Last session we began examining Luke’s infancy narrative, noting its similarities to and differences with Matthew’s narrative, and exploring the ways Luke intertwines the stories about John and Jesus. At the end of the hour I also presented evidence for the widely-held consensus that Luke composed his infancy narrative only after he had finished his gospel and the book of Acts, inserting it between his dedicatory address to Theophilus and his report of the beginning of Jesus’ story with the appearance of John the Baptist. I’ll say more about why he may have done so when we consider Matthew.

Today I want to begin by enumerating some additional inferences that can be drawn about how Luke composed his infancy narrative. One of those is that, whatever information Luke and Matthew shared, it was (as we saw last time) fragmentary. E.g. you’ll recall that both Matthew and Luke are aware that Jesus’ hometown was Nazareth, and both of them know the tradition that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. And yet, each portrays the relationship between Nazareth and Bethlehem differently. Matthew assumes Bethlehem was Joseph and Mary’s hometown and that only persistent threats to Jesus’ life from Herod’s household led them, upon their return, to settle in Nazareth. Luke, on the other hand, assumes that Nazareth is Joseph and Mary’s hometown, while Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem is a result of Joseph and Mary traveling there to participate in a Roman census. In this case, then, it appears that the traditions Matthew and Luke knew were sketchy as to the relationship between Nazareth and Bethlehem in Jesus’ early life.

But we can take this conclusion further in the case of Luke: we can establish that the relationship between Nazareth and Bethlehem in Luke was constructed by him.

I want to tell you where I’m headed with this and why. In order to show that Luke’s story of Joseph and Mary traveling to Bethlehem is his device to correlate the fragmentary traditions that Jesus was born in Bethlehem but grew up in Nazareth, I will need to expose the problems with Luke’s journey to Bethlehem. Understand that I would be quite contented to show that Luke’s story is entirely consistent with what we know of events in the Roman Empire. So my pointing out problems with Luke’s story line does not stem from a desire to undermine Luke. Rather, my intent is to note what these problems indicate about how Luke composed this narrative.

Luke’s setting of the story of John’s and Jesus’ births “in the days of king Herod” tallies with Matthew’s assertion that Jesus was born “in the time of King Herod.” And this setting agrees with Luke’s report at the outset of his genealogy, that “Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work.” We need to correlate this round figure with Luke’s report, at the beginning of the chapter, setting Jesus’ appearance “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius.”

Tiberius’ fifteenth regnal year of Tiberius was during 27-28 C.E. Subtracting from that Jesus’ approximate age of thirty places his birth shortly before the turn of
the era, at the very end of Herod’s reign, during the reign of Augustus Caesar. Herod’s death can be dated to 4 or 3 B.C.E. And so, Luke’s report of Jesus’ birth in the time of Herod tallies both with Matthew’s statement and Luke’s own round number of “thirty years” when Jesus began his work. Having established this, however, raises problems for another marker Luke gives for the time of Jesus’ birth.

As you’ll recall, Luke’s explanation of why Jesus was born in Bethlehem hinges on a Roman mandate: “1In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.”

This report raises four problems. The first is the dating of this census to the time Quirinius was governor/legate of Syria. The problem is that Publius Sulpicius Quirinius did not serve as the legate of Syria until 6 C.E. While some have conjectured that perhaps he served as legate briefly prior to that, towards the end of the first century B.C.E., there is no evidence to support that conjecture, and everything known about Quirinius’ career makes it difficult to find an occasion when he could have filled the post earlier.

On the other hand, we do know of a census that Quirinius executed during his tenure as Syrian Legate after 6 C.E., and what we know about that census exacerbates the problem of positing such a census during Herod’s reign. We can dub this facet of the problem the political implausibility of a census during this period.

When Herod the Great died, the Roman senate agreed to Herod’s last wish to entrust his territory to three of his sons. To Herod Antipas was given the region of Galilee and Perea; to Philip was assigned the territory across the Jordan from Galilee; while the largest piece of the pie, Judea and Samaria, was handed over to Archelaus under a probationary agreement. If he proved himself a good and trustworthy ruler, he would wield the sort of power his father had. Unfortunately for him, however, he did not pass the test and was deposed in 6 C.E., after which Rome dispatched a series of prefects – appointed Roman administrators responsible to the Syrian legate rather than directly to the Emperor.

As part of the job of closing down the 46 year rule of Herod and his family, the Syrian Legate, Quirinius, found it necessary to assess the tax resources of Judea and Samaria. Rome occasionally took a head count of Roman citizens, but the sort of census Quirinius undertook was aimed at gathering information for taxation. Herod – who was not a Roman, but contracted with the Roman government – had run his own system of tax collection, and so no Roman intrusion into Judean affairs was warranted during his reign. But once Herod was gone and Archelaus proved useless, Rome had to assert its own system of taxes. Thus, Luke’s report that “This was the first registration” accords with the circumstances of the census under
Quirinius. In fact, Josephus reports that Quirinius’ census provoked a revolt, suggesting that such a census was not a customary occurrence in Judea.

Therefore, given Herod’s role as Rome’s surrogate ruler, a Roman census executed by the Syrian legate is politically implausible, whereas the census after Archelaus was deposed makes good political and administrative sense.

A third problem is the way this report is formatted as a decree for all the world. Even though we know of a census by Quirinius, and even though we know of such censuses carried out at various times in different localities in the empire, there is no evidence of an empire-wide census under Augustus. Most likely Luke has, in effect, collapsed diverse administrative acts into an Empire-wide census as part of his attempt to set the story of Jesus within the larger Roman world.

And it is in this connection that a fourth problem arises. Because the census under Quirinius established a new tax system for Samaria and Judea after Archelaus, it had nothing to do with Galilee, where Nazareth is located. Because Galilee wasn’t included in this census, there would have been no general call for Galileans to report to their ancestral village. In fact, the whole scenario of requiring people to travel to their ancestral home is problematic.

We do have a papyrus from Egypt reporting a census in 104 C.E. that required those living at a distance from their property to return to the city of their holdings for the census. The rationale behind this was to account for taxable property. It may be that Luke’s portrayal of a journey to ancestral homes for a census plays off this sort of administrative practice, but that’s not the rationale Luke cites. He says nothing about Joseph owning property in Bethlehem; the issue Luke presents is Joseph’s ancestral ties to Bethlehem. Again, the scenario Luke constructs for Joseph and Mary’s visit to Bethlehem fails to ally with what we know of Roman administrative practices in Palestine.

As I said at the outset, I am not interested in pointing out these problems for their own sake. Rather, they form the foundation for understanding how Luke composed this part of his infancy narrative. Luke needs a means to get Joseph and Mary from their home in Nazareth down to Bethlehem in Judea, where Jesus was reputed to have been born. An empire-wide census requiring everyone to register in their ancestral town was the device he used to correlate the tradition about Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem with what he knew about Nazareth as Jesus’ hometown. Luke is working with a modicum of information, and so he connects the dots in a way that will make sense for his readers.

A similar conclusion applies to Luke’s narration of Gabriel’s announcement to Mary that she would bear a child: “26In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary…. 30The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” – As you know, Gabriel’s announcement catches Mary off guard, and she raises an objection: “34Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a
The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”

Here, of course, we find a reference to the “Holy Spirit,” which we already know to be a Lukan theme. And yet, we cannot use this as a base for attributing to Luke this visitation story, because the report of Mary being a virgin and conceiving Jesus by agency of the Spirit is a motif he shares with Matthew. But bringing Matthew’s announcement of Jesus’ birth alongside for comparison will prove helpful: “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Here again we find a reference to the Holy Spirit as the agent of Mary’s pregnancy. And, in keeping with that, we find in both these gospels the assertion of Mary’s virginity at the time of conception, although in Matthew this becomes explicit only in an explanation in an addendum: “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

As we’ll see, Matthew is especially fond of including this sort of note about Jesus fulfilling a passage from the Hebrew scriptures. Consequently, this is part of Matthew’s own formation of the story, although it again demonstrates that the theme of Mary’s virginity was part of the tradition each of these evangelists inherited.

The list of similarities between Matthew and Luke runs deeper than this, however. E.g. both have an angel announcing Mary’s pregnancy in advance. This sort of announcement of an upcoming birth is a common motif in narratives from ancient Israel’s literature, as (for example) in an angelic advance notice of Samson’s birth to his parents in Judges 13, which we’ll look at in a few minutes.

Both Matthew and Luke assert that the angel prescribed Jesus’ name. And, of course, they are agreed on the names of Jesus’ parents, Mary and Joseph. What’s more, Matthew and Luke both describe Joseph as a descendant of David, which is, of course, an important element in their claim of Jesus’ messianic status.

They also agree that Joseph and Mary were engaged at this point, although the significance of that plays out differently in the two gospels. For Luke, this provides the background for Mary’s logistical conundrum: “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” Mary’s concern is not with her relationship with Joseph, but with the practical problem of how she can get pregnant since she is not yet in a sexual
relationship. And this befits the scene in Luke, whose angelic annunciation precedes conception: “you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,” “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.”

In Matthew, by contrast, “[Mary] was found to be with child,” implying that it had become obvious that Mary was pregnant. Matthew’s story takes that as its starting point and deals with Joseph’s response to it, telling us that Joseph was looking for a quiet way to dismiss (i.e. divorce) her so as not to disgrace her publicly.

This mention of “divorce” reflects the fact that engagement was more binding in Judean society than in ours. Notice, in fact, that Matthew refers to Joseph as “her husband.” Because engagement established the legal status of husband and wife, to break an engagement required a full-fledged divorce, which is what Joseph contemplates in Matthew’s narrative. Divorce was always the prerogative of the man and not the woman. And in a situation in which a woman was guilty of adultery, it was virtually mandatory, based on an interpretation of Deuteronomy 24.1: “Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house.…”

A point of debate in the first century was what constituted “something objectionable.” The Hebrew phrase, ‘erwat dabar, means “the shamefulfulness of a matter,” which is rather oblique, thus giving rise to the debate. Was this as simple as burning the toast in the morning? (Believe it or not, one group argued that was sufficient grounds for divorce.) The stricter interpretation of this phrase involved transposing the terms to read debar ‘erwat, “a matter of shamefulfulness.” Because the Hebrew word ‘erwat typically means “nakedness,” this phrase (so transposed) was interpreted as alluding to sexual impropriety and thus, in a marital context, adultery. And Deuteronomy 22 is clear about what is to be done with adulteresses: “If, however, this charge [of sexual promiscuity] is true, that evidence of the young woman’s virginity was not found, then they shall bring the young woman out to the entrance of her father’s house and the men of her town shall stone her to death, because she committed a disgraceful act in Israel by prostituting herself in her father’s house. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.”

Fortunately, first century Judaism had found ways around applying capital punishment to adultery, but it still took seriously the command to “purge the evil from your midst,” and so regarded divorce as mandatory in such cases, which, again, is what Joseph ponders.

In essence, Matthew’s narrative counters two potential (if not actual) vilifications of Jesus’ origins: on the one hand, the suspicion that there was something irregular about Jesus’ conception (a charge actually leveled in the late first and second century) was addressed by this narrative; on the other hand, the story counters suspicions that could arise to the effect that Jesus’ father wasn’t really Torah observant.
That this latter issue was of special concern to Matthew is apparent from an addition he makes to a passage where the appropriate grounds for divorce are under discussion. In a debate with the Pharisees in Mark 10, Jesus declares that divorce violates God’s original intent in joining man and woman. Then Mark presents one of his scenes of Jesus teaching his disciples in private: “Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

If there is anything peculiar about this statement in terms of first century Jewish society, it’s the implication that a woman might divorce her husband and marry another. This scenario is likely attributable to the Gentile setting of Mark. In fact, Paul uses a similar formulation in 1 Corinthians 7: “To the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.” – The original form of this saying is more likely preserved in Q, whose Lukan version I’ll cite first: “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

Notice that here divorce is assumed to be the unique prerogative of the husband, and that it is the husband who commits adultery by marrying another. Note also that any man who marries a divorced woman is said to commit adultery – i.e. even if he is not divorced himself. This reflects the situation in which women were property, and the property rights of a man are held by Jesus to be inviolable, even after divorce.

Matthew likewise uses this tradition, and in two places. The first is in the Sermon on the Mount, in chapter 5, where Jesus contrasts his standard with common practice: “But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” – The assertion that a man, by divorcing his wife, causes her to commit adultery is based on the assumption that a divorced woman will remarry for the protection marriage affords her in a male-dominated culture. By divorcing his wife, her husband in effect forces her to commit adultery by making it necessary for her to remarry.

The second occurrence of this saying in Matthew is in chapter 19: “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.”

The remarkable feature of both these sayings is that Matthew adds the phrase, “except for unchastity.” No adultery is charged to the one who divorces a wife who has committed adultery. Lying behind this is the interpretation of Deut 24.1 contending that adultery demands divorce. Matthew’s rendition of Jesus’ words exonerates men who need to be true to this interpretation of the Torah.

The implication of this for Matthew’s infancy narrative is that his attention to Joseph’s behavior has been driven by his larger concern for this issue. In order to
prove that Joseph is the righteous man Matthew paints him to be, has must show why it was right for Matthew to retain Mary as his wife under the cloud of suspicion her pregnancy raised.

And so there is reason to conclude that Matthew and Luke each drew on the tradition of angelic annunciations of upcoming births, as well as the tradition of Mary’s virginity. Matthew shaped his story around Joseph, using it to answer both the charge of irregularity in Jesus’ birth and the specifically Jewish question about whether Joseph had done the right thing. Matthew’s shaping of the narrative this way is not surprising, since we have already seen him assert the tradition of Mary’s virginity within his citation of Isaiah 7.14, another feature typical of Matthean composition. Matthew has employed a strong hand in shaping this narrative, as we’ll see even more clearly when we study his infancy narrative.

What happens, then, when we take such observations back to Luke’s narrative of an angelic annunciation of Jesus’ birth? Of special significance in this regard is the perplexed question Mary poses to the angel: “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The NRSV offers you something of a paraphrase here, inasmuch as the Hebrew idiom used – “since I do not know a man” – is not readily intelligible in our culture. In this idiom, “not to know a man” is not to have had sexual intercourse. Thus, Mary’s question does not speak expressly of virginity, but of her lack of a current sexual relationship with a man, an obvious \textit{sine qua non} for conceiving a child.

And so, Mary’s question is (obviously) not about “the facts of life”; she’s not asking how a person winds up pregnant. Her question is how this can happen to \textit{her}, since she lacks a sexual partner. And yet, from another standpoint, Mary’s question seems a bit odd.

As I said earlier, engagement was a legally binding agreement. And yet, the final step was the actual transfer of the bride from her father’s house to that of her husband. And yet, there is no evidence that their culture regarded it as irregular for an engaged couple to enjoy sexual intercourse. Mary was, in the view of her society, already Joseph’s property.

And so Mary’s question, “How can this be?” – while not naïve from one standpoint – comes off rather simpleminded from another. Even if she and Joseph wished to wait until marriage to have intercourse, they were on the verge of marriage. And while Luke makes much of the fact that Mary is a virgin, without Mary’s question, the angel’s announcement could be understand in the same way such announcements are used throughout the Hebrew Bible. E.g. in Judges 13 the angel of the Lord speaks to the woman who will become the mother of Samson these words: “Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son. 4Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean, 5for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.”
In this angelic annunciation of the birth of a deliverer for Israel there is no unusual conception. It is acknowledged that the woman has had no success conceiving, thus accentuating the miraculous nature of Samson’s birth, but she never raises the question of who the father will be; she assumes (reasonably) that he will be her husband, Manoah.

Similarly, in the angel’s annunciation of Luke 1, there is no reason Mary should not have taken for granted that this promise applied to her upcoming marriage to Joseph, at which time she would conceive in the natural way. And so Mary’s posing this question is curious; why shouldn’t she assume Joseph will be the father?

Needless to say, this question has been pondered often through the life of the church, with the answer usually having to do with conjectured psychological causes, such as Mary assumption she would remain a virgin, even after Jesus’ birth. While that becomes later dogma, nothing in this context or elsewhere in the gospels makes that assumption. In fact, Luke, like Mark, speaks of Jesus having brothers and sisters.

The more likely solution is that this question is a literary device Luke used in constructing the story. It establishes for the reader that Jesus’ birth was not due to normal human reproductive processes. I.e. it gives the angel opportunity to say that not only is Mary a virgin at this point, but also that Jesus’ conception will not be due to normal human processes.

That this is Luke’s own construction is confirmed by studies of the vocabulary used in these verses, which is consistent with vocabulary found in passages Luke constructed else-where. E.g. the phrase “the Holy Spirit will come upon you” is strikingly similar to the promise attributed to Jesus in Acts 1.8 – “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” – and it resonates, as well, with words Jesus reads from the Isaiah scroll and applies to himself in the synagogue of Nazareth: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.”

We have already noted Luke’s interest in the theme of the Holy Spirit, and so it shouldn’t surprise us that his way of asserting Jesus’ conception should spotlight the Holy Spirit. Even though in Matthew the angel tells Joseph that the child Mary carries is “from the Holy Spirit,” only in Luke does the angel use the language, “the Holy Spirit will come upon you.”

Therefore, the way Luke affirms Jesus’ conception by a virgin is through a question and answer that he himself composes and that enables him to affirm again the unique involvement of the Spirit in Jesus’ life.

Before leaving the Lukan infancy narrative, I want to highlight another indication of Luke as its composer, in part because of a larger issue his authorship touches on. I have in mind the way Luke’s infancy narrative interweaves the stories of John and of Jesus.

If you recall Mark’s narrative about John, it’s fairly “bare bones”: 4John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the
people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.”

After reporting God’s pronouncement of Jesus as his son and then Jesus’ foray into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, Mark introduces Jesus’ ministry with these words: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.” – You might recall that Mark relates the story of John’s arrest and beheading only later, in chapter 6, as part of his intercalation into the midst of the report about the mission of the twelve. That is the sum total of Mark’s information about John.

However, Mark gives us a clue as to the relationship between Jesus and John in 1.7-8: “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” – Of course, he prepares us for this by his citation of a verse from the book of Isaiah prior to his portrayal of John: “As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

By introducing his story of John the Baptist with that quotation, Mark casts John as the forerunner of Jesus. And in this subordination of John to Jesus, Mark is followed by the other evangelists. But Luke’s is the only Gospel that gives us information about John’s birth and family. Where did Luke derive his portrayal?

First, we need to note that John is something of a problem for all the evangelists and, indeed, for the early church. The Synoptics agree that he was an preacher of apocalyptic doom who baptized people in the Jordan in anticipation of divine judgment. And Josephus gives us the same sort of description of him, and reports the activity of other such apocalyptic preachers in the Jordan river valley during the first century.

The Jordan was a common location for these preachers because it had high symbolic value, since Israel had entered its land by crossing it. Accordingly, some apocalyptic figures (not to mention the community at Qumran) made it their base of operations to symbolize a new start for Israel, calling on others to join them in that new start. According to Josephus, that was the prime motivation for Roman rulers shutting down people like John.

Given that background, the tradition that Jesus sought out John created something of an embarrassment for the early Christians. Why should Jesus submit to John’s baptism, described as a baptism of repentance and no doubt part of John’s vision of reconstituting Israel in expectation of divine judgment? At the
least, it suggests that Jesus began active religious involvement as John’s follower and thus his subordinate.

Indeed, the perception that John was an independent figure in his own right (rather than simply Jesus’ precursor) was widespread. The book of Acts, for example, tells of a Jewish preacher in Ephesus: “Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.”

Equally relevant is this report from the next chapter (19), also relating events in Ephesus: “Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” Then he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They answered, “Into John’s baptism.”

Several things stand out here. First, the latter passage views those who were baptized only into John’s baptism as inadequately instructed because they have not even heard of the Holy Spirit. Their baptism is judged insufficient, and so v. 5 reports that Paul baptized them “in the name of the Lord Jesus,” after which they received the Holy Spirit. Only then were considered they full-fledged believers.

In perplexing contrast to this is the earlier story of the discovery of Apollos, whom Luke reports “knew only the baptism of John,” and yet also describes as teaching “accurately the things concerning Jesus,” so that Priscilla and Aquila, who stumbled across Apollos, simply “explained the Way of God to him more accurately.”

Given that Apollos was active in Ephesus, why is it that the group who knows only “the baptism of John” doesn’t share his “accurate knowledge of the things concerning Jesus” since they likewise share his adherence to John’s baptism? And why is Apollos’ lack of knowledge cared for simply by further instruction, whereas the second group has to undergo a new baptism to be deemed legitimate believers? Moreover, how is it that Apollos can be said to have “taught accurately the things concerning Jesus,” when he knew only of the baptism of John? These are complex issues, but Luke seems to have “air-brushed” Apollos to some degree so that he, a prime associate of Paul in Acts, receives only a mild censure for being a disciple of John.

In any case, what these passages evidence is that the Baptist’s movement extended well beyond his life and beyond Judea’s borders. In fact, documents attest that this movement persisted through the first several centuries of the Common Era. So however the early stages of Christianity nuanced the relationship between John and Jesus as that of forerunner and Messiah, clearly those who followed John did not necessarily acquiesce to that description. And again, portraying the relationship between John and Jesus proved problematic for the evangelists.
E.g. while Mark speaks straightforwardly of John baptizing Jesus, Matthew nuances the report polemically. While he shares Mark’s report of Jesus coming to John, he alone reports this exchange: “14 John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” 15 But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented.” — This conversation makes it clear that Jesus is not repenting of anything in seeking John’s baptism, but merely “fulfilling all righteousness,” which is Matthean language for “doing what God requires.”

The Fourth Gospel recasts the relationship between John and Jesus even more dramatically. While John is again depicted as baptizing in the Jordan, his relationship to Jesus is cast differently: “29 The next day he (John) saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ 31 I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason: that he might be revealed to Israel.” 32 And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ 34 And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.” — Notice that while John speaks of having seen “the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove,” he doesn’t expressly relate this to Jesus’ baptism. In fact, nowhere does the Fourth Gospel narrate Jesus’ baptism by John.

Indeed, notice that when John describes his mission, it is a much narrower mission than the Synoptics assert for him: “I came baptizing with water for this reason: that he might be revealed to Israel.” — In the Fourth Gospel John’s entire purpose in baptizing is to create an opportunity for Jesus to be revealed to Israel. Correspondingly, that Gospel has no report of John’s interaction with the crowds or of his call for people to repent and be baptized. John’s subordination to Jesus is much more pronounced in the Fourth Gospel than in the Synoptics.

At the same time, with a view to our question about where Luke got his story of John’s birth, it is at least interesting that the John of the Fourth Gospel avers twice, “I myself did not know him.” — While I suppose you could posit some sort of family rift to explain why John and Jesus, cousins born about the same time, might have fallen out of contact, this assertion by John suggests a lack of family ties. And indeed, Josephus does not report any connection between Jesus and John, whether by kinship or by natural association as leaders of movements in the first century.

Consequently, given what we have seen of the various evangelists’ attempts to account for Jesus’ voluntary association with John and to explain his baptism, there is good reason to conclude that Luke’s elaborately structured narrative about the two as relatives whose miraculous births occurred around the same time, while at
every step accenting that John is inferior to Jesus, is part of Luke’s way of dealing with this issue.

It’s not that Luke has constructed every detail from scratch. There are reasons to think that he knew who John’s father was: Zechariah, a priest belonging to the priestly order of Abijah. And yet there are equally strong reasons to conclude that his story of Zechariah receiving an angelic visitation while serving in the temple was created by Luke as a parallel to the annunciation to Mary and as part of his larger intertwining of the lives of Jesus and John.

Obviously, much more could be said about Luke’s infancy narrative; we’ve barely scratched the surface. From what we’ve examined, however, it must be seen as built on a modicum of tradition Luke inherited, but fleshed out with his own construction of how events unfolded, above all with an eye to providing a framework for understanding Jesus: he, rather than John, is the central figure, and he derives his identity from his unique conception by the agency of the Spirit.

Next session we’ll take somewhat of a bird’s eye view of his overall narrative and, especially, his portrayal of Jesus.