from obscurity.

7.13 Naphtali's descendants are very briefly covered in one verse!

7.14-19 Manasseh's offspring are recorded including Zelophehad whose anomalous daughters claimed and gained their part of the inheritance. (7.15)

7.20-29 Ephraim's sons are mentioned, and a small fact about some of them who were killed by the Philistines of Gath, leading to Ephraim's bitter grief. His next son was therefore named Beriah (Heb בְּרִיָּה meaning, *in trouble*, because of the trouble that has come to his house.)

7.30-40 The sons of Asher and their valour are recorded here.

9.1 Drawing towards the close, it is noted that Israel was defined by these written genealogies, which would prove so important for later reckoning of who was included after the return from exile.

9.2 – 9 Early Jewish Inhabitants of Jerusalem are recorded, the city having held out under pagan control until the days of David.

9.10-16 The Priests living in Jerusalem

9.17-32 A record of the Gatekeepers

9.33-34 Accommodation is provided for the singers who sing day and night, for their convenience, in perpetuity.

Day 288

The Intertestamental Period and the Deutero-Canonical Books part 1

With the closure of the Old Testament around 425BC, there is a silence in Scripture of over four centuries until the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Yet there is not an historical gap, for history sweeps on towards the fulcrum of the ages in the Incarnation.

With the fall of the Persian Empire in 330BC at the battle of Arbela, a new political force comes to the fore, the Greeks, under their dynamic leader, Alexander the Great. This is the period of *Hellenisation* – the conversion of culture to Greek expression. The Greek language supercedes the Semitic languages (Assyrian and Aramaic) and the Persian, to become the *lingua franca* of the new empire.

A body of writing eventually becomes available, in the Greek language, which purports to contain the continuing story of the Jewish people. These books have never been recognised by the Jews as authentic Scripture, having been included in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, which was traditionally commissioned by Ptolemy II of Alexandria in the middle of the third century BC as a Greek translation of the Torah by seventy two elders of the Jews (hence the term, Septuagint, the Latin for seventy), but which grew in number until the middle of the second century BC.

The Septuagint (LXX) was known and quoted by Jews of the time of Jesus – references to it appear in the New Testament – yet it is a translation, not an original and differs at times from the Hebrew. Some Christian traditions, notable Roman Catholic and Orthodox, recognise these additional Greek books in the LXX as ‘deuterocanonical’ or ‘secondary canon’, not holding the authority of Scripture, but nevertheless worthy of acceptance and read as history and moral teaching. The Reformers, such as Luther and Calvin, regarded them as uninspired, although of some interest, and called them ‘apocryphal’ or hidden, books whose provenance could not be proven or relied on. The radical reformers or Anabaptists often included them in their Bibles in the same way as the Roman Catholics.

Here are the deuterocanonical books with short comments on their content.

1 Esdras Copying much of Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles, this is a retelling of the story of the rebuilding of the Temple; Esdras is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Ezra.

2 Esdras Originally written in Latin between 0AD and 300AD, this is a series of apocalyptic visions ascribed to prophets such as Daniel, seeking to address the problem of suffering, and of bad things happening to good people. There are no solutions, and many things are left to trust and mystery.

Tobit The non-historical tale of a Jew named Tobit and his son Tobias, and their journey from Nineveh to Ecbatana on which Tobias meets and marries his cousin Sarah who has mysteriously lost seven husbands on their wedding night, before consummating the marriage! Tobias is helped by an angelic guide, Raphael, who seems to combine the traditional angel with elements of Persian demonology. However, the message of moral uprightness comes through in the training given to his son by Tobit, which keeps him safe.

Judith This is another non-historical fable of a woman named Judith who saves Israel from the power of Assyria under the general Holofernes by decapitating him. The moral lesson for the Jewish reader is the importance of adhering to the Jewish laws to protect against mixture and desecration.

Esther Additions These additional elements of the book seem to have been appended to make the original more religiously acceptable by mentioning the Lord. One of these elements is a prayer by Esther before she goes to Ahasuerus to appeal for the people of Israel.

Wisdom of Solomon This is similar in style to the book of Ecclesiastes, which is therefore ascribed to Solomon, even though it does not appear before 50BC! It is a work of great depth, however, speaking of the nature of God, death and virtue, and of the unending faithfulness of the Lord to His people.

Ecclesiasticus This is the longest of the deuterocanonical or apocryphal books, with similarities to Proverbs. It is believed that this was originally written in Hebrew in Jerusalem around 180BC, then translated into Greek in Alexandria, Egypt in 130BC.

The book promotes the fear of the Lord, control of the tongue, love and humility, and warns against lust and drunkenness. There is also a rather humorous section on how to behave at table, and praise for certain occupations, such as physicians and tradesmen, who make the world turn. The end of the book is a review of famous Jewish men, ending with the high priest Simon who dies in 199BC.

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Deuterocanonical Books part 2

Baruch. Initially appearing at the end of the first century AD, the book of Baruch purports to be written by the scribe of the prophet Jeremiah. It is a confession of the sin of idolatry, and a prayer for mercy combined with the 'Letter of Jeremiah', a plea to the people of Israel in exile in Babylon not to become implicated in idolatry.

The Story of Susanna This writing forms a kind of legal precedent for the examination of witnesses in Jewish law. In the story, Susanna, falsely accused by two Jewish elders of being an adulteress, because she has refused their sexual advances, is condemned to death on the strength of the men's perjured testimony. As she is led away to die, Daniel intervenes and insists that the two men be questioned separately about their testimony, which is found to be inconsistent when they are cross-examined. The outcome is vindication for Susanna, who is proved to be pure, and death for the two perjurers.

The Song of the Three Children Written around 175BC, this is introduced as an addition to the book of Daniel, being an account of the miraculous deliverance of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the fiery furnace in Daniel 3. It also includes a prayer by Abednego-Azariah confessing his nation's sin and looking for mercy from the Lord and a song of praise for God's deliverance from the flames.

Bel and the Dragon This is a pseudonymous addition to the book of Daniel, dating from around 100BC when dragon-worship is common, which has Daniel in contention with the Emperor Cyrus. The argument is over whether the Babylonian idol Bel eats food put out for him or not. Daniel shows that the food is eaten by Bel's priests, and then causes the death of a celebrated snake which angers the Babylonians, for which he is consigned to the lions' den, where he is miraculously visited by the prophet Habakkuk divinely transported to minister to him.

The Prayer of Manasses is a prayer, probably written by a Pharisee, of sorrow for sin.

The last two books dealt with are more historical than sacred text, and give an insight into the period between the Testaments. They deal with the period after the era of Alexander the Great (356 – 323BC) when the eastern Mediterranean is divided between two opposing dynasties endowed by Alexander, the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Babylon. The territory of Israel comes at first under the control of the Ptolemaic dynasty, although still retaining enough autonomy to mint its own coins, but in 198BC after the battle of Panium, Ptolemy V loses control of the region to Antiochus the Great and a period of great suffering

and upheaval is introduced for the Jews. It is this period which the books of the Maccabees cover.

In 175BC, the son of Antiochus the Great follows his brother Seleucus Philopator onto the Seleucid throne. He is to be called Antiochus Epiphanes, the Divine Appearance. He is fierce and cruel.

During his campaign against Egypt, it is rumoured in Jerusalem that Antiochus Epiphanes has been killed. The high priest, Jason raises a force of 1,000 against Jerusalem and causes the impostor priest Menelaus to flee in fear. When the still-living Antiochus hears of this, he attacks Jerusalem as a rebel stronghold, and massacring around forty thousand Jews, selling another forty thousand into slavery.

Antiochus sets about Hellenising the Jews, enforcing Greek culture upon them.

1 Maccabees is the history of this troubled period from 175BC to 132BC. The Jews stand against the persecution of Antiochus, at great cost to themselves. A leader named Mattathias arises, who, with his three sons, conducts guerrilla warfare against the rulers over the intervening years. Mattathias' mantle passes first to Judas, who is named Maccabeus, from the Aramaic word *maqaba* meaning 'hammer'. After his victory the Temple is rededicated, giving rise to the Jewish festival of *Hanukkah* (Rededication, mentioned in John 10.22 as being attended by Jesus.)

Judas is followed by his brothers, Jonathan and Simon, and later Simon's Son, John Hyrcanus. Eventually, a respite is reached when there is a short-lived period of peace in the midst of centuries of war, under the Hasmonean Kingdom from 164BC to 35BC.

From the time of Jonathan and Simon, there is a change to a rule of law in Israel, which sees the roles of High Priest and Governor going hand in hand, with a system later called *zugot* or 'pairs', the Governor ruling the Assembly, the Sanhedrin, and the High Priest ruling the court, the *Bet Din*.

2 Maccabees claims to be a précis of a work by Jason of Cyrene, detailing some of the intense suffering and martyrdom of the Jewish people in their persecution, particularly Hannah and her seven sons who perish because they will not abandon the *Torah* when commanded by the Hellenizers. It is one of the most harrowing stories of Jewish suffering in history, ending in Hannah's suicide from a roof after witnessing the torture and death of her children for the sake of the name of God.

Day 290

Preparing for the Advent of the Messiah

Although a remnant of Jews return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple and re-establish the land of Israel, the majority are still scattered across the Middle East. Without the Temple, they continue their faith in God focussed around *Torah* in small groups where they are, praying and looking for God's faithfulness to continue.

This gives rise to a pattern of gathering known as the *synagogue*, from the Greek word meaning to gather together. It also gives rise to a new kind of leader, as the priests are not

around to help. The *Rabbi* (meaning, my eminent one) is the learned scholar, the *sopher* in the midst of the community. From a religion of sacrifice, scattered Judaism is becoming a religion of the Book.

What is happening here is a preparing of the way for the dissemination of the greatest chapter in the story, a positioning of the people of God out of their safe homeland environment in a place where they learn to live God's life among non-Jewish cultures.

The dispersion of the Jews happens in many different ways; there is the forced exile of 725BC and 583BC, but we also know that Jeremiah is part of a settlement that went to Egypt around the mid sixth century BC.

In the time of Ptolemy I, many Jews are deported to Egypt, but also many go voluntarily to the great new city of Alexandria, where the Scriptures are translated into Greek.

With the fall of the Hasmonean dynasty to the Romans in 63BC, the scene is finally set for the coming of Jesus. Pompey, the Roman conqueror, deports many Jews to Rome, and their small communities are spreading through Asia Minor. Jewish people are now to be found in many cities across the Empire.

The Romans set up a puppet regime, the Herodians, with a client King, who becomes Herod the Great appointed by the Roman Senate. He finally has control of Judea, the new name for the Roman province, by 37BC. However, he is a cruel and capricious ruler, guilty of many crimes against his subjects and his family. He rules until just after the birth of Jesus Christ, around 4BC. He reconstructs the Temple to be a monument to his reign.

Under Julius Caesar, the Jews have won concessions for their religion, namely that they are not required to worship the Emperor, only to pray for him. This exception allows the Jewish faith to flourish during this time.

Day 291

The Recorders of the Story Introduce Jesus Christ

Mark 1.1, John 1.1-18, Luke 1.1-4

The life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the core of the New Testament. There are four accounts of His life, from different perspectives. They are written in common or *koine* Greek by

- Matthew, a disciple of Jesus, a Jew, who is committed to presenting Jesus as the Jewish Messiah and fulfilment of the prophets' words.
- Mark, or John Mark, traditionally the recorder of Peter's account of the life of Jesus in Rome. He is the 'action gospel', full of events and insights, shorter than the others.
- Luke, a Gentile physician and friend of Paul, who examines the previous accounts and interviews eye witnesses. He is the most detailed of the four gospels, and includes more than others of the birth and early life of Jesus.

- John, a disciple of Jesus, the beloved one, whose self-confessed aim in writing is to help his readers to believe that Jesus is the Christ. (John 20.31) His focus is to discern who Jesus really is and the metaphysical nature of His life.

In this scheme of reading, Jesus' ministry is covered by harmonising the four together, drawing on their insights, rather than reading them consecutively. The first three, Matthew, Mark and Luke cover much of the same material, and for this reason are called 'The Synoptic Gospels', that is, 'seen together'. Thus, where there is overlap, one is quoted and the others referred to as a mirror.

In the transliterating of the Greek text for pronunciation purposes, Modern Greek pronunciation is employed, as used by Greeks reading the New Testament original today, with an accent to indicate where stress falls in the word. This makes for much more straightforward expression of Greek words than the Erasmian version which has little connection to spoken Greek.

Mk.1.1 Mark makes clear from the outset what he is presenting. This is the *good news* (Gk τὸ εὐαγγέλιον *to evangélion*, the 'good message') about Jesus who is the Christ, (Gk Χριστός *Christos*), the anointed one, equivalent of the Hebrew word *Mashiach*, Messiah, and the Son of God. This is the opening of an action-packed first chapter which the other writers take several chapters to cover!

John 1.1-18 John's opening is poetic, even hymnic and tells us immediately that he is looking back beyond the immediate birth of Jesus to what He represents in terms of the overall story of God and mankind. Echoing words from the opening of Torah in the Greek (Gk Ἐν ἀρχῇ *en archée*), 'in the beginning' John brings us His understanding of Jesus Christ as the ultimate meaning and purpose behind the universe, the *Lógos* (Gk ὁ Λόγος) of God. Borrowing from Greek philosophy, John uses a concept which is known to the Hellenic mind as shorthand for the essence of being, of the mind of God.

For John, Jesus is this meaning and purpose, who has existed from all eternity with God, and who is God. This is the revolution of history, to which John the Baptist is witness, the forerunner of the Messiah. (The mention of John here is not to the author himself, since John the Beloved is careful not to refer to himself by name in his gospel.)

The astounding reality John puts to us here is that this *Logos* of God has become flesh, has become *incarnate* (Greek σὰρξ ἐγένετο *sarx eghéneto*- flesh become) and lived among us. The glory we see in Him is in fact the glory of the One God, the *kabod Adonai* that Moses witnessed in Ex.34, God declaring Himself to be 'full of grace and truth.'

It is of note here that the Hebrew translation of the New Testament, in translating the word 'grace' (Greek χάρις *cháris*) employs throughout the word which has marked the covenant relationship of Israel with the Lord through the millennia, the word *chesed* (Heb חֶסֶד) that self-sacrificial obligation of the Lord to His covenant, which transforms the concept of grace from a simple freewill gesture to a self-giving bond so typical of God's inalienable love.

In this way, when John speaks of Jesus Christ as being *full of grace and truth*, he is echoing the words of the Lord in revealing His essence to Moses in Ex.34.6 (Heb רַב־חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת *rav chesed ve-emet*) This Jesus is the Lord in human form, beyond any doubt for John; while *Torah*, the rule of life comes through Moses, the man, through Christ comes *grace and truth* – *chesed ve'emet*, the very attributes of God Himself.

Lk.1.1-4 Luke, the man of science, Gentile and friend of Paul , as an investigator, makes it clear his purpose in writing. It is to present an orderly account, (Greek καθεξῆς *kathexées*, that is, a consecutive account) of what Jesus did and taught, having spoken with eye-witnesses. It seems very likely that among those Luke interviewed would have been Mary, mother of Jesus, since the detail of the conception and birth of Jesus he recounts are unparalleled in the other writers, even including personal thoughts and insights of the Blessed Virgin.

He is writing to an addressee, *Theophilos*, which is either an actual person or a title for all those who are ‘friends of God’, for that is what the word means. He wants the reader to have more grounds for knowing that the things believed are grounded in historical reality. Certainly, the detail Luke gives is more than the other writers.

This is volume one of a two-part work for Luke, for he goes on to write the Acts of the Apostles, opening that book with a similar address to his reader.

Day 292

The Lineage of Jesus

Matthew 1.1-17; Luke 3.23b- 38

Mt.1.1-17 Matthew Levi, the Jew, is immediately wanting to present the integrity of Jesus Christ’s lineage as a Jew of Jews. It has been noted from the return in Ezra how important to the Jew is the pedigree and line of descent. Matthew therefore gives Jesus’ lineage through his human family head, Joseph, back to the all-important Abraham.

In among all the illustrious names in His line, it is to be noted that there are four women included; Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. In mentioning these, Matthew is being up front about the blots on the landscape, not hiding the fact that Jesus’ lineage is very human, and includes an occurrence of incest, a harlot, an adulteress and a Gentile. But for those whose faith is in Him, the breadth of God’s grace is evident upon these ancestresses of Christ.

Luke 3.23b-38 Lastly, Luke traces the lineage of Jesus, but this time, taking into account that Jesus is not Joseph’s blood-son, through his maternal grandfather, Heli, and all the way back to Adam, who is called ‘of God’ – the word ‘son’ is not in the original Greek.

Day 293

The Births of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ (c.6 – 4BC)

Luke 1.5 – 80; Matthew 1.18- 25a; Luke 2.1 – 38

Luke 1. 5- 17 Luke pinpoints the place on the timeline of John and Jesus' birth to the period of Herod the Great; Luke is concerned with the context of the events he is recording, so that they can be verified against history.

Here is the account of Zechariah, a Levite priest of the division of Abijah, mentioned in 1 Chron. 24.10, the eighth of the priestly clans of Levi. He is burning incense when he is told by an angel that he will have a son, even though he and his wife Elizabeth are past the years of childbearing. The child's name will be John (Heb יוֹחָנָן *Yochanan*, Greek Ἰωάννης *Io-ánnēs*, meaning the Lord's favour) and he will follow the Nazarite vow of abstinence as Samson did. (See Numbers 6.2) The Holy Spirit will fill him in the womb, while he is still in his mother – something worth noting in terms of how the Lord views the unborn child, who can experience the Lord's power even before birth.

Luke 1.18 – 25 Zechariah doubts the angel's word, and because of this, Gabriel, the 'gentleman of God' (see Daniel 8.15) causes him to be dumb until the birth of his son. Zechariah once again demonstrates the fickleness of the Lord's people to trust Him at key moments. His wife Elizabeth, by contrast, when she finds herself pregnant, acknowledges the Lord's favour, which is wrapped up in the name of the son she has yet to see.

Luke 1.26 – 38 One thing which Luke is very candid about in his work is the key role of women in the unfolding story of the Messiah. Already, Elizabeth has been quoted, and now the scene switched to the home of a young, unmarried peasant girl in the northern village of Nazareth, considered almost foreign territory by Orthodox Jews, in the region known often as 'Galilee of the Gentiles.'

Gabriel comes to Mary in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, when she is betrothed to Joseph, and announces that she is to be the mother of God incarnate. The difference between her reaction and that of Zechariah is palpable. She asks a question, not in doubt, but for clarification, and is told that the Spirit of God, the great brooding hen-dove of heaven, seen at the beginning of all things in Gen.1.2, will 'overshadow' her and bring to birth in her something unseen before – conception without human intercourse, a creative act of the Father in her body. Her son will be called *Yeshua* (Heb. יֵשׁוּעַ, Grk Ἰησοῦς *Iee-sóos*) which was a common name of the time, meaning 'He will save'. But for this One, then name would be most fitting, for He will rescue His people from their failures.

Mary, as the first disciple of Christ, as it were, responds with a simple '*fiat*' – so be it done to me, according to your word.' With Mary's simple yes, the Lord's most incredible act of history is set in motion.

What would it be like for Mary to carry in her womb the incarnate God? To have growing in her the Saviour of the ages? What is so notable about her is her utter humility and her wonder at what God is doing. For those in the protestant tradition, it would help to take time to spend more time in meditation of this act of the Lord in this young woman's body, as the embryo Jesus draws from her life, forms in her likeness, no doubt, and feeds from her body. It is

utterly awesome, that God would see human conception as so key that He has to experience it, in order to share the whole of human life.

Lk.1.39 – 45 Mary now goes to visit her relative Elizabeth, whom the angel has revealed to Mary as also experiencing a miracle of conception in another way. We are not told how they are related, but Mary goes to Elizabeth to share her news. We see again here Luke's unbridled frankness about the women's key role in this unfolding drama. In fact, Elizabeth is chronologically the first person described in the New Testament as being 'filled with the Holy Spirit' (Greek ἐπλήσθη Πνεύματος Ἁγίου ἢ Ἐλισάβετ *epléesthee Pnévmatos Ayóo ee Elízavet*), recalling Joel's words that the Spirit would be poured out on men and women. In fact, Elizabeth is the first woman in Scripture to be so described. At this moment, the baby in her womb is also filled, in accordance with the angel's word, and she speaks the words prophetically which Roman Catholic believers recall in their frequent invocation of Mary's intercession – 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'

Lk.1.46 – 56 Mary responds with a Psalm of praise, the *Magnificat*, worthy of any Old Testament songwriter! It is full of Jewish psalmic terms, such as the praise of the enduring *chesed* of God which never fails the exaltation of the humble and the covenant to Abraham.

Mary remains with Elizabeth for the first three months of her pregnancy.

Lk. 1.57-66 Perhaps Mary is still with Elizabeth when she delivers John, since the three months of her stay would take her to the ninth month of John's gestation. On the eighth day, the baby is to be circumcised, and Elizabeth names him John. This raises objections, for it breaks the tradition of naming him in line with the family pedigree. But when Zacharias is consulted, he writes 'His name is John' and suddenly is able to speak, giving praise to the Lord. It is to be remembered that John is of the tribe of Levi, both his parents descended from the pedigree of priests. John will become the bridge from the line of Aaron to the Star of David, pointing mankind to the Lion of Judah.

Lk.1. 67 – 80 Now the old priest joins his wife, and is also filled with the Holy Spirit, pouring out another wonderful Psalm of worship to the Lord. He makes reference to the redemption of God, and the *chesed* of the Lord, as well as the covenant to Abraham, recurrent themes of Hebrew praise.

He also prophesies over his baby son the place he will take as the Elijah-forerunner of the Most High, heralding forgiveness and the rising of the light which Isaiah has presaged in the ninth chapter of his words.

As John grows, he becomes a lover of the desert places, and grows in the power of the Spirit until he speaks out publicly.

Lk.1.18-25a Before Joseph has the opportunity to divorce Mary quietly, because of her being pregnant, the angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream. This is the angel of the Lord who came to Moses, to Gideon, the pre-incarnation incarnation of God, and He comes to young Joseph to urge him not to disgrace Mary, but to cover her in her need. Therefore, Jesus is born into a family hallowed by marriage, although Mary remains a virgin until the birth of Jesus.

Matthew seems to be unequivocal here that Joseph and Mary did come together in sexual union after Jesus' birth. 'He had no union with her until she gave birth to a son.' (Matt 1.25) There is little support for the idea that Mary remained a virgin after the birth of Jesus, given this statement by Matthew. However it is clear that Mary's virginity was intact until the birth of Jesus.

Matthew is particular to point out whenever Jesus fulfils a prophetic word from the Old Testament. Here, the birth of Jesus to a virgin mother is the sign promised in Isa.7.14. Jesus is *Immanuel* (Heb עִמָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים), 'With us God', another indication of His deity.

Lk.2.1-7 Once again, Luke puts the action of his gospel in an historic context. He states that the birth of Jesus occurred in the reign of Augustus Caesar, while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

An objection to the reliability of Luke's account is raised, given that Quirinius did not attain governorship until 6AD, after the death of Herod the Great. This tends to suggest that Luke's account is inaccurate. However, without going into too much detail, it is probable that the census was overseen by Quirinius around 4 to 5BC as a trusted friend of Augustus, before he became Governor officially. Another objection is that no such census is recorded, although there are records of provincial censuses on a rolling basis for years before the birth of Jesus. Certainly, Justin and Tertullian later suggested their readers could go to Rome and see for themselves the records, which indicates some reliability of the records of Luke.

There is also an objection that Mary did not have to go with Joseph to be taxed, but a simple response to this is that they obviously decided to go together, given that Joseph could be gone a long time, and given the special nature of the child they were both aware of. They go to Bethlehem, the city of David, because this is the hometown of Judah, and Joseph's clan was from there originally.

The classic picture of the stable and the animals is somewhat misleading, given that animals often shared the house with people. Another translation of the Greek verse of the nativity is 'she wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger (in the animals' quarters) because there was no room for them in the guest room (Greek κατάλυμα *katályma*, guest-chamber). The original makes no mention of a stable as a separate building.

Lk.2.8-14 The appearance of the angels to shepherds near Bethlehem is a sign of the Lord's favour to the poor and marginalised. It is said that shepherds were despised by the general populace, and even that their testimony was not accepted in a court. Certainly they were at the bottom of the pile. Yet it is to them that the news of the birth of the Christ comes.

The angels sing of a saviour, and of *shalom* on earth, the fulfilment of the purpose of the Lord given to Abraham.

Lk.2.15-20 The shepherds go to visit the Christ, and find it all as they are told. They tell their story, but... who will believe a shepherd?

There is an insight here into the possibility that Luke personally interviewed Mary the mother of Jesus as one of his sources. How else could he have known that she had kept these things and meditated on them in her heart?

Lk.2.21 (mirrored in Matt.1.25b) Jesus is circumcised and named on the eighth day in accordance with *Torah*. He still bears that mark in his risen body, He is yet a Jew.

Lk. 2.22-24 Later, Jesus is presented to the Lord in accordance with the law concerning the firstborn, which He is. To redeem Him back, Mary and Joseph offer two doves, the poor people's offering.

Lk.2.25-35 While they are there for the presentation, a prophet named Simeon comes forward and speaks over Jesus. Note how much the Holy Spirit's role is mentioned here by Luke. He confesses Jesus as a light for the Gentiles, and the glory of Israel.

He then warns Mary that she will suffer because of this son, who will be an offence to many in the nation, as well as the salvation of all.

Lk.2.36-38 Once again, Luke, inclusive of the women in his account, tells of Anna the old prophetess of the tribe of Asher, who speaks of the child Jesus as key to the redemption, the release of the people of Jerusalem.