The Prophetic Dimension of Joseph

• **Giorgio Buccellati** •

"On Mary's word, Joseph accepted, however much through a glass darkly, that the Annunciation was the Incarnation."

1. Premise: the known and beyond

Hagiography, like any other kind of biography, comes in different shapes. As a *documentary* effort, it takes the form of a narrative which grounds the account in information that is traceable to specific sources. The documentary nature of this approach makes it the indispensable antecedent for all subsequent reflections, as is the case with any kind of history writing. It begins with a critical examination of the sources in their own import and in terms of the broader context from which they stem. As a chronicle of characters and events, it weaves the evidence into an explicit, chronologically arranged, record. It exposes known facts to a new critical reading and proposes variations on already established interpretations. It may develop into a search for new evidence and discover correlated facts that can be added to those already known.

The second type of hagiography corresponds to the effort of a *historian* as a social scientist. A saint, as the subject of inquiry, is then viewed within a system, or indeed a set of systems that intersect and help explain the central figure. By seeking to illumine the detail through the apprehension of the whole, the historian *qua* social scientist introduces a series of filters that help highlight different aspects of the central character. These filters describe the personal, spiritual, social, and political contexts seen as structural wholes that are

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abstract reconstructions even though they situate the specific person, the saint, in the concrete setting in which that person's life unfolded. Whether belonging to a remote or to a recent past, the systems so viewed are analyzed for their inner coherence, regardless of how they may or may not impact the observer's own life. Thus, for instance, one will extract a system of values that can be defined through a deeper semiotic analysis of the sources, whether or not the historian is open to the impact that such values may exercise on his or her own life.

The third type, in turn, is that of a *humanist* who seeks to go beyond the filters and to bring the past back to life as it was once lived, to recapture the vibrancy behind the system, to appropriate the core values that inspired the specific actions of the saint in question. In and of itself there is nothing wrong with such an approach to hagiography, just as there is obviously nothing wrong in the humanistic effort as a whole. That there should sometimes develop from this attitude gross exaggerations, whereby mere fictional accounts are presented as hagiographic history, need not deter us from seeking to pursue it in accord with the controls of proper humanistic historical method. It is more than legitimate to try to give expression to a past mystical experience so that it may provide a resonance and claim a response—just as legitimate as having the words of a dead classic poet resonate with the full sense of life that once inspired them.

The case of Joseph, the "husband of Mary" (Mt 1:16–19) who "was thought to be" the father of Jesus (Lk 3:23; cf. Lk 4:22; Mt 13:55; Jn 1:45; 6:42), seems hardly suitable for treatment under the heading of hagiography. The actual evidence is in fact extremely meager, to the point that any attempt at a meaningful historical approach seems hopeless. But that is just what I will seek to do in this article. With regard to the *evidence*, I will propose that, limited and ambiguous though it is, it can yield more than generally assumed, still within the parameters of careful philology. With regard to an *historical* evaluation, I will suggest ways of assessing how the evidence, for all its documentary fragility, fits well into a coherent set of patterns amply attested otherwise in the sources. With regard to a full *fruition* in a humanistic sense, I will argue that Joseph emerges as a distinctive figure in the gamut of spiritual responses that arose from the confrontation with the Incarnation, in such a way that he can still be a meaningful model as the confrontation continues well beyond its first moments and its first impact.

Needless to say, all of the themes I consider here have been treated before in the immense literature on the subject. While I am far from claiming any exhaustive control on this literature, I know enough of it to realize that several of the points for which I argue, as well as the resulting overall picture, have been assessed very differently, and that my overall approach goes against the grain of current criticism. The present format does not permit a great enumeration of details in order to provide a fuller argument in support of my thesis. And yet there may be some advantage in looking at data and methods from the broader perspective of somebody like myself, familiar with the history, the archaeology, and the languages of ancient Syro-Mesopotamia, and aiming to avoid missing the forest for the trees. In thus assessing the proper limits of the known, and showing the historiographic legitimacy[1] of going

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[1]The validity of such a claim is explicitly denied, for instance, in G. M. Soares Prabhu, *The Formula Quotations in the Infancy Narratives of Matthew. An Enquiry into the Tradition History of Mt 1–2*, Analecta Biblica 63 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1976), 12f: "The untroubled faith of an earlier generation" is replaced today by our awareness "that theology, not biography, is the primary aim of the Gospel genre." It is true that this is qualified with reference to the nature of the pre-redactional history of the Gospels; see, e.g., 105f; 168–170; 189f. But, throughout, the role of "literary feel" (190) is given such prominence that any possible concerns on the part of the ancient author for factuality come to be virtually ignored. And yet, the New Testament sources speak repeatedly to the significance of such concern for factuality over and against any literary ambitions. Soares Prabhu's book remains, nevertheless, an insightful treatment of the subject. See also Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York, 1977), who dismisses the "later pious sensitivities about Jesus' parents," particularly among Roman Catholics (127), and the position of "scholars . . . sensitive to later piety" (128), and suggests that "some sophisticated Christians could live with the alternative of illegitimacy," while "for many *less sophisticated believers*, illegitimacy would be an offense" (530, emphasis added). The notion that "historicity" was not a concern of the Gospel writers (see, e.g., Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 517, 527) is questionable (I think it can be shown it was indeed their concern), but in any case it bypasses altogether, and quite wrongly, I believe, the question about their central concern for factuality. The distinction is important: the denial of historicity (which might be understood as explicitly documented factuality) becomes in fact a denial of factuality *tout court*. It comes thus as a surprise when an author like Brown, after arguing in detail against the historicity, accepts in a few words the factuality: "The virginal conception was a miracle . . . . It was an extraordinary action of God's creative power, as unique as the initial creation itself . . ." (ibid., 530f; see also 314, where the virginal conception, eloquently described though it may be as an act of creation, remains essentially the construction of a later literary invention; see also 562). There is here a disconnect that seems

beyond those limits in a search for the deeper historical reality, I hope to propose a plausible alternative to the image that dominates today both exegesis and piety.[2] Historiographically, I assume that

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to rely, uncritically, on that same "pious sensitivity" the author has castigated in the rest of his work. See also below, n. 61.

[2]It goes without saying that the literature on the subject offers a multitude of conclusions that are very different from mine, even though they all start from the same evidence, and I make no claim to have covered the bibliography in any systematic way. An example of a radically different approach is found in J. Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus. A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), see esp. 67: Matthew's message is that "this child's existence is not an unpremeditated accident, and it is not cursed. The pregnant Mary is not to be punished"; also 72: Matthew's problem "was to make theological sense of the tradition concerning an illegitimate pregnancy," a problem that he solves (feminist *ante litteram*, even though he remains androcentric) by describing how God sided "with the endangered woman and child" (73f). The Magnificat is thus a song of liberation from the humiliation of rape (94–96, though seduction is equally possible, see 146; on page 198f an "alternative Mariology" is proposed, which is in effect a rape Mariology . . .). Absurdly, the Annunciation is then seen as the announcement of the coming rape, a rape that is celebrated as the overpowering coming of the Holy Spirit upon Mary, and Mary's fiat is the acceptance of such an event! Schaberg acknowledges that this is the major objection to her thesis, but meets it with only two very unsubstantial arguments (131f). The author describes herself as a "resisting reader," who can go "against the desires of" Matthew and Luke (17) by "grasping" their real "intention" (7; and see 193), thereby showing that they knew and accepted the illegitimacy of Jesus as a fact, but wanted to provide a "theologoumenon" that would offer an acceptable interpretation of that "fact." The second major absurdity, not faced by the author, is (a) to presume that the Gospels give evidence of a widely diffused pre-Gospel tradition of illegitimacy—in which case the opposition to Jesus, strong enough to bring him to death, would certainly have emphatically insisted on it and would have left clear traces (whereas Schaberg is forced to deduce it from totally inconclusive internal evidence of the Gospels); and (b) to assume that early Christians should have felt the need to *cover up* the scandal of a bastard birth—at the same time that they were going the full length in *proclaiming* the (certainly greater) scandal of the Cross (as well as, in a minor key, the uncomplimentary origin from Nazareth).—Schaberg wants her effort to be seen as a positive effort to rescue, as it were, the figure of Mary for feminist spirituality by presenting her as the emblem of a resilient victim on whom pregnancy was unduly forced (see especially 195ff). Professing to be a Roman Catholic author (11), and currently a Professor of Religious Studies and Women's Studies at the Jesuit University of Detroit Mercy, she claims that her position may be accepted as not incompatible with Church doctrine (196f), a claim that is certainly not new (see the examples cited by R. Laurentin, *Les Évangiles de l'enfance du Christ, Vérité de Noël au-delà des mythes. Exégèse et sémiotique—historicité et théologie* [Paris: Desclée, 1982], 471f, 494–497).

Matthew reflects an early apostolic understanding of the events surrounding the origin of the man the apostles had known for only a couple of years in his adult life, and that Luke's account stems from a later, more scholarly effort at probing the same events.

While I cannot give here a detailed argument in support of my reliance on Matthew and Luke as historiographically valid sources, I would like to mention three sets of considerations. (1) The terms *midrash* or *haggadah* are sometimes used as a mantra behind which one hides when one intends to suggest that a given narrative reflects essentially a fantasy, or at any rate a type of late literary interpretation, where the actors are literary figures and their experiences literary constructions. Two important qualifications need to be considered in this regard. The first is the nature of a *midrash*:[3] it is what it is first of all because of the author's explicit intention, which is to convey a teaching by couching it within the framework of a storyline. But the author is aware of the distinction between fact and imagination, all the more so if important consequences hinge on that distinction. Consider the similar case of the "parable" (Greek *parabolē* corresponding to Hebrew *māshāl* "proverb"), well known to us from the gospels. One cannot suggest that John thought of the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:5–42) or of Lazarus the brother of Mary and Martha (Jn 11:1–45) in the same way that Luke thought of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:30–37), or Lazarus the beggar (Lk 16:19–31)—even though the stories are so vividly told in Luke that the image of the good Samaritan and of Lazarus the beggar may instinctively be perceived as historical figures (as the *In Paradisum* sequence seems to

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Schaberg's book has gone through several reprints and its conclusions are often accepted within a professed Christian perspective, see, e.g., Ritva H. Williams, "An Illustration of Historical Inquiry: Histories of Jesus and Matthew 1.1–25," in *Handbook of Early Christianity. Social Science Approaches*, ed. Anthony J. Blasi et al. (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2002), esp. 104, 114f, 119f, 121f. See also G. Lüdemann, *Virgin Birth? The Real Story of Mary and her Son Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1998), who presents the same conclusions (51–60, 66–72, 77–79) if with only passing reference to Schaberg (77, 78, 135, 141, 155), with even less substance (but greater self-assuredness to make up for it), and with a marked *ad personam* virulence: Karl Barth is viewed as a hypocrite (32), Raymond Brown and Joseph Fitzmyer as cowards (141), and generally all scholars who hold to the Virgin Birth as a historical fact as liars (140).

[3]For a recent treatment of the relationship between *midrash* and Gospels, see Daniel C. Olson, "Matthew 22:1–14 as Midrash," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67 (2005): 435–453.

suggest for the latter Lazarus). In this perspective, there is no question in my mind but that Matthew and Luke intended what they say about Joseph as factual information, not as an interpretive *midrash* account. There was great concern in the apostolic circle to differentiate between fact and imagination. They did not live in a midrashic twilight, as it were, where the boundaries of reality were confused and blurred. On the contrary, they had a keen awareness of the distinction, and referred to it emphatically and repeatedly. It is this same awareness that Matthew and Luke display in talking about Joseph and the events that involve him. To them, these were facts about which they felt they had reliable information. The meagerness of the facts as related should be a cause of comfort rather than regret. It was a de facto meagerness of information, and yet assumed to be reliable, which they translated in the sobriety of their account.

(2) But there is another side to the "midrashic" coin. The impact of the *midrash* tradition on the writing of the gospels may well go back to the apostles' own self-understanding of the events and of their reaction to them. Precisely because of the widespread use and well-understood function of the *midrash*, there is little difficulty in assuming that it affected the apostles from the very beginning of their reflection. They had been raised in a wholly Jewish tradition, they viewed Jesus as their "rabbi," and they made an explicit effort to harmonize their experiences with their understanding of that tradition. It seems only logical that the whole crystallization process of their shared memories should have been imbued with this spirit. The conversation on the road to Emmaus is an emblematic example (see especially Lk 24:27), and so is Peter's Pentecost address (especially Acts 2:29–31), Stephen's apologia (especially Acts 7:37),[4] or again Philip's "exegesis" (*eàn mē tis hodēgēsei me?*: "unless somebody leads me along the way?" Acts 8:31) to the Ethiopian eunuch[5]—not to mention Mary's reflection on the one episode, the Annunciation, that remained in her and Joseph's life as a persistent reminder of the most mysterious divine intervention (Lk 2:51, see below, section 4). Jesus' comment to Philip, "For this

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[4]The emphasis on the early history of Israel in Peter's and especially Stephen's speeches is also in line with the interest that stimulated the inclusion of the two genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke.

[5]Note that the text in question is from Isaiah, a prophet much in evidence in Matthew's infancy sections.

long of a time I am with you, and you do not know me!?" (Jn 14:9) also anticipates a natural human setting where the need would be felt to give a specific outward embodiment to events and words that were still burning in memory. The basic current exegetical understanding of redactional activity is that it came into being as a late scribal exercise, when individual scholars, not dissimilar from their modern counterparts, would have pored over written sources and traditions and systematized everything in a sudden literary outburst. But it is even more reasonable to assume that the concrete setting for this redactional activity was instead the very initial confrontation of the apostolic circles with their own, lived, experience.

(3) The self-assuredness with which the exegesis of the last several decades has identified multiple redactional strands in the gospel narratives is, in my view, deceptive.[6] The methodological claim is clearly and repeatedly stated that this identification—of individual words as well as themes as belonging to very specific, distinct, and coherent sources—is only suggestive. But such identification, often marked by clear-cut typographical devices that confidently attribute different words to distinctive sources, does eventually acquire a life of its own. In this perspective, the "sources" emerge as "documents," even though they are pure conjectures arrived at on the basis of almost exclusively internal evidence; the redactor is assumed to cut and paste words and phrases that retain, as mechanically as if with a word processor, their discrete existence; the concrete setting in which the process would have taken place is viewed as that of scribal schools entirely absorbed in their own dependence on written texts, consulted for their own sake; and the net result is the projection of a growing series of Christian communities tied together by a literary bond whereby people lived, and

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[6]A quote from Laurentin, *Les Évangiles de l'enfance du Christ*, 9, is still applicable: "la naïveté inverse du faux savoir, qui réduit ces admirables Évangiles à la médiocrité de l'interprète." To serve as devil's advocates is in a way the mission of the scholars as they apply the filter of criticism to the data. Yet one should not take an otherwise proper critical attitude to the point where denial is proposed for denial's sake. Instinctively, many of those confronted with the extraordinary events associated with the person of Jesus applied the same standards and recoiled from credulity. Thomas has come to serve as the emblematic figure of doubt. At the other end of the spectrum are the Pharisees who seek to extract denial for denial's sake from the man born blind (Jn 9:16; 24; 28–29; 34), and are rebuffed in a commonsensical way: "In this there is indeed something to greatly marvel at, that you do not know where he comes from, and he opened my eyes" (Jn 9:30).

often died at great cost, to uphold the aesthetics of literary fiction, as if they were all touched by a Don Quixote-like mass hysteria. (Notice how these "Christian communities," which are supposed to have contextualized the most minute redactional processes, are assumed to have developed a coherent system of faith and thought even though what supposedly held them together was something that did not yet exist because it is these very communities that are assumed to have produced it.)

On the basis of an internal analysis of the same textual evidence, it seems just as plausible to project instead a setting, very early in the apostolic tradition, when the few people who held together after the debacle of the Crucifixion and the shock of the Resurrection reflected on who this man was who had so deeply touched them over the brief time span of a couple of years (and brief it was, chronologically, even though perceptually it must have seemed like an eternity, as Jesus himself says to Philip on the occasion just mentioned). Faced with his definitive disappearance, they gave an outward shape to their memory of "the days of his flesh" (*en taîs hēmérais tēs sarkós autoû*, Heb 5:7, or "his days-of-flesh" as it might have been in its Semitic equivalent). To a very limited extent, they went beyond their own personal memory. And in such cases, given the concern they had, repeatedly stressed in our sources, to keep fact from fiction, it seems plausible that they maintained the same posture in probing other people's memory. The largest portion of this pre-apostolic memory which informed the newly raised concerns pertains to the infancy narratives. The logical setting where such early memory would have been tapped is of the kind known to us from the reference to the "upper room" (Acts 1:13), where the eleven (mentioned by name) were staying together "with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus[7] and his brothers" (Acts 1:14).

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[7]Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 465, nicely interprets Simeon's words in Luke 2:35 ("a sword will pass through your very soul") as referring to the fact that Mary's "special anguish, as the sword of discrimination passes through her soul, will consist in recognizing that the claims of Jesus' heavenly Father outrank any human attachments between him and his mother" and that, "besides effecting personal discrimination, . . . the sword passes through Mary's soul so that the inmost thoughts of many may be revealed." In other words, Mary is the one who first comes to learn, through the experience of her own life, the deeper reality of Jesus, and whose mission it is to transmit it to others. However, the possibility of Mary having served as an actual source is generally discounted, see below, n. 61.

The fact that such a commonsensical assumption has been part of the interpretive tradition ever since its beginning does not make it less likely. It is, at any rate, the historiographic presupposition from which I start.[8] Not that I maintain that the Gospel of Matthew as the book we now have was written down in the Pentecostal period. But I do think it plausible that at that time a serious and explicit effort was undertaken to crystallize shared memories, to supplement them where possible with external information, to establish a chronological and conceptual framework within which these shared memories would fit, and to inject personal assessments based on the disciples' personal experience and on their familiarity with the Old Testament.[9]

In a nutshell, my argument concerning the events relating to Joseph is that Matthew's presuppositions and understanding of these events can be articulated as follows:[10]

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[8]The non-referential bent of contemporary exegesis is well highlighted by Laurentin, *Les Évangiles de l'enfance du Christ*, 370–372. In other words, the infancy narratives are seen as the projection of later thought processes and the possibility is simply dismissed that they may derive instead from references to events related by actual sources. In contrast, Laurentin develops, in the portion of his book that is opened by those pages, an approach that may properly be qualified as historiographic.

[9]The result was, in my view, the constitution of an apostolic core tradition that crystallized in two major forms, one broadly attributed, via Mark, to Peter (as the most authoritative among the apostles), which served as the basic factual kernel, and the other to Matthew (as the most educated within the same group), which incorporated both additional information and more explicit editorial reflection. These two articulations of the same core tradition need not be seen as necessarily sequential, and even less as specifically scribal in nature, but rather as parallel verbalizations, both chronologically and as to general conception. In other words, I consider the later redactional activity which yielded the Gospels as we now have them, and which was indeed scribal in nature, to have been less pervasive than generally assumed, and, conversely, the core apostolic traditions to have been much more developed and verbalized. At the root of my understanding of events is a seemingly different appreciation of scribal realities, an aspect of the formation process of the New Testament which is not sufficiently present, I believe, in current criticism.

[10]I concentrate here on the episode of the birth of Jesus, leaving aside the other few later events that pertain to Joseph. The fullest scholarly presentation of an argument similar to the one developed here is in an old article by X. Léon-Dufour, "L'annonce à Joseph," in *Mélanges bibliques rédigés en l'honneur de André Robert*, Travaux de l'Institut Catholique de Paris, vol. 4 (Paris: Bloud & Gay, 1958), 390–397. After reviewing patristic texts that oppose Justin's interpretation (see below, n. 31), he maintains that the message of the angel confirms what Joseph already knew. This is based on his understanding of the opposition *gàr . . . dè* in Matthew 1:20–21 as "certainly . . . but," so that one can paraphrase the text as

1. Mary's *fiat* (known to us from Luke, but implied by Matthew) signifies not only acceptance of a call, but also faith in the immediate realization of its effect, i.e. the pregnancy;

2. aware of her position as a married woman, Mary feels it is her responsibility to disclose immediately to Joseph, her legal husband, what she accepts on faith to be a very real pregnancy (this is the basic presupposition, indirectly supported by Luke's account, that most differentiates my understanding of events from that of others);

3. Joseph believes in Mary's belief, i.e., her belief in the words of the angel, and yields in awe ("fear") to the preeminent domain of divine intervention for which he has not received a call;

4. hence he resolves to release her from the marriage contract that binds her to him, "secrecy" being possible only because there is no physical sign yet of the pregnancy;

5. his attitude derives from a deep sense of alertness to the unpredictability of God's will ("justice");

6. the angel who comes to him "by way of a dream" changes his perspective by providing the rationale as to why he, Joseph, is in fact called to be a part of the mystery;

7. accordingly, he proceeds with the formalization of the marriage by "taking his wife" into his household immediately upon "having awoken," i.e., before the pregnancy could become obvious for all to see;

8. the verifiability of the Annunciation rests on his not having any sexual relationship that could have brought about the conception of the child ("he did not know her");

9. the actual pregnancy that follows and the eventual birth are constant reminders of the validity of the Annunciation and of the dream, i.e., of the incomprehensible scope of the divine invasion that took place, which we call the Incarnation;

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follows: "*You are correct in not doubting* (*gàr*) that what has been conceived is from the Holy Spirit, *but there is still something that you can do, namely* (*dè*): when she will bear a son, you will call his name Jesus." In this light, the stress in Matthew is on the "legal birth of Jesus" (395). Léon-Dufour argues as well (396f) that Joseph's fear is to be understood as awe, not as embarrassment; that his aim is to withdraw, not to castigate ("l'adverbe *láthra*$_i$ annule un acte dont l'effet premier est de rendre publiquement la femme divorcée capable de se remarier"); and that (citing a text of Bernard of Clairvaux) the response of Joseph is similar to that of Moses, Isaiah, Elizabeth, the centurion, and Peter (see below, section 5).

10. the single initial explanation provided by the angel is the only firm point of reference that Mary and Joseph have to the effect that the incarnation they had made possible is in fact the Incarnation;

11. the events as made known (by Mary) to the small group that held together after the death of Jesus were consonant with their new understanding of the man they had known for a short period of time, so that his "genesis" was deemed to be well worthy of prefacing the account into which their collective memories were beginning to coalesce and crystallize.

This reconstruction of the events may well seem "romantic"[11] to some, but I trust that the arguments proposed below may be followed in their substantive import and not dismissed out of hand simply on the basis of prevailing exegetical attitudes. In particular, there are two substantive points that are too easily overlooked, which I will develop in slightly greater detail below (see especially section 8) but which need to be mentioned briefly here. The first is what I call the Old Testament "catechumenate," i.e., the deep spiritual attitude that the Old Testament had made possible in even the simplest of people, as Mary and Joseph culturally were. In this light, the Annunciation is not a hallucination along the lines of a visit from outer space, but rather an understandable epiphany of a reality already known, however dimly, and one that could be meaningfully conceptualized. Even the mention of a Holy Spirit need not be read as the anachronistic telescoping of much later theological reflection, but as a plausible description of a specific divine agency, easily understood in its concrete referentiality.[12] The

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[11]Thus, e.g., Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 127. Yet a stripe of "romanticism" may just as well be seen in the commonly held view of an intense scribal activity of philologists bearing an uncanny resemblance to modern exegetes, diligently intent on cutting and pasting written texts circulating in a variety of written copies; addressing scores of relatively illiterate Christian communities scattered over long distances; and managing to shape, within a few decades, a coherent literary fantasy meant to explain their own growing reliance on the figure of a man whom they never personally met, and whose actual identity they would in fact have been busily fashioning.

[12]It seems important to distinguish between the relevance of literary patterns, on the one hand, and the way in which they were used, on the other. There is no question that exegetical awareness for the literary dimension is basic to any understanding of the texts. But it does not follow that the "actors" mentioned in the texts are themselves literary figures. Rather, it is perfectly consonant with the nature of the evidence to see the actors as individuals who themselves were

second point that is easily overlooked is the psychological impact of the annunciation and the consequent virginal conception. Either we do not accept it as fact, and then there is little point talking about it any further. Or, if we do, it must readily be admitted that the exceptionality of the event would have seared and shaped deeply the personality of Mary and Joseph. The commentaries make it appear instead as though they could have taken it for granted. But the only ones taking it for granted are, it seems to me, the commentators who read and write about it from a sterile intellectual distance that seems blithely to ignore the lived experience of the events.

2. Genesis

Matthew does not relate the story of the annunciation, but the substance of such an event and its immediate consequence, i.e., the conception of Jesus, are necessarily implied in his account.[13] His verbalization is stark and almost cryptic, but a close analysis suggests unexpected logical linkages. His stated purpose is to describe the "genesis,"[14] i.e., the origin, of Jesus, the way in which this particular man (Jesus), whom the apostles had grown to accept as the Messiah (Christ), had come into existence: "thus (*hoútōs*) was (*ēn*) the genesis

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touched by the full Old Testament ethos, in its substance and its literary expression. It was not just the later Christian communities that were sensitive to Old Testament literary patterns, eager to create fictional characters that would embody the values expressed by those patterns. Certainly, individuals like Mary and Joseph, not to mention Jesus, were touched by the same tradition, and perfectly capable of responding autonomously to that tradition when apprehending and expressing the religious events that affected them. Real events that touched them could well assume, in their perception and memory, a literary form with which they were thoroughly familiar, even if not through the medium of a scribal, scholarly habit. In other words, there is no reason to exclude the possibility that the impact of the literary dimension was operative at the level of the actors, well upstream of the redactors.

[13]This is explicitly rejected by, e.g., Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 126f, but without a convincing argument; see, e.g., L. Cantwell, "The Parentage of Jesus, Mt. 1:18–21," *Novum Testamentum* 24 (1982): 309.

[14]The meaning of the term is much discussed, see among others W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, International Critical Commentary, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 149–155.

(*hē génesis*) of *this* Jesus Christ (*toû dè Iēsoû Khristoû*)" (Mt 1:18).[15] Matthew looks at the events from the perspective of those who, having known Jesus as an adult and having come to accept him for what he had claimed to be (hence the full specific title "Jesus Christ" rather than simply "Jesus," and the referential determination "this," in Matthew's initial statement), began to look back, after his death, at his beginnings. In line with this point of departure, he refers to Mary as mother even before he explains how she came to be pregnant. This is because she was known to all as "his" mother—that was her identification, and the question now was to explain how her motherhood originated: "while *his mother Mary* was betrothed to Joseph, before they would cohabit, she was found having (a child) in her entrails[16] (*heuréthē en gastrí ékhousa*) from the Holy Spirit (*ek pneúmatos hagíou*)" (Mt 1:18).

This simple statement has two profound implications for our understanding of the rest of Matthew's narrative. (1) Let us consider, first, how he explicitly attributes the conception of Jesus to divine intervention. The verbalization points in a very physical direction. She "was found having in her entrails": the passive stresses the resulting physical state, resulting "from" an agent that produces directly the intended effect, not through other means. Her conception was not "through" (*diá)*, but "from" (*ek*) the Holy Spirit.[17] It

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[15]The formulation with the article *toû* in front of the compound "Jesus Christ" is unique in the New Testament and may be assumed to have special force, such as may be rendered in English by the demonstrative "this," see Prabhu, *The Formula Quotations in the Infancy Narratives of Matthew*, 177. It serves to anticipate the point of emphasis of the account that follows: it is not going to be so much a story about Joseph or Mary, but rather a statement about "this" person whom the apostles, whose memory Matthew reformulates, knew so well from their acquaintance with him as an adult.

[16]I will use "entrails" to render *gastēr*, and "womb" to render *koilía*.

[17]The preposition is the same that is used in Matthew 1:16 to describe the birth of Jesus "from" Mary (*ex hēs egennêthē Iēsoús*). It is also common in classical Greek to refer to origin from a given parent, e.g., *Iliad* 6:206. And yet, the common translation and understanding has "through," which is *not* the meaning of the preposition *ek*. For instance Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 124f, without addressing the question of the difference between *ek* and *diá*, indirectly supports his translation "through" (as though the text had *diâ*) by saying that "there is never a suggestion . . . that the Holy Spirit is the male element in a union with Mary, supplying the husband's role in begetting," and that "the Holy Spirit is not male." This is true enough, but none of it supports the reading of *ek* as "through" nor the

was not as though the Spirit arranged things so that a normal conception would take place through some other agent, but rather the Spirit himself was the agent. There is little question but that Matthew assumes the conception as having been outside of the natural channel of sexual intercourse—hence, clearly, there is no question of a theogamy, or, to put it differently, "God does not become the biological father of Jesus."[18] His account is all the more striking as he does not dwell on it, either descriptively (which is what Luke will do, relating the annunciation) or editorially (remarking on the wondrous dimensions of such an event, as Luke also will do with the Magnificat). Matthew simply relates what he takes to be a fact, and in so doing he affirms (implicitly but inescapably) two converging points: Joseph is not the biological father (because an alternative agency is explicitly identified), and Mary is not an adulteress (because that agency is supernatural).[19]

(2) The second major consequence of a close reading of Matthew's text is less immediately apparent but, in my view, just as inescapable: Joseph knew about the pregnancy before it had become physically obvious. This reading of Matthew's text, which poses a major difference vis-à-vis current exegesis, is based on two considerations. (a) The first is the way in which the pregnancy is heralded. The terse statement "she was found having (a child) in her entrails from the Holy Spirit" (Mt 1:18) can hardly be taken to refer to a visibly pregnant young woman. If we use the information provided by Luke, Matthew's statement would read rather oddly indeed: this young woman would be declared to "have been found pregnant by

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conclusion that Matthew understood the conception as having taking place through the intermediary, rather than as a result of the direct participation, of a divine agent. For some interesting comments on the use of the preposition *ek* and on the role of the Holy Spirit see Laurentin, *Les Évangiles de l'enfance du Christ*, 318; 476f. Incidentally, in Luke (1:26) "the angel Gabriel" *is* male. This, I believe, was not lost on the Renaissance painters who systematically place a strong vertical element (a column, a flower, a reading stand) between the angel and Mary in their rendering of the Annunciation scene, as if to stress the physical distance between the two at the time of conception, thereby explicitly excluding any sexual overtones.

[18]J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 274. See also Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 124f; Davies and Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 219–220.

[19]The notion of agency is explicitly adduced by, e.g., Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 125, 137, 138, 140.

the Holy Spirit," after coming back home, visibly pregnant, from a three-month absence. In my view, Matthew's emphasis is rather on the nature and immediate effectiveness of the extraordinary agency that has brought about the pregnancy, an agency that could never be verified physically. It is not as though, Mary being pregnant, the assumption arose that the pregnancy implied divine intervention, but rather the exact converse. A direct intervention of a divine agent having been announced, Mary believes, without any outward physical sign to support it, that she is pregnant. Thus Matthew refers to a point in time when the presence of the child was not physically verifiable, when one could only believe that a supernatural annunciation coincided with a supernatural conception. In the same way, he speaks of "his mother Mary" referring to a point in time when Mary was not yet a mother—and that is because he works back from the perspective of one who knew Jesus as an adult ("this Jesus Christ," Mt 1:18). The passive "she was found" cannot possibly be meant in the sense of "being found out, discovered," as if to stress the presence of some unmentioned observer, such as a woman in her family who might have noticed that Mary was pregnant while she was trying to cover it up. In that case, one would also have to say that the text would affirm that the observer could determine, from a physical observation, that the conception had been through supernatural means: "one found out that she was pregnant, and that this was from the Holy Spirit"—a verification (the second) that would patently be absurd. Rather, the passive is meant to lay stress on the subject that follows and which is a long noun phrase: she was found to be, she emerged as being, it turned out that she was "one-who-has-a-child-in-her-entrails-from-the-Holy-Spirit."[20] The first part of the noun phrase[21] "one having in her entrails" (*en gastrí*

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[20]The corresponding deep structure would be: "she has a child in her entrails from the Holy Spirit," not: "she has a child in her entrails; the child is from the Holy Spirit." In other words, "from the Holy Spirit" is governed directly by "she has."

[21]The adjunct *ek pneúmatos hagíou* "from the Holy Spirit" is an integral part of the noun phrase. As a result, by virtue of being part of the nominalized construct governed by *ékhousa*, the adjunct *ek pneúmatos hagíou* depends on *heuréthē* just as much as the adjunct *en gastrí*. The impact of nominalization may be better appreciated by indicating with hyphens the linkages: "she was found to be one-who-has-(a-child)-in-her-entrails-from-the-Holy-Spirit" (*heuréthēen-gastrí-ékhousa-ek-pneúmatos-hagíou*). Word order is also, I believe, very significant: the anteposition

ékhousa) nominalizes[22] the exact verbal clause that Matthew quotes shortly thereafter from Isaiah: "the virgin will have in her entrails (*hē parthénos en gastrí héxei*) and shall bear a son" (Mt 1:23). The quote goes on to introduce another noun phrase which is no less so for being in Hebrew and having become, in our ears, a proper name: "she will bear a child and they will call him God-is-with-us" (*Emmanouēl*, Mt 1:23). Matthew's care in providing a translation ("which is interpreted with-us-is-God," Mt 1:23) emphasizes the significance of the name and its overall semiotic relevance. In other words, Matthew sets up a parallel: Mary was found to be "the-one-who-has-a-child-in-her-entrails-from-the-Holy-Spirit" and Jesus was found to be "the-one-through-whom-God-is-with-us." What seems certain to me is that Matthew did *not* intend to say that Mary found herself pregnant (some physical signs having been verified by some other adult woman), and that she then rationalized the pregnancy through the story of the annunciation. The understanding of events as Matthew portrays them is in the exact reverse order, the same that, he claims, Mary and Joseph would have experienced: the annunciation comes first and on that basis, without verification, Mary, and—consequently—Joseph, act.

(b) The other point in support of assuming that Joseph shared in the knowledge of the annunciation immediately after it took place pertains to the fact that Matthew places emphasis on Joseph's intention not to make it "public" and to release Mary "in secret" (Mt 1:19, see below, section 4). Had Mary's pregnancy been so advanced that it could no longer escape public notice (even within the limited circle of her family), there was little merit to Joseph's

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of *en gastrí* and the postposition of *ek pneúmatos hagíou* establish a close juncture of both adjuncts with the participle *ékhousa*. For a similar use of the passive *heuréthē* used with a predicative complement that governs an adjunct, see, e.g., Appian, *The Civil Wars*, 1.3.20: "he was found dead without a wound." These grammatical considerations militate strongly, I believe, against taking *ek pneúmatos hagíou* as an editorial addition, as, e.g., in Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 124f.

[22]The impact of nominalization is felt even more strongly if one considers that it affects only the truncated first part of a verbal clause which is in effect a hendiadys: "the-one-who-has-in-her-entrails" stands for "the-one-who-has-in-her-entrails-and-will-bear a-son." The object ("son") is governed at one and the same time by both predicates ("has" and "will bear") in the full hendiadyc formulation of the verbal clause, but in the truncated noun phrase only the first predicate is nominalized and the object is deleted.

intentions of keeping a secret, as described by Matthew.[23] That being so, it is just as inescapable that, in Matthew's view, it was Mary who had informed Joseph, and him alone, of her incipient pregnancy before it had become physically obvious to her or anyone else. What she communicated, in other words, was the annunciation, for the consequence of which (i.e., the conception of a child) she had, as yet, no verifiable physical sign. She merely accepted what the angel had communicated to her and communicated it in turn, before any physical verification, to Joseph. If we accept this reading of Matthew, as I believe we must, we can add our own editorial comment to what Matthew has left as a bare bones statement. The Annunciation, and Mary's report of it to Joseph, is not just a statement about assent (the *fiat*), but a statement about faith (the Annunciation is accepted blindly and unequivocally as meaning conception) and mutual trust (between Mary and Joseph).

Luke's account does not so much correct as elucidate Matthew's.[24] The subtle overlaps are numerous.

1. In the genealogy, Luke states that Jesus began (his public activities) when he was about thirty years of age, "being the son, as it was assumed, of Joseph" (Lk 3:23|Mt 1:18, where it is explained how Joseph was not the father of Jesus).

2. In Luke, Mary asks "how" (*põs*, Lk 1:34) and Matthew, as if giving an answer to the same question, intends to explain "the way in which, how" (*oútōs*, Mt 1:18), the "genesis" of Jesus will come to be.

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[23]This represents a basic difference from current exegesis, where "having in her entrails" is taken to mean an advanced state of pregnancy. In this light, Joseph, like everyone else, is bound to notice the physical change in Mary, and draws his own conclusion; see, e.g., Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 160, 534; Giuseppe Giovanni Gamba, *Vangelo di San Matteo. Una proposta di lettura. Parte Prima: Mt 1,1–4,16: Chi è Gesù Cristo* (Rome: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 1998), 96. Even a traditional and influential treatment like that by Jean Guitton in *La vierge Marie* (Paris: Montaigne, 1949), part one, sections 2, 4, and 6, proposes on the one hand such a close premarital relationship between Joseph and Mary that they would have explicitly agreed to a virginal marriage, and yet excludes just as explicitly that Mary could have told Joseph about the Annunciation. My main objection is that this invalidates altogether the possibility of secrecy (for the importance of which see below, section 4), while on the other hand I feel that the reading I propose of Mt 1:18 is philologically valid (namely as a noun phrase that anticipates Isaiah's verbal clause, an anticipation that echoes the qualification of Mary as mother before she even conceives).

[24]For a detailed comparative study, see Laurentin, *Les Évangiles de l'enfance du Christ*, 357–366; 383–392.

3. In Luke, Mary says "I do not know man" (Lk 1:34) and Matthew says that "(Joseph) did not know her" (Mt 1:25).

4. Mary was "betrothed" to Joseph (*emnēusteuménē*, Lk 1:27 and 2:5 | *mnēsteutheisē*, Mt 1:18),

5. but was a virgin (*parthénos*, Lk 1:27 twice | Mt 1:23) when she conceived.

6. The conception is through the direct agency of the Holy Spirit ("the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you," Lk 1:35 | "she was found having in her entrails from the Holy Spirit," Mt 1:18, and "what is generated in her is from the Holy Spirit," Mt 1:20).

7. The news of such an event causes "fear" in both Mary (Lk 1:30) and in Joseph (Mt 1:20).

8. The impact of the Annunciation is described with attention to physical details: "You will conceive in your entrails"[25] (Lk 1:31) | "She was found having in her entrails" (Mt 1:18).

9. The eventual naming of the male child upon his birth is prescribed ahead of time (Lk 1:31 | Mt 1:21).

10. A future out of the ordinary is predicted for the child (Lk 1:32.35 | Mt 1:21).

The one important difference that affects our argument is that Luke *explicitly* posits the Annunciation ahead of any tangible realization of its physical consequences. The Annunciation is precisely that, an announcement about something that (a) expects an assent on the part of Mary, and (b) will have its effect consequently to that. Hence, the repeated use of the future tense (Lk 1:31, 35) in referring to the conception of Jesus. Even more than that, there is in Luke an explicit editorial comment that further supports the argument. It is couched in the form of a blessing that Elizabeth directs at Mary after she first greets her: "And blessed the one who believed that there will be fulfillment for what was announced to her by the Lord" (Lk 1:45). This blessing is applicable to Joseph to an even higher degree, if possible, because he was one step removed from the initial announcement—he believed Mary who believed the angel.

It is important to note the unusual attention that Luke accords to chronological details in relating the overall sequence of events, and the implications that this has for the consequent understanding of the chronology in Matthew. In Luke's account, the

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[25]Luke uses here *gastêr* as in Matthew, and not *koilía* as he does elsewhere.

angel gives as a sign to Mary the fact that her older relative Elizabeth had conceived and was now *"in her sixth month"* (Lk 1:36). The importance of chronology for Luke is further evidenced in the seemingly curious detail given earlier, that Elizabeth hid her pregnancy for five months (Lk 1:24): the point intended by Luke is that Mary would not have known about Elizabeth's pregnancy, which is why the notification of it on the part of the angel would indeed assume the value of a sign. What does this sign signify? It is certainly meant to underscore the power of God to intervene in the normal sequence of events—"for no word is incapacitated (when coming) from God" (Lk 1:37). In this light, the wonder of Mary's (supernaturally) conceiving is echoed, if not paralleled, by the wonder of Elizabeth's (naturally) conceiving late in life. But the sign has also another effect. It gives Mary an external verification that the Annunciation had resulted in conception before she could notice any physical changes in her body. In Luke, the Annunciation takes place "*in the sixth month*" (Lk 1:26, 37) of Elizabeth's pregnancy. "*In those days*" (Lk 1:39), i.e., immediately after the Annunciation, Mary goes "*with haste*" (i.e., without any long delay after the Annunciation) to Elizabeth and remains with her "*about three months*" (Lk 1:56), i.e., obviously until the birth of John, in the ninth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. And when she arrives at Elizabeth's, within a few days of the Annunciation, Mary's pregnancy (not yet physically perceptible) is sensed by Elizabeth. So a precise relative chronology is invoked no less than five times:

1	Lk 1:24	Elizabeth "hid herself *for five months*"
2	Lk 1:37	The angel tells Mary that "*this is the sixth month* for the one (Elizabeth) who was called sterile"
3	Lk 1:39	"*In those days* (i.e., in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy), Mary got up and walked *with haste* (i.e., still within the sixth month) to . . . the house of Zechariah"
4	Lk 1:56	"So Mary remained with her (Elizabeth) *for about three months* (i.e., *until the birth of the Baptist*) and went back to her home"
5	Lk 1:57	"(*At that point*), *the time span* of her pregnancy *came to an end* for Elizabeth and she bore a son."

Clearly, Luke's account does not aim to convey the notion that Elizabeth realized that Mary was pregnant from simply looking at her. For he says that Elizabeth congratulated Mary not on "seeing," but on "hearing" (Lk 1:41) her. And Elizabeth's realization is a consequence of the "fetus in her womb" leaping, and her being "filled with the Holy Spirit"—neither event relating to Mary's outward appearance. All of this underscores the fact that in Luke's as in Matthew's view Mary's pregnancy was accepted, before it became physically verifiable, by Mary herself, of course, by Joseph (in Matthew), and (in Luke) by both Elizabeth and the six-month-old fetus in her womb.

Looking at Matthew in the light of Luke's account, it appears that a delayed realization of Mary's pregnancy on the part of Joseph is even more improbable, if not downright absurd. It would entail the following understanding of the events. As soon as the Annunciation takes place, Mary leaves to visit Elizabeth, and remains there for about three months. She then returns home and after such a long absence away from Joseph, he (along with everybody else) happens to notice that she is pregnant. All he knows is that she has been gone three months and is now pregnant. Mary never says a word to him, so he considers, as an alternative to stoning her and always without even talking to her, giving her a formal bill of divorce in secret, as though secrecy were still possible for a girl who is three months pregnant. But he dreams of an angel giving him an explanation. So as soon as he gets up (as if speed would change the perception that people have formed of Mary in the meantime), he takes her formally in his household, even though it is known by then to everyone that she has conceived a child while she was gone for three months. And in spite of all this, Jesus, throughout his life, is universally "thought to be" the "son . . . of Joseph" (Lk 3:23; cf. Lk 4:22; Mt 13:55; Jn 1:45, 6:42). Notice: he is genuinely and universally "thought to be," as if no indication of a pre-marital pregnancy had ever taken hold, even though everybody would have had to draw that consequence when Mary returned, visibly pregnant, from her three-month absence.

My view is at quite a variance with this. As soon as the Annunciation takes place, Mary, whose *fiat* tells us that she believed in both the call (the Annunciation) and its effects (the pregnancy), knows that the one person most immediately affected by the event is her husband (they are betrothed, but the form of betrothal is such that a change of plans requires a formal act of separation or divorce;

hence Joseph is in fact already her husband). While the call could be taken as exclusively addressed to her, the pregnancy clearly affects him as well. The only responsible thing to do is to tell him, immediately. By accepting her word for it, he accepts the factuality of the whole situation—and, not having received a call to share in the mystery, he withdraws in awe. The vision of the angel in a dream points him in a different direction: he is indeed a part of the mystery, and his role is to convey Mary, without delay, into his household, thereby concluding the marriage. He does so immediately. In the public eye, the only unusual part about it is that this completion of the second phase of the marriage is moved ahead of schedule. And this anticipation of the timetable would naturally appear as quite justified by the fact that Mary is now leaving on a trip that would keep her away for a period of a few months. As indeed Mary does: she goes to visit Elizabeth, as if the Annunciation had contained an implied invitation to do so. When she returns, she naturally goes "to her household" (Lk 1:56), i.e., the household of her husband.[26]

3. Justice

With an explicit editorial comment, Matthew qualifies Joseph as *díkaios* (Mt 1:19), which is the Greek equivalent of Hebrew *ṣaddīq*. It refers to the person endowed with the quality of *dikaiosúnē*, Hebrew *ṣᵉdāqā*, a term with a complex semantic valence that goes well beyond that of English "justice." In our ears, the term "justice" may evoke a negative perception, as bigoted self-righteousness and therefore hypocrisy.[27] This is the attitude associated in our eyes with that of the Pharisees so sharply and repeatedly condemned by Jesus.

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[26]There is no reason why the qualification "her" should be taken to refer exclusively to her father's house, an argument that is taken to show (wrongly, in my view) that Mary's introduction into the husband's household took place after a three-month pregnancy, see, e.g., Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 338.

[27]However nicely phrased it may be (e.g., Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 231: "'upright,' . . . i.e., scrupulously faithful to the Law"), the negative connotation is inescapable. This is true even of an alternative understanding that seems to strike a more positive tone: Joseph does not want to appropriate an offspring that is not his issue; see Laurentin, *Les Évangiles de l'enfance du Christ*, 319–321, with references to earlier literature.

But to remain within those limits is quite wrong. In order to go beyond, and to sharpen our sensitivity for the full positive impact of the concept behind the word, we may consider three moments when we can gain a glimpse of Jesus' very special appreciation for it. When Jesus approaches John to receive the baptism, John at first refuses (Mt 3:14), in awe; and Jesus convinces him by associating himself to John and saying, in the first person plural, that "it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt 3:15). In the Beatitudes, Jesus extols those who "hunger and thirst for justice" (Mt 5:6[28]). And, finally, in an exchange with the "high priests and the elders of the people" (Mt 21:23|Mk 27|Lk 20:1), Jesus contrasts their ways with those of John the Baptist, who, he says, "had come to you in the way of justice" (Mt 21:32), but to whose message, to whose justice, they had remained impervious. These three moments stand out because of the way in which they are dramatically placed in the unfolding of Jesus' activity, and they deserve closer scrutiny.

The Beatitudes come towards the beginning of Jesus' public life, in the north, and they are of course a manifesto within a manifesto, a rhythmic proclamation of principles within the "sermon on the mount," which gives them special relevance. Contextually, the statement about justice is characterized by its transitivity, since hungering and thirsting implies an active search for a value. In contrast, being poor in spirit, meek, and grieving describe qualities that intransitively inhere in the subject.[29] In other words, it is interesting that the subject of blessedness is not within an intransitive category endowed with a static quality. Rather, Jesus provides a kind of gloss by explaining what "just" means, i.e., being rooted not in the possession of a quality, but in the active and suffered search for it.

The second moment reflects a confrontation with the established authorities about the very principle of authority. It takes place towards the end of his ministry and of his life in the south. It is the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes (Mt 21:23|Mk

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[28]The corresponding passage in Luke 6:21 is different in that it speaks of physical hunger and thirst.

[29]There is an analogous contrast in the next set of four Beatitudes (Mt 5:7–10)—the ones omitted in Luke—where the merciful, the pure in heart, and the persecuted (intransitive) are contrasted with the peacemakers (transitive).

11:27 | Lk 20:1) who approach Jesus to pose the central question that emerges from their theologically oriented background: by which inherent power (*exousía*), i.e., authority, has he been performing the extraordinary acts of which all are witnesses? (Note that the question is not about what he says, but what he does.) There is potential good faith in their question, which echoes that of another "leader," Nicodemus (Jn 3:2). Jesus' answer seems to elude the question, for he poses a counter-question (Mt 21:25 | Mk 11:30 | Lk 20:4): was the baptism of John the Baptist from heaven or from men? In fact, rather than avoiding the issue, this goes to the heart of the matter, for Jesus is in fact asking: what is the epistemological basis for the argument in the first place? In other words, Jesus argues here with the same dialectical tools of his questioners. The substantive answer emerges repeatedly in the Gospel of John within the framework of the complex concept of "witnessing" (*marturéō*), which is first evoked in connection with John the Baptist (Jn 1:7–8:32), and then used often by Jesus in relationship to himself. The key role of the Baptist helps explain Jesus' counter-argument in his reply to the representatives of the establishment: he invokes John as a model because to recognize authority ultimately means to "witness," to accept it.

In Matthew, there is a sequel to the confrontation with the authorities, and that is what brings us back to our interest in Joseph. The text of the gospel, possibly reflecting a temporal connection of events, follows up on the confrontation with the parable of the two sons, which ends with another invocation of the Baptist: just as the son who performs the right act even if he does not say the right word, so tax collectors and harlots will precede, in the kingdom, the religious and intellectual leaders—"because John came to you in the way of righteousness (*en hodō*$_i$ *dikaiosúnēs*), and you did not believe him" (Mt 21:32). The Baptist, the great adversary of the legalistic formalities of the "brood of vipers" (Mt 3:7 | Lk 3:7), is, in the eyes of Jesus, a champion of "justice"; he is, like Joseph, a "just" man.

This link of the Baptist with "justice" is echoed in two revealing passages in Luke. The first is included in the *Benedictus*, Zechariah's hymn, which, somewhat like Thucydides' speeches, evokes the attitudinal dimension to be inferred for the protagonists of the events related: "Zechariah was filled of Holy Spirit and spoke as a prophet (*eprophēteusen*) saying . . ." (Lk 1:67). Just before addressing the newly born John as a future prophet ("and you, child, will be called prophet of the Most High," Lk 1:76), Zechariah

concludes the first section of his address by praising God for ushering in a new phase of history when his people will be free to "worship him in holiness and *justice*" (*en hosiótēti kaì dikaiosúnēi*, Lk 1:74f). Clearly, one can hardly attach the semantic value of legalistic rigor to this use of the word in a context so richly imbued with the sense of God's live intervention and of the corresponding openness of the prophetic dimension. The second passage appears as an aside within the episode of the messengers sent by the Baptist to inquire about the nature of Jesus' mission (Mt 11:2–6|Lk 7:18–23). His direct answer is followed (Mt 11:7–19|Lk 7:24–35) by what appears to be a conflation of a variety of statements about John. One of them, found only in Luke (Lk 7:29), says that the entire people and the tax collectors, "justified" (*edikaíōsan*) God because they had been "baptized with the baptism of John." Their attitude is contrasted with that of Pharisees and lawyers who "rejected the plan (*boulēn*) that God had in store for them (*eis heautoús*)," because they had not been baptized. To "justify" God, then, means to adhere faithfully to this plan, and the "just" person will be the one who sets aside his or her own interests in order to identify more deeply with God's plan (*boulē*), however mysterious.

The semantic range covered by *dikaiosúnē* is thus much wider than that of its narrow English counterpart, "justice." One dimension of this semantic range is that of "religiosity," a concept for which no specific Greek (or Hebrew or Aramaic) word exists.[30] And it seems to me inescapable that Matthew's qualification of Joseph as "just" (*díkaios*) must be understood in this light, as meaning "imbued with a deep religious sense of the divine reality." Not to do so reflects on our being captive, within a nominalistic mold, of modern semantics rather than properly establishing the situation envisaged by the writer. It cannot possibly be assumed that Joseph's "justice" was meant in a legalistic sense, which is ultimately selfish as it entails hiding behind a stated canon in order to avoid responsibility, just like the "brood of vipers" against whom the Baptist railed. "Justice" was understood as a liberating force, not as a paralyzing one.

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[30]Terms like *thrēskeía*, *eusébeia*, *theosébeia*, *deisidaimonía* hover within the semantic range of "religiosity," but refer more to acts of religious observance than to an inner spiritual disposition.

4. Secrecy

Once it is assumed (wrongly, in my view) that *díkaios* refers primarily to a person informed by legalistic concerns, it inevitably seems to follow that Joseph's "intention not to make public her (condition)" (*mē thelōn autēn deigmatísai*, Mt 1:19) be interpreted as a face-saving device. The underlying assumption is that Joseph believed Mary to have been guilty of adultery.[31] To be true to "righteousness" in the sense of a strict observance of the law, he would have had to bring her to justice, and have her stoned. But driven by mercy, he would go against the law, and spare Mary—a course of action that would after all invalidate the legalistic qualification of "righteous," leaving us to wonder why Matthew would have emphasized this quality in the first place. (Why not call him "merciful"?) His solution would then have been to "divorce her in secret" (*láthra$_i$ apolũsai autēn*, Mt 1:19). The reputation that was thereby being saved was not Mary's, but Joseph's, since Mary's pregnancy could already be verified. Joseph, on the other hand, would have been cleared by having acted immediately upon learning of her state. By acting "secretly," he would merely have avoided an awkward fuss. As a result, what at first may seem like a statement about Joseph's compassionate attitude, one that makes him ready to go against the legalistic justice of which he is supposed to be a champion, would instead seem to suggest plain and simple selfish self-righteousness. What would have been Matthew's purpose in painting such an unsavory character?

A deeper look at the context supports, in my view, the alternative interpretation. The immediate context intimates a contrast between public knowledge on the one hand (*deigmatísai*), and privacy on the other (*láthra$_i$*), rather than between shame and compassion. The direct object of Joseph's concern was Mary's pregnancy. But what aspect of it was it in his power either to display or to protect? And why was it that his choice, according to Matthew's editorial comment, was dominated by his profound sense of

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[31]An explicit statement of this interpretation appears very early in the Christian tradition, i.e., in Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, chapter 78: "supposing her to be pregnant by intercourse with a man, i.e., from fornication . . . ." For alternative patristic interpretations, see the article by Léon-Dufour cited above, n. 10.

surrender to God's will (*dikaiosúnē*)? These are two important questions that we must consider separately.

(1) First, as to the aspect of Mary's pregnancy that concerned Joseph. The notion that his first and only thought should have been to believe in an extra-marital affair is quite out of character with what Matthew wants to convey, and equally out of character that he should have conceived of Joseph as being concerned first and foremost with safeguarding his reputation. It is natural that Joseph would not of his own come to think of the all-important detail by which the story is prefaced (that Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit) and on which the angel elaborates in the subsequent dream. It is also true that his personal knowledge of Mary may have been limited. But the narrative gives no reason to assume that it was non-existent. In fact, as I have argued above (section 2), the story as told by Matthew makes sense only if we assume that Joseph knew about the incipient pregnancy before it had become physically apparent, hence directly from Mary, who in turn relied (according to Luke's account of the event) only on the word of the angel and not on any perception of revealing physical changes in her body. Even apart from the chronology for which I have argued, it seems out of joint with the logic of the story to assume that Joseph would know Mary so little as to immediately come to the conclusion that he should simply cast her out as an adulteress. It seems instead quite in keeping with the logic of the narrative that the privacy which Joseph meant to protect was the awesomeness of an event that he could not fathom (hence the need for a dream to explain its implications). He sensed that something greater than himself was at work here, which seemed to exclude him and with which he felt unable to cope. Hence his releasing Mary in secret to whatever higher power was at work.

(2) Hence, also, Matthew's qualification of Joseph as *díkaios*—which brings us to the second point we must consider: why is it that Matthew qualifies Joseph as "just" in order to explain his reaction? In the conventional interpretation, it sounds as though Matthew aims to apologize for Joseph's conduct: he had to do something about the adultery because he was so obliged by the law. But, as we have seen, *díkaios* does not refer in New Testament usage to mere adherence to the tenets of the law. Rather, it describes a state of dynamic spiritual tension, such as is found in that most unconventional of prophets, John the Baptist. In this light, Matthew's adjective points to the receptivity that Joseph has for the mystery. He is *díkaios* in the way the prophets were, open rather than

closed, alert to the unpredictable rather than a champion of convention.

Accordingly, the alternative interpretation for which I am arguing is that Joseph, having accepted at face value and with deep trust the young girl's revelation that she had become pregnant through divine intervention, is so awed by her and the mystery she (literally) embodies, that he feels he is confronting God himself, in front of whom he should retreat and hide in his nothingness. Luke attributes the same feelings to Elizabeth, who first recognizes the wonder ("Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb," Lk 1:42), then recoils in front of the mystery ("From where is it for me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Lk 1:43). Such was Joseph's reaction as well. The main difference was that Joseph recoiled into a posture of secrecy, while Elizabeth "exclaimed with a loud cry" (Lk 1:42), and this was because their relationship to Mary was quite different: Joseph had a preemptive right which he felt had become presumptuous for him to uphold once Mary had confided in him. Also, by the time Mary had reached Elizabeth she had already been conveyed into Joseph's household (in my interpretation), and thus there was no need for secrecy.[32] But when Joseph first learned about the pregnancy (announced and accepted on faith), it was indeed a secret, and their secret alone. For all the starkness of his style, Matthew feels compelled to qualify this moment by stating that Joseph's reaction was prompted by *dikaiosúnē*.

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[32]The presumption of a local, pre-gospel tradition about the illegitimacy of Jesus is, in my view, without any basis in fact. The long section on this subject in Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, 145–177, is quite inconclusive. See also "la très ferme tradition locale assurant qu'il n'était pas fils de Joseph" (Laurentin, *Les Évangiles de l'enfance du Christ*, 7; 477–480; Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 143). It is curious that the one potential piece of evidence that would seem to support this thesis is ignored, namely Elizabeth's salutation of Mary in which the pregnancy is clearly recognized: if Mary's child was not from Joseph, then Elizabeth would be loudly proclaiming an illegitimate birth. To my mind, we have here an argument to prove exactly the opposite, namely that Joseph's conveyance of Mary into his household had taken place *before* Mary's trip to Elizabeth in "the city of Judah" (Lk 1:39), i.e., right after the Annunciation: the conveyance had taken place specifically in order to protect the secret. Thus Elizabeth could not wonder about the legitimacy of the child, since Mary and Joseph had already come to cohabit and as a result Joseph could be viewed, outwardly, as the one responsible for the conception of the child. Elizabeth would then be the first in whose eyes Joseph "was thought to be" (Lk 3:23) the father of Jesus.

Joseph accepts Mary's report as to how she had conceived, and thus, far from being scandalized by assuming adultery, he is profoundly respectful of a divine intervention that seems to preempt his role as husband. He yields, rather than rejects. He releases (*apolũsai*) Mary, rather than casts her out (*apolũsai*).

It should be noted that secrecy characterizes Elizabeth's pregnancy as well: "Elizabeth conceived and she hid (*periékruben*) herself for five months" (Lk 1:24). It was possibly due to natural discretion, but not to shame, since bearing a child was a mark of distinction. In fact, Luke comments explicitly that conception, far from bringing shame, had in fact removed it. He does so by having Elizabeth proclaim her own small Magnificat: "Thus the Lord has done to me in the days in which he looked at me in order to remove my shame within society" (Lk 1:25). But the reason why Luke relates this detail is not to provide psychological insight into Elizabeth's discretion, but rather to serve the logic of the narrative as it subsequently unfolds. This requires that Mary should be unaware that Elizabeth was in her sixth month at the time of the annunciation (see above, 2), and this would not have been possible if Elizabeth had not concealed her pregnancy.

The shared secret about the mystery lasted throughout the lives of Joseph and of Jesus, since the notion that a supposed illegitimate birth of Jesus should have been widely known is, in my view, wholly untenable (see above, notes 2, 23, 32). Only twice does the record show that the veil was as if slightly lifted, in the sense that some recognition seems to emerge of the exceptional implications of the virginal conception—but this recognition does not really extend beyond the narrow circle of the three participants. In the first instance it is Jesus who does so, in the episode related by Luke of the young teenager remaining in Jerusalem unbeknownst to his parents. At twelve years of age (Lk 2:42) he had remained behind, and it took "his parents" (*hoi goneîs autoû*, Lk 2:41, 43) three days to find him, at which point they saw him listening to the rabbis in the temple and asking questions (2:46). To the mother's pain ("Why did you behave thusly to us? Your father and I, distressed, were looking for you!" 2:48), Jesus responds with a pointed reference to *his father* as being different from Joseph ("Did you not know that it is necessary for me to be about my father's things?" 2:49). There is a certain tension evinced by the attitudes as related, and this is underscored by Luke's editorial comment: "they did not understand the word he had spoken to them" (2:50). As a matter of fact, one would expect them

to have understood the contrast between the two fathers, to which Jesus alludes, since the virginal conception had been the foundational event of their shared lives. His *parents'* surprise (Lk 2:48) and their lack of understanding must refer to the modality of it all—Jesus' unannounced disappearance and his lack of an apology in the face of his parents' pain, his ability to interact with city adults outside the rural family circle, and his interest in intellectual issues for which neither his age nor the Nazareth setting had culturally prepared him. All the more so since the episode does not mark a break in their lives: Luke stresses the fact that, having returned to Nazareth, Jesus remained "subject to them" (2:51). He also adds: "His mother was watching-and-guarding-through-and-through (*dietēreî*) all the spoken (events) (*pánta tà rēmata*) in her heart" (2:51). The explanation may in part come from Luke's comment that immediately follows: "And Jesus was advancing in wisdom, age, and grace before God and men" (2:52). His life having been set in motion in such an extraordinary way, Jesus is now going through regular developmental stages in the most ordinary manner, and when flashes break the routine, then the surprise sets in. Such a flash as the early teenager's foray in Jerusalem reveals sudden insights into his own exceptionality.

In the second instance it is Mary who gives evidence of a special knowledge of Jesus' exceptional qualities when, at the wedding of Cana, she decisively sets in motion the chain of events that will become a hallmark of Jesus' brief public life, as if overcoming a hesitation on Jesus' part. It is John who relates the episode. Mary initiates things by explicitly calling Jesus' attention to a merely embarrassing social situation: "They have no wine" (Jn 2:3). Jesus rebukes her in tones that, as related, sound rather sharp: "What is this to you and me, woman?" (Jn 2:4, where "woman" is not, however, a disparaging term as it sounds in the literal translation, but rather a reverential term as in "milady" or the Renaissance Italian "madonna"). He also gives a rationale that would seem to preclude any further insistence: "My hour has not yet come" (Jn 2:4). And yet Mary does insist, with the net result that she ends up causing his first miracle (Jn 2:11), as if proving Jesus wrong (his hour, it would seem, had come after all . . .). No amount of motherly pushiness can explain Mary's self-assuredness as rendered by John's text (and the author was probably among the eyewitnesses, since he says that "his disciples were with him as well," Jn 2:2). It sounds rather as though Mary's attitude is justified on the basis of certain knowledge—such

as precisely what she had carried with her since the Annunciation and the virginal conception.

When and why was such secrecy abandoned, and its content revealed? Unless we assume that Matthew and Luke plainly invented the story of Jesus' "genesis," and unless we disregard the full impact of the situation evoked by the notion of secrecy, their source can only have been Mary. The setting where the transmission of the information would have taken place can be assumed to have been similar to the one described for Pentecost (Lk 1:14), namely, at a point when the apostles began to reflect on the history that preceded those two and some years that had so deeply touched their lives. There are two reasons that make such a view of events particularly compatible with the inner logic of this earliest Christian community. (1) Pentecost, as described in Acts 1:14; 2:1–4, is a single event where there comes to be, as it were, a powerful and explicit irruption of grace, with very tangible and visible phenomena. The coming of the Holy Spirit had been heralded by Jesus in very explicit terms (most recently in Acts 1:8), and this had predisposed the apostles to an articulate verbalization of what did in fact happen to them. In such a setting, Mary's memory of the Annunciation would have been particularly relevant, and the content of the angel's verbalization[33] as she remembered it would have made more sense

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[33]When considering the possibility that a mention of the Holy Spirit at the Annunciation may be anachronistic, one is reminded of the use of the term "Immaculate Conception" by Bernadette Soubiroux as she related what she felt she had heard at Massabielle. It was a technical term that she did not comprehend, but may have been in the air even in the remote village of Lourdes, since it had been proclaimed as a dogma a little over three years earlier. As for the Annunciation, it is true that the term "Holy Spirit" as such, with its explicit and rationalized trinitarian implications, belongs to a later era, but the general notion was not so out of keeping with an Old Testament upbringing as to be pointless if used in a communication to the young Mary. It makes perfect sense, I think, to accept that Mary and Joseph had a deeper confrontation with trinitarian reality than any other human being, in such a way that "Holy Spirit" and "Son" meant to them something incomparably more real and concrete than to anyone else—the growing Jesus, and the divine agent who had brought him into physical existence, being the perennial very concrete memento of this confrontation. Without any such physical verification, and *si licet parva componere magnis*, Bernadette's perception of the Immaculate Conception was similarly a triumph of concrete simple apprehension over an otherwise abstract and complex, however valid, definition of a mystery.

In another respect, a reference to modern apparition stories deserves consideration. There are what one may call literary patterns that characterize these

than ever before. (2) The reason for secrecy was not so much to protect Mary's reputation, but was rather linked to a higher spiritual perspective, the same that we see operative in the case of the so-called Messianic secret. Emblematic in this respect is what happens following the Transfiguration: in Matthew 17:9 and Mark 9:9 explicit reference is made to the fact that the event witnessed by the three apostles must not be made public until after the resurrection, while Luke 9:36 says simply that the apostles did not speak of the event "in those days." Secrecy is then the expression of respect for the mystery, on the part of the three apostles for the Transfiguration as on the part of Mary and Joseph for the Annunciation. Release from secrecy came after the Resurrection and specifically at Pentecost, when a whole new perspective opened up that made it possible for the mystery to be perceived in its proper light. At that point, secrecy turns into a mandate to announce publicly, to "evangelize." Luke 9:36 says that following the Transfiguration the three apostles "did not proclaim to anyone (*oudení apēngeilan*) anything of what they had seen." But after the Resurrection, and rooted in the relatively quiet moments when they were gathered together in the setting of Pentecost, just such a good proclamation (*tò euangélion*, which echoes *apēngeilan* of Lk 9:36) became precisely their stated goal. Mary's contribution to the pool of shared memories was the account of the Annunciation.

Philologically, this interpretation of the meaning of secrecy depends in part on the semantic valence attributed to the two verbs *deigmatísai* and *apolũsai*: "not wanting to make public her (condition)" (*mē thélōn autēn deigmatísai*, Mt 1:19), Joseph decided "to let her go in secret" (*láthra$_i$ apolũsai autēn*, Mt 1:19).

The first (*deigmatísai*) is extremely rare, being attested only twice in the New Testament,[34] never in the vast body of Greek

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stories, e.g., the person perceived in the apparitions, the age and background of the visionaries, the tone of the messages, the building of a shrine tied to a place, the popular concourse that follows, etc. Yet, one could hardly say that the details about the visionaries of Lourdes, Fatima, or Medjugorje were invented by later Catholic communities who felt the need to explain their religious fervor in going on a pilgrimage to these sites (see also below, n. 61).

[34]The Latin term used in the Vulgate, *traducere*, is more frequent, and it has both a neutral or positive ("to display in public") and a negative valence ("to bring to shame").

literature,[35] and only a few times in Greek papyri.[36] The other New Testament passage is Colossians 2:15, where it refers to the public display that the victorious Christ makes of powers of the world. Etymologically, it derives from *deíknumi* "to point out, show," and more directly from *deígma* "proof, example." Its basic meaning is "to make a show," and in an intransitive sense it means "to appear." Slightly more frequent[37] is the related verb *paradeigmatízō*, etymologically related to the English word "paradigm," which means specifically "to make into an example." It occurs in Hebrews 6:4, referring to the apostates who have, as it were, privately crucified Jesus and exposed him to shame. Several manuscripts of Matthew use *paradeigmatízō* in Matthew 1:19, which suggests that the copyists' understanding favored the interpretation whereby Joseph assumed Mary to be an adulteress and considered the option of making an example of her by publicly accusing her. But this very use of the more explicit form in lieu of the *lectio difficilior* suggests that the simpler, and rare, form *deigmatísai* was not strong enough to support unequivocally the negative valence one wished to read in it. We may say that both the neutral and the negative valence of *deigmatísai* are operative in our Matthew passage: by "divulging" Mary's condition, i.e., by revealing her secret, Joseph would have (albeit unwittingly) "brought shame" on her because who else would have believed her story, even if he, Joseph, did?

The primary meaning of the second verb here under consideration, *apolūsai*, is "to let loose from," and is used regularly with the meaning "to set free, to release" and "to discharge" (e.g., said of an army or a debt). It is not used in classical Greek with the meaning "to divorce," for which the stronger verbs *ekbállō*, "to throw out," or *ekpémpō*, "to send away," are used instead. In Matthew, on the other hand, it is the primary verb used with the meaning "to divorce [a wife]," as in Matthew 5:31 or 19:7, where the action is explicitly linked to the giving of a written divorce

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[35]Based on a search of almost 5 million words in Perseus (http://www.perseus.tufts.edu on 8 February 2005).

[36]W. Bauer, *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur* (Berlin, 1958), col. 342, where examples of both the verb and the derived noun *deigmatismós* are given.

[37]For instance, it occurs seven times in Polybius, and a few times in LXX, e.g., with negative meaning, in Numbers 25:4.

document. But it is also used, and more frequently, with the meaning "to let go, to release," as when the disciples urge Jesus "to dismiss the crowds" (Mt 14:15) or "to let [the Canaanite woman] go, because she keeps screaming at us" (Mt 15:22), or, in Luke, with Simeon's *nunc dimittis* (*nũn apolúeis*, Lk 2:29). In our specific context (Mt 1:19), the technical meaning "to divorce" is called for by the association with the explicit concept of "betrothal" in Matthew 1:18. But it is precisely this association that nuances the full impact of the term. The two being formally engaged, Joseph could release Mary only by formally breaking the engagement. In my view, the point that Matthew makes is that such a formal release was necessary if Joseph wanted to yield his presumptive rights to the higher power that had intervened according to what Mary had told him; and that, not knowing what the intended course of action was supposed to be and overawed by the event as related by Mary, he felt that what was required of him was to protect the secrecy; hence his conclusion that the release should be, yes, formal (a divorce), but secret. Just as Mary had felt it her (legal) responsibility to make Joseph aware of her pregnancy (as announced), so Joseph thought it his responsibility to allow Mary the freedom to respond as needed to the divine invasion of their relationship. In other words, "divorce" is not intended here as a righteous casting aside of an adulteress, but as the stepping aside of the presumptive husband who bows to a mystery. Joseph did not presume to be called to share in the mystery, and thus was ready to withdraw.

5. Fear

The message of the angel to Joseph, in his dream, is then to assure him that, indeed, he was called to be a part of that mystery, the mystery that came to be known as the "Incarnation." The angel confirms what Joseph had already learned from Mary, but the central issue of the dream is not to inform. The main thrust of the dream lies in the initial words: "do not hold back out of fear"[38] (*mē phobēthēs*), and in the insight offered into the mystery, an insight that is at the same time a call to Joseph to be a part of it. What was it that Joseph

[38]This is the proper translation, given the aorist form, see Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 129.

was not to be afraid of, what was the fear that the angel meant to assuage?

The current interpretation implies that he was afraid of the scandal in which he would have been implicated. How could his righteousness be upheld when it would become known that Mary was an adulteress and he had done nothing about it? This implies also, as we have seen, that Joseph had not believed Mary's disclosure, that he considered her a liar as well as an adulteress. Against all of this, a dream was sufficient to reassure him about her character. The high-sounding message of the angel (which is about as long as the whole first half of the episode) almost appears, in this perspective, as a Freudian self-justification on the part of Joseph, who convinces himself by having recourse to a glorious (or, in this light, vainglorious) perspective of Messianism. In this interpretation, then, Joseph is scared of the embarrassment that would follow the eventual public disclosure of her pregnancy.

But loss of face was not, in my view, what Matthew implied that Joseph feared.[39] Rather than fear in the sense of anxious uneasiness about well-being, Joseph's fear was trepidation in the sense of an awed confrontation with a divine wonder. It was "fear of God" viewed as a gift of the spirit, as in the classical statement by Isaiah (Is 11:3): "the spirit of the fear of the Lord will fill him."[40] It is the same fear that Matthew attributes to the three witnesses of the Transfiguration who are said to "fall on their face and fear greatly"

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[39]There is nothing new about the two alternative understandings of Joseph's response, the "fear (awe)" and the "suspicion" hypotheses, see, e.g., Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 127f; U. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, vol. 1, *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, I/1 (Zürich-Neukirchen: Benziger-Neukirchener, 1985), 103f. But the choice of the interpreters is overwhelmingly in favor of the latter. For a position similar to mine, see above, n. 10.

[40]In Hebrew, the term occurs also in the primary list of the gifts (11:2), whereas in the Greek of the Septuagint the term is here glossed as "piety."

	Hebrew	Greek (Septuagint)
11:2	*ruah . . . yir'at Yhwh* "spirit of the fear of Yahweh"	*pneûma . . . eusebeías* "spirit of piety"
11:3	*yir'at Yhwh* (without *ruah*) "fear of Yahweh"	*pneûma phóbou theoû* "spirit of the fear of God"

(Mt 17:6|Mk 16:6[41]) and to the two Marys who first witness the aftermath of the resurrection (Mt 28:5|Mk 16:6 and Mt 28:8|Mk 16:8[42]). It is the fear that falls on Zechariah in Luke's account of the announcement of the birth of the Baptist (*phóbos epépesen ep'autón*, Lk 1:12), and, most especially, the fear that the angel dispels from Mary (*mē phoboû*, Lk 1:30).[43]

Of particular interest for our purpose is the reaction that this fear can elicit, namely the turning away from the object of fear with a sense of profound unworthiness. Two classical loci of this attitude may be found in the episodes of Moses in front of the burning bush and Peter on the lake of Gennesaret. In Exodus 3:6, Moses' curiosity is checked by God who orders him to take off his shoes, thereby making it clear that the burning bush is no ordinary epiphany, at which Moses "hid his face because he was afraid (*yarē'*) to stare at God." And after the miraculous draught of fish, related only by Luke, Peter "fell down at the knees of Jesus, saying: 'Go away from me, because I am a sinful man, oh Lord.' For a fearful astonishment (*thámbos*[44]) had seized him" (Lk 5:8–9).

This is then, in my view, the fear that had seized Joseph. It was *phóbos* in the sense of *trómos* and *thámbos* and *ékstasis* and *khará*, i.e., an instinctive astonished, yet joyful, distancing from a perceived

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[41]It is interesting to note Mark's choice of words, which provides as if a gloss for the concept of *phóbos*. Instead of Matthew's "do not fear" (*mê phobeîsthe*), Mark writes "do not be astonished" (*mê ekthambeîsthe*).

[42]In Matthew, fear is linked with joy, *metà phóbou kaì kharâs*. Here, too, Mark's choice of words is interesting. Instead of *phóbos* and *khará*, he uses the terms *trómos* "trembling" and *ékstasis* "ecstatic astonishment."

[43]The applicability of this notion of "fear" to our context is entertained by the same authors who think that Joseph's realization came as a result of Mary's advanced pregnancy, e.g., Cantwell, "The Parentage of Jesus," 309–311; Gamba, *Vangelo di San Matteo*, 96, 98, 100, n. 43. But without some explanation on Mary's part, how could Joseph think on his own of divine intervention? (Cantwell, "The Parentage of Jesus," 312f, explains it with reference to the demonic interference in marriage related in the book of Tobit, a book the content of which would have been at least generically known to Joseph.) Either Joseph learns from Mary about the Annunciation before the pregnancy becomes apparent (in which case the secrecy makes sense), or else he becomes aware of her pregnancy when it becomes physically obvious, in which case he would logically assume that it had occurred through natural channels.

[44]Note how the term *thámbos* corresponds to *phóbos* in the two passages of Matthew and Mark just quoted (note 41).

mysterious event that signals a divine intervention above and beyond the subject's capacity of normal human control.

The reassurance of the angel explains to Joseph what his role is supposed to be. Matthew's text does this by having the angel proclaim an explicit editorial parallel to the Old Testament, namely to Isaiah's announcement of a young woman, a virgin who will conceive a child to whom a special name will be given. As we will see presently, it is the virginity of the mother that matters here. But in terms of the impact on Joseph, it seems valid to say that Matthew implies as well a parallel between Joseph and the figure of Moses.[45] In Exodus 3:7–10, the Lord announces to Moses the exodus deliverance. In Matthew 1:21, the angel announces to Joseph the messianic deliverance from sin. In both cases, the reassurance is not in terms of a psychological pat on the back, but rather as an explanation of why the wondrous event was necessary—the burning bush in the case of Moses, the virginal conception in the case of Mary and Joseph. The turning away in fear is justified in both cases (Moses hiding his face, Joseph planning to release Mary within the context of the mystery), but must be overcome in function of a specific mission for which the responsibility is now being assigned.

Joseph's response to the message from the angel provides an indirect but strong confirmation of the fact that Joseph's awareness of the pregnancy had to precede the appearance of any outward physical signs. The message provides a summons to accept his role in the mystery and to proceed immediately with the second part of the marriage, which entailed formally taking his wife into his household: "do not let your awe keep you from taking formally your wife Mary in your household" (*mē phobēthēṭs paralabeîn Marían tēn gunaîka sou*, Mt 1:20). Thus, "Joseph, having awakened, . . . took formally in his household (*parélaben*) his wife" (Mt 1:24). Had the pregnancy been physically visible, how could the paternity have been attributed to Joseph if they had not yet come to live in the same household?

The use of this particular verb (*paralambánō*), in the specific sense of "conveying into the husband's household," also makes it clear what the object of Joseph's fear was. The angel does not suggest that Joseph should not be concerned with the origin of the preg-

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[45]For a detailed and enlightening summary of all parallels with the Moses tradition, including later rabbinic literature, see Davies and Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 192f.

nancy (who was the male culprit?), its background (did Mary give in?), or its consequences (the scandal). In that case, the message would have sounded differently: "do not worry about what happened to Mary,"[46] or "about the potential scandal." Instead of addressing the mental state of Joseph, the angel addresses the broader implications for the course of affairs. Joseph was "awed and afraid" to "convey Mary into his household" now that his rights had been preempted by supernatural intervention. And he was "awed and afraid" to face the child that was going to be the issue of such intervention. Addressing *this* fear, this double fear, the angel urges Joseph not to fear to arrogate to himself the onus (and thereby the privilege) to be formally responsible for the young woman who is now, Joseph already knows, mother. Just as significantly, Joseph should not fear to become formally responsible for a child who is so infinitely beyond his own psychological reach. Clearly, in my view, the message of the angel does imply a pre-existent knowledge on the part of Joseph of the conception as recounted to him by Mary. The focus is on halting a recoiling impulse on Joseph's part vis-à-vis his role in the matter. He should not be afraid to go ahead with completing the second phase of his marriage (the conveyance). And he should not be afraid to be responsible for the future of the child, a responsibility which, the angel indicates, will be formally assumed by having Joseph name the child.[47]

What we have, in my view, is the description of a very real situation that entails facing not only strong psychological reactions, but also concrete formal responsibilities. Mary and Joseph are betrothed, but in the sense of a pre-conveyance marriage, i.e., a legal bond that needs only to be finalized through the conveyance of the bride into the household of the husband. As Mary accepts the angel's announcement, she also believes in the factual realization of what has

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[46]Something like *mê merimnēi̯s ti epêlthen epì Marían*. For a similar use of the verb *merimnõ* see for instance: "do not worry about how or what you shall say . . ." (Mt 10:19). The verb *phobéō* could also be used in the normal sense of "being scared," as in Mt 2:22, where it is said that Joseph "was afraid to go there" (*ephobêthē ekeĩ apeltheĩn*).

[47]The commentaries understand the naming of Jesus primarily in function of establishing the legal basis for Jesus' title as "son of David" (via Joseph). This is certainly a valid point. Just as pertinent, it seems to me, is the psychological impact that this announcement would have on Joseph: he was called to do something that no one else could do.

been announced—that she is pregnant even though she has no outward physical sign of her new status. (1) The first step in the chain of events that are defined by the responsibilities Mary and Joseph face, is for Mary to tell Joseph: she is married, even though not in that phase of the marriage where the two yet cohabit ("I am not yet in the state where I know (my) husband" *ándra ou ginôskō*, Lk 1:34). Accordingly, *her* child affects *his* responsibility very directly, and she is bound to share with her husband the announcement and her faith in its de facto (albeit still hidden) realization. (2) The second step is Joseph's response. He has not received a call to care for the child, and this must mean, in his eyes, that he has to yield. His formal responsibility, he feels, is to release Mary from their mutual contract, according to which he would have conveyed her in the near future into his household. (3) The message of the angel in the dream summons Joseph to the opposite response, and this is the third step: his responsibility is to proceed not with a formal act of release, but rather with an immediate formal act of conveyance. The message implies that Joseph's reverential fear is well placed, and must still be operative, but from within the situation itself, rather than from without, as a bystander. With this newly formed bond between themselves, shared in secret (*láthra*$_i$), Mary and Joseph accelerate the conveyance ceremony and embark on the marriage they had planned, but one which is now profoundly altered in its basic implications by the utterly unexpected, and utterly awesome, divine invasion.

6. Virginity

The central purpose of Matthew's narrative of the birth of Jesus is unequivocally stated at the beginning: "thus (*houtōs*) was the genesis of Jesus Christ" (Mt 1:18)—not "*this* (*toiautē*) was . . . ." The latter formulation would have simply referred to the event in its factuality, but the use of "thus" (*houtōs*) stresses instead the modality of the process,[48] a modality that is explained in both the narrative and

[48]Interestingly, Matthew's *houtōs* "thus" is matched by Luke's *pōs* "how": "*how* will this be, given that I do not know man?" (Lk 1:34). Note also the correlation between "I do not know man/husband" in Luke and "(Joseph) did not know her" in Matthew (1:25); see above, section 2.

the commentary that Matthew provides. The narrative tells us twice that the conception was from the Holy Spirit, first as a statement of fact ("from the Holy Spirit," Mt 1:18), then as a proclamation by the angel ("from the Holy Spirit," Mt 1:20). Matthew's commentary provides the citation of Isaiah that is put in the mouth of the angel: "a virgin will have in her entrails and shall bear a son" (Mt 1:23 = Is 7:14). Regardless of the proper meaning of Isaiah's original *'almâ*, there is little doubt that Matthew understood *parthénos* as "virgin," since it was clearly intended to reinforce the doubly repeated statement of the conception being "from the Holy Spirit."[49]

But there is also another aspect of the narrative that stresses the same point. The narrative concludes with the statement that "Joseph . . . took his wife and did not know her until she bore (her) son" (Mt 1:24f). The current interpretation lays stress on the conjunction "until such time as" (*héōs hoû*), as if what mattered to Matthew was to let us know that, after the birth of Christ, Joseph was no longer held to some kind of commitment that presumably he felt he had before the birth. This makes little sense, because there is no indication of, nor interest in, such a presumed commitment from which Joseph would have been released. Matthew's concern is "how" the "genesis" took place, i.e., the fact that it was the result of divine intervention. As I have already argued (above, section 2), it is obvious that the annunciation did not produce an immediate visible effect, and that Mary's relating it to Joseph did not in fact prove that she had become pregnant. This, in my view, is Matthew's concern—to exclude the thought that, having accepted the annunciation at face value, Mary and Joseph then placed its validity in question by having a relationship that could have been the real cause of the conception.[50] Were such to have been the case, there would have been just Mary's word for it. The emphasis, then is not on "until" as pointing to a target date when things change, but rather on the period during which a normal human relationship might have circumvented the acceptability of divine intervention in the birth of Christ.[51]

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[49]Note that some late manuscripts of Matthew introduce the qualification *parthénos* for Mary in the genealogy of Jesus (Mt 1:16).

[50]The curious attention to chronological details in Luke (see above, section 2) also serves to stress the fact that Joseph and Mary were apart for the first three months of her pregnancy.

[51]Note that *héōs hoû* occurs also with the meaning "while," e.g., in Mt 26:36 | Mk

The *phóbos, trómos, thámbos*, *ékstasis*, and *khará* (see above, section 5), i.e., the astonished and joyful recognition of the extraordinary dynamics of divine invasion of the human sphere—in one word, the "fear of God" as a gift of the Holy Spirit—could never have left Joseph and Mary. The actual development of Mary's pregnancy was a constant reminder, as well as a verification, of what they, and they alone, had shared knowledge of. The "secrecy" was to extend not only through the pregnancy, but all the way through Jesus' life and until his death, since interest in Jesus' origins (his "genesis," in Matthew's terms, Mt 1:1–18) was to arise after that. This gives a whole new weight to what we have been considering with regard to that adverb "in secret" (*láthra*$_i$) that so well characterizes the unique bond of Joseph and Mary.

It is in this light that we should approach the question of their virginity not just as a time-bound situation, but as a state of life. Matthew and Luke's concern in relating the infancy narratives was, primarily, the "genesis" of the man they knew so well—not the story of Joseph, whom they never knew, and nor even of Mary, who had remained in the background. They knew Jesus, and having accepted his identity as the Christ, who (in John's account) spoke of "why he had come into this world" (Jn 18:37; see also 3:19; 16:28), became then interested in "how" he had in fact come into the world. But in so doing, they touched a chord that came to resonate widely, from the very beginning, in the Christian community, namely virginity as a state of life. Where is the connection? A proper understanding of this question as it applied to Mary and Joseph will help us place in the proper perspective the very essence of Christian virginity as a wholly novel and utterly distinctive spiritual attitude.

The radical motive for the uniqueness of Christian virginity lies in the *ontological* motivation of the virginal conception of Christ.[52] As awesome a mystery as it is, it can be stated in very simple

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14:32: "Sit here, while (*héōs hoû*) I go there and pray." Gamba (*Vangelo di San Matteo*, 104, n. 61) rightly points to 2 Sam 6:23 where it is said that Michal did not have a child "until (*héōs* in the Septuagint) the day of her death," which obviously does not imply her having a child afterwards!

[52]Recently, it has been recognized that celibacy was not as uncommon in pre-Christian Jewish life as once thought, but the reasons did not obviously include the incarnational dimension I propose here for Christianity. They are instead primarily eschatological and dualistic (verging on misogynism); see P. W. Van der Horst, "Celibacy in Early Judaism," *Revue Biblique* 109 (2002): 390–402. The

terms: as a person of the Trinity, Jesus could not *become a person*.[53] Let us briefly elaborate this point. Each time it happens through sexual intercourse, normal human conception posits a new person. Accordingly, Jesus' fundamental status as a person of the Trinity (as the Logos, in Johannine terms), made it ontologically impossible for him to be conceived through the same means that generate a *new* person. Hence the virginal conception did in no way result from abhorrence of sex, but rather from an exaltation of its role: for the result of normal human conception, precisely through sexual intercourse, can in this light be seen as (however dimly) analogous in its effect to the generation of a divine person. The process could not be applied to Jesus because, being already a person as we are, he could not *become* a person the way we do.[54]

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former (eschatological) aspect approaches the incarnational motif, especially where it is seen, in the case of Moses and Moses alone, as the result of the confrontation with the living God in the episode of the burning bush (396f). One reason why celibacy did not take firm roots in Judaism is attributed in part to its intent of establishing a deliberate contrast with Christianity (401), as well as to the fact that Judaism, unlike Christianity, remained profoundly ethnic and demographically limited (hence with an inherent need to cultivate procreation within the group). But an even stronger reason is the incarnational awareness to which I am calling attention.

[53]This may seem in contrast with a central argument of Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, to the effect that the virgin birth is not "the ground for the real divinity of Jesus, his 'Divine Sonship'" (274) and that "the doctrine of Jesus' divinity would not be affected if Jesus had been the product of a normal human marriage" (274f; see also Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 529). But his argument is in effect aimed in a different direction: the virgin birth is not the constitutive factor of Jesus' divinity, i.e., Jesus does not "become" God by virtue of his being born of a virgin. This is to counteract the notion that the virgin birth should be considered as a theogamy, thereby equating it with a mythical understanding of things (275), hence Ratzinger's stress on the fact that the virgin birth does not "belong *directly* to the doctrine of Jesus' Divine Sonship" (277, emphasis mine; the word "directly" is repeated twice on the same page). Also note that one would still have to qualify the full import of what a "normal human marriage" would be, since the conception of Jesus would in any case have had to be immaculate, as with Mary. My point is that a human couple generates a person, not just an embryo. On this revolves, it seems to me, both the doctrine of original sin and the Church's position against abortion.

[54]I have developed this argument more fully in "Religious Vows and the Structure of Love," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 23 (Fall 1996): 570–572. The exact opposite view is held, by, e.g., W. Pannenberg, *Jesus, God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 143.

Mary and Joseph were the first witnesses of this reality. Not that they could, or needed to, articulate the argument. It was infinitely more poignant for them: first, they believed in the announcement of a virginal conception, then they saw its fruits in Mary's pregnancy and in the birth of Jesus, and finally they lived *láthra*$_i$, i.e., in the secrecy of a mystery only they could share, for a number of years. Could they ever forget the Annunciation? Could they ever for a moment ignore the special status of the baby, the child, the adolescent, the adult they were caring for?[55] It was, for them, a constant confrontation with the impossible invasion of their human world by the divine reality. It was, in truth, the most suffered face-to-face encounter with the Trinity that any human being ever experienced. They were aware of trinitarian reality in a way that no amount of mystical insight, and much less of subtle theological investigation, could ever match. What the apostles discovered slowly and over a relatively short period of time (as with the Petrine confession, Mt 16:16), what the blind man experienced in and for an instant ("'Who is he, that I may believe in him?' . . . 'I believe, Lord,' and he bowed down to worship him," Jn 9:36–38), Mary and Joseph faced as a mystery that came as an explosion and then developed over a lifetime of the most ordinary and un-mysterious routines. The mystery of Jesus' conception was for them, and for them alone, as though a constant paschal announcement long before that other explosion of the Resurrection. If there ever was a moment when the supreme outward reach of the "economic" Trinity was not perceived as merely functional;[56] when an external trinitarian "mission" was sensed to be in full unison with the internal trinitarian "processions"; when, in other words, the depth of patristic and scholastic reflection was experienced in real life—it was that first moment when Mary and Joseph accepted the Incarnation in faith (through their double yet individual *fiat*); and it was also every subsequent moment of their lives, each time they confronted the dynamic unfolding of the Incarnation's issue. It is only through jaded attitudes dulled by excessive reliance on intellectualistic theorizing

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[55]The emotion would have been analogous to that voiced in 1 John 1:1: "what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have contemplated and our hands have felt by touching . . . ."

[56]A danger against which H. de Lubac warns: *The Christian Faith. An Essay on the Structure of the Apostles' Creed* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 92.

that we have come to perceive Mary and Joseph as though living with but a literary topos.

The appellation Gabriel uses for Mary, "ingraced" (*kekharitōménē*), describes fully the situation. Grace is the stand that God takes vis-à-vis our world; it is the specific interaction of the absolute with the relative, of the infinite with the finite, of the invisible and intangible with the concrete. The most concrete realization of this process happens in Mary: she is "ingraced" because, in her, Grace becomes grace, the Word becomes flesh. Joseph is also ingraced, if derivatively. Mary and he, alone, lived the full perceptual confrontation with the most physical dimension of Grace ever. We all experience moments of incarnation when we feel God intervening in some special way in our own personal world of finitude and physicality. We are always sustained by Grace, but there are moments when we feel we can touch it. For Mary and Joseph every moment was that kind of moment, since their daily confrontation with Jesus was never independent of their initial confrontation with that uniquely blinding moment they confronted at his genesis, the moment when the one who could not have a beginning did in fact have a beginning. This, infinitely beyond any kind of argumentative rationalization, they did perceive, and assented to, in full consciousness.

Their accepted reciprocal virginity was their response to this confrontation. The *phóbos* in all of its many nuances suffused their response at the start, and, while not documented for the later years, it can only have continued to suffuse their life: the situation that occasioned it at the beginning (the virginal conception) continued to impact them in its effects (the concrete, enduring presence of the fruit of that conception). Thus their virginity was by no means a negative statement, as if about a perceived impurity. Quite on the contrary, it was the proclamation of a new order of being, the Incarnation, and, with it, the trinitarian dimension of the world. What we refer to as the "hidden" life of Jesus was matched by the secrecy with which Mary and Joseph guarded their awareness of the incarnation humbly and faithfully, a secrecy that became all the more poignant as the fruit of this incarnation, Jesus, grew in the most normal of ways, as if the initial wonder could be forgotten. Mary, alone, went on to witness the flowering of this mystery along paths she probably never quite imagined (in spite of Simeon's prediction, Lk 2:25–33), leading all the way up to the truly unimaginable ending on the cross. And she still kept her secret, humbly and faithfully. The

láthra$_i$ spirituality that had first come into being as she shared the annunciation with Joseph, remained with her as even Jesus seemed to shun her. Like the "Messianic secret" in the case of the apostles (see above, section 4), the virginal conception secret aims at deflecting attention from anything flamboyant as potentially misleading. During his lifetime, the highest position Jesus attains on earth is but the cross. It was only at Pentecost that Mary felt absolved from the secret about the mystery, and could relate, to those who had known the flowering but not the seed, how the "genesis" of it all had come to be.

In this light, it seems plausible to assume that Mary's and Joseph's commitment to virginity arose as a consequence of the annunciation, and was not rooted in a vow antecedent to their marriage. Mary's statement in Luke, "how will this be (*põs éstai toũto*), given that I do not know man (*epeì ándra ou ginôskō*)" (Lk 1:34) seems at first to provide the main reason for thinking otherwise, since it uses the future tense ("will be"). But two reasons support, I believe, the interpretation for which I am arguing. (1) The critical place where one would expect a future is not the first, but the second verb, whereby the sentence would be something like: "given (my determination) that I *will* not know (*ou gnôsomai*) man." (2) The term for "man" (*anēr*) is to be understood primarily, and certainly in the context of the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, as "husband," not as "male" (just like *gunē* in Mt 1:20 means "wife" and not "woman"). Accordingly, the sentence in Luke 1:34 does not mean "I do not know a male" in the sense of "I do not (generically) have sexual relationships" (and even less in the future: "I will not [generically] have sexual relationships"). It means, rather, "I do not (specifically) know (my) husband" in the sense of "I do not (yet) cohabit with my husband," "my marriage has not reached the formal stage when I have been introduced into my husband's household."

Accordingly, we can understand Mary's response as starting from the assumption that the first message from the angel referred, in Mary's ears, to an immediate future. Mary's response addresses then precisely this issue: does this mean that my marriage should be brought immediately to its completion? The angel's answer is directed specifically to this concern, as it explains that the conception will be independent of the marriage. Matthew's account parallels[57]

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[57]If we assume, as I do, that Mary is the source of the information understood by

Luke's by relating how the same events affected Joseph. To review what we have already seen, he (Joseph) knows from Mary that a hidden pregnancy is underway because, she says, of the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit; and believing in both her and the message, he feels called to withdraw from the marriage contract that gave him specific rights which he now feels have been awesomely pre-empted. The message in the dream tells him that he should follow instead the opposite direction: conception has taken place outside of marriage, but from a divine agent, and the marriage has to be completed right away to provide a channel wherein the consequences of the extraordinary conception can unfold within an ordinary setting. It would then be the confrontation with the extraordinary nature of this conception that would have jolted Mary and Joseph into the type of incarnational virginity I have been describing. If so, virginity would not be for them an ascetical choice derived from a pre-existing human commitment to austere self-denial, but rather the result of their prophetic apprehension and proclamation of mystery—the unfathomable mystery of the historical incarnation of Jesus, understood in their daily experience, with the perfectly clear dimness of faith, as the Incarnation of God.

The impact was immense. Beyond *their* virginity, i.e., the virginity of Mary and Joseph, the confrontation with the incarnation would remain at the root of the whole new attitude towards this new state of life that developed in early Christianity and was to remain characteristic of it through the centuries. Vows of virginity in other religious traditions stem from its being linked with purity, asceticism, and social service. These three factors are operative in the Christian tradition as well, and any one of them has become, I believe, unduly prevalent at times, as when purity is, or was, so conceived as to imply that not just sex, but even sponsality, is inherently impure; asceticism so conceived as to focus obsessively on

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both Matthew and Luke as referring to factual events (see below, n. 61), and, further, that Matthew reflects an original apostolic understanding of the events, and Luke a subsequent enlargement resulting from personal inquiry—then it would appear that the earlier communication (to the apostles as reflected by Matthew) puts the stress on Joseph away from Mary, and that the specifics of her role were provided only upon further prodding (by Luke). In terms of the actual sequence of events, the Annunciation to Mary came first. But in relating these events, Mary would have spoken first of Joseph's role, and only upon subsequent nudging about her own.

the mastery of the self as the ultimate goal;[58] and service so conceived as to suggest that virginity is but a release from the outward fetters of married life. While in a proper measure these factors are valid, in and of themselves they are ultimately sterile, and do not begin to explain the vitality and inner power of the Christian, and especially Catholic, tradition of virginal life. What explains it, I believe, is the existential situation that we first witness with Mary and Joseph: the astonished confrontation with the incarnation. This incarnational, and hence trinitarian, dimension of virginity is exclusively Christian. It proclaims a virginity that is based on encounter, not on distance. The secret of the truly miraculous tradition of Christian virginity begins and ends with the contemplation of the incarnation seen as a trinitarian explosion.

In this sense, virginity is a prophetic proclamation. It proclaims the mystery that Jesus was born virginally because he was the pre-existent Logos, an eternal person who became man and yet retained fully his divine personhood, a person who did not have a beginning and yet had a genesis. Hence it proclaims the Trinity. The historical locus for this event is the acceptance on the part of Mary and Joseph of this unimaginable invasion. They accepted it in their lives, not because they could reflect abstractly on the theology of the Logos and of the Trinity, but because they confronted every single day, ever since they had accepted the shared mystery of the annunciation, the mystery of a man virginally conceived. And prophecy is essentially the proclamation of such unpredictable divine invasions, of such unspeakable mysteries. So it is with the Christian tradition of virginity that follows in the wake of Mary and Joseph. Virginity proclaims, not through the articulation of an argument, but through the witness of experience, that God came among us as a person without, however, *becoming* a person. He was not conceived of human seed: this was the firm starting point of any consideration for Mary and Joseph as they witnessed, experientially in their daily life, the fertile dimension of their shared virginity. Herein lies the fundamental impact of Mary and Joseph for the Christian tradition of virginity: they provide a fundamental anchor not because of any

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[58]Laurentin, *Les Évangiles de l'enfance du Christ*, 497, rightly points out that a problem with the pre-modern Catholic view of virginity was that it celebrated "la virginité *comme un privilège et un prodige, sans en évaluer le sens*" (author's emphasis). A proper assessment of the uniquely incarnational dimension of Christian virginity, as proposed here, would help redress this attitude.

discursive narrative on their part, which we do not have (and in which they would not have engaged), but because of the simple knowledge, which we do have, of their persistent contemplation of the fruit of the annunciation. Luke refers to this explicitly speaking of Mary: "and his mother was watching and guarding through and through (*dietērei*) all the spoken (events) (*pánta tà rēmata*) in her heart" (Lk 2:51), but there can be little doubt that the initial acceptance of the annunciation would have flowered into a constant attitude of contemplation for *both* Mary and Joseph. The persisting tradition of Christian virginity is nurtured by the same spirit of contemplation and imbued with the same *láthra*$_i$ spirituality.

In the light of this prophetic, incarnational dimension, sponsality and spiritual fertility emerge as strong characteristics of Christian virginity, which make it so different from all other traditions of virginity, because it is so positive instead of just negative (abstaining from sexual relationships). Sponsality is the expression of a unique (in the sense of univocal) personal relationship: the Christian virgin is the spouse of Christ because he or she identifies uniquely with Jesus as the virginally conceived, incarnate Logos. And spiritual fertility is the result of the prophetic proclamation: as a state of life, virginity proclaims the incarnational mystery, and this witness projects an apprehension of reality that goes well beyond the impact of any verbal communication.

7. *The prophetic dimension*

More than an expression of purity, asceticism, or service, then, virginity is a compelling witness, a "martyrdom." In Greek, we do not have the noun "martyr" but only the verb "to witness" (*marturéō*) and the abstract "evidence given as testimony" (*martúrion*, *marturía*). The noun "martyr" comes into existence in Latin (*martyr*) to signify the person who gives witness to the mystery to the point of suffering the greatest dangers even unto death. The linkage of virginity with martyrdom is generally seen in terms of the dramatic dimension of suffering: just as the "martyr" suffers even unto death, so the "virgin" suffers the privation inherent in the ascetic practice of avoiding sexual acts. This is an essentially negative view, one that hardly goes to the heart of the matter. I see, instead, a much more positive relationship between virginity and martyrdom, namely the confrontation with the mystery that is common to both, a confronta-

tion that calls for our unconditional assent and witness, regardless of the consequences this assent may have for our lives.

In this respect, both martyrdom and virginity are rooted in the prophetic ethos that is so deeply rooted in the Old Testament tradition. Here, too, we should divest ourselves of a superficial and nominalistic understanding of the concept of prophecy as mere "prediction." True, that aspect is a component of the figure of the prophet, but it is, in and of itself, not the primary one. Rather, the prophet is the most direct witness to the living God, one who senses the presence and communicates it. The prophet is a mystic but, we might say, a public mystic: through the prophet, the mystery is communicated to others. While the mystic is touched by God with a special measure of intensity and immediacy, the prophet is so touched that he may touch others. This communication can never become static, because it would thereby become sterile. Prophecy is always imbued with the dynamic sense of unpredictability, the unpredictability that is inherent in life. In this respect it anticipates, for others, a sense of the divine will that entails an insight into what is going to happen. Hence the prediction of the unpredictable. It is never a frozen prediction, because it never means to communicate mere events, but rather to communicate the mystery of God's intention behind such events. The prophet faces the future because the future is God. It is in this sense that Abraham is a prophet, that John the Baptist is a prophet.

It is also in this sense that Mary is a prophet, and Joseph is a prophet. They witnessed in the most unique way the divine invasion that we call incarnation. We may say that for them the Incarnation (as a theological term, with a capital "I") was always the incarnation (as a concrete, biological term, lower case). They both believed the Annunciation, saw its fruits in the pregnancy, the birth, and the long human growth of a plain and simple human being. But the divine origin of the whole chain of events could never for one moment have escaped their wondering attention. Hence they were always aware of, and witness to, the divine dimension of this plain and simple human being. Having been exposed to the incarnation, they became witnesses to the Incarnation. And so it was that, without the niceties of any proper terminology, they were the first witnesses to the Trinity, whom they faced as the inescapable consequence of the divine imprisonment they confronted on a daily basis.

The prophetic witness, the "martyr," is never a mere informational witness, one who communicates events (though he or

she may be that as well, in a derivative sort of way). The prophet knows by experience, and communicates not so much the factuality of the event witnessed, but the essence of the experience as lived in the first person. So it was that, even in their hidden response, the *láthra*$_i$ dimension of their life, they witnessed. Mary was to verbalize the experience as the apostles began to wonder about the "how," about the "genesis." But before any verbalization to outsiders, Mary and Joseph shared throughout their life together the witness to a mystery of which they knew the beginning, and to which they remained humbly and silently faithful, never forgetting what this "genesis" had been—for how could they ever forget the annunciation? When the litanies speak of Mary as the "queen of the prophets" and as the "queen of the martyrs," we can read in this not just a reference to homage due her (as by the angels or the patriarchs, of whom she is also proclaimed queen), but as the foremost prophet and martyr herself (as in her recognition as "queen of the virgins"). And a similar recognition is not unseemly for Joseph as well.

Joseph's dream (Mt 1:20–21) is reminiscent of Jacob's dream (Gn 28:11–19). Jacob sees the ladder linking heaven and earth, and Yahweh above it who renews the promise made to Abraham about his descendants inheriting the land. To Joseph, the angel proclaims that the fruit of the annunciation will be a male child who "will save his people from its sins" (Mt 1:21). And Matthew's editorial commentary links the message of the angel to Isaiah's prophecy about a young woman, a virgin bearing a son who will be called, and will thereby attest to the fact that "God is with us" ("Emmanuel," Mt 1:23). So Joseph is fully privy not only to the dynamics of the annunciation and of the divine conception, but also to the scope and meaning of the divine intervention. To this he will be a witness within the compass of his secret bond with Mary.

It is interesting to note that Luke places the *Benedictus* (Lk 1:68–79) in the mouth of Zechariah rather than of Joseph, and that the focus is on the Baptist (Lk 1:76–79), rather than on Jesus.[59] John is called explicitly a "prophet" (Lk 1:76): his role was fundamental for the apostles as the point of suture (Acts 1:22) between their Old Testament spirituality and their acceptance of Jesus. John's witness

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[59]As a result of an excessive editorial interest in parallelism, some late manuscripts place the *Magnificat* in the mouth of Elizabeth, see Laurentin, *Les Évangiles de l'enfance du Christ*, 13–22.

was not about the "genesis" of Jesus, but about the legitimacy of his presence. The apostles, the disciples, the crowds, did not follow Jesus because of anything they knew about his birth (something so central to our faith today), but because of their response to him as an adult. They believed in him as Jesus before they believed in him as the Christ, or rather: they believed in him as the Christ because they believed in him as Jesus. In other words, it was the magnetic pull of his personality, his urgent call for human friendship with him that progressively opened their hearts, if not their eyes, to him (their eyes and minds would be more fully opened at Pentecost). Joseph is like the other side of the coin. He believed in Jesus only because of his "genesis," since he did not come to know him as the Christ he proclaimed himself to be in his adult life. While Mary witnessed the whole gamut of Jesus' genesis, life, and death, and of the Church's genesis as well, Joseph was only, we might say, the prophet of the annunciation, of the incarnation, of the Incarnation.

8. Conclusion: coherence and verbalization

Was Joseph "just" in the prophetic spirit of the Baptist, and thus awed by the mystery he faced and respectful of its remove from the ordinary—or was he "just" in the spirit of Caiaphas, and therefore ready to pick up a stone and hurl it at Mary as an adulteress? Was Joseph one who hungers for justice as the manifestation of the dynamic presence of the living God—or one who is paralyzed by justice as a moral straightjacket? That is the dichotomy that emerges as we read the texts of Matthew and Luke carefully. To paraphrase in terms of the legalistic (Caiaphas's) interpretation: Joseph, having seen Mary pregnant and having immediately concluded that she was an adulteress (and a liar, in the case of her having mentioned the Annunciation), being at the same time a man concerned about legal proprieties and unwilling to expose Mary and especially himself to the scandal that would follow from an early exposure of Mary's affair, decided to send her away in secret (even though the pregnancy had in fact already exposed her) in a (hopeless) attempt to save (his) face. And to paraphrase in terms of the prophetic (the Baptist's) interpretation: Joseph, having been told by Mary of the Annunciation as soon as it took place, and thus well before any outward sign of Mary's pregnancy became evident, being at the same time a man imbued with a profound sense of surrender to God's plans and with

an equally profound sense of that fear of God that precludes divulging the depth of a mystery, decided to remove himself from the scene as unworthy to be publicly associated with the unfathomable. The exegetical aspects of the two interpretations are summed up in the following table, in which I place side by side the two alternative translations of the original Matthean text (with indirect support from Luke's account):

	Alternative Interpretations	
	1. Joseph assumes divine intervention	2. Joseph assumes adultery
euréthē en gastrí ékhousa ek pneúmatos hagíou	she was found with-child-from-the-Holy-Spirit (the reference to the Holy Spirit being an integral part of the story, intended to convey a sense of Joseph's awareness of the substance of the annunciation)	she was found with child—from the Holy Spirit (the reference to the Holy Spirit being a redactional aside intended as background for the reader without reference to the protagonists)
díkaios	imbued with a sense of God	legalistically concerned
deigmatísai	to divulge	to put to shame
láthra$_i$	in secret (to protect a perceived mystery)	quietly (to avoid embarrassing comments by the people)
apolũsai	to release	to divorce
mē phobēthē$_i$*s*	do not be overwhelmed (by awe in front of the mystery)	do not be scared (of an embarrassing situation)
ouk egínōsken autēn héōs hoũ éteken huión	throughout the time that led up to the birth of the child, he did not have any relationship with her (such as could have brought about the child's conception)	he did not have a relationship with her *until* she bore the son (but very well may have had afterwards)

Clearly, my view is that the first interpretation is the only one that is tenable on exegetical grounds. (A third approach would obviously be to discard altogether the sources as we have them, and to forget about the whole story.) But whatever one's choice, if one goes for the second interpretation, one should accept all its implications[60]—in other words, that Joseph was in practice a plain and simple cad.

In addition to the immediate exegetical dimensions of the interpretation, there is another aspect that cannot be ignored. A fundamental aspect of historical interpretation is to identify the subtle and often hidden coherence of facts, attitudes, and statements, across time and space. In our case, we can point to two elements of such coherence as it pertains to the figure of Joseph. The first is the set of unexpected correlations between Matthew and Luke that I have been pointing out in the course of this article (see in particular section 2, above). This points in the direction of a common source that was not verbalizing the original account in the same way each time, but had a clear picture of the events and was relating details that varied depending on the questions it answered, details that are unexpectedly coherent in their own diversity. The sources support, in my view, the conclusion that this source was Mary,[61] and that the

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[60]An element that I have ignored in my analysis is the presence of four women in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, the mention of which is assumed to serve as an expression of Matthew's assessment of Mary. In particular, attention has been called to the fact that the stories associated with these women have strongly irregular sexual overtones, and are therefore assumed to support the adultery (or rape) interpretation (see, e.g., Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, 20–42; for a new, and more balanced, look at this question, see John Nolland, "The Four (Five) Women and Other Annotations in Matthew's Genealogy," *New Testament Studies* 43 [1997]: 527–539). An interesting, if indirect, perspective on the purpose of the genealogy is to consider what Jesus' own opinion of his ascendancy, or genealogy, might have been. He pointedly calls himself "son of man" where the others call him "son of David" (except indirectly in Mk 12:35 | Lk 20:31), and in Mt 3:9 he says that "God is able to raise children for Abraham out of these stones." See also the brief remarks above (notes 4 and 5) about the attitudinal correlation between the genealogies in Matthew and Luke, or the emphasis on Isaiah in Matthew and several passages in Acts.

[61]The notion of Mary as a possible source is readily dismissed in the literature, see, e.g., Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 238 ("pure guess"), 316 and 318 (Luke's account is "not . . . a historical reminiscence of Mary's reaction" but rather "a Christian intuition"), 525 ("untenable"), or 245, n. 33 ("it is now clear in Roman Catholic thought that inspiration of the Scriptures does not guarantee historicity. There is no reason why a Roman Catholic could not judge the scene to be the

opportunity for a searching of her memory would have arisen in the period immediately following the crucifixion and the resurrection. Our sources mention, but do not stress, the way in which she and the other women interacted with the apostles in that period. The lack of any editorial intervention is part of the hidden factual coherence that the texts reflect. Thus, Matthew and Luke give us, if unwittingly, the equivalent of a legal cross-examination of Mary.

The second point that can be made with regard to a deeper historical coherence pertains to a proper contextualization of the major themes. The notions of justice, fear, prophetic ethos, as described above, are embedded in a vast framework of meanings that identify the whole of the religious experience of ancient, biblical Israel as it faced the most critical confrontation of its history, the one resulting from the claim of an incarnate epiphany of the living God. While the formalism of some had developed to the point that incarnation was considered impossible even in the form of an openly voiced word (the word "Yahweh" could no longer be pronounced by human lips), the openness of others kept alive the sense of confrontation with Yahweh as living, ever more unpredictably so. There is no question but that the former could not be aligned with the prophetic ethos: they had frozen a former understanding of the mystery so that the mystery could no longer speak to them. They

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product of Luke's creative imagination, so long as he or she did not deny the theological truths contained therein"; see also 246f, 521, 528f). Yet this view, based purely on internal argument, seems to me too facile, and based on too subjective a reading of the evidence, one that unduly privileges a priori the reflection of later communities over the equally or more plausible reflection of protagonists like Mary and the apostles. In the prevailing argument, fine lines are imperceptibly crossed as the argument itself is constructed along the following lines: literary patterns are observed in the description of events (e.g., the structure of an angelic announcement); these patterns are understood to give evidence of a later reflection about the phenomena (Christianity is growing, therefore one should account for its founder); the phenomena are seen as the convergence of collective beliefs (Christology); these beliefs in turn tell us more about those who believe than about the thing believed (the Christian communities); thus in the final analysis there is no referential support for the belief, i.e., the belief is about itself, not about a fact at the origin of it all (the "theological truth" of Brown). This is the exact path that lies at the origin of mythical thought, as in the ancient Near East. Faith gazes at facts, it relishes and delights in their very factuality, whether their implications can be fully analyzed or not. Myth establishes order on facts and dotes on explanation, whether it leads to full understanding or not, and remains wholly unconcerned about factuality. See also above, n. 33.

had become fundamentalists in the specific sense that fear of change dominated their whole mental disposition and made them comfortable only in their dependence on well-cemented conventions. In contrast, those alive with the sense of mystery could respond in the same spirit that had shaped the response of the earlier prophets in their tradition. What this means for our particular context is that the description we have of Joseph, however meager, appears to be perfectly in line with this tradition and with those others who championed it in the same context as Joseph, in particular Mary and John the Baptist. It is this broader coherence of protagonists and of themes that adds considerable weight, I believe, to the interpretation which is otherwise already suggested on exegetical grounds.

This deeper coherence is all the more significant as it is unintentional, i.e., not immediately apparent and not heralded by any editorial comment on the part of the sources. The sources attest to the reality they document as much by what they do not, as by what they do, verbalize. The situation of the historian is indeed, in this respect, analogous to that of an attorney who cross-examines a witness, by posing questions that are meant to elicit, unbeknownst to the witness, different perspectives on facts about which other perspectives have already been offered. Unlike a person on the witness stand, historical sources are mute and cannot offer new verbalizations of the facts. But the historian's task is to unravel the thin threads that hold together, as invisible filaments, the unfolding of events, the character of the protagonists, the nature of the situations across and beyond the explicit statements. A deeper historical causality can thus emerge that will account for facts otherwise seen only in the contingency of their individual appearance. A deep structure can then be discerned that "explains" the surface structure.

For our part, we can become slaves to the value of express verbalization, as though it could take the place of the reality, as though verbal coherence were more imperative than existential coherence. Just because we now have the term "Trinity" as a fixed point of verbal and conceptual reference, we are tempted to draw the conclusion that we know more about "it" than, say, Mary or Joseph, to whom the term would in fact have been quite foreign. In so doing, we blithely disregard the essential fact that they faced the epiphany of the reality quite apart from how they might have called it. If they could not frame it in words, they were certainly aware of the fact that, in our terms, the Trinity had become a phenomenon,

tangibly present in their lives in the form of a very concrete pregnancy, a very specific child. Rather than with verbalization, they dealt with "phenomenalization," so to speak. And the unexpectedly profound coherence to which they were able, prodigiously, to respond was the one between *that* set of real events and the earlier epiphany of God as they knew it from the Old Testament. Far from causing a rupture, their confrontation with the Trinity led them to respond more fully to the Yahweh of their previous experience.

In a converse sort of way, just because the term "Holy Spirit" came to be loaded with specific theological valences in later centuries, there is no reason to conclude that the concept, if not the term, must have originated at such later date. In my view, there is no historiographic impediment to understanding the sources as relating a live experience on the part of Mary of the same "Holy Spirit" known to later theological reflection. If Pentecost was an event, witnessed and related as specifically linked to a presence, a tangible phenomenon, to which Jesus had already given a specific verbalization in terms of "the Spirit"; and if the Annunciation was also an event in which another future event had been verbalized which did, shortly thereafter become verifiable as a real pregnancy and a real child; then there is no particular reason to deny a priori that this early verbalization may indeed have included a reference to the same Spirit; that, in the light of the event witnessed in the "upper room" where she was together with the apostles, Mary would have heard again, with a sudden new sound, the words that had seared her existence some thirty years earlier; and that, finally, she would feel called upon to relate her own experience of that earlier Pentecost when the Spirit had appeared not as a dove nor as a tongue of fire but as the agency that had caused her to be, very concretely and physically, pregnant.

It is in this light that I have sought to articulate a different understanding of the figure of that Joseph who was thought to be (Lk 3:23) the father of a man whom Matthew and the apostles had come to know intimately, if briefly, in the last couple of years of his adult life. If the interpretation proposed had been verbalized explicitly in the sources, there would be no need for further analysis. On the other hand, ad hoc extrapolations from isolated statements remain unarguable and possibly hopelessly fanciful. The approach I have followed yields a picture that may or may not be acceptable but can be argued on historical grounds. It is the picture of a set of events that can be cross-referenced in unexpected ways across the

boundaries of our sources. It is, above all, the picture of a personality, Joseph's, that is wholly coherent in its deeper import with a gamut of profoundly different personalities (from Mary and John the Baptist to the apostles and Nicodemus) who were similarly faced with a claim seemingly absurd and blasphemous in its prima facie expression, and yet irresistibly genuine and convincing for those who could sense its deepest roots.

Within this mosaic of prophetic figures, Joseph can legitimately be seen to strike a unique posture. He faced the genesis. The Old Testament "catechumenate" provided the essential presuppositions for his response, as it did, in different ways, for Mary and the others. It was the deeper spirituality of the Old Testament, its proclamation about the need to face the living God, that trained the New Testament protagonists to accept this wholly new divine invasion of their, of our, human world. Among them, Joseph was given at first the least to go by—the Annunciation as reported to him by Mary. But that was sufficient to open for him a window onto the transcendent dimension he knew so well from his Old Testament roots. On Mary's word, he accepted, however much through a glass darkly, that the Annunciation was the Incarnation. And of this he felt so unworthy that he could only "cover his face" as Moses had once done. Then came the tangible efflorescence of the incarnation—the pregnancy that did indeed manifest itself, the birth, the childhood, the adolescence. After the initial promise (the angel in the dreams, the shepherds, the Magi), nothing else even remotely glorious emerged in his life, nothing to show that the incarnation was, in fact, the Incarnation. He had to keep looking at the Incarnation as incarnation. So he had to re-live the faith of Abraham. The Old Testament taught him that Abraham was ready to give up his physiological son, in spite of the contradictory promise that from this very son would spring forth countless descendants. Strong from this spiritual (if not necessarily scholarly) training, Joseph learned to give up any pretense of reconciling the extraordinary (the virginal conception) with the ordinary (the childhood and adolescence of Jesus as he saw it). And so he remained the prophet of the Incarnation witnessed primarily as the incarnation, without any manifestation of its ramifications, as they were to unfold so dramatically in later years.

Therein lies a good rationale for the role of Joseph as patron of the Church. It is our obscurity that he shared, our inability fully to reconcile the extraordinary with the ordinary, or grace with

history, our witnessing almost helplessly the seemingly absurd wonders of divine invasion in our world—and our call to accept this with fear and trembling, not with scandal and revulsion. We, too, the Church, are called to be prophets of the genesis, waiting, through a glass darkly, for a resurrection beyond our lifetime.[62] □

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[62]In respectful homage to that other Joseph, Benedict XVI.