

# Group Study Guide for *Born Divine*

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## Introduction

The purpose of this Study Guide is to facilitate the group discussion of *Born Divine* in adult education and book club settings. It can also be adapted for college and seminary courses.

The Study Guide consists of questions and discussion topics that lead readers to the important points of the book, section by section through each chapter. Working with the Study Guide will help you to follow the book's train of thought, to examine the evidence and reasoning for its conclusions, and, most important, to make up your mind in dialogue with both the book and your discussion partners. (The Study Guide can be used by individuals, in which case you will, in effect, be having discussions with yourself.)

The best way to use the Study Guide is for each member of a group to work with it as they do their own reading, answering the questions and thinking through the discussion points for themselves prior to meeting as a group. Careful preparation by individuals makes for more thoughtful and productive group discussions.

Most of the items in the Study Guide come in the form of questions or discussion topics.

The discussion topics invite you to discuss a specific point, sometimes by considering that point in the light of other information. The purpose of these discussion points is to direct your attention to information of special interest or to elements in the reading that contribute to your understanding of the big picture.

Many of the questions quote or restate a key sentence, ask you what exactly the sentence means and whether you agree with it. There are three benefits to engaging these types of questions.

1. The quoted sentences are chosen because they gather up a train of thought. In order to explain what one of these sentences mean, it is usually necessary to understand a number of other points that lead up to and/or flow from it.
2. It is one thing to read a statement and grasp its meaning. But to explain in your own words what exactly that statement means requires more attention and thought, which makes for a deeper level of understanding.

3. The questions invite you to decide whether you agree with the given statement, but only after challenging you to make sure you fully understand what you are reading. Proceeding in that sequence will avoid the futility and confusion that results when people offer their own views on things they only partly understand. Furthermore, while you might not know at the outset whether you agree with a statement, taking the effort to understand the reading might well produce new insights.

When discussing whether you agree with the book on this or that, keep in mind the following:

- i. Explaining *why* you do or do not agree with something is far more interesting than simply stating yes or no.
- ii. It is seldom the case that agree/disagree are the only two options. Explaining why you agree with this but disagree with that can help others to sharpen their grasp of the issue.
- iii. When asked if you agree, it is perfectly acceptable to say, "I don't know; I have to think about it more."
- iv. Disagreement among members of a group, if handled with courtesy and respect, can spark further discussions which can increase everyone's understanding.

### Setting the Agenda with the Study Guide

Depending on how much time you have for your sessions and how talkative your group is, your group might not be able to deal with all the items in the Study Guide for a given chapter. It is not recommended that you simply take up the items in order and discuss as many as time allows, since that will usually leave out material toward the end of the chapters, which is sometimes where it gets the most interesting. It is more prudent to decide ahead of time which questions are more interesting and important. Here are two ways you can do this.

1. The discussion leader selects the questions. If the leader is willing to read ahead, the best arrangement is for the leader to announce at the end of a session which items will be on the agenda for the next session. That way everyone will know the forthcoming agenda as they do their own reading between sessions.
2. Everyone takes responsibility for selecting questions as they read in preparation for the upcoming meeting. The group takes a few minutes at the start of the session to hear everyone's suggestions and to agree on a manageable agenda.

Whether these decisions are made by the leader or by the whole group, it will help you to make your selection by sorting the items in the Study Guide into three categories (most important, somewhat important, least important).

## Selecting Chapters for Discussion

*Born Divine* is a long and serious book intended for general readers (see p. xiii). Because of the book's length, only the most dedicated groups will be able to discuss all of it. In most cases, organizing a study group for *Born Divine* means that decisions have to be made about which parts of the book to discuss together and which parts to leave for individuals to read on their own. Thoughtful planning is a key factor in having a successful discussion group.

Start by examining the Table of Contents, which divides the book into six sections. Take a few minutes and dip into each section to get a taste of the different kinds of topics.

Then read the Introduction (pp. 1–5), which explains the aims and outline of the book and describes the contents of its chapters.

Then prioritize your interests. For example, some groups will be most interested in a close study of the gospel texts. They will want to focus on Chapters 1–6. Other groups will be more interested in the theological issues raised by the virgin birth. They will want to focus on Chapters 11–16. Still other groups may be very curious about gospels outside the Bible. They will want to explore Chapters 17–22.

It is strongly recommended that any study of *Born Divine* include the following:

Chapter 1 (an overview and full text of the New Testament infancy narratives); Chapter 7 (Greek and Roman infancy narratives that will be new information for most readers); Chapters 9 and 12 (assessments of the major historical questions surrounding Jesus' birth); Chapters 15 and 16 (an exploration of the ancient and modern meanings of the virgin birth).

Finally, note that some chapters vary greatly in length. Some are just right for discussing in one session. Other chapters are short enough to be adequately discussed in a half or third of the time your group allots for its meetings, while a few chapters may be too long to fully discuss in one session.

Be realistic about how much your group can discuss. If you take on so much that your group cannot cover it all, you are, in effect, leaving it to chance which parts of the book you discuss and which you pass over. Experience teaches that it is far better to make those decisions ahead of time.

## Chapter 1

# The Infancy Narratives

### How to Read this Chapter

- i. Before reading pp. 7–13, read through Luke 1–2 and Matthew 1–2 (pp. 13–21), taking a short break between them.
- ii. Then read pp. 7–13 and answer the questions below.
- iii. Read the infancy narratives again, slowly. Take notes, listing questions you have about these stories. Keep your list and refer to it as you study Chapters 2–5.

### Overview (pp. 7–13)

1. Why do you think the birth of Jesus left so little mark on the New Testament (see pp. 7–8)?
2. What terms would you use to describe the different atmospheres in Luke and Matthew?
3. What do you think are the assumptions about the Bible of those who try to harmonize the gospels? Do you think we should even try to harmonize? Why or why not?
4. Is there anything wrong with blending the two gospels in the way the Christian tradition always has (for example, by putting magi and shepherds in the same scene)?
5. What difference does it make whether we think of a single composite Christmas story that blends Matthew and Luke, or whether we treat the two infancy narratives as separate and independent stories?
6. “The timelines in both narratives are seamless and irreconcilable” (p. 13). What does that mean? Do you agree?
7. Can you think of any more points of agreement than are listed on p. 13?

**Chapter 2****Luke 1****John and Jesus (pp. 23–25)**

1. Imagine what the followers of John and the followers of Jesus would say to each other about the two men a few decades after their deaths.
2. Using Box 2.2, track the specific ways in which Matthew and Luke cope with the implication that Jesus had acknowledged John's authority by submitting to his baptism.
3. Discuss the ways in which the gospels and Acts of the Apostles (see p. 26 and Box 2.3) make John out to be one who prepared the way for Jesus.

**Old Testament Models (pp. 27–29)**

4. What effect does Luke create for his original audience by modeling his characters and stories after Old Testament ones?
5. Read the stories about Ishmael, Isaac, Samson, Moses, and Gideon (the Old Testament references are on pp. 28 and 29). Use Box 2.4 to compare those stories to the ones about John and Jesus. Some argue that this evidence shows that the scenes of the angel announcing the births of John and Jesus were made up by Luke on the basis of Old Testament stories. What do you think? The position one takes on this issue makes a big difference: is Luke retelling stories he had heard from earlier Christians or is he consciously writing religious fiction? What is at stake for you in this issue?

**Luke 1:5–25 (pp. 29–36)**

6. Using the comments on 1:11 and 1:15–17 and Boxes 2.5 and 2.6, what do you think Luke is implying about John?
7. Do you agree with the judgment in the comment on 1:20 that the questions of Zechariah and Mary are not really different?
8. Discuss the comment on 1:24, which explains one example in which Luke manipulates the story line by introducing details that would have seemed unrealistic to his audience. What does this tell us about Luke's overall purpose for his infancy narrative?

**Luke 1:26–38 (pp. 36–39)**

9. The passage on p. 36 breaks with traditional English translations in three places. 1) Verse 27 uses "girl" rather than "virgin," a choice explained in detail on pp. 189–90

and 192–93 (note especially the last paragraph on p. 193). 2) Verse 35 uses “a holy spirit” rather than “the Holy Spirit,” a choice explained in the cameo on pp. 40–41. 3) Verse 38 uses “slave” rather than the milder “servant” or the archaic “handmaid.” Do these three translation choices have any effect on your understanding or appreciation of the story?

10. What is at stake for Luke in his choice of verbs describing Mary’s conception in 1:35 (see the comment on p. 38)?
11. Examine the parallel passages in Mark 3 and Luke 8 on pp. 38–39. Do you agree with the interpretation of those two passages given in the comment on 1:38? Many Christians resist the negative features in Mark’s version of this scene and prefer Luke’s retelling of it. Some even claim that Mark’s scene has the same meaning as Luke’s. What do you think?

#### **“Son of God” in Luke 1:35 (pp. 39–40)**

12. Miller argues that in its present context Luke 1:35 describes a virginal conception, but would not do so if taken by itself (p. 39). What is the reasoning for this assertion? Do you agree with it?
13. Miller argues that from Luke’s perspective Jesus’ being God’s son does not mean that Jesus is divine (p. 39). What is the reasoning for this assertion? Do you agree with it?
14. What do you think is the significance of the fact that Jesus is not the only one whom Luke refers to as son of God?
15. What exactly is Luke claiming about Jesus by calling him God’s son?

#### **Cameo: “a holy spirit” (pp. 40–41)**

16. What do you think about the choice to use “a holy spirit” instead of “the Holy Spirit”?
17. What does the term “holy spirit” mean for Luke?

#### **The Canticles (pp. 41–43)**

18. What features of the canticles make them fit awkwardly in their present contexts?
19. What is the evidence that the canticles were not the spontaneous creations of Zechariah and Mary?
20. Who composed these prayers?

#### **Luke 1:39–56 (pp. 43–46)**

21. What are Luke’s purposes for 1:39–45?
22. Why is the word “lord” capitalized in vv. 45 and 46 but not in v. 43?

23. Why is it thought that v. 48 is a later addition to the original canticle?
24. What do the verbs in vv. 51–53 indicate about the perspective of the original canticle?

**Box 2.8 (p. 47)**

25. Box 2.8 features Hannah's song (1 Sam 2:1–10). For the full story about Hannah, who conceives a son through God's intervention, read 1 Samuel 1.
26. What is it about Hannah's song that makes it a suitable model for the Magnificat?

**Luke 1:57–80 (pp. 49–52)**

27. What elements in Zechariah's canticle seems to be more about Jesus than about Zechariah's son John? What are we to make of this?
28. The comments on 1:58 (p. 50) and 1:60–63 (p. 51) argue that certain elements in the story are unrealistic. Do you agree? If so, what does that tell us about Luke's purpose in writing?
29. Christian tradition has imagined that Luke's gospel was based on information by eyewitnesses (see Luke 1:1–4). How is that theory affected by the information in the comment on 1:59?
30. What details in 1:76–77 indicate that Luke created these verses himself? Why is this finding significant?

NOTE: *The best way to study the Appendix (pp. 317–21) is in conjunction with Chapter 2.*

## Chapter 3

### Luke 2

#### Luke 2:1–20 (pp. 55–58)

1. As you read this section, keep in mind that Luke's original audience lived under the rule of the Roman Empire. In light of that fact and in light of the comments on 2:10–11 and 2:11, how do you imagine Luke's first readers would respond to 2:1–20?
2. "Although Luke's description of the census is full of historical errors, theologically it is a brilliant stroke" (p. 56). Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. The translation of 2:1–20 breaks with tradition in several places: "feeding trough" instead of "manger" (vv. 7, 12, 16); "travelers' shelter" instead of "inn" (v. 7); "a whole troop of the heavenly army" instead of "a multitude of the heavenly host" (v. 13). Discuss the comments on these terms. Do these new translations have any effect on your appreciation of the nativity story?

#### Luke 2:21–40 (pp. 58–65)

4. Why is it thought that Simeon's canticle (2:29–32) might not have been part of Luke's original story?
5. How does Simeon's oracle (2:34–35) affect the tone of the scene? Why do you think Luke included the oracle here?
6. Do you think that the parallels between 1 Samuel and Luke 2:22–40 (see Box 3.3 on p. 63) are sufficient evidence that Luke consciously constructed his narrative in imitation of the story of Samuel? If so, what was Luke's purpose?
7. Does the information about the ceremonies (pp. 61–62) affect your estimation of Luke as a historian? If so, how?
8. In view of the comment on 2:23, what do you think of Luke's free style of quoting the Old Testament?
9. What do you think about the practice of some ancient gospel copyists described in the comment on 2:33?

#### Luke 2:41–52 (pp. 65–68)

10. "Once again it is evident that among Luke's purposes in writing neither historical accuracy nor realistic storytelling has a high priority" (p. 66). Based on the reasons presented, do you agree?

**The Precocious Child (pp. 69–70)**

11. After studying the selections in Box 3.4, what do you imagine was the attitude of ancient readers to stories like these? Do you think that ancient audiences took them to be literally true? to be amusing tales? to be true in some symbolic sense?
12. What would people who knew stories like these make of Luke 2:41–51?

## Chapter 4

### The Genealogies of Jesus

#### *Before starting this chapter*

1. Ask yourself why you want to study these repetitive lists of mostly obscure names. What questions do you have regarding them? What do you hope to learn by studying this topic?

#### **The Genealogy in Luke (pp. 73–75)**

2. Why do you think Luke's genealogy goes back all the way to Adam, while Matthew's starts with Abraham?
3. Considering the historical problems in Luke's list (p. 74), what do you think of his genealogy?

#### **The Genealogy in Matthew (pp. 75–82)**

4. The comments on 1:8 and 1:11 (pp. 77–78) provide two explanations for the missing generations in Matthew's list. Does it make a difference to you whether Matthew made those omissions deliberately or through honest mistakes?
5. Considering the historical problems in Matthew's list (p. 78), what do you think of his genealogy?
6. The section "Three Times Fourteen?" argues that Matthew's purpose in drawing attention to the numerical patterns in the genealogy was to communicate that "Jesus was born at precisely the right time for the appearance of the messiah" (p. 82). What do you think of this message in light of the fact that Matthew's claim about the three fourteens is false? (See p. 79 and Box 4.3.)

#### **Similarities and Differences in the Two Genealogies (pp. 80–81)**

7. Comparison of the two genealogies shows numerous contradictions between them. Both genealogies also contradict the Old Testament in a number of places (see Boxes 4.1 and 4.2 and the comments on the relevant verses). Does this knowledge make a difference to how you regard the Bible? What difference should this knowledge make for traditional understandings of the Bible as the Word of God?

#### **The Four Women (pp. 82–85)**

8. To fully appreciate this topic, read and discuss the Old Testament stories about these four women. (The Old Testament references are given on pp. 83–84.)

9. Do you agree that the story about David and Bathsheba (see the cameo on p. 84) is the story of a rape? If so, why do you think it has traditionally been understood as a story of adultery and seduction?
10. Matthew mentions the four women in order to prepare for the story of Mary, but the similarities between them and her are not obvious. What do you think of the explanation in the last two paragraphs on p. 84 and on p. 85?

## Chapter 5

### Matthew 1–2

#### **Matthew 1:18–25 (pp. 87–91)**

1. Some translations of the Bible describe Mary and Joseph as “engaged” in 1:18. In light of the information on betrothal and marriage (pp. 87–88), do you think “engaged” or “betrothed” is the better choice in contemporary translations?
2. Discuss how Matthew portrays Joseph as adopting Jesus (see the comment on 1:20–21 on p. 89). What is at stake in this for Matthew?
3. Does the information in the comment on 1:21 (p. 89) affect how you understand the early Christian belief that Jesus was the Messiah?
4. Most translations of 1:19 tell that Joseph was a righteous man, “and so” did not want to expose her publicly. However, the translation in this book has “but” in the place of “and so.” How does this difference change the meaning of the story? In light of the comments on Joseph’s dilemma (pp. 89–90), which translation do you think is more appropriate?

#### **Legal Paternity (pp. 91–92)**

5. Certain Christian groups promote what they call “the Bible’s plan for marriage.” How do you imagine those Christians deal with the biblical law regarding levirate marriage (see pp. 91–92)?
6. In Box 5.4 how does the passage “make it clear that Onan’s sin was not one of sex, but of injustice” (p. 92)?
7. What does Onan’s story have to do with Matt 1:18–25?

#### **Isaiah 7:14 (pp. 92–97)**

8. Discuss the meaning of Isa 7:14 in its original context in the Book of Isaiah. How important do you think an understanding of the political and military situation behind Isa 7:1–16 (pp. 93–94) is for the interpretation of 7:14?
9. Examine and discuss the Hebrew and Greek versions of Isa 7:14. Do they differ in their meanings?
10. “In Isa 7:14, the divine sign is the timing of the conception, not its manner” (p. 95). What exactly does that mean? Do you agree with the statement? What is at stake in this distinction?
11. What do you think accounts for the resistance among some Christians to an accurate translation of Isa 7:14?

12. What does the Hebrew phrase *harah vyoledeth ben* mean? (See pp. 95–96 and Box 5.6.) How important is an understanding of this phrase to the interpretation of Isa 7:14?
13. Discuss the two questions at the end of the second paragraph on p. 97.

**Emmanuel (pp. 97–98)**

14. The last paragraph on p. 97 argues that it is “beside the point” that Jesus is never actually called Emmanuel. Do you agree?
15. What exactly does Matthew mean by the claim that Jesus is Emmanuel?
16. “This is one place where we can badly misunderstand Matthew if we forget that his frame of reference was Jewish” (p. 98). Why so?

**The (In)significance of Jesus’ Conception for Matthew (pp. 98–100)**

17. “If Matthew saw Mary’s pregnancy as a miracle, that is not how he treats it in his narrative” (p.98). Do you agree?
18. What is the difference between the significance Luke sees in Jesus’ conception and the significance Matthew sees in it? Is this difference important? Why or why not?
19. “For Matthew the virginal conception is, as it were, theologically inert” (p. 99). What does that mean? What reasons are offered in support of it? Do you agree with the statement?
20. What do you think of the two “educated guesses” on the top half of p. 100?

**Matthew 2:1–12 (pp. 100-108)**

21. “Matthew is not interested in the birth itself, but in the different responses to it” (p. 100). What do you think?
22. How does the story of the magi (see p. 100) allude to the situation of Matthew’s own day?
23. “The story [of the magi] makes little sense apart from its religious symbolism” (p. 100). What do you think?
24. Discuss the cameo on p. 101 and study the scenes in the Book of Acts that are mentioned there. How do you think early Christians who knew those stories would respond to Matthew’s story about the magi?
25. How does Matthew use the scene in 2:3–4 to anticipate the end of his gospel (see p. 106)?
26. The comment on 2:9 asserts, “Here the coherence of the story breaks down” (p. 108). Do you agree?

**The Star (pp. 102–3)**

27. Do you think it is appropriate to look for a scientific basis for the star in Matthew's story?
28. How much do you think the story of Balaam has influenced Matthew's story?

**Comets (cameo, pp. 104–5)**

29. Should the information about comets in the cameo make any difference to judgments about whether Matthew's story is historical?

**The Magi in Christian Legend (pp. 106–7)**

30. How did the magi become three kings?

**Matthew 2:13–23 (pp. 108–112)**

31. Discuss the ways by which Matthew associates the child Jesus with the history of Israel.
32. What do you think Matthew was trying to communicate through that association?
33. Do you agree with the assertion in the comment on 2:16 (p. 110)? If so, what can you infer about the nature of Matthew's narrative?
34. Does the comment on 2:17 (p. 110) perhaps read too much into a minor difference in wording?

**Prophecies in Matthew 2 (pp. 112–19)****Matthew 2:6 (pp. 112–13)**

35. How has Matthew "corrected" Micah's prophecy?
36. "Analyzing Matthew's use of Micah here lets us see how a prophecy can be changed by the event it 'foretells'" (p. 112). What exactly does that mean? Do you agree with the statement?
37. What does the practice of blending verses from different prophets into one quotation imply about the early Christian perspective on the Jewish scriptures?

**Matthew 2:15 (pp. 113–14)**

38. How exactly has Matthew given the prophecy of Hosea "a meaning quite foreign to its original sense" (p. 114)?

**Matthew 2:18 (pp. 114–15)**

39. What did Jeremiah 3:15 (see Box 5.10) mean in its original context?
40. How has Matthew used Jeremiah 3:15 for his own purpose?

**Matthew 2:23 (pp. 115–19)**

41. What can we infer from Matt 2:23 and the examples in Box 5.11 (p. 110) about the early Christians' understanding of the nature of scripture?
42. In order to follow the complex theory described on pp. 117–18, try the following exercise. Create a chart with the relevant verses (including the Greek and Hebrew words) arranged so that you can see Matthew's train of thought as he came up with wording of the quotation in 2:23.
43. Do you think Matthew was unethical in creating this prophecy? Do you think he was trying to deceive his readers? What do you imagine were his motives here?
44. Matthew apparently felt the need for a prophecy about Nazareth. Why?
45. Matthew "designed his story of Jesus' life, in part, to pre-empt Jewish objections to Jesus' origins" (p. 119). What specifically does this mean? Do you agree with the statement?

## Chapter 6

### The Moses Haggadah

1. What is the Moses Haggadah?
2. What major weakness in the Exodus story does the Haggadah try to remedy? How?
3. In what specific ways does the story of Joseph's dilemma in Matthew reflect the influence of the Moses Haggadah?
4. Discuss the three items under "More Similarities" (p. 124–25). In each case, do you think the similarities are close enough to justify the judgment that Matthew recycled those elements from the Moses Haggadah?
5. Discuss the items under "Escape to/from Egypt" (pp. 125–26). In each case, do you think the similarities are close enough to justify the judgment that Matthew recycled those elements from the Book of Exodus?
6. What do you imagine that people in the ancient world who knew the story of baby Sargon (p. 127–28) would think of the story of baby Moses?
7. Discuss the second paragraph on p. 128. What does it help us to see about ancient attitudes toward stories? How do the ancient assumptions about the nature of stories compare with ours?

#### **Pseudo-Philo (pp. 128–30)**

8. Discuss how Pseudo-Philo's version of the Moses Haggadah elaborates and/or improves the story in Exodus 1:6–2:10 (see Boxes 6.1 and 6.2).
9. In your estimation, does Pseudo-Philo succeed in telling a more satisfying and effective story than the one in Exodus?

#### **Josephus (pp. 130–31)**

10. In your estimation, does Josephus succeed in telling a more satisfying and effective story than the one in Exodus?
11. A major message in Josephus' story is that "no one can defeat the will of God" (v. 209). Discuss how Josephus communicates that particular theme in his story.

#### **Book of Memory (pp. 131–32)**

12. In your estimation, does the *Book of Memory* succeed in telling a more satisfying and effective story than the one in Exodus?

*At the end of the chapter*

13. Assuming that the audiences for the different versions of the Moses Haggadah also knew the biblical story of Moses, what can we infer about ancient people's understanding of the nature and authority of their scriptures? What value do you think they placed on creative retellings of scriptural stories?
14. Since Matthew belongs to a religious culture in which it was acceptable, even praiseworthy, to creatively embellish and improve traditional stories—including biblical stories—what can we infer about the nature of Matthew's entire gospel?

## Chapter 7

### Hellenistic Infancy Narratives

1. A major point of pp. 133–35 is that “stories about divine paternity were purely interpretive, not informational.” What exactly does this mean? What do you think of the reasoning behind that statement?
2. How do you think hellenistic Christians who were familiar with biographies of ancient heroes would regard the gospel infancy narratives?

#### **Theagenes (pp. 136–38)**

3. The comment on v. 2 makes a crucial point: a story about a miraculous conception could arise after a man’s death and be based solely on the desire to explain his extraordinary achievements. In your judgment, is that conclusion justified by the way the story of Theagenes is told?

#### **Alexander the Great (pp. 138–40)**

4. What does 2.3–5 tell us about ancient beliefs about dreams? Compare these dreams to those in Matthew’s infancy narrative (Matt 1:20, 2:12, 2:13, 2:19; see also 27:19). Judging from this comparison, to what extent does it appear that the Bible’s perspective on dreams is part of the common culture of the ancient world?
5. What is the religious symbolism of snakes in the hellenistic world?
6. Discuss the conflicting accounts in 3.3 and 3.4. What does 3.4 reveal about ancient people’s inclination to believe that someone like Alexander was a son of God?

#### **Augustus Caesar (pp. 140–45)**

7. Discuss the roles of snakes (Dio Cassius 1.2 and Suetonius 4a) and dreams (Dio Cassius 1.3 and 2.2–4 and Suetonius 4b, 6a, 8–9) in these stories.
8. What do you think of the parallels between the story in Dio Cassius and Matthew’s narrative (p. 142)?
9. Discuss the importance and role of omens in Suetonius’ account (vv. 2, 3, 5b, 10, 11). Discuss the comments on v. 1 and v. 2 about the role of hindsight in interpreting omens.
10. Discuss the baby stories in Suetonius 6b, 7a, 7b. Do you think they are based on actual events or are they pure fictions? How do you think ancient audiences took stories like these?

**Plato (pp. 145–47)**

11. What do you think about the parallels (see the comment on v. 2) between this account and Matthew's story?
12. Discuss how the poetry in v. 45 describes Plato as a savior of souls. Discuss the reasoning by which the poem concludes that Plato had been fathered by a god.
13. Which do you think came first: the story reported in v. 2 or the reasoning displayed in v. 45? In other words, do you think the story about Apollo and Ariston gave rise to the belief that Plato was a son of God, or was it the other way around?

**Apollonius of Tyana (pp. 147–49)**

14. How do v. 4b and v. 6 broaden our understanding of ancient beliefs about "divine men"?

**Pythagoras (pp. 149–52)**

15. (*This is an very important text.*) Iamblichus' writing shows that some ancient readers took the stories about divine begettings seriously but not literally. Here is an ancient author who believes that his hero Pythagoras was truly the son of a god, even though the author emphatically denies that the god physically fathered Pythagoras. Discuss how Iamblichus communicates his understanding of this matter (see the comments, especially those on v. 3 and v. 8).

**Herakles (pp. 152–53)**

16. What does 9.3 imply about how stories of divine begettings could originate? How do you think ancient readers took a story like this one?

***After finishing the chapter***

17. How does your knowledge of the stories in this chapter affect the way you look at the infancy narratives in the gospels?

## Chapter 8

### Did Jesus Fulfill Prophecy?

#### Matthew 4:15–16 (pp. 155–57)

1. Using Box 8.1, track how Matthew used Isa 9:1 to help him compose Matt 4:13.
2. What is it about Isa 9:1 that made it important for Matthew?
3. Why do you think Matthew here refers to “Capernaum-by-the-sea” whereas everywhere else the town is called simply “Capernaum”?

#### Matthew 21:4–5 (pp. 157–59)

4. See Box 8.2: How exactly does “Matthew’s ‘quotation’ of Zech 9:9 blend elements from the original Hebrew and the Greek translation of Zechariah” (p. 157)?
5. Using Box 8.3, track the specific ways Matthew alters Mark in order to have Jesus ride two animals.

#### Matthew 27:9 (p. 159)

6. Using Box 8.4 (p. 160), track the specific way Matthew used Zech 11:12–13 to help him compose Matt 26:14–15 and 27:3–10.
7. Matt 27:9 identifies the prediction as one from Jeremiah, whereas the quotation is actually based on Zechariah. Is this mistake significant to you? Why or why not?

#### What these three examples show (pp. 159–61)

8. Is the explanation in the italicized sentence on p. 161 sufficiently supported by the analysis of the three examples on pp. 159–60?

#### Prophecies in the Infancy Narrative (pp. 161–62)

9. Discuss the original meanings given on p. 162 of the five prophecies, reviewing pp. 92–98 and 112–19 as necessary.
10. The comments on p. 162 point out that two of the prophecies turned out to be false hopes. Is this significant to you? Why or why not?

**Prophecy and Polemic (pp. 162–64)**

11. Why do you think that the word “rejected” in the first line of p. 163 is in quotation marks?
12. Miller argues that the story in Matt 28:11–15 (see Box 8.5) is “a malicious lie” (p. 163). What do you think? What is at stake for you in this issue?
13. “Nor was Matthew’s manipulation of scripture meant to persuade the open-minded” (p. 164). Do you agree?

**Evaluating Matthew’s Claims (pp. 164–67)**

14. What exactly is meant by the question, “Are these messianic prophecies?” (p. 164)
15. The Summary at the top of p. 166 concludes that only one of the five prophecies is a messianic prophecy. Is this a valid conclusion?
16. Look ahead and study p. 210, especially the first paragraph. Then consider the assertion, “Since there is no good historical (i.e., public) evidence for the virgin birth, it cannot count as an historical truth” (p. 166). What do you think?
17. Miller argues that even if Mary’s pregnancy was a miracle, it “would not accomplish what a fulfilled prophecy is supposed to do” (p. 166). What exactly does that mean? Do you agree with the statement?
18. Discuss cases B, C, and D on p. 167, consulting pp. 181–84 as necessary. In your judgment, are the conclusions sufficiently supported?
19. Is the Conclusion at the bottom of p. 167 an accurate statement of the findings on pp. 164–67?

**Matthew’s Selectivity (pp. 168–70)**

20. How do we know that Matthew could read both Hebrew and Greek?
21. “Isaiah 7:14 works for Matthew only in Greek, Hosea 11:1 only in Hebrew” (p. 169). After examining the different versions of these verses at the top of p. 95 and in Box 8.6 (p. 169), do you agree with the statement?
22. The section “Quoting Out of Context” concludes that Matthew can connect most of the prophecies to Jesus “only by taking carefully chosen lines out of their surrounding contexts” (p. 170). In your judgment, is that conclusion justified by the evidence presented on pp. 169–70?
23. Considering both Matthew’s selectivity in choosing translations and his quoting out of context, what issues come to your mind concerning Matthew’s tactics and motives?
24. Does Matthew’s selectivity in his handling of prophecy raise any questions for you about the nature or authority of the Bible?

**Judaism and Matthew's Use of Prophecy (pp. 170–74)**

25. Why would Jews of Matthew's day not object to his general approach to prophecy?
26. "It seems most unlikely that anyone who was not already inclined to believe that Jesus was the messiah would be persuaded by Matthew" (p. 171). Do you agree?
27. The paragraph that begins with "Scholars generally agree" argues that Matthew used the prophetic books as sources of information about Jesus. What exactly does that mean? Do you agree?
28. Miller argues for an extremely important point: "the early Christian belief that Jesus fulfilled prophecy arose after and because of the belief that he was the promised messiah" (p. 172). Is this conclusion sufficiently supported? Do you agree with it?
29. How important is it to consider the religious and social circumstances of Matthew and his community in assessing his use of prophecy?
30. "Do not Christians now have the moral obligation to let go of the notion that if Jews truly understood the scriptures they would become Christians?" (p. 173) Discuss this question in two parts:
  - a. Do you think that Christians should let go of that notion?
  - b. In your judgment, are Christians under a *moral obligation* to let go of that notion?
31. Are the four bulleted items in the middle of p. 173 a fair and objective summary?
32. Discussing the three assumptions on the bottom of p. 173 and the top of p. 174, why is it that if you have doubts about *even one* of them, you will not be persuaded that Jesus fulfilled prophecy? Do you agree or do you think that it is necessary to doubt all three of the assumptions in order to not be persuaded by Matthew?
33. What do you think about the assertion on the bottom on p. 174 that the belief that the prophets were pointing to Jesus is "obsolete, self-serving, and dangerous"? If you agree with any of those characterizations, explain why you think that the belief in question is obsolete, or self-serving, or dangerous.

## Chapter 9

### Are the infancy narratives historical?

#### **The Unhistorical Nature of the Infancy Narratives (pp. 175–79)**

1. “The theory that Mary’s personal memories are the source for Luke’s story is untenable” (p. 176). Is this statement sufficiently supported? Do you agree with it?
2. There are many theologically conservative scholars who defend the historicity of the infancy narratives. What responses can you imagine them making to the four reasons given on pp. 175–77?
3. Discuss how the conventions for biographical literature in Luke’s hellenistic culture affected how his readers would have taken his infancy narrative.
4. Discuss how the conventions for religious storytelling in Matthew’s Jewish culture affected how his readers would have taken his infancy narrative.
5. How were the eight bulleted items on pp. 178–79 selected for historical assessment? Are the criteria for selection valid and appropriate?

#### **When was Jesus born? (pp. 179–80)**

6. What do you think of the reasoning for the conclusions about the date of Jesus’ birth in both Matthew and Luke?

#### **Was Jesus born during a census? (pp. 180–81)**

7. The conclusion on p. 181 is stated with certainty, without qualifiers such as “perhaps” or “probably.” Is the evidence and reasoning presented persuasive enough to support such a confident conclusion?

#### **Where was Jesus born? (pp. 181–83)**

8. Does John 7:40–43 indicate that John believes that Jesus was born in Bethlehem?
9. If Matthew and Luke independently agree that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, how can there be serious doubt about the historical truth of this tradition?
10. Why is it theologically important for Matthew and Luke that Jesus was born in Bethlehem?

#### **Did Herod meet with magi? (p. 183)**

11. What do you think?

**Did Herod massacre babies? (p. 184)**

12. “The massacre in Matt 2:16 may be fictitious, but it is realistic fiction” (p. 184). Do you agree?

**Was Jesus descended from David? (pp. 185–87)**

13. What can we infer about ancient genealogies from the discrepancies in the different passages discussed in the cameo about Zadok? How is Zadok’s case relevant to Jesus’ genealogy?
14. In your judgment, what does the text from Eusebius (pp. 185–86) contribute to the historical assessment of Jesus’ ancestry?
15. How significant is it that there is “no evidence that any Jews questioned Christian claims that Jesus was a son of David” (p. 187)?

**In Review**

16. Go back and review the arguments for each of these statements:
- Jesus was born sometime around the end of Herod’s life.
  - Jesus was born during a Roman census.
  - Jesus was born in Bethlehem.
  - Herod met with magi to discuss Jesus’ birth.
  - Herod massacred babies in Bethlehem.
  - Jesus was descended from David.

For each statement, take a Jesus Seminar style vote on the question: “Is this statement historically accurate?” (Vote by color: *red* - yes; *pink* - probably; *gray* - probably not; *black* - no.) Discuss your results.

## Chapter 10

### What is a “virgin”?

#### Greek and Hebrew (pp. 189–91)

1. How did biblical authors convey the meaning (in both Greek and Hebrew) that the word “virgin” has for us today?

#### Matthew 1:23 (pp. 191–92)

2. Why does Matt 1:23 present a translation dilemma?
3. What do you think of the decision to translate Matt 1:23 as “a ‘virgin’ will conceive”? (See p. 19 for the full verse along with its context.)

#### Luke 1:27 (pp.192–93)

4. How does Luke 1:34 clarify the meaning of Luke 1:27?
5. What do you think of the decision to translate *parthenos* as “girl” in Luke 1:27? (See p. 14 for the full verse along with its context.)

## Chapter 11

### Is there a virgin birth in Matthew?

1. “The issue under discussion in this chapter is whether Matthew describes a virgin birth. Please note that this is a literary question, not an historical one” (p. 195). What exactly does this mean?
2. Why is it important for our consideration of this topic to “pretend that all traces of Luke’s gospel have been lost” (p.196)?

#### **The Case for a Virginal Conception (pp. 196–98)**

3. Discuss each of the four reasons presented in this section. How persuasive is each one by itself? Do you agree that “taken together they make an impressive case that Matthew does not think that Jesus had a human father” (p. 197)?

#### **The Case against a Virginal Conception (pp. 198–201)**

4. In your judgment, is the discussion of “A Shared Tradition” on p. 198 an effective response to the points made in the paragraph numbered 1 on p. 197?
5. Why all the fuss over the Greek word *ek*?
6. Study the verses from the Gospel and First Letter of John on p. 226. What light do they shed on our topic?
7. Study the examples listed on the top of p. 199. How strongly do those passages support the conclusion that in Matthew’s Jewish world “being fathered by God was never understood to exclude being fathered by a human male” (p. 199)?
8. Study 11:5–7 from the Infancy Gospel of James (see p. 263 for the full text). What light can this passage shed on our topic? Do you think it is valid to consider evidence that comes from a text that was “written in a non-Jewish setting long after Matthew’s gospel” (p. 199)?
9. Read and discuss the full story of Tamar in Genesis 38 and, if necessary, review the explanation of levirate marriage on pp. 91–92. (In considering Tamar’s story, it is crucial that we set aside our own beliefs about sexual morality and take this ancient story on its own terms.) Then study Gen 38:24–26 carefully to check the analysis of those verses on p. 200. How does an understanding of Tamar’s story affect the way we understand the story of Mary and Joseph in Matthew?
10. Why does the mention of the four women in the genealogy *not* prepare readers for a story about a virgin birth?

**Matthew 1:23 (pp. 201–4)**

11. “It would help if we put the shoe on the other foot” (p. 201). What is this referring to and why would it be helpful?
12. “The normal sense of ‘the virgin will conceive’ connotes nothing miraculous” (p. 202). Do you agree?
13. After discussing the arguments on p. 202, do you agree with the italicized conclusion at the bottom of the page?
14. If Matthew did *not* intend his story to be about a virgin birth, why would his quotation of the prophecy in 1:23 be a “strong signal of reassurance” (p. 203) to his audience?
15. If Matthew’s story is not about a virgin birth, he “was not foisting an alien meaning unto the words of Isaiah” (p. 204). Do you agree?

**Can they all be wrong? (cameo, p. 201)**

16. This essay attempts to explain how it is possible for Matthew’s story to be so widely misunderstood by other early Christian authors. In your judgment, is the explanation persuasive?
17. Isn’t it arrogant for Miller to think that he understands Matthew better than all the early Christians who wrote about that gospel?

**Conclusion (pp. 205–6)**

18. Considering the summary of the evidence at the top of p. 205, how would you vote on the question: “Does Matthew intend his story to be about a virgin birth?”  
(Vote by colors: *red* - yes; *pink* - probably; *gray* - probably not; *black* - no.)
19. “If you take up the passage expecting a virgin birth, nothing there will lead you to think otherwise” (p. 205). Do you agree?
20. “If you come to Matt 1:18–25 *without* expecting a virgin birth, nothing is there to support it” (p. 205, note 5). Do you agree?
21. If you agree with the statements in both 19 and 20, then what assumption do you think we *should* bring to our reading of Matt 1:18–25?
22. Why would Matthew have a bias against the idea of a virgin birth? Does considering Matthew’s bias help us answer question 21?

## Chapter 12

## Is the virgin birth historical?

1. "While it's theoretically true that silence doesn't prove what people don't know, appealing to this principle in this case is special pleading" (p. 208). What exactly does that mean in this context? Do you agree with the statement?
2. Why were gentile Christians receptive to belief in the virgin birth?
3. In order to check your own assumptions on this topic, ask yourselves whether you believe that it is possible for a human life to begin without a biological father. (For the sake of avoiding tangents irrelevant to the issue of the virgin birth, leave out considerations concerning modern reproductive technologies.)
4. Those who believe that a miracle like a virgin birth is impossible are sometimes regarded as not being open minded. Is that a fair and accurate characterization?
5. "If you believe that it was possible for Jesus to have no human father, you also have to hold open the same possibility for Plato, Pythagoras, Augustus, and the other hellenistic heroes" (p. 209). Why so?
6. "Those who believe in the virgin birth of Jesus but not in the hellenistic stories are using religious criteria to make this distinction" (p. 209). How so? Do you agree?
7. What is the relevance of the example from the Qur'an (p. 209) for the question of the historicity of the virgin birth?
8. "In short, since a virginal conception cannot be an object of public knowledge, the virgin birth of Jesus cannot be historical knowledge" (p. 210). [This is a crucial point, so be sure to discuss it.] What exactly does that mean? Do you agree with the statement?
9. "History is a partial account of the past" (p. 210). What are some implications of this principle for the issue at hand?
10. Some scholars argue that "historians cannot say anything either for *or against*" the historicity of the virgin birth (p. 210). What do you think is the reasoning for this position? Do you agree with it?
11. "A properly historical account of Jesus' life must proceed on the assumption that his life began as naturally as anyone else's" (p. 210). Since the validity of this statement hinges on how we define history, discuss the meaning of "properly historical." You can do that by discussing the best way to fill in the following blank: "a properly historical account of someone's life is an account that is \_\_\_\_\_."
12. After discussing the issue in question 11, discuss whether you agree that "a properly historical account of Jesus' life must proceed on the assumption that his life began as naturally as anyone else's."
13. How important is it for us to make a distinction between what we believe about the past on the basis of religious faith and what we believe about the past on the basis of historical evidence? To think through this question in concrete terms, imagine how a

conversation between a Muslim and a non-Muslim would go on the question of whether Jesus was crucified (see the bottom of p. 209). What would be at stake in such a discussion?

## Chapter 13

### Was Jesus illegitimate?

#### Allusions in the Gospels? (pp. 211–15)

1. What might the reference to Jesus as “son of Mary” in Mark 6:3 mean?
2. Does Mark think that “son of Mary” insinuates that Jesus was illegitimate? Why or why not?
3. How and why did Matthew alter Mark 6:3?
4. How and why did some ancient copyists of the New Testament alter Mark 6:3? (See the cameo on p. 213.)
5. How does John 6:41 insinuate that Jesus was illegitimate?
6. Is John 6:41 evidence that some of Jesus’ contemporaries considered him illegitimate? Why or why not?

#### Second-Century Accusations (pp. 215–16)

7. In the scene from the Acts of Pilate (Box 13.1 on p. 214), how do some Jews defend Jesus against the accusation of illegitimacy? (If necessary, review the information on betrothal on pp. 87–88.)
8. What does this passage contribute to the historical question of whether Jesus was illegitimate?
9. What is the basis for Celsus’ accusation? (See the top of p. 256 for information about Celsus.)
10. Why is it likely that this passage from Celsus’ treatise is actually a response to Matthew’s gospel? Why is this finding important to the historical question of whether Jesus was illegitimate?
11. Is “Panthera” is the name of an actual person?

#### Jesus in Jewish Literature (pp. 216–19)

12. What do rabbinic references to Jesus as “Ben Pantera” tell us?
13. Why did some rabbis call Jesus “Ben Stada”?
14. How does the *Toledoth Yeshu* account for the story about Jesus’ virgin birth?
15. What do these passages from the Talmud and the *Toledoth Yeshu* contribute to the historical question of whether Jesus was illegitimate?

**Results (pp. 219–20)**

16. Review the five statements on p. 219. Is each one a clear and accurate analysis of the evidence presented earlier in the chapter?
17. “The hypothesis that Jesus was conceived out of wedlock is unsupported by solid historical evidence” (pp. 219–20). Do you agree? If so, does that completely settle the question of whether Jesus was illegitimate?

**A Plausible and Ugly Scenario (pp. 220–21)**

18. What exactly do we know from Roman history that is relevant to our issue? What do we *not* know? In your judgment, is there value in making educated guesses here about things we cannot ever know for sure?
19. The first paragraph on p. 221 advances a theory for explaining why Jesus could have been considered illegitimate by people of his day. What do you think about this theory?

**Closing Thoughts (pp. 221–22)**

20. “Nothing in our modern discussion of the topic [of Jesus’ illegitimacy] imputes moral blame to Mary” (p. 221). Do you agree?
21. Some theologians are worried about the negative effect the idea of Jesus’ illegitimacy can have on Christian believers. In your judgment, are those concerns valid? If so, how should those concerns be addressed?
22. Miller argues that there is a “symbolic symmetry” between the notion of Jesus’ illegitimacy and his crucifixion (p. 222). What exactly does he mean? Do you agree with him on this?
23. Miller finds the notion of Jesus’ illegitimacy “theologically attractive” (p. 222). What does he mean? What do you think?

## Chapter 14

### Son(s) of God in the Bible

#### Son of God as a Title in the Old Testament (pp. 223–26)

1. After considering the four categories of examples on pp. 223–24, study the last full paragraph on p. 224. Which statement in that paragraph do you think is the most important? Why?
2. The four passages on p. 225 describe conceptions that are entirely natural and yet are attributed to God's intervention. What does that tell us about the biblical understanding of how God works?
3. Miller describes his decision on how to translate the Greek word *gennan* as an "inelegant compromise" (p. 226). What do you think?

#### Christians as Fathered by God (pp. 226–27)

4. If you had to pick one of the verses on p. 226 to be the single best illustration of the concept of divine fathering, which one would you select and why?
5. Paul's way of describing Ishmael and Isaac is "a strong clue about how Jews and early Christians understood the language of divine begetting" (p. 227). Where do you think this clue leads?

#### Jesus as Divinely Fathered/Begotten (pp. 227–30)

6. Do you think that point #2 at the top of p. 228 is a fair interpretation of Rom 1:3-4?
7. "Paul's silence about the virgin birth strongly suggests that that belief did not yet exist" (p. 228). Do you agree?
8. Why is the use of "only son" in the Letter to the Hebrews (see the cameo on p. 228) important?
9. Review the information on Psalm 2:7 on p. 40. What does the use of Psalm 2:7 in the New Testament contribute to our topic?
10. "In light of the way the Bible uses the terminology of divine begetting, we should not simply assume that Matthew believed in the virgin birth" (p. 230). Do you agree?

#### When did Jesus become God's son? (pp. 230–35)

11. How important do you think it is that we *not* consider the doctrine of the Trinity when seeking to understand the New Testament's perception of Jesus as the son of God?

12. "The earliest understanding of how Jesus was God's son is that God made him his son at the resurrection" (p. 231). Is that conclusion fully supported by the passages presented on p. 231?
13. In light of the passages presented in Stages 1 and 2, what do you think of Adoptionism (see p. 230)? Would you consider Adoptionism to be a helpful way for contemporary Christians to formulate belief in Jesus? Does Adoptionism reflect anything of your convictions about Jesus?
14. "By beginning their gospels with infancy narratives, Matthew and Luke create a story line within which the divine voice at the baptism confirms rather than confers Jesus' status as God's son" (p. 232). What exactly does that mean?
15. The belief that Jesus was the son of God from the beginning of his life "was the result of a process of development in christological thinking" (p. 232). What implications might that insight have for how Christians should understand the nature of biblical authority or the concept of divine revelation?

## Chapter 15

### The Virgin Birth in Context

#### **The Jewish Context (pp. 235–38)**

1. The second paragraph on p. 236 argues that Mary's conception is no more miraculous than Sarah's. What do you think?
2. "One way to rank miracles is to ask which one is publicly and indubitably a sign of God's power" (p. 237). Why so?
3. Judging by the above standard, whose conception do you think is a greater miracle, Sarah's or Mary's?
4. "The belief that Jesus is the son of God is logically prior to the belief in the virgin birth" (p. 237). What exactly does that mean? Do you agree with the statement?

#### **Emperors as Sons of God (cameo, pp. 238–39)**

5. What do you think are the presuppositions about the nature of God that lie behind the Roman belief that the emperors were sons of God?
6. What beliefs about the nature of God do you think Christians who lived in that Roman environment were expressing in their claim that Jesus was the only son of God?

#### **The Pagan Context (pp. 238–42)**

7. "Gentile audiences would have found it odd if Jesus' story did not begin with some account of his divine origin" (p. 239). Why so?
8. What do the statements by Plutarch on p. 241 add to our understanding of our topic?
9. How did Matthew and Luke each avoid giving the impression that Mary's pregnancy was due to some physical contact with God?
10. What do you think of the passage from Justin Martyr in Box 15.1? How convincing do you imagine his argument was to Christian readers? How convincing do you imagine his argument was to the open minded pagans he was addressing? How convincing is it today?

#### **The Modern Context (pp. 242–43)**

11. "Would Mary's conceiving Jesus without a human father be less miraculous if Jesus had not been her first child" (p. 243)? Why or why not?

12. "Surely the passenger dignifies the vehicle, not the other way around" (p. 243). What does that statement have to do with the topic under discussion? Do you agree with the statement?
13. "The affirmation of the virgin birth said something about Jesus, not Mary" (p. 243). Do you agree? How important do you think this principle is to our topic?

**Mary, Ever Virgin (pp. 243–46)**

14. Read Infancy James 19:18–20:2 on p. 266. Miller thinks that "this scene strikes us as not only distasteful but as bizarre" (p. 244). What is your reaction to the scene?
15. Why do you think that early Christians felt the need to believe that Mary had been morally perfect?
16. Why do you think so many Christians reject the thought that Jesus was married?
17. What was the linkage that the early Christians saw between Mary's virginity and human salvation? What do you think of that linkage?

## Chapter 16

### The Meaning of the Virgin Birth

#### Getting Started (pp. 249–50)

1. Do you agree with the observation that “people who believe in the virgin birth *want* it to be true” (p. 249)?
2. Try the experiment described in point #2 on pp. 249–50, answering both which outcome you would be hoping for and *why* you would care about it.
3. “To what yearning does the virgin birth speak? It’s difficult even to imagine an answer” (p. 250). Do you agree?

#### Fact and Meaning (pp. 250–52)

4. Imagine a respectful discussion about the virgin birth between a Muslim and a Christian who takes the Bible literally. How would that discussion go?
5. Imagine a respectful discussion about the virgin birth between a Muslim and a Christian who takes the Bible seriously but not literally. How would that discussion go?
6. Does it sound like “common sense” to you that “the only honest way to believe in the meaning of the virgin birth is to believe in it as a fact” (p. 252)?
7. Miller argues that no one actually believes that Jesus is literally the son of God. What does he mean by that? Do you agree with him?
8. Miller argues that “the question of whether the virgin birth was a biological fact is . . . without theological significance” (p. 252). What do you think?

#### Belief in the Virgin Birth, Back Then (pp. 252–56)

9. Why were Greco-Roman stories about miraculous births more relevant to the early Christians’ understanding of the virgin birth than were the miraculous birth stories from the Hebrew Bible?
10. “The meaning of a story about a miraculous birth is retrospective” (p. 254). What does that mean? What reasons are presented to support that assertion?
11. Discuss the thought experiment on p. 255. Do you agree that Jennifer’s virgin birth would be “without significance”?
12. “For early Christians the virgin birth of Jesus was believable *only* because it was *Jesus’* birth” (p. 255). What does that mean? Do you agree with the statement?
13. Why did Celsus (p. 256) reject the belief in the virgin birth of Jesus?

**Belief in the Virgin Birth Today (pp. 256–57)**

14. What do you think were the real-life implications of believing in the virgin birth for the early Christians?
15. In your judgment, what are some of the implications of believing in the virgin birth today?
16. In this section, is Miller's point that belief in the virgin birth has nothing to do with what one believes about the actual birth of Jesus but is instead about what one believes about God? If so, do you agree with Miller? If not, then what is his point here?
17. In your judgment, which belief requires stronger faith: believing in a literal virgin birth or believing in the meaning of the virgin birth without taking it literally?

**Is Jesus the only son of God? (pp. 257–58)**

18. Miller asserts that the assumption that Jesus could not be the Son of God if he had a human father is pagan, not biblical (p. 257). Do you agree? If so, what implications might this have on the contemporary Christian understanding of the virgin birth?
19. Is Miller's point on p. 258 that insisting on the literal fact of the virgin birth comes down to believing that Christianity is the only true religion? If so, do you agree with him? If not, then what is his point here?
20. *If* affirming the literal fact of the virgin birth implies that Christianity is the only true religion, do you think contemporary Christians should repudiate the virgin birth as a literal doctrine?

## Chapter 17

### The Infancy Gospel of James

1. The author of Infancy James “expected Christians to accept both his narrative and the canonical originals, even though his gospel sometimes differs dramatically from them” (p. 261). How do we know that? What does that tell us about early Christian attitudes toward the canonical infancy narratives and toward the imaginative stories in the infancy gospels?
2. How do we know that the author’s claim to have written this gospel shortly after the death of Herod is false?
3. Compare and contrast InJas 11 (p.263; comments on p. 269) to Luke 1:26–38 (pp. 14–15). What is different? Why is 11:6 important to the author’s purpose in this scene?
4. Why do you think the author has Mary forget what the angel had said to her (12:6) in the story of InJas 12–13 (p. 263–64; comments on p. 269–70)?
5. InJas 14 (p. 264, comments on p. 270) retells and supplements Matt 1:18–25 (p. 19). Where does the logic of the new story break down?
6. What do you think the author is trying to communicate through Joseph’s vision in 18:3–11 (p. 266, comment on p. 271)?
7. What do you think of the scene about Salome in 19:18–20:11 (pp. 266–67, comments on pp. 271–72)? How do you imagine early Christians responding to this scene?
8. What does 22:5–9 (p. 268, comment on p. 272) imply about the way early Christians were interpreting the New Testament gospels?
9. In your judgment, what is the value for us today in studying this gospel?

## Chapter 18

### The Infancy Gospel of Thomas

1. What is your reaction to the stories in chapters 3–5 (pp. 276–77)? Does it make a difference that in these stories Jesus is five years old (see InThom 2:1)?
2. What do you think about the story of Jesus and his teacher in InThom 6–7 (pp. 277–78, comments on p. 282)? How do you imagine that early Christians responded to this story?
3. For the sake of this exercise, assume that you believe Jesus to be fully divine. Take a few minutes and make up story about Jesus' first day at school. Share your stories and your reactions to them. Discuss how your stories differ from the ones in Infancy Thomas.
4. The translation of InThom 7:11 involves some guesswork (see the comments on p. 282). Which choice (“god” or “God”) do you think is the better one and why?
5. What does InThom 8:3 imply about early Christian reaction to certain stories in this gospel? (See the discussion on p. 275 and the comment on pp. 282–83.)
6. What do the stories in chapters 9, 10, 16, 17, and 18 all have in common? If you had to choose one of these stories as an example of the whole group, which would you select? Why?
7. What do the stories in chapters 11, 12, and 13 all have in common? If you had to choose one of these stories as an example of the whole group, which would you select? Why?
8. Why do you think the author of this gospel chose to end it with the story in chapter 19?
9. Looking back over the whole gospel, which story is your favorite? Why?
10. In your judgment, what is the value for us today in studying this gospel?
11. Here's a chance to try your hand at the art of revising an infancy gospel. Study InThom 14–15 and think how it could be improved to make it a better vehicle for honoring Jesus and expressing Christian faith. Rewrite the story accordingly (or at least write down what changes you would make.) After you finish this imaginative process, study chapter 29 from the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (p. 313; see also the comments on pp. 315–16). How does your revision compare to Pseudo-Matthew's (which was written six or seven centuries after Infancy Thomas)? Which version, your's or Pseudo-Matthew's, do you prefer?

## Chapter 19

### Two Docetic Birth Stories

1. What is Docetism?
2. “There can be little doubt that Docetism is an implicit belief of many Christians” (p. 285). Do you agree? On what evidence do you base your impression?

#### **The Vision of Isaiah (pp. 286–88)**

3. What theological points do you think the author was making through the story in vv. 7–11?
4. Verse 16 “seems to be directed against the stories in Matthew 2” (comment on v. 16 on p. 288). Do you agree? If so, why do you think the author objected to the stories in Matthew 2?

#### **The Latin Infancy Gospel (pp. 288-89)**

5. What theological values are expressed through this story?
6. How do you imagine Christians from earlier ages responding to this story?
7. Since the audience for this gospel undoubtedly knew the nativity stories from the New Testament, what do you imagine they thought about this story? In what sense, if any, do you think they regarded it as true?

## Chapter 20

### The History of Joseph the Carpenter

1. Chapters 6 and 7 in the History of Joseph contain several examples of how elements from different gospels were blended together (see the comments on pp. 294–95) to create a new version of the story. What do you think was the motivation for this kind of creativity?
2. Relying on your experience of such things as Christian preaching, artistic and dramatic depictions of gospel scenes, and movies about Jesus, to what extent do you think that the practice of blending gospels persists in contemporary Christianity? What is your judgment about the value of that practice?
3. What understanding of the nature of the Bible do you think that practice entails? In other words, what do you think that those who blend gospels believe about the Bible?
4. In light of HistJos 11:3–4, how do you think the author would have regarded the stories about the trouble-making Jesus in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas? How do you imagine he regarded the story of the young Jesus in the temple in Luke 2:41–51 (p. 18)?

## Chapter 21

### The Arabic Infancy Gospel

1. Judging from chapters 7–8, how do you think the author regarded Zoroastrianism (the religion of the magi)?
2. What do you think the author's regard for Zoroastrianism reveals about early Christian attitudes toward other religions? (Consider also the report in 23:10.)
3. What do you think of the story in chapter 19?
4. Taking into consideration the information in the cameo "Isis and Mary," how literally do you imagine early Christians took the story in chapters 20–21?
5. The stories in chapters 23 and 35 feature characters who, in the canonical gospels, appear only later in the life of Jesus. Discuss how the author ensures that the audience makes the connection between the characters in his gospel and their namesakes in the canonical gospels. What do you think is the motivation for this technique in storytelling?
6. Imagine a conversation between early Christians who valued the stories in chapters 37 and 40 (p. 303) and those who enjoyed stories such as those in Infancy Thomas 3–5 (pp. 276–77). What do you imagine each side would say about both sets of stories?
7. What do you think is the point of chapter 41?
8. Compare Arabic Gospel 50–53 to Luke 2:41–52 (p. 18). Then imagine that Luke was somehow able to read Arabic Gospel 50–53 (ignoring, for the sake of the exercise, that that would be impossible). What do you imagine Luke would say?

## Chapter 22

### The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew

1. This gospel was written in the Middle Ages (eighth or ninth century) and was very popular. What does it imply about Christian beliefs about scripture that new gospels continued to be written so many centuries after the New Testament?
2. What do the cover letters (p. 309) reveal about Christian attitudes towards non-canonical gospels?
3. In your judgment, which of the following is more likely concerning the stories in chapters 14, 18, and 19?
  - a. The author inherited these stories from his tradition and used his knowledge of scripture to match them to Old Testament prophecies.
  - b. The author created these stories from scratch on the basis of the quoted prophecies.
4. In view of your answer to the preceding question, how similar do you think Pseudo-Matthew's process for writing scenes about prophecy fulfillment was to Matthew's?
5. Imagine that Matthew was somehow able to read Pseudo-Matthew 14:1–5, 18:2–4, and 19:5–8 (ignoring, for the sake of the exercise, that that would be impossible). What do you imagine Matthew would say about these passages?
6. Compare Pseudo-Matthew 29 to Infancy Thomas 4–5 (pp. 276–77). (See also the comments on pp. 315–16.) Which version do you prefer and why?
7. Several of Pseudo-Matthew's stories feature Jesus taming dangerous animals (chapters 18, 19, 35, 36). Why do you think this theme was so important to the author and audience of this gospel?
8. What do you think is the point or message of 42:4–6?
9. How do you think medieval Christians who knew the stories in Matthew and Luke regarded the ones in Pseudo-Matthew: as literally true, as entertaining fictions, as pious legends expressing religious truths, as stories with hidden or symbolic meanings, or what?

## Appendix

### The Births of Aeneas and Jesus

NOTE: *This Appendix should be studied in conjunction with Chapter 2.*

1. In your judgment, are the parallels between the Hymn to Aphrodite and Luke's gospel sufficiently close and numerous as to suggest that Luke was consciously imitating the Hymn?

*If you answered yes to question 1, here are some more questions.*

2. If Luke was imitating the Hymn, would it be accurate to say that Luke was knowingly writing fiction?
3. Which of the following theories seems more likely?
  - a. Luke believed that angels really had appeared to Zechariah, Mary, and the shepherds, but he didn't know what exactly had occurred or what was said on those occasions, so he used the Hymn as a model for filling in the details.
  - b. Luke had no information at all about angelic appearances, and so he made up those scenes by imitating the Hymn.

*Or, is there some other theory that makes more sense to you?*

4. Keeping in mind that the Caesars claimed to be descended from Aeneas and the goddess Aphrodite, what do you think Luke's purpose was in imitating the Hymn to Aphrodite?