

INFANCY NARRATIVES IN THE NT GOSPELS

accounts. The mutual agreement have an importance, for they probably represent points that were in a tradition antedating both Matthew and Luke. For instance, an intelligent case can be made that Jesus was truly descended from David and born at Bethlehem in the reign of Herod the Great. Arguments to the contrary are far from probative (Brown 1977: 505–16). In particular, the virginal conception (popularly but confusingly called the Virgin Birth) should be evaluated cautiously. Despite extremely limited attestation and inherent difficulties, no satisfactory nonhistorical explanation which could dispense with the virginal conception has been brought forward. The frequent approach to the virginal conception as a theogoumenon, whereby the common "Son of God" title of Jesus would have been translated into a (fictional) narrative in which he had no human father, could acquire plausibility only if there were a good antecedent or parallel for the idea of virginal conception. There is no good antecedent or parallel. While there were Greco-Roman and other examples of male gods impregnating earth women to produce a divine child, the NT contains no hint of such a sexual union. Within Judaism there was no expectation that the messiah would be born of a virgin. (The MT of Isa 7:14 does not clearly refer to a virgin, and even the LXX need mean no more than that one who is now a virgin will conceive through future intercourse. Matthew has not derived Jesus' conception from Isa 7:14, but interpreted the OT passage through Christian data.) A claimed Hellenistic-Jewish tradition that the patriarchal wives conceived from God without male intervention (Philonic allegory; Gal 4:23, 29) is far from certain. (On all this, see Boslooper 1962; Brown 1977: 517–33). In terms of historical catalysts behind the concept of a virginal conception, those worth noting are: (a) the agreement of Luke (implicit) and Matthew that Jesus was conceived before Joseph and Mary came to live together and hence that the birth might be noticeably early after cohabitation; (2) the 2nd-century Jewish charge that Jesus was illegitimate (Or. Cels 1.28, 32, 69), possibly reflected earlier in John 8:41. If there was a family tradition of a virginal conception, the pre-Gospel shaping of it into a narrative may reflect Christian pastoral needs in face of Jewish polemics.

B. Theological Motifs

The question of historical elements in the infancy narratives should not distract from the clearer theological intent to Matthew and Luke. The following major theological emphases are to be noted:

1. **Christology.** By referring to Jesus from his conception as descended from David through Joseph and as the Savior/Son of God through the Holy Spirit, the two Evangelists are adapting to this first stage of Jesus' life language that elsewhere in the NT is related to the resurrection or the baptism. Rom 1:3–4, for instance, refers to ". . . the gospel concerning God's Son who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh; designated Son of God in power according to a Spirit of Holiness [= Holy Spirit] as of resurrection from the dead." A combination of Holy Spirit, designation as Son of God, and divine power is found in relation to the *baptism* in Luke 3:22; 4:1, 14. The angelic annunciation at the time of conception in Luke combines Davidic descent in 1:39–39 with 1:25 where the

2. **Imagery from Jewish Scriptures.** Matthew begins his narrative with the genealogy of Jesus that includes the Hebrew patriarchs and the Judean kings. Matthew's story of Joseph, who receives revelation in dreams and goes to Egypt, clearly recalls the story of the OT Joseph, the dreamer or master of dreams (Gen 37:19) who went to Egypt. The wicked king Herod who kills the male children at Bethlehem evokes the pharaoh who killed the male children of the Hebrews in Egypt. Jesus, the one child who escapes to become the Savior of his people, offers a parallel to Moses. The words spoken to Joseph by the angel after Herod's death, "Go back to Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead" (Matt 2:20) are almost verbatim the words to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all those who were seeking your life are dead" (Exod 4:19). When ultimately Moses went from Egypt through the desert toward the land of Canaan, he encountered another wicked king with homicidal tendencies. Balak of Moab summoned Balaam, a visionary or magus (Philo, *Vita Mos* 1.50 §276) who came from the East (LXX Num 23:7) with two servants (22:22). Balaam foiled the hostile plans of the king by delivering oracles seen in a vision (as of one who sees God in his sleep; LXX 24:4, 16). These predictions concerned a star coming forth from Jacob (24:17) and a king who would rule many nations (24:7). The Matthean magi echo this story. Indeed, the blending of the pharaoh and Balak into Herod may have been facilitated by developments of the Moses story attested in Josephus (*Ant* 2.9 §205–37) and in early midrashim, whereby the pharaoh was forewarned by his sacred scribes (or in a dream which had to be interpreted by magi) that a Hebrew child who would deliver his people was about to be born. At this news, the Egyptians were filled with dread (cf. Matt 2:3: "When King Herod heard this, he was startled and so was all Jerusalem with him."). The pharaoh's plan to forestall the work of the promised child by executing all the male Hebrew children was frustrated because God appeared in a dream to Amram (Moses' father), a Hebrew whose wife was already pregnant. Obviously, Matthew's infancy account is quite close to these midrashic developments of the Moses story.