

Explain THAT to Me!

SEARCHING THE GOSPELS
FOR THE HONEST TRUTH ABOUT JESUS

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From the Editor



A child of the sixties and seventies, I attended CCD classes in a time of transition in the Church. Latin was replaced with English. Classic hymns were set aside for folk songs. And our catechisms were supplemented with the Bible, namely *Good News for Modern Man*, an American Bible Society translation. An anonymous benefactor donated a copy for every student in our tenth-grade class.

I liked *Good News* well enough, but was pleasantly oblivious of the challenges of Scripture until, as stage manager for a public high school production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, I tried to design the set for the passion and death of Jesus. I opened *Good News* and began reading the accounts in each of the Gospels. Whoa! I rushed with my Bible to the school office and asked one of the secretaries, “Can you explain this?” It never occurred to me that the secretary couldn’t or wouldn’t help.

When we read the Gospels today or listen to the readings at Mass, we are seeking “the honest truth about Jesus.” That’s what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) and *The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* call it. “The honest truth.” Even after hearing a Gospel passage over and over again, it can suddenly strike us in a new and unexpected way and lead us to ask, “Why? How can that be? What did Jesus really mean?”

In this helpful book Joseph McHugh addresses some of the puzzling and challenging questions about the life and teachings of Jesus, including those differences I encountered long ago in the Passion Narratives. The book is divided into five sets of questions: Jesus’ infancy and childhood, his family, his baptism and temptation, his ministry and teaching, and his passion and resurrection.

In addition to passages from the *New Revised Standard Bible*, McHugh incorporates excerpts from *The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition*, a dynamic, faith-filled translation of the Bible in contemporary English. The words and images of *The Message* shed new light on both the meaning and relevance of Scripture.

The Afterword provides an overview of Catholic teaching on Scripture as well as information on the development of the Gospels, their cultural setting, and their original audiences.

McHugh can't possibly cover every troubling passage or answer every question, but he hopes his examination will lead readers to an appreciation of the "honest truth about Jesus" and to discover, as did Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, "fresh lights" and "hidden meanings" in the precious sacred text. (See CCC 127.)

PATRICIA A. LYNCH

Part One



Questions about the Infancy and Childhood of Jesus

When was Jesus born?

We don't know the hour, day, month, or year of Jesus' birth, but we do know that the Second Person of the Trinity, God the Son, took on our human nature, being born of the Virgin Mary on a specific day in a specific year. He ministered in word and deed. He died on the cross for our sins. He was raised from the dead and now sits in glory at the right hand of the Father. Compared to all this, the precise date of Jesus' birth is insignificant.

In the earliest days of the Church, the single Christian holy day was the weekly celebration of the resurrection—Sunday, the Lord's Day. In the second century, the Church began to observe a solemn annual commemoration of the resurrection on the "Great Sunday," Easter. Only in the fourth century do we find firm evidence of a feast of the Nativity, the birth of the Lord.

It may seem strange that the Gospels do not tell us precisely when Jesus was born, but we must remember that the Gospels are proclamations of the *risen* Jesus. Though they contain biographical information, they are not biographies in our modern understanding. In fact, the biographies of many historical figures focus only on the adult person, especially if their childhoods were so ordinary that no one thought to record the details.

A case in point is the Roman Emperor Augustus (Octavian) during whose long reign Jesus was born. One modern biographer points out that we know very little about the young Augustus, although in his case, we do know the exact date and time of birth—just before sunrise on September 23, 63 B.C. We know that much because of his father's late arrival at a very serious meeting of the Roman Senate. The same modern biographer writes that we may assume Octavian had the typical education of a Roman boy of good family, but specific details are few. It is interesting to me that young Octavian made his first formal public appearance in a most precocious fashion. He gave the funeral oration for his grandmother Julia (the sister of Julius Caesar) when he was not quite twelve years old. (The twelve-year-old Jesus also made his debut in the Temple, discussing the Law with the elders and making a very favorable impression.)

The New Testament is not a biography of Jesus, his disciples, or any major character. The apostle Paul, for example, reveals little about himself in his letters, and the Acts of the Apostles (in which Paul is a major character) tell us only about his adult conversion and his career as an apostle.

The earliest preaching of the Church focused on Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection. This is the good news that Paul preached before the Gospels were written. When Mark, the first evangelist, wrote his Gospel, he added accounts of Jesus' public ministry, but Mark tells us nothing about Jesus' birth or childhood. When Matthew and Luke composed their Gospels, they added accounts of Jesus' birth and childhood. John, the last of the four Gospels, begins with Jesus' eternal existence before the beginning of creation, eons before his conception and birth to Mary: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). John gives us no information on Jesus' childhood. In short, Mark presumes Jesus' birth, and John distills it into a single verse: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14).

In what year was Jesus born?

Matthew and Luke offer a little help with the year and the month of Jesus' birth. Matthew tells us that Jesus was born in the reign of King Herod the Great, while Luke tells us that John the Baptist was conceived (and so was Jesus six months later) in the reign of Herod. While some scholars have tried to prove that Herod died in 1 B.C., most historians place his death in the spring of 4 B.C. We know from Matthew that Herod, in his attempt to kill Jesus, ordered the slaughter of all the male children of Bethlehem up to age two. That implies Herod believed Jesus was around two years old at the time of the visit of the Magi. Moving backward from Herod's death, the birth of Jesus would have been in 7 or 6 B.C.

How can it be that Jesus was born *B.C.*—*Before Christ*? Dionysius Exiguus ("Dennis the Short"), a monk who lived around 470 to 544 A.D., introduced a system of calculating time based on *Ante Christum*

Natum (before Christ, now B.C.) and *Anno Domini* (in the year of the Lord, now A.D.). His system replaced a variety of other methods. One, for example, started with the founding of Rome and divided time according to the names of the corresponding Roman consuls. Unfortunately, Dionysius made a few incorrect assumptions and erred by several years on the year of Jesus' birth.

What about the month of Jesus' birth?

Luke tells us shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks in the fields on the night of Jesus' birth. Under normal conditions, shepherds in the Judean hills let their flocks out to pasture between March and October. That's the season for keeping watch for wandering sheep and predators. In the cold winter months, the sheep were safely enclosed. If the winter of 6 B.C. had been mild, it is possible that flocks might have been in the fields in December. Without meteorological records, however, we have very little to go on. If the shepherds were keeping watch under normal weather conditions, Jesus' birth would have occurred in or after March, but there is no way of confirming that.

How did December 25 become the day of Christ's birth?

It follows that if we cannot determine the *month* of Jesus' birth, neither can we determine the exact *day*. Saint Clement of Alexandria tells of some second-century Alexandrian Christians who settled on the twenty-fifth day of the Egyptian month of Pachon in the twenty-eighth year of the Emperor Augustus—May 20, 3 B.C. Others disagreed, suggesting that Jesus' birth occurred on either the twenty-fourth or the twenty-fifth day of the month Pharmuthi—April 19 or 20. Several other calculations were employed in the choice of December 25 as the day of Christ's birth.

One approach to dating the Nativity is based on the solar rhythm of the year, specifically the marking of each solstice and equinox. Early in the third century, the prominent Roman priest and theologian Hippolytus explained that one calculation of the date of Christmas was based on the age-old assumption that Creation began on the spring equinox. According to the Roman calendar in use at the time of his writing, that

would have been March 25. Adding a touch of theology, Hippolytus then linked Creation and the *new* creation ushered in by the redemptive death of Christ. Thus, he decided that March 25 was both the anniversary of Creation and the date of the crucifixion.

In ancient Jewish thinking, important persons were thought to live in whole years. In other words, they died on their birthdays. We may laugh at this idea, but it had a purpose, symbolizing completeness or perfection in God's plan. If Jesus died on March 25, some Christians argued, then he must have been born on March 25. A third-century Christian named Sextus Julius Africanus accepted all the foregoing arguments, but insisted that the moment of the incarnation occurred not at Jesus' *birth*, but at his *conception*. So Jesus' conception/incarnation would have occurred on the spring equinox (March 25) with his birth nine months later at the winter solstice (December 25). Here we have the dates that would become the feasts of the Annunciation of the Lord and Christmas.

Eastern Christians set the Nativity on January 6, the winter solstice according to the Alexandrian calendar. Later this date was almost universally adopted by Christians as the celebration of the Epiphany, or the visitation of the Magi. Many Eastern churches now celebrate January 6 as Christmas eve and January 7 as the combined feasts of the Nativity, Epiphany, and baptism of Jesus.

By the middle of the fourth century, the Church at Rome was celebrating Christmas on December 25. This date also afforded the Church an opportunity to syncretize, or bring together, pagan Roman worship of the sun and Christian beliefs.

Pagan Romans believed the winter solstice marked the day when the sun halted its steady descent in the southern skies and began its ascent toward the northern skies, reaching its zenith on the summer solstice. December 25, then, was celebrated as the birthday of the Unconquered Sun, the date on which the sun began its ascent. Another winter solstice celebration involved the cult of Mithras, a Persian god revered by Roman soldiers. Whether December 25 was borrowed from the pagans or set as a Christian feast in opposition to their celebrations,

it is clear from references to the prophet Malachi that Christians made the connection: “But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings” (Malachi 4:2). From this perspective, the birthday celebration of Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness, was the Christian response to the birthday celebrations of the pagan sun god and Mithras. The third verse of “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing” incorporates this beautiful imagery:

Hail the heav’n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Ris’n with healing in his wings.

Before leaving this calculation by solstices and equinoxes, we should mention one more liturgical feast—the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist. The annunciation to the Virgin Mary took place in the sixth month of the pregnancy of her cousin Elizabeth. (See Luke 1:36-37.) Once the dates for the feasts of the Annunciation and Christmas were established, the date for the feast of John’s birth became obvious: June 24, the summer solstice in the ancient calendar, the moment when the sun was at its highest point in the sky. Thereafter the sun resumed its descent toward the darkness of the winter solstice. John the Baptist said of his relationship with Jesus, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Thus Jesus’ birth is celebrated when the sun’s position begins to rise (increase); John’s birth is celebrated when the sun begins to descend (decrease).

These two theories—Jesus’ being conceived and later dying on March 25, and the syncretization of pagan festivals—have their adherents among scholars. The matter is still debated, but it seems likely that one or both calculations led to the choice of December 25 as Christmas.

What do we know about the hour of Jesus’s birth?

The Gospels are silent on this point as well. We know from Luke that an angel appeared to the shepherds while they were tending their flocks

by night. In the same way that the prophecy in Malachi was applied to Jesus as Sun of Righteousness, so too was a passage from the Book of Wisdom, referring to one of the plagues inflicted on the Egyptians, used to point to the hour of his birth.

For while gentle silence enveloped all things,
and night in its swift course was now half gone,
your all-powerful word leapt from heaven... (Wisdom 18:14-15).

And so, the last piece of the puzzle fell into place: Jesus was born at midnight. Around 450, Pope Sixtus III added Mass at midnight at the Basilica of Saint Mary Major to the existing Mass on Christmas morning at Saint Peter's.

Why didn't Mark describe the birth of Jesus?

As mentioned earlier, the Gospels contain biographical material about the life of Jesus, but are not biographies in our modern sense. Mark begins his account with the introduction of the adult John the Baptist, followed immediately by John's baptism of the adult Jesus. His Gospel does not contain a narrative of Jesus' birth, and it does not tell us where Jesus was born. Mark does not mention Bethlehem, but he sometimes calls the Lord "Jesus of Nazareth." Mark recounts that the man possessed by the unclean spirit calls out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" (Mark 1:24) and that the blind beggar Bartimaeus was told that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by. (See Mark 10:47.) Later, the young man dressed in a white robe at Jesus' tomb tells the women, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here" (Mark 16:6). The designation "of Nazareth" does not necessarily imply that Jesus was born there, but only that he was brought up in Nazareth and set out from there at the beginning of his public ministry. Mark does not mention Joseph by name and does not say anything about Jesus' earthly foster father. Only later in his account does Mark refer to Jesus' mother: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary...?" (Mark 6:3).

Saint Paul, writing years before the Gospels, shows little interest in the events of Jesus' life and even his teachings. Instead, he focuses on the Paschal Mystery, what God has done for us in Christ, and how we can participate in the life of the risen Jesus. A little later, the preaching of the early Church expands on the basic theme of Jesus' passion, death, resurrection, and exaltation, and incorporates some of Jesus' sayings, parables, and miracles. These stories probably circulated orally as separate units and may have been written down before Mark wrote the first Gospel around 70 A.D. The details of Jesus' birth and childhood seem to be of little concern.

By the time Matthew and Luke write their Gospels, between 80 and 90 A.D., believers are interested in the virginal conception and birth of Jesus. The two evangelists use Mark's basic outline but add details, including stories of Jesus' infancy and, in the case of Luke, one story of his childhood. These infancy stories made a powerful theological statement about Jesus' identity and introduced themes that would appear in later chapters of their Gospels.

What can we learn from John?

The fourth Gospel, written by John in the 90s, does not contain a narrative of Jesus' birth, but it shows that there is some confusion about Jesus' hometown. When Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Festival of Booths, the crowd is divided. Some say Jesus is from Galilee, but others claim he must be a descendant of David and thus come from Bethlehem, David's city. (See John 7:40-42.) John is much more interested in Jesus' divine pre-existence than in his town of origin or the early years of his life.

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word

became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a *father's only son*, full of grace and truth (John 1:9-14, emphasis added).

So important is the prologue of John's Gospel (1:1-18) for the feast of Christmas that it is used as the Gospel reading at the Mass during the Day, the first of the three Masses the Church devised for the feast. Only later did the Church add the Mass at Midnight with its Gospel reading about the manger and shepherds from Luke 2:1-14.

The story of Jesus' call of Philip and Nathanael, later in the first chapter, references Jesus' origin: "Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth'" (John 1:45). Initially, Nathanael is unimpressed by anyone coming from Nazareth—a town with, at most, a few hundred people. But later Nathanael changes his mind, saying, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (John 1:49). For John, it is far more important that Jesus is Son of God than that he is son of Joseph from Nazareth.

Again, we need to remember that the Holy Spirit inspired the four evangelists to write the story of Jesus in ways that would be meaningful to their respective faith communities. Thus we have inherited a great treasure—not one, not two, not three, but four Gospels. Study and reflection on the totality of these accounts, including their differences, can lead to a deeper understanding and experience of the risen Jesus. *Vive la différence!*

Why don't Matthew and Luke agree on all the details?

This question may not occur to some readers, but it can cause consternation for others. The familiar crèche scene often combines the accounts of both Matthew and Luke, but some Christians tend to force one evangelist's account into the timeframe of the other.

Matthew and Luke agree on eleven important points comprising the heart of the Infancy Narratives.

- Mary and Joseph are legally engaged, but have not cohabited. They have not had sexual relations.
- Human intercourse is not involved in the conception of Jesus.
- The conception is through the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Joseph is a descendant of King David.
- An angel announces to Joseph in Matthew and to Mary in Luke that the child to be born will be the Son of God.
- An angel directs that the child be named Jesus.
- An angel announces that Jesus is the Savior.
- Jesus is born after the parents have begun living together.
- Jesus is born in Bethlehem in Judea.
- Jesus is born during the reign of King Herod I (the Great).
- Jesus grows up in Nazareth in Galilee.

Each evangelist, however, introduces some unique features. Matthew tells us about the star, the Magi, Herod's plot against Jesus' life, the massacre of the young boys of Bethlehem, and the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt. Luke, on the other hand, is the only writer to present Elizabeth and Zechariah and describe the birth of their son, John. Luke is also the one who tells us about the census that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, the shepherds, the presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple, and the teaching of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple.

Imagine using modern technology to document the events connected with Jesus' birth and his first few years. Would photos, video, and sound give us an accurate account of everything mentioned in Matthew's Gospel? In Luke's? The answer is no or, at least, highly unlikely. It's impossible to reconcile every detail in these two Gospels, although we might combine the two in popular Christmas traditions or even in liturgical celebrations. For example, it's common for nativity sets to arrange Luke's shepherds and Matthew's Magi together at the manger, and Christmas carols often contain verses from both Gospels.

Why were Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem?

Let's address some of the differences in the two Gospels, starting with the setting of Jesus' birth.

Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph live in Nazareth in Galilee but have come to Bethlehem in Judea to comply with an imperial census. Clearly the family does not have a permanent home in Bethlehem. That's why they need to find shelter. They remain in the area long enough to travel the six miles to the Temple in Jerusalem where they present Jesus, their firstborn, to God forty days after his birth. Then, "When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth" (Luke 2:39).

Matthew, on the other hand, makes no mention of Nazareth until the very end of his narrative. We meet the Holy Family in Bethlehem. The Magi make inquiries about the Messiah and find Jesus at home with his mother. At this point, when Jesus is most likely a toddler, Herod orders the massacre of all boys two years old and younger in an attempt to eliminate all possible threats to his kingship. When an angel warns Joseph of Herod's murderous intentions, he takes Mary and Jesus into exile in Egypt. When, after Herod's death, an angel tells Joseph to return to the land of Israel, he sets off for home—Bethlehem. At this point, Matthew tells us, Joseph changes his plans. "But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth..." (Matthew 2:22-23). With the equally brutal Archelaus in charge, *all* of Judea is no longer safe for the Holy Family. Though back in Israel, Joseph and his family are again in exile: They go *away* from their home in Bethlehem to Nazareth in the district of Galilee, a region outside of Archelaus' jurisdiction. Here the Holy Family is finally safe.

Matthew and Luke tell us Jesus is born in Bethlehem and grows up in Nazareth, but there is no mention in Luke's account of the Holy Family hanging around Bethlehem for several years or anything in Matthew's account about a departure from Bethlehem after only forty days.

What do the different accounts reveal about Jesus?

Both inspired writers used materials from the Hebrew Scriptures and early Christian tradition to flesh out their Infancy Narratives, but the stories are not biographies. They have a deeper purpose: to proclaim who Jesus is, to link his coming with what God has done for his people in the past, and to introduce important themes. Each evangelist addresses a *specific* community with *unique* concerns.

Matthew, for example, uses the treachery of the leaders of Israel—Herod and the chief priests—in Jesus’ infancy to foreshadow the events of Jesus’ passion at the hands of Pilate and the chief priests. Matthew also shows us pagan believers, the Magi, who foreshadow the Gentiles who will be converted when Jesus sends the apostles to make disciples of all the nations. (See Matthew 28:19-20.)

Luke, on the other hand, mentions shepherds at the time of Jesus’ birth to alert us to Jesus’ association with and compassion for the poor and the outcast. He gives us another hint of this theme in the Magnificat, Mary’s song of praise: “He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:51-53).

If we reflect on these passages with the risen Christ in mind, we can discover just what the Holy Spirit wants us to know about bringing Christ to birth in our own lives.

Why did Matthew begin his Gospel with a genealogy?

A few years ago, I attended a family reunion in Pennsylvania. All who attended were descendants or spouses of descendants of a common ancestor from the eighteenth-century. I trace my lineage down through the generations through my paternal grandmother to my father to my siblings and myself. So far, the family line continues through two more generations—children of siblings and other descendants, and their children as well.

Thanks to the efforts of two clan members, a detailed family tree was on display at the reunion. It was so large that it took up two tables! As

we examined it, we were soon engaged in lively discussions. Some were surprised by relationships: “John was Mary’s nephew? I always thought he was her son.” Others speculated on the names of some of our ancestors’ wives. A marriage may have been short-lived, and there may have been no offspring. In those cases, names had been forgotten and were sometimes represented by a question mark. Information was sketchy or missing for some of the more adventurous clan members who had set off in covered wagons across the Great Plains and the Rockies in the nineteenth century. The document was a remarkable achievement, helping us all to appreciate the connection to family—past and present.

Our clan memory only went back two hundred years, but the time from David to Jesus was close to a thousand years. We were fortunate to have a variety of written family records as well as the assistance of professional genealogists and online resources. The situation in ancient Israel was much different. Most of the people were illiterate, and records were destroyed over centuries of invasions by foreign powers.

By the sixth century B.C., the Jews had experienced hardship and tragedy. Jerusalem and its Temple had been destroyed. The king had been blinded and, along with large numbers of his subjects, had been deported from the Promised Land to Babylonia (now Iraq). In this foreign land, they longed for a sense of identity and connection—both rooted in their covenant with God. During their exile, the prophet Ezekiel preached that these things had happened as God’s judgment on their sins, and the people began to turn back to God. Genealogies were one way the Jewish people could keep in touch with their identity as God’s people, even as they waited in a foreign land for their return to their homeland.

Genealogies can be found in Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers. Ruth and the books of Samuel and Kings give us the genealogy of David and his descendants, the kings of Judah. The prophet Zephaniah’s genealogy traces his line back to his great-great-grandfather. The longest set of genealogies in the Bible fills the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles. Genealogies of the tribes of Judah and Levi were important after the return from Exile, when the Jews were trying to rebuild Jerusalem and its Temple and to reestablish the worship of Yahweh. The purpose of these

lengthy genealogies was the proper ordering of society, especially the verification of the legitimacy of the priests of the tribe of Levi (Levites).

Matthew, writing for a Jewish-Christian community, opens his Gospel with a genealogy to show that Jesus is a descendant of David, and thus a candidate for Messiah. He chronicles generation after generation through the period of the Exile until he reaches Jesus, the one in whom God's promises to David would be restored. In fact, Matthew begins the family tree with Abraham, the father of the Jewish people and many other non-Jewish, or Gentile, nations. This establishes Jesus as a Jew, a member of the covenant people, as well as the Savior of *all* nations.

Isn't there something missing?

Clearly, Matthew has skipped some generations. Forty-two generations cover 2,000 years. This means that each male would have to be about fifty years old when he fathered the next generation. Given the much shorter life expectancies in antiquity, this is extremely unlikely. So, we should not take the formula "X was the father of Y" in its most direct meaning. Even in calling Jesus "son of David, son of Abraham," Matthew is using *son* in a very loose sense. Obviously there are centuries between these "generations." In naming "Joram [or Jehoram] the father of Uzziah [also known as Azariah]," Matthew skips three kings found in the record of David's dynasty in 2 Chronicles 22-25: Ahaziah, Joash, and Amaziah. These similar-looking and similar-sounding names apparently caused some confusion.

Does this mean there is error in the genealogy and in the Bible?

Fundamentalist Christians hold that, since the Bible is the word of God, *every* word in *every* line of the Bible is inerrant, at least in the original manuscripts, which are no longer available. Catholic teaching also holds that the Bible is the *word of God*, but equally the *words of human beings*. The Bible is free from error in this sense: "that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures" (CCC 107). In his genealogy, Matthew's inspired message is that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel and Savior of all the nations.

What about Jesus' female ancestors?

Genealogies were rarely kept for women. The great exception is Judith, whose ancestry is traced back sixteen generations to the patriarch Jacob [Israel]. (See Judith 8:1.) Matthew includes five women in the genealogy of Jesus. One is Mary, the mother of Jesus: “Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah” (Matthew 1:16). Note the order of phrases in this passage. This is how Matthew announces the virginal conception of Jesus: Physically, Jesus is son of Mary, but not of Joseph. As the angel had commanded, Joseph names his son Jesus. This act of naming is, in effect, an act of legal adoption. In this way Jesus becomes part of the line of David even though Joseph, descendant of David, is not his biological father.

Matthew includes four women from the Hebrew Scriptures—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba—to show that God intervenes when necessary to continue the “family” line of the Messiah. These four women, like Mary, experienced irregularities in the birth of their children. In a way, Matthew uses them to prepare us for something unusual and unexpected—the virginal conception of Jesus. You can read about Tamar in Genesis 38; Rahab in Joshua 2 and 6; Ruth in the book of Ruth; and Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite, in 2 Samuel 11-12.

Matthew's genealogy of Jesus covers the gamut of God's relationship with the covenant people—times of certainty and consolation, as well as times of struggle, hardship, treachery, and despair. If compared to the phases of the moon, that relationship waxes and wanes and waxes again down through the years.

If we dig deeply enough into our own genealogies, we are likely to find both the virtuous and the not-so-virtuous. Jesus' “family tree” is like that. Abraham was righteous and so were a few of the kings, but Jesus is also descended from King Ahab, who would not trust the word of the Lord addressed to him by the prophet Isaiah, and from his grandson King Manasseh, who practiced human sacrifice. (See Isaiah 7 and 2 Kings 21:6.)

Like most of us, Jesus is also descended from very ordinary people. Matthew's genealogy reminds us that God is faithful and his love for us

is enduring. Even human weakness and sin cannot deter God's saving purpose.

Why do the Gospels tell us so little about Jesus' childhood?

The "hidden years" of Jesus extend from his infancy to the beginning of his public ministry. After the visit of the Magi, the flight to Egypt, and return to Nazareth, Matthew skips ahead to Jesus' baptism and the inauguration of his ministry. Luke mentions Jesus' presentation in the Temple at only forty days old and adds the story of his preaching in the Temple at twelve years old. Then Luke resumes his narrative with Jesus' adult ministry. The first two chapters of Matthew and Luke contain all that we need to know about Jesus' childhood, that is, all that the Holy Spirit decided we needed to know for our salvation.

Why did Luke tell the story of Jesus in the Temple?

The account in Luke 2:41-52 serves as a transition from Jesus' childhood to his adult life. But more than that, it foreshadows Jesus' final days. In this story, Jesus travels with his family to Jerusalem for Passover and, unbeknownst to his parents, stays behind as they journey home. Frantically tracing their path back to the Temple, they find Jesus in dialogue with the teachers. Luke tells us: "And all who heard him were *amazed* at his understanding and his answers" (Luke 2:47, emphasis added). During the final week of his earthly life, Jesus also confounds the scribes and Pharisees in the Temple: "and being *amazed* by his answer, they became silent" (Luke 20:26).

If we look at this passage through Mary's eyes, we can see another connection to Jesus' last days. Earlier in Luke's Gospel, Simeon prophesied to Mary: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:33-35). Like any mother, Mary must have felt deep anxiety and pain at these words. Just as she loses Jesus for three days in his youth, so would Mary "lose" her son again for the three days he was in the tomb before his glorious resurrection.

What do other authors tell us about Jesus' childhood?

The same Holy Spirit who inspired Luke to include the story of the twelve-year-old Jesus also inspired the evangelists *not* to include stories from other sources. But we human beings are curious. We always want a prequel. Beginning in the second century, Christian writers addressed that curiosity by using a variety of sources to compose “infancy gospels.” The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, the Gospel of Thomas, and the Arabic Infancy Gospel are not included in the canon, or official list, of Sacred Scripture. In short, they don’t matter. The four canonical Gospels contain everything we need to know in order to believe in, glorify, and follow the risen Christ.