

ARTICLE

De stella magorum: The Night of the Comet and the Births of John and Jesus

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Abstract

Roy D. Kotansky* argues in ‘The Star of the Magi: Lore and Science in Ancient Zoroastrianism, the Greek Magical Papyri and St. Matthew’s Gospel’ that the pericope in the M Source regarding the star of Bethlehem reflects Zoroastrian traditions about Magi who divine from a star seen falling to Earth the birth of a coming saviour, who will deliver the world from bondage and inaugurate the blessing of a new millennium. Following Nikos Kokkinos’ chronology for Jesus’ birth, Kotansky argues that the star of Bethlehem is not part of a midrash fulfilling the prophecy that ‘a star shall come forth out of Jacob’ (Num 24.17), but Halley’s comet, which appeared twice (perihelion) in the sky in 12 BCE during the rulership of Herod the Great. According to Kotansky, the author of the Gospel of Matthew integrated Zoroastrian interpretations of this astronomical phenomenon with Jewish messianic and Bethlehem segments such as Mic 5.2 (Matt 2.6). As Kotansky acknowledges, his interpretation results in two Synoptic dates for Jesus’ birth – (1) 12 BCE with the appearance of the comet (Matt 2.2, 9, 10), and (2) 6/7 CE at the time of the census by Quirinius (Luke 2.2). This essay explores whether the messianic and Bethlehem segments of Matthew 2 refer to a lost tradition of the birth of John the Baptist that took place in 12 BCE at the time of Halley’s comet, suggesting a separate tradition of Jesus’ birth in 6 CE at the time of the ‘first census’.

Keywords: star of Bethlehem; John the Baptist; Halley’s Comet; census of Quirinius

1. Introduction

In the Hermeneia Series version of his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew 1–7 published in 2007, Ulrich Luz dismisses attempts to discern prior traditions behind the Magi story in Matthew 2, characterising this text as lacking the ‘tensions and contradictions that have led to its source-critical deconstruction’.¹ Yet in that same year, in ‘The Star of

* This essay was inspired by an email exchange with Roy Kotansky whom, readers will see, I credit with its primary insight. I wish also to thank R. Matthew Calhoun, Arthur J. Droge, Teresa Morgan, and members of the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas (Vienna, July 2023) who offered comments on a prior version of this essay.

¹ U. Luz, *Matthew 1–7* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 102. Luz (103) dismisses both F. Hahn’s view that the Herod motif was added to an original Magi story (*The Titles of Jesus in Christology: Their History in Early Christianity* (Cleveland: World, 1969) 264) and the reverse view of W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (3 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988–97) 1.194–5). Luz refutes tension between Matthew 2 and the rest of the gospel (103), meanwhile asserting that the chapter is ‘a story whose historicity is improbable’ (106). Drawing a similar conclusion, see A. de Jong, ‘Matthew’s Magi as Experts on Kingship’, *The Star of Bethlehem and the Magi: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Experts on the Ancient Near East, the Greco-Roman World, and Modern Astronomy* (ed. G. H. van Kooten and P. Barthel; TBN 19; Leiden: Brill, 2015)

the Magi: Lore and Science in Ancient Zoroastrianism, the Greek Magical Papyri and St. Matthew's Gospel', Roy D. Kotansky argues that this pericope from the M Source regarding the star of Bethlehem reflects Zoroastrian traditions about Magi who divine from a star seen falling to Earth the birth of a coming *Saošyant*, a saviour and future prince, who will deliver the world from present bondage and inaugurate the promised blessing of a new millennium.² Following (in part) Nikos Kokkinos' chronology for Jesus' birth,³ Kotansky makes the case that the star of Bethlehem is not part of a midrash fulfilling the prophecy that 'a star shall come forth out of Jacob' (Num 24.17); it is, rather, Halley's comet (1P/Halley) which appeared twice in the sky in 12 BCE during the rulership of Herod the Great, precipitating a range of predictions in the region.⁴ According to Kotansky, the author of the Gospel of Matthew integrated Zoroastrian interpretations of this astronomical phenomenon with Jewish messianic and Bethlehemic segments such as Mic 5.2 (Matt 2.6).⁵ Kotansky acknowledges that his interpretation results in two Synoptic dates for Jesus' birth: (1) 12 BCE with the appearance of the comet (Matt 2.2, 9, 10), and (2) 6/7 CE (hereafter 6 CE) at the time of the census by Quirinius (Luke 2.2).⁶ If Kotansky is correct that messianic and Bethlehemic segments were added to a core Zoroastrian tradition in Matthew 2, what prompted these intrusions? The present essay will explore whether the messianic and Bethlehemic segments of this chapter suggest a lost tradition of the birth of John the Baptist that took place in 12 BCE at the time of Halley's comet, implying a separate tradition of Jesus' birth in 6 CE at the time of the census of Quirinius (ἀπογραφὴ πρώτη 'first census', Luke 2.2).⁷

271–85, at 282. Concerning Matt 2.5–6 and citing G. Strecker (*Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit: Untersuchungen zur Theologie des Matthäus* (FRLANT 82; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962) 57), Luz (113) states, 'Matthew, who here in the mouth of the scribes avoids his fulfillment formula, does not see in the quotation (of Mic 5.1 LXX) primarily an "OT basis of the historically-biographically fixable beginning of Jesus life".'

² R. D. Kotansky, 'The Star of the Magi: Lore and Science in Ancient Zoroastrianism, the Greek Magical Papyri, and St. Matthew's Gospel', *ASE* 24.2 (2007) 379–421; on the date of these traditions, see 388–90. Kotansky regards this legendary material as background to Matthew – too thoroughly integrated into the text to be exposed to source-critical analysis. That said, he offers a reconstruction including a restored Greek text at 'IX. Restored Text' (417–18): 'In our reconstruction, we do not suggest that Matthew has edited an original, independent document, only that the restored Greek represents the core historical realities laying behind Matthew's source. He, or a previous editor, has carefully integrated the Magi-material with the Bethlehem traditions and messianic prophecy. The integration is rather complete, so we can no longer speak of a once independent, free-standing Greek "text". Nevertheless, the removal of the extraneous "additions" leaves a fairly uniform whole' (418–19, see discussion below). Recent work on the Magi includes E. Vanden Eykel, *The Magi: Who They Were, How They've Been Remembered, and Why They Still Fascinate* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2022).

³ N. Kokkinos, 'Crucifixion in A.D. 36: The Keystone for Dating the Birth of Jesus', *Chronos, Kairos, Christos: Nativity and Chronological Studies Presented to Jack Finegan* (ed. J. Vardaman and E. M. Yamauchi; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1989) 133–63.

⁴ Kotansky, 'Star of the Magi', 384–5.

⁵ Kotansky, 'Star of the Magi', 384–5, following Kokkinos, 'Crucifixion in A.D. 36', 158; idem, 'The Relative Chronology of the Nativity in Tertullian', *Chronos, Kairos, Christos II: Chronological, Nativity, and Religious Studies in Memory of Ray Summers* (ed. E. J. Vardaman; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998) 119–31; and E. J. Vardaman, 'A Provisional Chronology of the New Testament: Jesus through Paul's Early Years', *ibid.*, 313–20. On the integration of messianic and Bethlehemic segments, see Kotansky, 'Star of the Magi', 414, 417–19.

⁶ Kotansky, 'Star of the Magi', 417 n. 51. Luz, who discusses in some detail the various theories and mentions the possibility of a comet, dismisses this date as 'too early for Jesus' birth' (*Matthew* 1–7, 105).

⁷ On the census, see Luke 2.2; cf. Acts 5.37; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.4. Discussion in Kokkinos, 'Crucifixion in A.D. 36', 139–41. J. Nolland (*Luke 1–9.20* (WBC 35A; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989) 99–102) dismisses the old view of W. M. Ramsay that Quirinius had two terms of office (*Was Christ Born at Bethlehem? A Study on the Credibility of St Luke* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1898) at esp. 227–50). He points out that the census of 6 CE would not have included the inhabitants of Galilee (101), summarising what is at issue: 'It would seem, then, that the greatest difficulty for the Lukan account is posed by the attempt to locate an earlier governorship of Quirinius in Syria during the final years of Herod's reign. Otherwise, despite the objections raised, Luke's account squares well with what is known

2. The Births of John and Jesus

In 1989, Nikos Kokkinos advanced the thesis that the star of Bethlehem refers to the appearance of Halley's comet in 12 BCE.⁸ Hitherto, this hypothesis had been ignored because the date was considered too early to accommodate other NT evidence about Jesus' life.⁹ Kokkinos' case is based on the following four observations.¹⁰ First, the star of Bethlehem is a single 'star' of giant expanse (not a group of stars); this is precisely the impression made by a comet. Kokkinos explains, 'Comets sometimes extend 90 degrees or more on the vault of heaven.'¹¹ Second, the 'star' appeared twice (2.2, 9) just as comets do, which come into view initially and then are seen again in their perihelion, the point in a comet's highly elliptical

from other sources of the Roman history of the period' (101). So, also, E. Dąbrowa, 'The Date of the Census of Quirinius and the Chronology of the Governors of the Province of Syria', *ZPE* 178 (2011) 137–42, against L. Di Segni, 'A Roman Standard in Herod's Kingdom', *Israel Museum Studies in Archaeology* 4 (2005) 23–48. See also Mussies, n. 8 below.

⁸ Kokkinos, 'Crucifixion in A.D. 36', 159–62. As Kotansky establishes at the outset of his article, it has not been fully appreciated by subsequent scholarship that Kokkinos has correctly fixed the death of Jesus in 36 CE ('Star of the Magi', 380–2). Earlier, this theory was advanced by A. Stentzel, *Jesus Christus und sein Stern: Eine chronologische Untersuchung* (Hamburg: Hans Christian, 1928²). Other theories include that the star was the comet witnessed by Chinese astronomers in the year 5/4 BCE or the Jupiter-Saturn conjunction that appeared three times in the year 7/6 BCE (Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 105–6). M. R. Molnar backs the Jupiter-Saturn thesis in *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013). Luz (105) rightly dismisses the Jupiter-Saturn proposal on the grounds that such a convergence could still never have been seen as one star (Matt 2.2, ἀστὴρ). Depending on (1) how long Mary and Joseph stayed in Egypt, (2) how Herod interpreted what is meant by 'his (the child's) star' (Matt 2.2; see Kotansky, 'Star of the Magi', 387 n. 14, 402–6), and (3) how soon after the Bethlehem massacre Herod dies, the phrase 'two years old and younger' (ἀπὸ διετοῦς καὶ κατωτέρω, Matt 2.16) could imply that the birth took place more than a year before the events narrated in Matthew 2. On the implications of this phrase, see G. Mussies, 'The Date of Jesus' Birth in Jewish and Samaritan Sources', *JSJ* 29 (1998) 416–37, at 417. Τὸ παιδίον (Matt 2.9) may denote a child who is still a suckling, but not necessarily an infant. Reports about John suggest he suckled for two or three years (*Life Bapt. Serap.* 3.1, 5.5; *The Lost 'Book of the Nativity of John': A Study in Messianic Folklore and Christian Origins, With a New Solution to the Virgin-Birth Problem* (trans. H. J. Schonfield; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1929) 7, 74, respectively). See also the translation by S. Čéplö in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures* (vol. 1; ed. T. Burke and B. Landau; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023) 268–92, at 280, 282. Čéplö dates this text to the fourteenth century based on traditions, some as old as the fifth century. In addition to the above-noted passage, the text also reports that, during the reign of Herod the Great, at the time of the Massacre of the Innocents (*Life Bapt. Serap.* 1.1, 4.1; cf. *Prot. Jas.* 22.5–9), Zechariah sends Elizabeth into the wilderness with John to avoid capture. *Life Bapt. Serap.* 3.11–12 reports that before Zechariah sends them off, Gabriel appears to him and gives Zechariah a scapular and leather belt, instructing him to attach them to John's camel hair clothing, which Zechariah does. These lines trace the divine origin of John's attire (Mark 1.6; Matt 3.4; cf. *Life Bapt. Serap.* 8.7), but also imply that John wears adult-sized clothing during the reign of Herod the Great. Subsequently, *Life Bapt. Serap.* 7.2 specifies that, 'after five years' in the wilderness, when John is 'seven years and six months' his mother dies on the same day as Herod (7.2; cf. 'fifteenth day of the month Amšir [Ševat]', 7.14; ET: Čéplö). The implied chronology of these chapters is, thus, that John was born in 12 BCE, departed with his mother into the wilderness in 9 BCE (when he was 3 years old), and buried his mother in 4 BCE when he was 7½ years old. What is more, *Life Bapt. Serap.* 8.2 marks a shift from Herod the Great to his son: 'King Herod the Younger, who ruled over the province of Judea', and 8.9 states that John rebuked this king until he was 30 years old, including that Jesus was 12 at this time (i.e., 18 CE, 9.2). The entire timeline is striking for its unusual precision and for supporting our thesis exactly. Luz regards Matthew's portrayal of the star as unrealistic (*Matthew 1–7*, 105) and discusses the various traditions concerning the time of the Magi's visit, including the options of two years after the birth and the thirteenth day (so Augustine, *Serm.* 203.1 (*PL* 38.1035–6)) after the birth (*Matthew 1–7*, 116). *Gos. Barn.* 6–10 reflects a similar timeline applied to Jesus (i.e., at Herod the Great's death Jesus is seven years old, §9).

⁹ Corroborating evidence for this claim: Kotansky, 'Star of the Magi', 379 n. 1. One representative of this view is Harold W. Hoehner, 'The Chronology of Jesus', *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (ed. T. Holmén and S. E. Porter; 4 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2011) 3.2315–59, at 2326 n. 57.

¹⁰ Kokkinos ('Crucifixion in A.D. 36', 159–60) makes five observations. I collapse #2 ('strange appearance') and #4 ('they appear twice') making four.

¹¹ Kokkinos, 'Crucifixion in A.D. 36', 159.

orbit when it swings around the back of the sun and reappears.¹² Kokkinos writes, ‘Comets remain visible for days, weeks, and months, and often reach a maximum brilliance considerably brighter than Jupiter. They appear twice: once as they approach the sun and again after perihelion. Their brightness can be seen occasionally even during the day.’¹³ In 12 BCE, Halley’s comet could be seen in the sky for approximately seven weeks from 26 August to 20 October.¹⁴

Third, whereas actual stars are stationary from the vantage point of Earth, according to Matt 2.2, 9, the star of Bethlehem moved quickly: ‘rising’ and ‘stopping’. Kokkinos writes, ‘Comets move fast in their journey through the inner solar system: they move across the sky with a speed of about 10 degrees per day, moving from one constellation to the next every three or four days.’¹⁵ Fourth, whereas the ‘star’ of Matthew 2 came to a perceptible stop over the city of Bethlehem (v. 10), actual stars cannot be said to rest over any specific place on Earth because they are too far away.¹⁶ Kokkinos provides details:

The description that the star ‘stood over’ (that is, in astronomical parlance, ‘it reached its zenith’ directly above the observer), could only reasonably apply to a comet. It was regarded in this manner as early as the time of Origen (*Against Celsus* 1.58) and probably even earlier in the time of Ignatius (*Letter to the Ephesians* 19.2). One only has to compare Matt 2.9, ἐστάθη ἐπάνω οὗ ἦν τὸ παιδίον, ‘it stopped over the place where the child was’, with similar terminology in Dio Cassius 54.29.8, ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἄστεως αἰωρηθεῖς ‘hung over the city’ (describing the comet of 12 B.C., which stood over Rome at the time of Marcus Agrippa’s death), and Josephus (*Jewish War* 6.289), ὑπὲρ τὴν πόλιν ἄστρον ἔστη ‘a star stood over the city’ (describing the comet in A. D. 66 that stood over Jerusalem).¹⁷

¹² Concerning Matt 2.9–10, Luz characterises the second appearance of the star as a literary artifice with theological import: ‘The Magi travel at night, not because that was the custom in the Near East but because that gives the narrator another chance to speak of the star. As in related reports, the readers are to sense God’s guidance that is at work in the entire event and to share the overwhelming joy that the Magi feel’ (*Matthew* 1–7, 114).

¹³ Kokkinos, ‘Crucifixion in A.D. 36’, 159–60.

¹⁴ Kotansky, ‘Star of the Magi’, 403. Relevant scientific background: J. T. Ramsey, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Greco-Roman Comets from 500 B.C. to A.D. 400* (Syllecta Classica 17; Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006) 1–242, at Object 30, 129–32; idem, ‘A Catalogue of Greco-Roman Comets from 500 B.C. to A.D. 400’, *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 38 (2007) 175–9; D. W. Hughes, ‘Astronomical Thoughts on the Star of Bethlehem’, *Star of Bethlehem and the Magi* 103–37, at 109. Different from the more circumspect discussion in the book-length treatment, Ramsey’s article describes the comet of 12 BCE as the ‘Star of Bethlehem’ (180). In the book, Ramsey cites Kokkinos as ‘intriguing but highly speculative’ (*Descriptive Catalogue*, 131 and n. 173; cf. also n. 172, which mentions the Baptist and the Mandaean comet). Concerning Giotto’s artistic rendering of the star of Bethlehem as a comet, see R. J. M. Olson, ‘Giotto’s Portrait of Halley’s Comet’, *Scientific American* 240 (1979) 160–71; eadem and J. M. Pasachoff, ‘New Information on Comet P/Halley as Depicted by Giotto di Bondone and Other Western Artists’, *Astronomy and Astrophysics* 187 (1987) 1–11.

¹⁵ Kokkinos, ‘Crucifixion in A.D. 36’, 159.

¹⁶ Comets, *pace* Kotansky (‘Star of the Magi’, 391), are theoretically more ‘pinpointing’ than stars, which are further away. On terminology used to refer to comets in ancient languages, see S. Rudolf, ‘“A Great Star Falls”—Cometology in Syriac Language and Literature’, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 69 (2023), accessed on 13 December 2023.

¹⁷ Kokkinos, ‘Crucifixion in A.D. 36’, 160. Although ancient sources may be unreliable about dates, historical events, no matter how trivial, were linked to appearances of comets and not the other way around. Some of these circumstances were the births and deaths of rulers. Historians initially regarded the comet seen at Julius Caesar’s death in 44 BCE as a later embellishment until J. T. Ramsey (see n. 14) and A. L. Licht proved that it was historical (*The Comet of 44 B.C. and Caesar’s Funeral Games* (American Classical Studies 39; Atlanta: Scholars, 1997) *apud* Kotansky, ‘Star of the Magi’, 386 n. 12). Ignatius’ report emphasises the novelty of the star as compared with everything else in the sky: ‘A star in the sky shone brighter than all the stars (ὑπὲρ πάντας τοὺς ἀστέρας). Its light was indescribable (ἀνεκάλητον) and its novelty created astonishment (καὶ ξενισμὸν παρεῖχεν ἡ καινότης αὐτοῦ). All the other stars,

Vis-à-vis this hypothesis, Kokkinos addresses the chronology of Jesus' life, successfully integrating a majority of evidence from the New Testament. In the course of his investigation, however, he is forced to dismiss as unreliable Luke's reference to Jesus' birth at the time of the census by Quirinius in 6 CE (Luke 2.3):

It is my belief that Luke was presented with a tradition, from a strong source, that placed the birth of Jesus at the time of a taxation assessment in Herod the Great's Judea. Luke searched unsuccessfully in history for this taxation, and, unable to reject this tradition, he finally associated it with the well-known census of Quirinius. Unfortunately, the census he chose to link it to can today be decisively dated long after the death of Herod. I am assuming, therefore, that in his effort to fix the date of the Herodian taxation assessment, Luke erroneously identified it with the first Roman census of Judea undertaken by Quirinius.¹⁸

Although Kotansky agrees with Kokkinos that the star of Bethlehem was the comet of 12 BCE, he is, nevertheless, reluctant to dismiss any evidence out of hand. He, therefore, prefers to view the Synoptic Gospels as preserving two traditions about Jesus' birth, one at the time of Halley's comet in 12 BCE and the other in 6 CE at the time of the census of Quirinius (Luke 2.2).¹⁹ In the final footnote to his essay, he makes this point and, in the form of a question, offers a novel solution:

... it has been suggested that Jesus could have been born as late as 6 CE, based on Luke's infamous reference to Quirinius. We have argued throughout that Jesus was born in 12 BCE and that his 'star' was Halley's comet of that same year. How does one ultimately reconcile the conflicting dates, of which only one can be correct? ... Is it possible that Jesus indeed was born in 6 CE and that it was John who was born in 12 BCE and thought to be the true 'messianic'-king?²⁰

In this same footnote, Kotansky cites a passing reference by Kokkinos to the Mandaean *Book of John* – which states that 'a comet flew over Judea' at the time of the birth of John the Baptist (§18)²¹ – and asks whether Matthew 2 might have applied a Baptist tradition

along with the sun and the moon, formed a chorus to that star, and its light surpassed all the others. And there was a disturbance over whence it had come, this novel thing (ἡ καινότης), so different from the others (ἡ ἀνόμοιος αὐτοῖς) (Eph. 19.2 (ed. and trans. B. D. Ehrman; LCL 24.238–9).

¹⁸ Kokkinos, 'Crucifixion in A.D. 36', 158. Concerning Luke 2.3, see the discussion of Josephus, *Ant.* 18.26 and Acts 5.37 in Mussies, 'Date of Jesus' Birth', 418–19, who historically situates Jesus from 6–36 CE, as we do here. So also D. Koch, *Der Stern von Bethlehem* (Frankfurt: Verlag der Häretischen Blätter, 2006⁴), trans. *The Star of Bethlehem* (http://www.gilgamesh.ch/Koch_StoB_english_web.pdf, 2016) 26. In Koch's truly exhaustive treatment, he favours the Venus-Jupiter conjunction on 17 June 2 BCE at 8.20 p.m. as the celestial phenomenon represented as the star of Bethlehem in Matthew 2 (176). Cf. also van Kooten and Barthel, *Star of Bethlehem and the Magi* (see n. 1 above).

¹⁹ Kokkinos argues that the age of 'thirty' in Luke 3.23 may be 'forty' ('Crucifixion in A.D. 36', 157 and see above). According to Kokkinos, Jesus was born in 12 BCE and (thus) would have been forty in the fifteenth year of Tiberius (28 CE) and forty-eight in 36 CE, the presumed year of his death. Correspondingly, he would have been 'not yet fifty' (John 8.57), still paying the temple tax (Matt 1.24–7), and the approximate age of the temple. Kokkinos (153) sees a correspondence between Jesus' age and the reference in John 2.20 to the temple restoration project taking forty-six years.

²⁰ Kotansky, 'Star of the Magi', 417 n. 51.

²¹ Kokkinos, 'Crucifixion in A.D. 36', 161. Kotansky ('Star of the Magi', 417 n. 51) includes that references may be found in G. Widengren, *Iranisch-semitische Kulturbeggnung in parthischer Zeit* (Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen: Geisteswissenschaften, Ht. 70; Köln: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1960) 70. The book of John (*draša d-iahia*) is also known as the 'teachings of the kings' (*draša d-malkia*). The shooting peculiarity of this star suggests a comet.

similar to that of the Mandaean text to Jesus. Recently translated from Mandaic-Aramaic by Charles Häberl and James McGrath, the section of this text concerning the star reads as follows:

‘... I saw a **star** came upon Elizabeth, | upon elder father Zechariah, | the sun set and the lamps shined forth | and smoke wreathed the Temple | so that the earth shook from its place. | A **shooting star** burst over Jerusalem²² | and the moon shined forth during the day’. | He tossed dust upon his bare head, | and brought forth the Book of Dreams | seeing what is written within | and interprets them in his heart but not aloud | and explains them in a scroll, saying to them, | ‘Elizabeth is giving birth to a child! | A child is being born in Jerusalem! | Elizabeth is giving birth to a child! | Johannes is born in Jerusalem | and will be called a prophet in Jerusalem!’²³

In a blog on a related topic, McGrath observes similarities between the Mandaean text and the infancy narrative of the Gospel of Luke.²⁴ Further, he comments that reading Luke 1 and ‘skip(ping) the parts about Jesus’ suggests the likelihood of ‘an infancy story about John the Baptist before any was written for Jesus, and which influenced those about Jesus’, a conjecture held by others before him.²⁵ How might such a conjecture correlate with the hypothesis that the star of the Magi refers to Halley’s comet in 12 BCE and the birth of John the Baptist?²⁶

²² Schonfield (*Lost ‘Book of the Nativity of John’*, 59) cites G. R. S. Mead’s translation of this line (*The Gnostic John the Baptizer* (London: Watkins, 1924) 36), ‘A star flew down into Judaea, a star flew down into Jerusalem.’

²³ *The Mandaean Book of John: Critical Edition, Translation, and Commentary* (trans. C. G. Häberl and J. F. McGrath; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019) 55, with minor modifications to punctuation for presentation in this essay. Also, M. Lidzbarski, *Das Johannesbuch der Mandäer: Einleitung, Übersetzung, Kommentar* (Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1915, repr. 1966). Lidzbarski’s translations and references to the ‘comet’s’ appearance at John’s birth are as follows: p. 75 (§67), ll. 20–4: ‘Als ich dalag, schlief ich nicht und ruhte nicht (und schaute), daß ein Stern erschien und über Enishbai stehen blieb. Feuer brannte an Abā Sābā Zakhriā; drei Himmelslichter (Lampen) erschienen.’ And p. 76 (§67), ll. 2–4: ‘Ein Stern flog dahin in Judāa, ein Stern flog dahin in Jerusalem.’ Mead translates this line: ‘The star that came and stood over Enishbhai’ (Mead, *Gnostic John the Baptizer*, 37). Methodologically, this essay will not prioritise the canon and its sources over extra-canonical texts and theirs, although its first interest is the data and sources represented by Matthew and Luke.

²⁴ See esp. the fifth paragraph of J. F. McGrath, ‘The Birth of (the Messiah?) John the Baptist?’, *The Bart Ehrman Blog*, 18 August 2022, <https://ehrmanblog.org/the-birth-of-john-the-baptist-anniversary-guest-post-by-james-f-mcgrath/>. McGrath reports that he has undertaken a new project on John the Baptist, (see n. 95). To be sure, this text may be, at least to some extent, reliant on the Synoptic Gospels – even perhaps the *Protevangelium of James*, a text discussed in detail below. On the Jewishness of the *Protevangelium of James*, see L. Vuong, ‘“Let Us Bring Her Up to the Temple of the Lord”: Exploring the Boundaries of Jewish and Christian Relations through (sic, with the author’s permission) the Presentation of Mary in the Protevangelium of James’, *Infancy Gospels: Stories and Identities* (ed. C. Clivaz, et al.; WUNT 281; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011) 418–32.

²⁵ Summarising scholarship tracing the Lukan Infancy narratives to a written source that is Baptist in origin, see C. K. Rothschild, ‘The Lukan Baptist: *Cura deum di sint*’, *Sacred Texts and Sacred Figures: The Reception and Use of Inherited Traditions in Early Christian Literature; A Festschrift in Honor of Edmondo F. Lupieri* (ed. C. G. Pardee and J. M. Tripp; Judaïsme ancien et origines du christianisme 25; Turnhout: Brepols, 2022) 301–19, at 302–7. A. S. Geyser reconstructs John’s youth from what he regards as a suppressed parallel – i.e., an account about John that is parallel to the one about Jesus in Luke 2.41–52 (‘The Youth of John the Baptist: A Deduction from the Break in the Parallel Account of the Lukan Infancy Story’, *NovT* 1 (1956) 70–5, at 74).

²⁶ The *Gospel of the Ebionites* also features a ‘great light’ shining at John’s baptism of Jesus (30.13.7–8, trans. P. Vielhauer, *NTApoc* 1.169–70, at 169) possibly reflecting a memory of John and the comet. The text states that this ‘great light’ shone ‘when Caiaphas was high priest’ (i.e., 18–36 CE, but if reliant on Luke 3.1–2, then 28 CE) but also erroneously harmonising with Matt 2.1, ‘in the days of Herod, the king of Judea’. However, ‘light’ over the Jordan is widely found (e.g., Justin, *Dial.* 88.3; *Sib. Or.* 6.5–6, 7.81–4), and apparently goes back to Diatessaronic readings which W. L. Petersen regards as original (*Tatian’s Diatesseron: Its Creation, Dissemination, Significance, and History in Scholarship* (VCSup 25; Leiden: Brill, 1994; repr. Atlanta: SBL, 2013) 425). Cf. J. Frey, ‘Die

If we think first of the Third Gospel, Luke 1.5 reports that John the Baptist's birth occurred during the reign of Herod the Great (d. 4 BCE), but then Luke 2.2 records Jesus' birth at the time of the census by Quirinius (in 6 CE), an apparent contradiction if John and Jesus were near contemporaries.²⁷ However, like John 1.31, 33 (καγὼ οὐκ ᾔδειν αὐτόν, 'I myself did not know him') and Matt 11.12 (ἀπὸ δὲ τῶν ἡμερῶν Ἰωάννου τοῦ βαπτιστοῦ ἕως ἄρτι, 'from the days of John the Baptist until now')²⁸ – which both imply that John was considerably older than Jesus – Luke 1.80 points to a separation plausibly even as great as a generation between the time of John's childhood and his ἀνάδειξις ('public appearance') to Israel.²⁹ According to Luke 2.1, John's 'manifestation' to Israel – not his birth – takes place at the time of Quirinius' census. The phrase, ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις ('in those days') in 2.1 follows immediately upon Luke 1.80, differentiating the later time of the census from the earlier reign of Herod the Great (1.5).³⁰

Turning to the Gospel of Matthew, although the massacre of the innocents (Matt 2.16–18) under Herod the Great pertains (with difficulty) to the birth of Jesus rather than to John, this chapter corroborates our timeline by reporting Jesus' birth and John's ministry (Matt 3.1, 'Ἐν δὲ ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις παραγίνεται Ἰωάννης ὁ βαπτιστὴς κηρύσσων ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ τῆς Ἰουδαίας) at the time of Herod Archelaus (Matt 2.22).³¹ Thinking of

Fragmente jüdenchristlicher Evangelien', *Antike christliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung* (ed. C. Marksches and J. Schröter; 2 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012) 1.607–22, at 619. On Gos. Eb., see also n. 35.

²⁷ Some have disputed the identity of this Herod but, as most commentaries observe, it can hardly be anyone but Herod the Great. Mussies ('Date of Jesus' Birth', 420, 435) argues that the Herod of Luke 1.5 must be Herod Antipas. J. D. M. Derrett ('Further Light on the Narratives of the Nativity', *NovT* 17 (1975) 81–108, at 83–4) acknowledges the possibility that it was Archelaus. Kokkinos ('Crucifixion in A.D. 36', 157) argues that Luke contradicts Matthew as well as himself, although Luke does not contradict himself if the Herod in Luke 1.5 is dead by the time that Jesus is born. M. D. Smith ('Of Jesus and Quirinius', *CBQ* 62 (2000) 278–93, at 292) interprets Luke 1.5 as referring to Herod Archelaus (285–6), categorically dismissing Matthew's reference to Herod the Great as theological and literary, 'not historical'. None acknowledges that the Herod referred to in Luke 1.5 is relevant to the life of John not Jesus because, according to Luke 1.80, significant time passes between the two nativities (as explained in our discussion). On its own (i.e., apart from data about Jesus' lifespan of thirty or so years, death under Pontius Pilate, etc.), there is no need to assume that John or Jesus was born near the end of Herod the Great's life (e.g., 4 BCE), rather than (say) years earlier. Likewise, the proposals that the Herod in Luke 1.5 is Herod Archelaus or Herod Antipas unnaturally assume that John and Jesus would have to be born in the first year of their respective reigns (4 BCE). If, however, we correlate either of these claims with Matt 2.16, which requires two additional years after Jesus' birth, then John and Jesus would not have been born before 2 BCE.

²⁸ Similarly, John 10.40 refers to the place across the Jordan where John the Baptist had been baptising 'first', 'formerly', 'originally', 'in the beginning' or 'at the outset' (τὸ πρῶτον). Furthermore, John 1.29, 36 characterise Jesus as a 'lamb' – that is, young (technically a sheep less than twelve months old Ex 12.5; Lev 12.6). Heb 9.19 contrasts Jesus' death with the slaughter of 'young cows' ('the blood of calves', τὸ αἷμα τῶν μόσχων). Cf. Num 19.2 LXX.

²⁹ Although this prophecy may not originally have applied to Jesus but to the 'One', namely God (see C. K. Rothschild, *Baptist Traditions and Q* (WUNT 190; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) 62–3), the phrase, ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος ('the one who comes after me') (Matt 3.11; Mark 1.7; John 1.27; cf. Luke 3.16) can denote a student, a later date, or both. Cf. also Matt 16.24; Mark 8.34; Luke 9.23; 14.27. See also BDAG 716, s.v. ὀπίσω, 2. ὀπίσω μου ('after me') in Mark 1.7 (Matt 3.11; John 1.27) most likely implies that the 'coming one' is one of John's disciples, i.e., Jesus. Its absence from Luke (3.16) may suggest that Jesus is not John's disciple until John baptises him (3.21–2).

³⁰ Luke 1.80, Τὸ δὲ παιδίον ἡξάνεν καὶ ἐκραταίουτο πνεύματι, καὶ ἦν ἐν ταῖς ἐρήμοις ἕως ἡμέρας ἀναδείξας αὐτοῦ πρὸς τὸν Ἰσραὴλ. 'The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he publicly appeared in Israel.' D. J. Armitage ('Detaching the Census: An Alternative Reading of Luke 2.1–7', *TynBul* 69 (2018) 75–95) proposes that Luke 2.1–5 is a digression – the census brought in to emphasise Joseph in Bethlehem, not Jesus' birth.

³¹ É. Nodet discusses two Slavonic additions to Josephus related to Herod the Great. In the first, shortly after Herod the Great's arrival in Jerusalem ca. 37 BCE, a debate takes place among teachers of the law as to whether Herod is the messiah. Concluding that he is not, Herod has the teachers slaughtered. As Nodet points out, the episode presupposes that the question was raised, noting that Herod had the messianic star (Num 24.17) depicted on some of his coins. The second insertion involves the star over Jerusalem which astronomers claim indicates the

Archelaus' deposition in 6 CE rather than the commencement of his reign in 4 BCE, this datum corresponds to Luke's report about John's public appearance (Luke 1.80) and therefore to Jesus' birth at the time of the census of Quirinius (Luke 2.1–7).³² Matt 3.13, 16 announces Jesus' baptism by John, as taking place τότε, an unknowable amount of time after the report about John's ministry in 3.1, but accommodating Luke's reference (3.1) to 'the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius' (28/29 CE).³³

If John were born in 12 BCE, he would have been eighteen years old in 6 CE, the last year of Archelaus' reign, precisely the age to be presented in public (Exod 30.14).³⁴ Chronologically, this matches the Slavonic additions to Josephus, which introduce John's ministry during the reign of Archelaus (4 BCE–6 CE).³⁵ Luke 3.1 reports that the 'word of God' comes to John 'in the fifteenth year of the reign of emperor Tiberius', that is, in 28 CE, twenty-two years after the commencement of his ministry (Matt 3.1). If John was born in 12 BCE, he would have been forty years old when the 'word of God' came to him (Luke 3.2). If his ministry began at his public appearance in 6 CE, then the word of God's arrival probably represents

birth of one who will be master of the world, precipitating Herod's massacre of children in Bethlehem ('Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Herodians', *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (4 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2010) 2.1495–1544, at 1531–2).

³² Matt 2.22 is the only explicit reference to Archelaus in the NT. Joseph fears returning to Jerusalem under Archelaus – a delay that resembles the hesitance that kept many of the relatives of Salome, Herod the Great's sister, away from the city, perhaps, reflected in Luke's version of the parable of the pounds (Luke 19.11–27) (N. Kokkinos, *The Herodian Dynasty: Origins, Role in Society and Eclipse* (London: Spink & Son, 2010) 190–1, including n. 63).

³³ This essay assigns 'the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius' to 28/29 CE, however, a convincing case can be made for 18/19 CE based on the elevation of Tiberius to full tribunicial power jointly with Augustus in 4 CE. On Pilate's dates, see Kenneth Lönnquist, 'Pontius Pilate—An Aqueduct Builder?—Recent Findings and New Suggestions', *Klio* 82 (2000) 459–74; Daniel R. Schwartz, 'Pontius Pilate', *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. D. N. Freedman et al.; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 5:395–401, at 396–7).

³⁴ According to a rabbinic source, this is the traditional age of marriage and twenty, the age of commencing work: 'He used to say: At five years of age the study of Scripture; At ten the study of Mishnah; At thirteen subject to the commandments; At fifteen the study of Talmud; At eighteen the bridal canopy; At twenty for pursuit (of livelihood); At thirty the peak of strength; At forty wisdom; At fifty able to give counsel; At sixty old age; At seventy fullness of years; At eighty the age of "strength"; At ninety a bent body; At one hundred, as good as dead and gone completely out of the world' (m. 'Abot 5.21). Cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.22.5, where just such a schema is used of Jesus: '... the first stage of life embraces thirty years, and this extends onwards to the fortieth ... and from the fortieth to the fiftieth ...', then with reference to the apostle John living until the reign of Trajan. We tentatively infer that from age '18' (6 CE) to age '40' (28 CE) John's ministry was irenic, tensions mounting with the commencement of mass public baptism that persisted until his arrest in 35 CE. Josephus describes a similar timeline of his own life. At age fourteen, he won acclamation for his 'love of letters' from the chief priests and leading men of the city. At age sixteen, he sought personal experience of several sects and thus spent three years in the wilderness (ἐρημία). At the age of nineteen, he returned to the city living according to the rules of the Pharisees. At age twenty-six, he travelled to Rome on official business (*Vita* 2–3). His three-year discipleship is sometimes compared with the initiation period of Essenes (cf. IQS 6.21). The DSS indicate that a minimum age of twenty was required for admission to their community (IQSa 1.8–9).

³⁵ See R. Eisler, *The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist* (New York: Lincoln Macveagh, 1931) 225–8; J. M. Creed, 'The Slavonic Version of Josephus' History of the Jewish War', *HTR* 25 (1932) 277–319; Nodet, 'Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Herodians', *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 2.1525–44 ('Appendix II'). E. J. Vardaman argues that Josephus' reference to Jesus' ministry in 15–19 CE suggests that he was born in 12 BCE ('Jesus' Life: A New Chronology', 55–82). Epiphanius cites a 'version' of Luke 3.1–20 (beginning of John's ministry), which he says is the beginning of the Ebionite gospel. In place of 'Herod the tetrarch of Galilee' (καὶ τετραρχοῦντος τῆς Γαλιλαίας Ἡρώδου, i.e., Antipas, Luke 3.1), it has 'Herod, King of Judea' (cf. Luke 1.5; Justin, *Dial.* 103.3). Epiphanius skips over what comes next in the Ebionite gospel, acknowledging the missing material as follows, 'And after much has been recorded it proceeds'. The baptism of Jesus (Luke 3.21–2) follows. The gap, however, attests to a chronological separation between John's early ministry at the time of Archelaus, that is, no later than 6 CE and Jesus' baptism, twenty-two years later (*Patristic Evidence for Jewish-Christian Sects* (ed. and trans. A. F. J. Klijn and G. J. Reinink; NovTSup 36; Leiden: Brill, 1973) 179–81).

a turning point.³⁶ According to Luke 3.2–3, it represents the commencement of mass public baptism (cf. Matt 3.6). This final phase of John’s ministry – during which Jesus may have been baptised (at age ‘22’, in 28 CE, if born in 6 CE)³⁷ – would have lasted seven years until 35 CE when, at age forty-seven (cf. ‘not yet fifty’, recorded about Jesus in John 8.57), Herod Antipas arrested and killed John (Luke 3.19–20).³⁸

One might object that Mary’s conception took place under Herod the Great, but in fact, the angel Gabriel in Luke 1.35 does not specify such timing. Elizabeth’s blessing upon the fruit of Mary’s womb (Luke 1.42) does not necessarily imply that a pregnancy has already begun, tying both births to the reign of Herod the Great.³⁹ As the last line of the pericope states, Gabriel’s prediction ‘will come to pass’ (ἔσται τελεῖωσις), that is, at some unknowable time in the future (1.45).⁴⁰ Although to a lesser extent than John’s, the narrative is

³⁶ Like Luke (1.80), Matt (3.1) reports John’s ministry beginning ca. 6 CE (under Archelaus, 2.22); however, Matthew compresses the initial (public presentation) and the subsequent (mass baptism) phases of John’s career into one (3.1–17).

³⁷ It is also possible that Jesus was baptised earlier. See Roy D. Kotansky, ‘Light from the “Luminous Teaching” of the East: The Ur-Text of Luke 3:23 and the Baptism of Jesus at Twelve’, (forthcoming). Luke 3.21–2 appears to resume the narrative thread dropped at 2.51.

³⁸ Luke presents Jesus’ baptism (3.19–20) as a rite signifying the inauguration of his teaching ministry and succession of John, ca. 34/35 CE. In this gospel, John does not baptise Jesus because, as in Acts 19.1–7, John’s baptism does not include the gift of the Holy Spirit. Luke specifies the descent of the Holy Spirit (τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον) at Jesus’ baptism (3.22; cf. Mark 1.10; Matt 3.16) and heralds its involvement in Jesus’ ministry in 4.1, 14, and 18. Armitage understands this passage as a ‘flash forward’ – an interpretation which harmonises with Mark 1.9–11 || Matt 3.13–17 (‘Detaching the Census’, 83–84).

³⁹ As in the Matthean Beatitudes (Matt 5.3–11), the macarism of Luke 1.42, εὐλογημένη σὺ ἐν γυναιξίν / καὶ εὐλογημένος ὁ καρπὸς τῆς κοιλίας σου has both a present and future aspect. H. D. Betz explains their temporal orientation, ‘As principles of eschatological and divine justice the Beatitudes are *ipso facto* future oriented. As principles pronounced in the present, they have an impact on the present as well’ (*The Sermon on the Mount* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 96). Beatitudes, thus, resemble promises, although with one important difference. Betz explains, ‘While the promise assures one about something one commonly knows and expects, the beatitude reveals a fact commonly unknown or unexpected’ (96). Moreover, this scene in Luke imitates God’s revelation to Abraham that his wife will give birth in old age (Gen 16, 18.1–15, 21.1–21), but if the tradition that John’s parents were elderly is historical (i.e., extricated from the legend), then John, their child, would have been much older than Jesus. In that narrative, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the couple’s residence in Gerar intervene after the prediction but before the conception. Abraham was ‘75’ when he was promised children (Gen 12.1–4) and ‘100’ (Gen 21.5) when Isaac was born. Thus, the prediction to Mary that she will give birth to Jesus (Luke 1.26–38) can take place as narrated, namely, sixteen years before the conception and birth, the point at which Mary has been promised in marriage (ἐμνηστευμένην ἀνδρί, v. 27) but not wed. For the sake of comparison, we note that Herodias was eight when promised in marriage by her grandfather Herod to his son by Mariamme II, Herod III (28 BCE–33 CE?) (N. Kokkinos, *The Herodian Dynasty: Origins, Role in Society and Eclipse* (London: Spink & Son, 2010) 265 and 525). Betrothal could last many years. Kokkinos speculates that Archelaus’ engagement to Mariamme IV may have lasted seven to eight years (227). In Luke 1.34, when Mary addresses the angel, she asks how she can give birth because she is only promised in marriage. That she is ‘troubled’ (διεταράχθη) by the angel’s visit and does not immediately comprehend the message suggests child-like naiveté (1.29). Without specifying when she will conceive, the angel sums up that nothing is impossible with God (v. 37; Gen 18.14). Surprisingly, when Mary later becomes pregnant, Luke is silent on divine intervention. Contrast Matt 1.24–5 where Mary is Joseph’s wife. See Armitage, ‘Detaching the Census’, 88 and n. 40. S. C. Carlson argues that Joseph and Mary wed in Joseph’s hometown of Bethlehem (‘The Accommodations of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem: Κατάλυμα in Luke 2.7’, *NTS* 56 (2010) 326–42, at 339–40). *Quest. Bart. (Gos. Bart.)* 2.15–21 reports conception three years after the annunciation. Cf. C. Clivaz, ‘Beyond the Category of “Proto-Orthodox Christianity”: An Enquiry into the Multivalence of Lk 1.35’, *Infancy Gospels*, 161–88, at 171.

⁴⁰ Luke 1.31–3, 35 stresses the future tense, συλλήμψη, καλέσεις, ἔσται, κληθήσεται, δώσει, βασιλεύσει, ἔσται, ἐπελεύσεται, ἐπισκιάσει, κληθήσεται. Contrast the perfect tense, συνέλφηεν with respect to Elizabeth in v. 36. We note the tendency to situate Mary’s conception during Gabriel’s visit in English translations of καὶ (in the phrase, καὶ αὐτὴ συνέλφηεν) as ‘also’ rather than ‘even’, the latter making more sense because it emphasises the point of that passage which is God’s power to accomplish the impossible (v. 37).

modelled after the birth of Isaac which took place at least a decade after its prediction.⁴¹ The foetus leaps not at Jesus' presence, but at the sound of Mary's voice (1.41).⁴² Ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν in 1.48 implies that the speaker has at least conceived,⁴³ but as Adolf von Harnack once argued, the variant, 'Elizabeth' for 'Mary' in v. 46 makes more sense not least because Elizabeth is between the sixth and ninth month of her pregnancy at that time, whereas Mary's conception has only been predicted.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Luke 1.48 (ἐπέβλεψεν) echoes Elizabeth's exclamation that God has 'looked with favour' upon her in 1.25 (ἐπείδεν) and 1.26 (τῷ μὴνι τῷ ἔκτῳ) tracks Elizabeth's pregnancy (cf. Luke 1.24, μῆνας πέντε), stressing her expectant state and suggesting that she is the narrative's first interest.⁴⁵

In addition to Luke 2.7 (Jesus' birth at the time of Quirinius' census in 6 CE), Kokkinos also regards the evidence provided by Luke 3.23 – Jesus 'beginning at about thirty years' (καὶ αὐτὸς ἦν Ἰησοῦς ἀρχόμενος ὥσει ἐτῶν τριάκοντα) – as unreliable.⁴⁶ Must this datum also be dismissed? If Jesus was born in 6 CE and died in 36 CE, he would have been 'about thirty' (ὥσει ἐτῶν τριάκοντα) the year that he was killed,⁴⁷ his ministry lasting approximately one year.⁴⁸ Such a chronological scheme comports well with a variety of data. For example,

⁴¹ G. Holtz, *Jungfrauengeburt und Greisinnengeburt: Zur Rezeptionsgeschichte von Gen 21,1f im antiken Judentum und im frühen Christentum* (BThSt 172; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017).

⁴² Most commentators assume the two fetuses 'met'; see, e.g., Michael Pope's trilogy of articles: (1) 'A Note on Gabriel's Entrance and Biblical Violence in Luke's Annunciation Narrative', *JBL* 137 (2018) 701–10; (2) 'Luke's Seminal Annunciation: An Embryological Reading of Mary's Conception', *JBL* 138 (2019) 791–807; and (3) 'What Exactly Did Mary "Conceive" in Her Womb?' *Journal of Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies*, forthcoming. Although Pope assumes that Mary conceives at her annunciation (e.g., 'Luke's Seminal Annunciation', 791–2 n. 1), his extensive observations of sexual language (paternity, spermatology, embryology, fecundity, sexual penetration, etc.) may still pertain, only to the prediction of conception.

⁴³ With gratitude to Margaret M. Mitchell for raising this point.

⁴⁴ A. von Harnack, 'Das Magnificat der Elisabeth (Luk. 1,46–55) nebst einigen Bemerkungen zu Luk. 1 und 2', *SPAW* 27 (1900) 538–58; repr. *Studien zur Geschichte des Neuen Testaments und der Alten Kirche I: Zur neutestamentlichen Textkritik* (AKG 19; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1931) 62–85; A. Loisy, *Les Évangiles Synoptiques* (2 vols.; Ceffonds: Chez L'Auteur, 1907–8) 1.292–311; and, more recently, J. Kloha, 'Elizabeth's Magnificat: Luke 1.46', *Texts and Traditions: Essays in Honour of J. Keith Elliott* (ed. P. Doble and J. Kloha; NTTSD 46; Leiden: Brill, 2014) 200–19. See Kloha's discussion of Harnack's position including Harnack's point that the Magnificat's echoing of Hannah's son over Samuel's birth in 1 Sam 2.1–10 fits Elizabeth better than Mary (207–8, 213–14).

⁴⁵ With gratitude to Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte for raising this point.

⁴⁶ Kokkinos, 'Crucifixion in A.D. 36', 157. In Luke 23.5, οἱ δὲ ἐπίσχυον λέγοντες ὅτι ἀνασείει τὸν λαὸν διδάσκων καθ' ὅλης τῆς Ἰουδαίας, καὶ ἀρξάμενος (here the aorist participle) ἀπὸ τῆς Γαλιλαίας ἕως ὧδε ('But they were insistent saying, "He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, having begun from Galilee even to here"'), the verb, ἀρχω ('to begin') refers to the place where Jesus' ministry started, namely, Galilee. Most assume that this passage denotes the commencement of Jesus' public ministry. However, the initial phrase, literally, 'And Jesus himself was beginning about thirty years old' appears to be missing something. Justin, Clement and ms 700 report ἐρχόμενος for ἀρχόμενος. The Syriac, some Coptic and a few other manuscripts omit the verb altogether. Ἰησοῦς appears to have been added to clarify the subject. Cf. D: ἦν δὲ Ἰησοῦς ὡς ἐτῶν λ' ἀρχόμενος ('Now Jesus was about 30 years old, beginning ...'). On the corrupt nature of Luke 3.23, see Roy D. Kotansky, 'Light from the "Luminous Teaching"'. If Jesus dies in 36 CE, then the span of time between the word of God coming to John (Luke 3.1–2, i.e., 28 CE) and Jesus turning 30 (Luke 3.23, 36 CE) is eight years. In other words, John's public ministry lasts seven years before Antipas arrests him (3.20). During those seven years, Jesus would have been John's follower. Luke 3.7–17 could summarise key teachings from that period.

⁴⁷ Throughout this essay, I accept the dates for the deaths of John the Baptist and Jesus in the years 35 and 36 CE respectively. See Kotansky, 'Star of the Magi', 380–2.

⁴⁸ At thirty, in 35/36 CE Jesus commences a ministry cut short in 36 CE when he is arrested and killed. P. Arzt-Grabner, 'How Old Was Jesus?', in idem, J. S. Kloppenborg, and C. M. Kreinecker, *More Light from the Ancient East: Understanding the New Testament through Papyri* (Papyri and the New Testament 1; Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2023) xxv–xxxiii (shorter version of thesis); idem, 'How Old Was Jesus at the Start of His Mission? The Papyrological Evidence and Impacts for the Calculation of Jesus' Year of Birth', *Talking God in Society: Multidisciplinary (Re)constructions of Ancient (Con)texts Festschrift for Peter Lampe* (ed. U. E. Eisen and H. E. Mader; 2

the entire narrative of the Gospel of Mark can be squeezed into only a few weeks' time.⁴⁹ Also, the punishment of crucifixion makes sense as a swift imperial response to Jesus' perpetuation of the movement that John was killed to stamp out.⁵⁰ Gerard Mussies defends a year-long ministry for Jesus on the basis of Jewish and Samaritan sources.⁵¹

And, other evidence supports our scheme. First, Luke 16.16 – 'The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force' – distances John and Jesus, placing John in an Israel of the past.⁵² Second, if the advanced ages of John's parents can be extricated from his birth narrative in Luke, Zechariah and Elizabeth seem to have belonged to a generation before Mary and Joseph, implying that John was significantly older than Jesus.⁵³ The two figures, John and Jesus are also separated geographically: John in Jerusalem and a city in the neighbouring hill country, and Jesus in Galilee, a topic explored below.⁵⁴

On our reading, Luke's narrative about shepherds seeing angels (Luke 2.8–15) appears to be a theologised transferal of John's comet in 12 BCE to Jesus' birth in 6 CE.⁵⁵ We note that, on account of its theological (not to mention rural) traits, this Lukan report is suspiciously

vols.; *Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus*; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020) 1.641–60 (longer version of thesis). Using papyrological data, Arzt-Grabner argues that the fifteenth year of Tiberius must be converted to 28–29 CE and ὥσει ἐτῶν τριάκοντα implies +/- one year (ὥς indicating an exact number or a number that is 'as exact as possible', shorter version, p. xxvii, longer version, p. 644, emphasis original).

⁴⁹ M. Kähler famously referred to Mark as a 'passion narrative with an extended introduction' (*The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964; German, 1892¹) 80 n. 11).

⁵⁰ John's attraction of crowds was likely an impetus for his arrest. See J. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 219.

⁵¹ Mussies argues that Jesus' birth in 6 CE implies that, with a crucifixion in 36 CE, his ministry 'can hardly have lasted more than one year' ('Date of Jesus' Birth', 437). Samaritan sources accommodate Jesus' birth in 6/7 CE better than Matthew's earlier date (*ibid.*, 433). Ps.-Clem. *Hom.* 17.19.2, καὶ εἰ μὲν ἐρεῖς Δυνατόν ἐστιν, διὰ τί ὅλῳ ἐνιαυτῷ ἐργηγοροῖσιν παραμένων ὁμιλῆσεν ὁ διδάσκαλος; 'And if your opinion is, "That is possible," why then did our teacher spend a whole year with us who were awake?' (ed. B. Rehm; GCS 42 (1969²); 239–40; trans. G. Strecker; *NTApoc* 2.537). Irenaeus accuses heretics of holding that Jesus preached only for one year (*Haer.* 2.22.3, 5).

⁵² So also Kokkinos, 'Crucifixion in A.D. 36', 138.

⁵³ According to Luke 1.7, 36, Elizabeth and Zechariah were 'both prolonged in their days' (καὶ ἀμφότεροι προβεβηκότες ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις αὐτῶν ἦσαν) during the reign of Herod the Great. In those same days (ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ταύταις, 1.39), Mary, her kinswoman (ἡ συγγενὴς σου, Luke 1.36) was a young girl (πρὸς παρθένον ἐμνηστευμένην ἀνδρὶ, 'a virgin, engaged to a man', 1.27), although we do not know Mary's age and there is no indication of exactly how much older Elizabeth was. Συγγενὴς ('kin', Luke 1.36) neither is necessarily the same as ἀνεψιός ('cousin'), nor establishes the precise relationship between Mary and Elizabeth (J. Murphy-O'Connor, 'John the Baptist and Jesus: History and Hypothesis', *NTS* 36 (1990) 359–74, at 362 n. 13). 'Ἐν γήρει αὐτῆς' ('in her old age', v. 36) must refer to 'old age' or 'age' would not need to be mentioned. In Luke 1.18, Zechariah explicitly states that his wife is old when he describes her condition as parallel to his own, asking the angel, κατὰ τί γνώσομαι τοῦτο; ('how will I know this?'), adding, ἐγὼ γάρ εἰμι πρεσβύτης καὶ ἡ γυνή μου προβεβηκυῖα ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις αὐτῆς ('for I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years', RSV). Lukan terminology of 'days', 'months', and 'years' further suggests John's chronological distance from Jesus. In Luke 1–2 passages treating John employ historically vague ἡμέραι-formulas as opposed to the more historically precise term ἔτος, used once Jesus is born.

⁵⁴ As emphasised by H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960) 29–31.

⁵⁵ R. H. Gundry envisions the opposite transformation, arguing not only that stars were regarded as angels, but more importantly that Matthew changed the details of the Lukan birth story: '... he (Matthew) has replaced an angel of the Lord with a messianic star, substituted distinguished magi for lowly shepherds, and substituted the Magi's worship and expensive gift-giving in place of the shepherds' mere sight-seeing' ('Topographical Christology in Matthew's Narrative of Jesus' Birth and Infancy', *To Recover What Has Been Lost: Essays on Eschatology, Intertextuality, and Reception History in Honor of Dale C. Allison Jr.* (ed. T. Ferda, D. Frayer-Griggs and N. C. Johnson; NovTSup 183; Leiden: Brill, 2020) 195–213, at 202, and citing D. C. Allison Jr., *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) 17–41). Cf. also *Decap. Bapt.* 8.4–5; *Birth Bapt.* 2.4 (see discussion below). On the likeness of stars and angels, see Kotansky, 'Star of the Magi', 403. Could Luke have transformed the star tradition in Matt 2.2 into a 'heavenly host' (πληθος στρατιᾶς οὐρανόυ, Luke 2.13) prompted by the angelic name, Emmanuel (Matt 2.23)?

unexposed to examination by proof – unlike Matthew’s report about the star for which reliable astronomical records could have been consulted.⁵⁶ We see thus that Luke’s chronology can be considered coherent from both a narrative and historical viewpoint.⁵⁷

In the third volume of *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, Tony Burke presents three additional texts with Baptist traditions that support a date of 12 BCE for John’s birth: *The Decapitation of John the Forerunner* (Decap. Bapt.), *The Birth of Holy John the Forerunner* (Birth Bapt.) and *The Martyrdom of Zechariah* (Mart. Zech.).⁵⁸ Four examples from these texts pertain to our argument. First, *The Decapitation of John the Forerunner*, Recension B, 3.1 refers to John as ‘fifteen’ years old when he commences his ministry (Recension A, ‘thirty’). This is best explained by the assumption that his birth took place in 12 BCE. If John is born in 12 BCE, he is fifteen years old in 3 CE, and eighteen, as in Luke 1.80 and 2.1, in 6 CE. This timeline also matches the Slavonic additions to Josephus, noted already, by positioning John’s ministry during the reign of Archelaus (4 BCE–6 CE).⁵⁹ This datum does not fit the overall chronology of either Recension A or Recension B of *Decap. Bapt.*, and is, thus, probably a remnant of an older, independent tradition. Second, the reference in both Recensions A and B of *Decap. Bapt.* (5.2) to Herod Antipas (r. 4 BCE–39 CE) summoning John at age ‘thirty-two’ also fits this schema.⁶⁰ Third, Recension B, 1.1 refers to the birth of Jesus at the time of ‘Herod the tetrarch’, likely denoting Archelaus (technically, ethnarch). This datum does not require but accommodates Jesus’ birth in 6 CE.⁶¹ Finally, *The Martyrdom of Zechariah* shares much overlapping material with *The Decapitation of John the Forerunner*. *Mart. Zech.* 9.1 reports that John was ‘twelve’ during the reign of Archelaus, which corresponds, like *Decap. Bapt.*’s reference to John as ‘fifteen’, to John’s birth in 12 BCE.⁶²

⁵⁶ Even if (1) few people knew the precise year of their birth (apart from an association with a specific regional date), (2) epiphanies were ubiquitous and would probably not have been seen as more tendentious than a miraculous star, especially if allegedly seen by a group, and (3) the idea that portents or strange happenings signal the birth of great men was common, reliable ancient records about comets were kept and historical events, no matter how trivial, were linked to appearances of comets, not the other way around. Cf. C. A. Evans, ‘Romulus, Roman Omens, and the Portents of the Birth and Passion of Jesus’, *Gods, Spirits, and Worship in the Greco-Roman World and Early Christianity* (ed. idem and A. Z. Wright; SSEJC 23; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2022) 83–121, esp. 100–5 (‘Omens at the Birth of Jesus’, but with no reference to comets). With gratitude to Teresa Morgan for her insight on these ideas.

⁵⁷ We note that various passages in Luke (e.g., 2.1–2; 3.1–2) demonstrate explicit interest in a historical timeline.

⁵⁸ T. Burke and S. Veale, trans., ‘The Martyrdom of Zechariah: A Translation and Introduction’, *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures* (vol. 3; ed. T. Burke; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023) 140–57; T. Burke, trans., ‘The Decapitation of John the Forerunner: A Translation and Introduction’, *ibid.*, 158–77, including *Birth Bapt.* at 176–7.

⁵⁹ See n. 35 above.

⁶⁰ *Decap. Bapt.* 5.5 (trans. Burke, ‘Decapitation’, 168–9), ‘This Herod was the last and different from the father of Archelaus. This one was king after Archelaus, the son of the first Herod, fled to Galatia. Since, therefore, they were as wicked as one another, he (John) pronounced the first charge and said, “Be ashamed because you took the wife of Philip, your brother.”’ Burke (168 n. ‘j’) writes, ‘K omits “was the last”’. Herod Antipas was not, indeed, the last of the Herods; he was succeeded by Herod Agrippa I and Herod Agrippa II’ (although Herod Antipas was the last of Herod’s sons, as Herod Agrippa I and Herod Agrippa II were his grandsons).

⁶¹ Burke ‘Decapitation’, 164 n. ‘a’) reports that ‘the author has misidentified Herod the Great with Herod Antipas, the only Herod to bear the title of tetrarch’. On confusion concerning Archelaus’ title, see M. D. Smith, ‘Of Jesus and Quirinius’, 291.

⁶² *Mart. Zech.* 9.1 (trans. Burke and Veale, ‘Martyrdom’, 154), ‘When John became twelve years old, Archelaus, having been tried, fled to a city of Galilee. And he ruled cunningly for nine years.’ Concerning the trial of Archelaus, Burke (154 n. ‘d’) observes, it ‘may be an allusion to Archelaus’ appearance before Caesar, at which time he was confirmed as ethnarch of Judea (Josephus, *J.W.* 2.111–13 and *Ant.* 17.342–44)’. According to this passage, Archelaus appears to reign following his flight, suggesting it occurred at the assumption of his rule (4 BCE). It might, however, imply 3/2 BCE since, according to the passage, only nine years of his ten-year rule remain. As Burke and Veale acknowledge (*ibid.*), *Mart. Zech.*’s reference to Archelaus’ reign as lasting nine years in this passage seems correct. According to our schema, in 3 BCE John would have been nine not twelve years old, but Kokkinos (*Herodian*

In view of John's operating at the time of Archelaus (4 BCE–6 CE), G. R. S. Mead observes that, not only does this mean that John preached for almost thirty years (accepting John's death ca. 35 CE), it means that John had to have been born early enough to be preaching between 4 BCE and 6 CE.⁶³ If it were only in Archelaus' last year that John began to preach (6 CE), John would have begun his preaching ministry when he was eighteen years old precisely as Luke 1.80 submits.⁶⁴ The profound length of John's ministry (29 years if it began in 6 CE and he was killed at age 47 in 35 CE) could also explain why, for someone with disdain for apocalyptic movements, Josephus, nevertheless, reports sympathetically on John (*Ant.* 18.109–19).⁶⁵

Marcion, Origen (*Cels.* 1.58), the *Toledoth Jesu* and the Old Slavonic *History of Zacharias* offer additional evidence for Jesus' birth after the death of Herod the Great and contemporary with the census of Quirinius in 6 CE.⁶⁶ In sum, we are inclined to agree with

Dynasty, 226–7) suggests that Archelaus did not come into full power until after he crushed his enemies at the turn of the century. Varus himself had to suppress a regional revolt after Herod the Great's death, and Archelaus had to appoint High Priests and mint coins, etc. in 1 BCE/1 CE. At this time Archelaus also married his first wife (Mariamme IV), whom he quickly divorced and then married Glaphyra, who also died soon thereafter. If *Mart. Zech.* refers to this phase of Archelaus' reign, then John would have been twelve years old, if born in 12 BCE. Admittedly, this does not precisely accord with *Mart. Zech.*'s reference to 'nine years', unless that statement is a mere summation of Archelaus' reign, unrelated to his trial and flight; see Kokkinos, *Herodian Dynasty*, 228 n. 83 on the length of Archelaus' reign as 'nine' years in Josephus, *Jewish War*, corrected to 'ten' years in his two later works. Another possibility is that *Mart. Zech.* conflates two of Archelaus' trips to Rome before the emperor Augustus. An initial trip to secure his throne (to review Herod the Great's will) and a second, to be removed from office and banished. Between these two antipodal events taking place between 4 BCE and 6 CE, 1 BCE/1 CE is the midpoint when Archelaus began to rule peacefully, mint coinage and commence his building program. On a related matter, Burke and Veale regard as problematic the reference in *Mart. Zech.* 7.1 to John as thirteen months old in 4 BCE when Herod the Great died, adding with regard to *Mart. Zech.* 9.1, 'twelve years after the end of Archelaus's reign [6 CE], making John's age here around twenty-two [18 CE]' (154 n. 'c'). However, the angel may not have announced Herod's death, just when it happened. The passage reports that Archelaus is now reigning for his father – denoting 1 BCE/1 CE (see above). Furthermore, the reference to John as one year old ('thirteen months', *Mart. Zech.* 7.1) may operate – like the reference to both John and Jesus as 'thirty' in 11.6 – from a different apologetic concern, namely, to show John and Jesus as nearly identical in age. Finally, 'Galilee' in *Mart. Zech.* 9.1 may be a corruption based on Archelaus' exile to 'Gallic' Vienna, a point Burke mentions with respect to Archelaus' flight in *Decap. Bapt.* 5.5 ('Decapitation', 169 n. 'a'). Kokkinos explains, 'After a reign of ten years, and after being accused in front of the emperor by Jewish and Samaritan embassies, he was banished to Vienna in Gaul in 6 CE. Strabo has Archelaus' brothers (Antipas and Philip) being present at Rome, and narrowly escaping punishment themselves. In a similar context, Dio describes the brothers as actually being the accusers of the ethnarch' (*Herodian Dynasty*, 228). On the other hand, *Mart. Zech.* 9.1 might inadvertently adopt for Archelaus what is intended about Joseph in Matt 2.22, 'Ἀκούσας δὲ ὅτι Ἀρχέλαος βασιλεὺς τῆς Ἰουδαίας ἀντὶ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ Ἡρώδου ἐφοβήθη ἐκεῖ ἀπελθεῖν· χρηματισθεὶς δὲ κατ' ὄναρ ἀνεχώρησεν εἰς τὰ μέρη τῆς Γαλιλαίας, plausibly translated: 'And having heard (this), Archelaus (began to) rule Judea instead of his father and was afraid to leave there, but being warned in a dream he departed (fled?) to parts of Galilee.'

⁶³ 'And when he (John) had been brought to Archelaus and the doctors of the law had assembled, they asked him who he is and where he has been until then' (Mead, citing Slavonic Josephus, *Gnostic John the Baptizer*, 104).

⁶⁴ I.e., 12 BCE + 6 CE = 18 years old. Mead, *Gnostic John the Baptizer*, 110.

⁶⁵ J. J. Price, 'Josephus and the Dialogue on the Destruction of the Temple', *Josephus und das Neue Testament: Wechselseitige Wahrnehmungen* (ed. C. Böttrich and J. Herzer; WUNT 209; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007) 181–94, at 194.

⁶⁶ Marcion's Gospel, if it began at Luke 3.1, positions Jesus' first appearance at the time of Tiberius. See J. B. Tyson, *Marcion and Luke-Acts: A Defining Struggle* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006) 90–100, at 90. Tyson discusses whether Luke's gospel began with 3.1, as well as Conzelmann's argument concerning inconsistencies in the characterisation of John the Baptist in Luke 1.5–2.52 and the rest of the gospel (94–6). Tyson argues that the Lukan infancy narratives are 'Jewish' in character, making the case against Marcionism (90). He also observes a confusion between John and Jesus in this section of the Lukan text. Cf. discussion in Mussies, 'Date of Jesus' Birth', 420. According to Celsus, Herod the Tetrarch ordered the children in Bethlehem to be killed: 'After this instead of the magi of the gospel (ἀντὶ τῶν ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ μάγων) Celsus' Jew speaks of Chaldaeans, saying that

Kotansky in his surmise that John's birth took place at the time of Halley's comet in 12 BCE and Jesus' birth took place at the time of the census of Quirinius in 6 CE.

3. Bethlehem

What, then, can be said of the Bethlehemic and messianic segments – according to Kotansky, intrusions in Matthew's infancy narrative on a Zoroastrian core tradition?⁶⁷ If the source of Matt 2.1–23 originally concerned John and was adapted by Matthew for Jesus, would that explain the integration of these segments?

Kotansky argues that the original core of Matthew 2 consisted of Matt 2.1–3, 7–9a, 11–12, and 16. With respect to Bethlehem, he writes:

(Matthew), or a previous editor, has carefully integrated the Magi-material with the Bethlehem-traditions and messianic prophecy. The integration is rather complete, so we can no longer speak of a once independent, free-standing Greek 'text'. Nevertheless, the removal of the extraneous 'additions' leaves a fairly uniform whole. With that said, a few comments on our 'restored' text seem in order: 1) 'in Bethlehem in Judaea' (2,1) must be extracted, as argued above, since this has nothing to do with the Magi's historical search. Scholars have long been aware that John 7,27, 40–44 show, too, that Jesus was not born in Bethlehem. Matt 2,1 parallels, as a doublet, the 'birth' at 2,18, and all of 2,18–25 makes no mention of Bethlehem. For the same reason 'in Bethlehem' must be removed in 2,8.16, since the search was more 'global' and time-consuming (hence, the Greek 'in all the surrounding areas'—a remnant of the original text). ... In 2,8 the core-text would have had a simple 'sending out', with no mention of Bethlehem.⁶⁸

With respect to these Bethlehem segments, we acknowledge that the location of John's birth is unknown. That said, Luke 1.65 reports John's birth in the 'hill country, in a city of Judah'

according to the account of Jesus they were moved to come to his birth to worship him as God although he was still an infant; and they informed Herod the tetrarch (καὶ Ἡρώδης τῷ τετράρχῃ τοῦτο δεδιλωκέναι) of this: but he sent men to kill those born just at that time, thinking that he would destroy him also with them, lest somehow, after he had lived for the time sufficient for him to grow up, he should become king' (Origen, *Cels.* 1.58, ed. Borret, SC 132.234, trans. H. Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953) 53). (Herod the tetrarch is, of course, Antipas (r. 4 BCE – 39 CE), not the earlier, Herod the Great.) Origen, as noted earlier, goes on to say that the star of Bethlehem was a 'new star ... to be classed with the comets'. In the *Toledoth Jeshu* (H), Joseph and Mary live 'in the days of Tiberianus Caesar' (14–37 CE) and 'Herod II, King of Israel': 'Während des zweiten Tempels, in den Tagen des Kaisers Tiberius und Herodes II. Königs von Israel, der viel Böses that, wie aus Josippon zu ersehen, damals gab es einen Mann aus der Nachkommenschaft des Hauses David, der hieß Joseph Pandera; der hatte eine Frau, die hieß Maria; es war aber selbiger Mann gottesfürchtig und war Schüler des R. Schimeon ben Schetach' (*Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (ed. and trans., S. Krauss; repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1977) 64, 88). The Old Slavonic *History of Zacharias* 1.1, likewise, reports that Herod the Tetrarch undertakes a search for a newborn king: 'Im 40. Jahre der Herrschaft des Herodes veranstaltete dieser eine Nachsuchung, um das Kind, welches in Jerusalem (im unspensischen Kodex der Moskauer Synodabibl. und im Kod. der Petersb. geistlichen Akademie ist dafür in marg. emendiert: 'in Bethlehem' war, umzubringen; da empfing Joseph den Bescheid von dem Engel Saphodamuöl, welches (sie) die Kraft Gottes des Höchsten ist, das Kind zu ergreifen und nach Ägypten zu fliehen, was er auch ausführte' (*Studien über Zacharias-Apokryphen und Zacharias-Legenden* (trans. A. Berendts; Leipzig: Deichert, 1895) 71; cf. idem, *Die Zeugnisse vom Christentum im slavischen 'De bello judaico' des Josephus* (TU n.F. 14/4; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1906) 6). 'In the fortieth year of Herod's reign, Joseph was warned by the angel Saphodamuel to flee into Egypt, where the family lived twelve months in the house of Alpheus, a man of God' (*The Lost Apocrypha of the Old Testament: Their Titles and Fragments* (trans. M. R. James; New York: Macmillan, 1920) 74–7, at 76). Mussies, 'Date of Jesus' Birth', 420 nn. 5, 6.

⁶⁷ For Kotansky's reconstruction of the text, see 'Star of the Magi', 418.

⁶⁸ Kotansky, 'Star of the Magi', 419. Bracketed chapter numbers have been corrected from original article's '2.18' and '2.18–25'.

(ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ ὀρεινῇ τῆς Ἰουδαίας).⁶⁹ Correspondingly, in Luke 1.39, Mary finds Elizabeth at home in ‘a Judean town in the hill country’ (εἰς τὴν ὀρεινὴν ... εἰς πόλιν Ἰούδα). Which city is most likely implied? In Luke 2.4, Bethlehem is designated ‘of Judah’ (εἰς τὴν Ἰουδαίαν εἰς πόλιν Δαυὶδ ἥτις καλεῖται Βηθλέεμ).⁷⁰ Matt 2.6 also specifies Bethlehem as a city ‘in the land of Judah’ (καὶ σὺ Βηθλέεμ, γῆ Ἰούδα, οὐδαμῶς ἐλαχίστη εἶ ἐν τοῖς ἡγεμόσιν Ἰούδα). Furthermore, according to Luke 1.5, Zechariah belonged to the priestly order of Abijah, son of Rehoboam, who fortified Bethlehem. John’s Davidic lineage, as reported in Luke 1.69, also corresponds to Bethlehem as David’s birthplace and the location of his anointing by Samuel (1 Sam 16.1–4, 18; 17.12; Luke 2.4, 11).⁷¹ In short, the most likely location of John’s birth according to Synoptic tradition is Bethlehem – very close to Ein Kerem today, a neighbourhood of Jerusalem approximately eight miles from Bethlehem. Ein Kerem was considered the site of John’s birth since the fourth century.⁷²

Furthermore, the *Protevangelium of James*, regarded by some as a creative collation of the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke – first mentioned by Origen (*Comm. Matt.* 10.17) and written sometime in the second half of the second century – provides non-canonical evidence of a connection between John and Bethlehem. Germane features of this work may be summarised. After sixteen chapters about the birth and betrothal of Mary, *Prot. Jas.* 17.1 reports Augustus’ declaration of a census.⁷³ This census is likely taken from Luke 2.1–2, although in this case rather than a registration of the whole world,⁷⁴ Bethlehemites alone are required to register (*Prot. Jas.* 17.1).⁷⁵ Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem to be enrolled, but midway through their journey – that is, not yet in Bethlehem (*Prot. Jas.* 17.10) – Mary dismounts and gives birth in a cave (*Prot. Jas.* 19.16).⁷⁶

Following (1) the arrival of a baby boy, (2) a midwife’s verification of Mary’s perpetual virginity, and (3) the appearance of a woman named Salome (chapter 20) – just as Joseph and Mary are about to depart for their home (i.e., their home is *not* in Bethlehem), a great

⁶⁹ F. Bovon (*Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1 – 9:50* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 58 n. 30) notes that Ἰούδα refers to the land settled by the tribe of this name, also referred to as ἡ Ἰουδαία, and should not be understood as the incorrect name of a city. Ὀρεινὴ refers to the hilly territory between the Shephela (‘lowlands’) in the west, the Jordan Valley in the east, and the Negev in the south (cf. LXX Num 13.29; Josh 9.1, 10.40; Jer 40 (33). 13; Josephus, *Ant.* 12.313; *Bell.* 1.41). See M. Wolter, *The Gospel according to Luke, Volume 1: Luke 1–9:50* (BMSSEC; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016) 87. Mountains are associated with the sense of God’s nearness. See W. Foerster, ‘ὄρος’, *TDNT* 5.475–87; C. H. J. de Geus, ‘Judah (Place)’, *ABD* 3.1033–6.

⁷⁰ Of eight occurrences of ‘Bethlehem’ in the New Testament five are in Matthew 2 (v. 1, 5, 6, 8, 16). Two others are in Luke 2.4, 15 and one in John 7.42.

⁷¹ Isho’dad of Merv reports a tradition that Zechariah lived on the border of Bethlehem but dwelled in Jerusalem on account of the high priesthood. See Schonfield, *Lost ‘Book of the Nativity of John’*, 29. Based on Joseph’s intention to return there (Matt 2.20–3, contrast no τόπος in Luke 2.7), Gundry regards Matthew’s depiction of Jesus’ home in Bethlehem as emphasising (with much else) his Davidic sonship and kingship – even without Luke’s reference to Bethlehem as the ‘city of David’ (Luke 2.14) (‘Topographical Christology’, 201). Cf. *Decap. Bapt.* 8.1.

⁷² S. Gibson, *The Cave of John the Baptist* (New York: Doubleday, 2004) 25–32.

⁷³ *Prot. Jas.* 17.1. Cf. *Ps.-Mt.* 13.1; Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 34; *Dial.* 78.

⁷⁴ Δόγμα παρὰ Καίσαρος Αὐγούστου ἀπογράφεσθαι πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην, ‘a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered’ (Luke 2.1).

⁷⁵ *The Protevangelium of James* (trans. L. C. Vuong; Early Christian Apocrypha 7; Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019) 91 n. ‘E’.

⁷⁶ In 2004, Gibson (*Cave of John the Baptist*) published his belief that the large mikveh in the so-called Suba Cave – discovered in 1999 during an archaeological survey in a small, abandoned Arab village about 3 miles west of Ein Kerem – was the site of John’s baptising ritual. In a review of this volume, J. Strange expresses doubt: <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/reviews/the-cave-of-john-the-baptist/>. One may, nevertheless, wonder whether reference to a cave in *Prot. Jas.* reflects an origin account of a specific cave as a holy site or pilgrimage destination.

commotion arises.⁷⁷ As in the *Mandaean Book of John*, the *Protevangelium* reports ‘an incredibly brilliant star shining among these stars, (so bright) it dimmed them so that they could not be seen’ (21.8) and Magi arrive to worship the king (*Prot. Jas.* 21.3, 7–8). Like Matthew 2, it is unclear whether the king is a newborn, although it is implied that the child was born at the time of the ‘incredibly brilliant star’.⁷⁸ The text does not cite but seems to know (‘for that is what is written’, 21.5) the conflation of Mic 5.2 with 2 Sam 5.2 from Matt 2.6, which lends messianic relevance to Bethlehem as David’s hometown (1 Sam 16.1–13).⁷⁹

Hearing the reason for the visit of the Magi, Herod issues an order to find the child (*Prot. Jas.* 21.9).⁸⁰ As in Matt 2.11, the Magi locate the child and present him with gold, frankincense and myrrh (*Prot. Jas.* 21.11).⁸¹ In response to Herod’s threat (*Prot. Jas.* 22.2), Mary flees to hide her child in an ox-manger (*Prot. Jas.* 22.4),⁸² after which the focus abruptly shifts to John, who assumes the role of protagonist for the remaining chapters of the book. Different from Jesus who was born in a cave halfway to Bethlehem (*Prot. Jas.* 17.10, 19.16), John was born in Bethlehem, denoted by the following two narrative elements. First, Herod explicitly seeks John, not Jesus, in response to the prediction that the king will be born in that city: ‘But when Elizabeth heard that they were looking for *John*, she took him and went up into the hill-country and was searching for any place to hide him’ (*Prot. Jas.* 22.3).⁸³ Herod *might* seek Jesus, but he certainly seeks John and, as a result of this targeted pursuit, *John* assumes a mixture of royal and messianic traits while maintaining his priestly lineage.⁸⁴ Second, John’s mother, Elizabeth heads *from* the location of his birth *to* the hills to hide John (22.5), implying that his birth took place in the city.⁸⁵ The *Protevangelium* then reports the death of John’s father, Zechariah.⁸⁶ Simeon – whose prophecy in Luke (1.28–32) like Anna’s (v. 38)

⁷⁷ According to Josephus (*Ant.* 18.5.4), Salome (Σαλώμη) was the daughter of Herod II and Herodias (stepdaughter of Herod Antipas). She is associated with John the Baptist in Mark 6.21–8 (|| Matt 14.6–11), although in both NT reports, she remains nameless. See also Mussies, ‘Date of Jesus’ Birth’, 427.

⁷⁸ Vuong, *Protevangelium of James*, 103 n. ‘C’.

⁷⁹ Matt 2.6, Ἐκ σοῦ γὰρ ἐξελεύσεται ἡγούμενος, ὅστις ποιμανεῖ τὸν λαόν μου τὸν Ἰσραήλ, ‘for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel’.

⁸⁰ With two exceptions (11.7; 14.6, both echoing Luke 1.31) Jesus’ name is absent from *Prot. Jas.*

⁸¹ Kotansky discusses the implications of the variant εὑρον (‘they found’) for εἶδον (‘they saw’) in Matt 2.11 (474 *al lat*): ‘the “sighting” of a heavenly “star-child” replaces the “finding” of an earthly ruler’ (‘Star of the Magi’, 403).

⁸² Vuong, *Protevangelium of James*, 105 n. ‘A’. Cf. Rev 12.6.

⁸³ Trans. Vuong, *Protevangelium of James*, 105, emphasis added. Schonfield regards certain elements of Jesus’ and John’s concealment from Herod as parts of an early cycle of messianic nativity folklore (*Lost ‘Book of the Nativity of John’*, 36).

⁸⁴ Zechariah works in the temple, e.g., *Prot. Jas.* 23.1–3. On the dual expectations of a priestly or Davidic Messiah, see Schonfield, *Lost ‘Book of the Nativity of John’*, 84. That John was regarded as a messiah is a plausible interpretation of Luke 1.68–79. As for the messianic association with Bethlehem, Kotansky characterises such motifs in Matthew 2 as distinguishable from royal ones, allocating only the latter to a Zoroastrian core tradition. For example, he contrasts the reference to a ‘king’ in v. 2 (ὁ τεχθεὶς βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων) with the reference to a ‘messiah’ in v. 4 (ὁ χριστός). These figures may originally have been distinct but are merged in Matthew. Likewise, *Prot. Jas.* conflates a royal (‘king’, 21.1, 7; ‘to rule over Israel’, 23.4) and messianic figure (21.4) – traditions which, in this text, converge in the figure of John. *Prot. Jas.* seems to know (21.5, ‘for that is what is written’), but does not cite, the conflation of Mic 5.2 and 2 Sam 5.2, the passage that gives David’s hometown of Bethlehem (1 Sam 16.1–13) specific messianic relevance. See Vuong, *Protevangelium of James*, 103 n. ‘F’. Kotansky’s reconstruction (Matt 2.1–3, 7–9a, 11–12, 16) excludes v. 4–6 (‘Star of the Magi’, 418).

⁸⁵ On the hill, Elizabeth struggles to find a place to hide John. After she prays, ‘Mountain of God, take me in, a mother with her child’, the mountain splits open protecting them and an angel appears shining a bright light on Elizabeth (22.7, trans. Vuong, *Protevangelium of James*, 105).

⁸⁶ *Prot. Jas.* 24.8–11, trans. Vuong, *Protevangelium of James*, 107: ‘And the ceiling panels of the temple cried out, and they ripped their clothes from top to bottom and they did not find his corpse, but they found his blood turned into stone. They were afraid and went out and reported that Zechariah had been murdered. And all of the tribes of the people heard and mourned for him and lamented for three days and three nights.’ This narrative shares the tearing of the temple panels, empty grave and three-day interval of mourning in common with Synoptic accounts of Jesus’

corresponds in certain aspects to Zechariah's blessing over John (Luke 1.68–79)⁸⁷ – is chosen to replace Zechariah as priest in the Temple (*Prot. Jas.* 24.13).

Concerning *Prot. Jas.* 22.5–24.14, McGrath postulates that these chapters must have been 'lifted straight out of a source available to the creator of the Proto-Gospel about John the Baptist'; and, because the text draws from Matthew's infancy narrative (Herod, Magi, etc.), McGrath now asks whether Matthew, like Luke, drew on a source about John to compose his infancy narrative about Jesus.⁸⁸ For our purposes, it suffices to acknowledge the corroborating evidence that this text provides for the association of John with the star of Bethlehem tradition in Matthew 2 and the hypothesis that he, not Jesus, was born in Bethlehem under Herod the Great at the time of the appearance of Halley's comet in 12 BCE.⁸⁹

Moreover, the *Protevangeliū* is not the only extra-canonical source that supports this thesis. The pre-fifth century (perhaps as early as the late-second or early-third) *Revelation of the Magi* composed in Syriac retells the story of Matthew 2 from the perspective of twelve or more Magi, descendants of Adam's third child, Seth, from the mythological land of Shir.⁹⁰ They see a star in the Cave of Treasures on the Mountain of Victories where it appears in the form of a small, luminous human being (*Rev. Magi* 12.3–7). They follow this star to Bethlehem where it transforms into the infant Jesus, although he is never identified as such (*Rev. Magi* 18.1). About the identification of the star as Jesus, Brent Landau writes: the star is 'clearly Christ, but his precise identity is never explicitly revealed'.⁹¹ Intrigued by this fact, Landau presents his interpretation that, for this anonymous writer, the Christ figure cannot be identified with Jesus of Nazareth exclusively:⁹² 'The case of the Magi, then,

Passion. See Schonfield's discussion of a complex range of sources in *Lost 'Book of the Nativity of John'*, 38–44. Based on a 'Judaic style' and prominence of Zechariah, Schonfield believes that Luke preserves the first part of John's nativity story and Isho'dad and the *Protevangeliū* of James preserve the conclusion (50; cf. 71). Kloha supplies additional evidence of shifting narratives between Elizabeth and Mary in infancy-related narratives ('Elizabeth's Magnificat', 201), posing the question, 'If the author of *Prot. Jas.* feels free to take words spoken about Elizabeth (in Luke) and apply them to Mary, might it not be the case that the author felt free to take the Magnificat away from Elizabeth and attribute it to Mary? The available evidence does not allow a definite conclusion. However, it is clear that in the earliest period, some readers of Luke were quite interested in Mary and elevating her status, even at the expense of the Lukan narrative' (202). He also points to tension between the Magnificat and Mary's portrayal elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke: '... in the Magnificat the singer notes that μακαριοῦσιν με πᾶσαι αἱ γενεαί. Yet in the subsequent narrative of Luke no particular condition of μακαρία is acknowledged as belonging to Mary, even when Jesus (11.27–8) has specific opportunity to acknowledge it' (216).

⁸⁷ Cf. references to salvation (ὅτι εἶδον οἱ ὀφθαλμοί μου τὸ σωτήριόν σου, Luke 2.30; τοῦ δοῦναι γνῶσιν σωτηρίας τῷ λαῷ αὐτοῦ, Luke 1.77b) and enlightenment (φῶς εἰς ἀποκάλυψιν ἔθνων, 2.32; cf. ἐπιφάναι τοῖς ἐν σκότει καὶ σκιᾷ θανάτου καθημένοις, Luke 1.79); plus, Anna's reference to 'redemption' (ἐλάλει περὶ αὐτοῦ πᾶσιν τοῖς προσδεχομένοις λύτρωσιν Ἱερουσαλὴμ, 2.38; cf. ὅτι ἐπεσκέψατο καὶ ἐποίησεν λύτρωσιν τῷ λαῷ αὐτοῦ, 1.68b).

⁸⁸ McGrath, 'Birth of (the Messiah?)'.

⁸⁹ Whereas Schonfield thinks that Luke is inventing these traditions about Jesus to 'counteract the messianic claims put forward on behalf of John', we prefer to think of this author as lightly redacting Baptist traditions more or less changing the subject from John to Jesus. Schonfield regards *Prot. Jas.* as a 'Christian overworking' of a nativity story about John, with Joachim, Anna, and Mary replacing Zachariah, Elizabeth, and John (52). In the 1950s, discussion of the alternation of John and Jesus in Luke 1–3 led to the conjecture of a Baptist source behind these chapters. Unfortunately, R. E. Brown's rejection of this hypothesis in his influential *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1993²) 285) quelled an otherwise productive debate.

⁹⁰ For the date of the text including redactional layers, see B. Landau, *Revelation of the Magi: The Lost Tale of the Wise Men's Journey to Bethlehem* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010) 25. On the land of Šir (= Gk. Σῆρες, 'silk people') or China, see A. Y. Reed, 'Beyond the Land of Nod: Syriac Images of Asia and the Historiography of "The West"', HR 49 (2009) 48–87, at esp. 77–82 and Kotansky, 'Light from the "Luminous Teaching" of the East'.

⁹¹ B. Landau, 'Revelation of the Magi', *e-Clavis: Christian Apocrypha*, accessed 31 December 2022, <https://www.nasscal.com/e-clavis-christian-apocrypha/revelation-of-the-magi/>; idem, *Revelation of the Magi*, 9.

⁹² Landau, *Revelation of the Magi*, 31.

raises the possibility that Christ has appeared to many people and yet not revealed himself as Jesus Christ.⁹³ Landau further extrapolates from the star's polymorphism a 'more positive view of non-Christian religious traditions than any other early Christian writing'.⁹⁴ We point out, however, that the text may know a rival tradition such as the *Protevangeliium of James* identifying *John* as the glorious star-child, 'the ancient light perfecting the will of the Father of majesty' (*Rev. Magi* 19.1), praised by angels (20) and commissioning witnesses to the truth (21.5), the author thus seeking an ameliorating position not among all religions, but between 'Christians' and 'Baptists', a rivalry more fitting to the period of this text's composition and attested in the NT canon in Acts 18.24 and 19.1–7.⁹⁵

In addition to this 'positive' evidence, it is widely recognised that a few passages in the NT indicate that Jesus was not born in Bethlehem. The angel Gabriel was sent to Nazareth to predict to Mary the birth of her son Jesus (εις πόλιν τῆς Γαλιλαίας ἣ ὄνομα Ναζαρέθ, 'to a city in Galilee called Nazareth', Luke 1.26). Luz notes that Matt 1.18–25 does not narrate in detail the birth story of Jesus in Bethlehem, it only states that it took place there after the fact, as an afterthought. The actual birth narrative, he rightly acknowledges, is missing, and Matt 2.1 (τοῦ δὲ Ἰησοῦ γεννηθέντος ἐν Βηθλέεμ τῆς Ἰουδαίας) is a transitional verse intended to bridge this 'narrative gap'.⁹⁶ Luz also refers to the introduction of Bethlehem in this verse as abrupt.⁹⁷ Furthermore, Matt 13.54 refers to Nazareth as Jesus' fatherland,⁹⁸ a point also made in John 1.46 when Nathanael rejects Philip's news that he and the others have discovered the messiah by referring to Jesus' hometown of Nazareth.⁹⁹ John 7.40–4 too reports a controversy that Jesus was not born in Bethlehem, beginning, 'Surely the messiah does not come from Galilee, does he?' (μὴ γὰρ ἐκ τῆς Γαλιλαίας ὁ χριστὸς ἔρχεται:)

4. The Special Materials

Thus far, we have argued that behind the legendary material of the Synoptic infancy narratives lie a few historical traditions that John's birth took place at the time of Halley's comet in 12 BCE and Jesus' birth took place at the time of the census of Quirinius in 6 CE. In this final section, we briefly explore how segments of Special M narrative material in Matthew 1 and 2 support this thesis, insofar as they appear to reflect a Baptist source: (1) the massacre of the innocents (Matt 2.16–18); (2) the identity of the 'Nazorean' (Matt 2.23); (3) the citation of 2 Samuel 5 (Matt 2.6); and (4) the Matthean genealogy (1.12–17).¹⁰⁰

⁹³ Landau, *Revelation of the Magi*, 28.

⁹⁴ Landau, *Revelation of the Magi*, 29.

⁹⁵ Landau, *Revelation of the Magi*, 66. Gnostic affinities with later groups such as the Mandeans might also suggest a connection. On John the Baptist and the Mandaean texts, see the new academic monograph by James F. McGrath, *John of History, Baptist of Faith: The Quest for the Historical Baptizer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024).

⁹⁶ Luz, *Matthew* 1–7, 102.

⁹⁷ Luz, *Matthew* 1–7, 102.

⁹⁸ Καὶ ἐλθὼν εἰς τὴν πατρίδα αὐτοῦ, 'and coming to his country' (Matt 13.54). Acknowledging that Luke refers to Bethlehem as Joseph's 'own town' (εις τὴν ἑαυτοῦ πόλιν, 2.3) yet to Nazareth as the family's 'own town' (ἐπέστρεψαν εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν εἰς πόλιν ἑαυτῶν Ναζαρέθ, 2.39), Smith ('Of Jesus and Quirinius', 289) argues that Joseph probably owned two homes travelling from Nazareth to Bethlehem at the time of the census with his pregnant wife 'to take advantage of a tax loophole' (290). Carlson argues that Joseph's hometown was Bethlehem and Mary's was Nazareth ('Accommodations', 338 (interpretation of εἰς πόλιν ἑαυτῶν, 2.39), 342).

⁹⁹ Ἐκ Ναζαρέτ δύναται τι ἀγαθὸν εἶναι; 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' (John 1.46).

¹⁰⁰ Matthew 2 represents Matthean Special Material. If the author of this gospel treated Q in the same way as Mark (i.e., without making significant excisions), and Luke too used Q in the same way as Mark (i.e., abridging his source significantly) – whether or not they had identical versions of Mark and Q – then Special M passages such as Matthew 2 might in fact retain additional Q material. A good case can be made for Matt 6.16–18 (on fasting) since the Sermon on the Mount (5.1–7.27) – of which this passage is a part – appears to have been adopted *en bloc* from its Q source. Luke would have excised this passage – one surrounded on both sides by Q material – perhaps

Multiple sources, including the Old Slavonic *History of Zacharias* and the commentaries of Isho'dad of Merv, associate the massacre of the innocents (Matt 2.16–18) with John.¹⁰¹ In addition, clear correspondence of this pericope with Pharaoh's command to kill all male children at the time of Moses' birth (Exod 1.15–22) indicates that the original subject was regarded as a prophet like Moses. Jesus characterises John as just such a figure in Matt 11.9–11: 'What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet (περισσότερον προφήτου)... Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist' (cf. Luke 7.24–8).¹⁰² In his exploration of motifs about Moses in the nativity legends, Schonfield points to their proximity to New Testament narratives about John, speculating that these tales provided the background for John's birth story in Luke. He summarises a significant number of parallels as follows:

Amram and Jochebed, like Zachariah and Elizabeth, are of the house of Levi a worthy pair, and well-stricken in years; for according to tradition Jochebed was an hundred and thirty years old when she conceived Moses. In both cycles of legend Magi predict to the king the birth of the wonder child, who thereupon decrees the slaughter of all the male children. There is an annunciation to Amram similar to the one made to Zachariah. In each case their wives are promised sons who will deliver their people from oppression. Both Moses and John are concealed from the officers of the king.¹⁰³

Clear association of John with Moses in Matthew might thus suggest that the Matthean massacre of the innocents originated as a Baptist tradition.

Matt 2.23 provides a second case for consideration. The source and meaning of this proof-text about a person from Nazareth called a 'Nazorean' (Ναζωραῖος) is unclear.¹⁰⁴ 'There he made his home in a town called Nazareth (Ναζαρέτ), so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean"' (ὅπως πληρωθῇ τὸ ῥηθὲν διὰ τῶν προφητῶν ὅτι Ναζωραῖος κληθήσεται). The passage supports the claim that the Messiah will come from Nazareth, but no proof-text is provided. Luz argues that the writer

because he regarded it as conflicting with the tradition that Jesus did not fast (Luke 5.33–5 || Mark 2.18–20). H. D. Betz argues that Matthew and Luke each had their own versions of Q (*Sermon on the Mount*, 43–4). See Rothschild, *Baptist Traditions and Q*, 102–4. About Matt 2.1–12, Luz observes, 'This section is bracketed with the following section (2.13–23) by means of numerous common catchwords. Without 2.1–12, 2.13–23 would not be understandable. That is true for all of 2.13–23 and not merely the episode of the murder of the children in vv. 16–18. The connection with 1.18–25 is not as close' (*Matthew 1–7*, 102). Later Luz acknowledges structural similarities between 1.18–25 and 2.1–12 (177).

¹⁰¹ Collected by Schonfield in *Lost 'Book of the Nativity of John'*, 27, 29. Citing Jer 31.15, Matt 2.16–18 also emphasises Bethlehem (v. 18 refers to Ramah – fourteen miles from Bethlehem – and to Rachel who, according to Gen 48.7, died in Bethlehem). R. A. Culpepper (*Matthew: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021) 43–4) dates the birth of Jesus to 7/6 BCE, with no acknowledgment of Halley's Comet, Kokkinos, or Kotansky. He discusses comets as a cosmic sign (43), the association of stars with angels ('... it is likely that Matthew understood the star that guided the magi to Bethlehem as a divinely appointed angel', 44), and the comet at the death of Caesar, Suetonius on Nero's comet, and Josephus on the comet over Jerusalem (43), but never associates the Star of Bethlehem and IP/Halley, nor tries to explain from an astronomical viewpoint why he selects the date 7/6 BCE for Jesus' birth.

¹⁰² Moses predicts this prophet in Deut 18.15 LXX: προφήτην ἐκ τῶν ἀδελφῶν σου ὡς ἐμὲ ἀναστήσει σοι κύριος ὁ θεός σου, αὐτοῦ ἀκούσεσθε. Cf. Deut 34.10 LXX, καὶ οὐκ ἀνέστη ἐτι προφήτης ἐν Ἰσραὴλ ὡς Μωυσῆς. Cf. 'prophet of the Most High' (προφήτης ὑψίστου, Luke 1.76) with reference to John.

¹⁰³ Schonfield, *Lost 'Book of the Nativity of John'*, 98–100, at 98. Schonfield's summary neglects the parallel of a great light reported in the nativity of Moses in *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*; see Schonfield (97) where this text is acknowledged, citing M. Gaster, *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1899). According to the *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, a similar light shone at the birth of Abraham (Schonfield, *Lost 'Book of the Nativity of John'*, 100).

¹⁰⁴ Kotansky's observation that historical events did not garner proof-texts, whereas theological arguments did, may be relevant: "'Proof-texting' only proves that there is an absence of proof in the text" ('Star of the Magi', 385).

uses the plural (διὰ τῶν προφητῶν) because he could not identify the quotation transmitted to him.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, Luz believes that Judg 13.5,¹⁰⁶ 7 and 16.7 (Ναζιραῖος) are most likely intended.¹⁰⁷ Assuming that Luz is correct, Matthew could have modified Ναζιραῖος in Judg 13.5 to Ναζωραῖος, understanding Ναζωραῖος as synonymous with Ναζαρηνός and, on account of this adjustment, omitted the citation information.¹⁰⁸ Whatever explanation one accepts for the reference, the passage most likely refers to the Nazirite vow, associated in Luke 1.15 and 7.33 with John, not Jesus.

The third Matthean passage for consideration as Baptist in origin involves the citation from Micah 5 in Matt 2.6. We begin by recalling that, in addition to Luke's reference to Jesus' birth at the time of the census by Quirinius in 6 CE (Luke 2.2; see above), Kokkinos rejects as unreliable Luke's reference to Jesus as thirty years old (Luke 3.23), noting that it may derive from 2 Sam 5.4 (LXX): 'The figure might have been taken from 2 Sam 5.4, for it is appropriate that the Son of David should inaugurate his activities at David's age. Or, one has to consider the possibility that Luke might have originally written "forty" instead of "thirty"'.¹⁰⁹ The Gospel of Matthew also demonstrates an interest in 2 Samuel 5. In the second formula quotation occurring in Matt 2.6, Mic 5.1–3 (LXX) is combined with 2 Sam 5.2, 7 (LXX) probably to underscore the author's point that a great leader from Bethlehem will shepherd God's people as David did.¹¹⁰ Whereas Micah's prediction emphasises Bethlehem as the paradoxical source of salvation, 2 Sam 5.2 and 7.7 highlight the city's Davidic association. Matthew, it seems, engages 2 Samuel 5 to complement the Davidic lineage of Jesus' genealogy in chapter one with David's birthplace.¹¹¹ Since 2 Sam 5.2 is employed, one might ask why 5.4 concerning David's age was not included – especially given that Luke reports this tradition.¹¹² If Jesus' birth takes place at the time of the 'star of Bethlehem' during the reign of Herod the Great, that is, in 12 BCE, as implied by Matt 2.2, 9, then Jesus would have been '30' in the year 18 CE. In such a case, either his ministry would have lasted almost two decades (d. 36 CE) or, if only a one- to three-year ministry is implied, the tradition that he was brought before Caiaphas (Matt 26.57–68) and executed under Pilate (i.e., 36 CE, Matt

¹⁰⁵ Luz, *Matthew* 1–7, 123. Cf. Acts 17.28. On Matt 2.1, Luz (112) writes, 'Jesus, the messianic king from David's family (1.1, 6), comes from the city of David, Bethlehem in Judea. That Bethlehem is the birthplace of the Messiah – an idea already derived in Judaism from the scriptures – is so definite for Matthew that Jesus' move to Nazareth requires special scriptural proof (2.22–23)'. Matthew's denotation of a 'house' in Bethlehem makes Jesus' stay there appear permanent.

¹⁰⁶ Judg 13.5 LXX, ὅτι ἰδοὺ σὺ ἐν γαστρὶ ἔξεις καὶ τέξῃ υἱόν, καὶ οὐκ ἀναβήσεται σιδηρός ἐπὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ, ὅτι ἡγιασμένος ναζιραῖον ἔσται τῷ θεῷ τὸ παιδάριον ἐκ τῆς γαστροῦ, καὶ αὐτὸς ἄρξεται σῶζειν τὸν Ἰσραὴλ ἐκ χειρὸς ἁλλοφύλων.

¹⁰⁷ Luz, *Matthew* 1–7, 123. Cf. 1 Sam 1.11. Mark refers to Jesus as Ναζαρηνός (four occurrences: 1.24; 10.47; 14.67; 16.6). Gundry argues that Isa 11.1 is behind Matt 2.23, which announces a homonymic 'branch' (נצר) from the roots of Jesse' ('Topographical Christology', 209).

¹⁰⁸ However, variation in the spellings of non-Greek words is common. Furthermore, Matthew might be engaging in a kind of portmanteau – blending 'Nazirite' and 'Nazarean'.

¹⁰⁹ Kokkinos, 'Crucifixion in A.D. 36', 157. In n. 78, he cites relevant literature: T. Lewin, *An Essay on the Chronology of the New Testament* (Oxford: J. H. Parker, 1854) 11; idem, *Fasti Sacri; Or, A Key to the Chronology of the New Testament* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1865) xv; J. Van Bebbber, *Zur Chronologie des Lebens Jesu* (Münster im Westphalia: Schönningh, 1898) 147. Luke adopts 2 Sam (2 Kgdms) 5.4 LXX, 'David was a son of thirty years when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years' (υἱὸς τριάκοντα ἐτῶν Δαυὶδ ἐν τῷ βασιλεῦσαι αὐτὸν καὶ τεσσαράκοντα ἐτὶ ἐβασίλευσεν) to highlight a Davidic parallel with the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. To be sure, other passages in Luke reflect Jesus' Davidic lineage (1.32; 18.38–9), although Luke 1.69 highlights John's Davidic lineage. Reliant on Mark 12.35–7a, Luke 20.41–4 (|| Matt 22.41–6) draws Jesus' Davidic background into question. Kokkinos (145) embraces the variant τεσσάρων for δεκατεσσάρων in Gal 2.1.

¹¹⁰ Luke 1.72–3 cites Mic 7.20, preserving a further association between John and this prophet.

¹¹¹ Gundry, 'Topographical Christology', 198–9. On whether a genealogy traced John's lineage back to King David, see C. R. Bowen, 'John the Baptist in the New Testament', *AJT* 16 (1912) 90–106, at 99–100.

¹¹² Kokkinos, 'Crucifixion in A.D. 36', 157.

27.1–26) is proven false – each, unviable options. As desirable a tradition as ‘the age of thirty like David’ must have been for Matthew, it was, therefore, impossible to adopt. The tradition does, however, make sense if it pertains to a child born in 6 CE, publicly executed in the year 36 CE – the same year that he ‘began’ (Luke 3.23). In sum, the ‘thirty-year-old’ (2 Sam 5.4 LXX) tradition corresponds well to the census of Quirinius but not to the star of the Magi, explaining why it is found in Luke but not in Matthew.

Finally, correspondences between Special M and Baptist traditions might also explain aspects of the Matthean genealogy in chapter 1 (Matt 1.1–17). Jacob, Judah, Boaz, Obed, Ruth, Jesse (1 Sam 17.12), David (Luke 1.69), Rehoboam and Abijah (associated with John in Luke 1.5) all hail from Bethlehem – a city closely associated with John. In addition, Zerubbabel (Matt 1.13), whom Matthew situates after the deportation to Babylon, must be the figure who led the first group of Jews back from exile. If this is correct, and we assume that the third division of the genealogy persists in its commitment to Bethlehem, then the otherwise unknown names in v. 12–16 may represent a lost list of the one hundred plus people from Bethlehem who returned as reported in Ezra 2.21 and Neh 7.26.¹¹³ Some of these names of ostensible members of the Davidic line (prior to Joseph) possess namesakes in the south.¹¹⁴

It is acknowledged that the correspondences between Special M material in Matthew 1–2 and Baptist traditions identified here are of varying argumentative weight. At a minimum, though, they strengthen the case for reconciling otherwise irreconcilable chronological data by admitting the conversion of Baptist sources as a redactional strategy of the NT evangelists.¹¹⁵

5. Conclusion

A timeline in which Jesus is (1) born under Herod the Great, at the time of a great comet (Matt 2.2, 9), in the year of the census of Quirinius (Luke 2.2), (2) commences ministry at age thirty (Luke 3.23), (3) engages in ministry for one to three years, (4) and is put to death under Pontius Pilate presents irresolvable conflicts. If, however, Kokkinos and Kotansky are correct that the star of Bethlehem refers to Halley’s comet of 12 BCE, then the two implied Synoptic dates of 12 BCE (Matt 2.1–23) and 6 CE (Luke 2.1–7) for Jesus’ birth can be reconciled provided the earlier one, as Luke 1.5 implies, originally belonged to John the Baptist.¹¹⁶ The *Mandean Book of John* and the *Protevangelium of James* offer additional evidence of a comet at the birth of John. When read as Baptist traditions, Bethlehemic and messianic segments in Matthew 2 – at odds with certain traditions about Jesus – provide an ideal complement. If John is born under Herod the Great in 12 BCE, and John’s life is, either historically or within the traditional storyline (prophet like Moses), threatened by Herod the Great, then the report in Mark 6.16 that Antipas fears that John has been resurrected from

¹¹³ Genealogies are often the purview of priests (e.g., the genealogy from Adam to Noah in Gen 5.1–32 comes from the P source; Zechariah, as represented in Luke 1 and *Prot. Jas.* 8.6–7; 23.1, is a priest). See R. R. Wilson, ‘Genealogy, Genealogies’, *ABD* 2.929–32.

¹¹⁴ Tyson points out that, in Luke, Jesus is distinct from Joseph (and hence his Davidic lineage): ‘... except for the parenthetical comment, ὡς ἐνομίζετο, in Luke 3.23, Jesus’ genealogy does not cohere with the narrative of Luke 1.5–2.52. Although the infancy narrative maintains that Jesus is to be a descendant of David (Luke 1.32) and that Joseph is “of the house of David” (Luke 1.27), the annunciation scene (Luke 1.26–38) involves a birth without participation from Joseph’ (*Marcion and Luke-Acts*, 96).

¹¹⁵ Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 256–85, 330–92; Nolland, *Luke 1–9.20*, 21–2.

¹¹⁶ See Kotansky’s helpful review of Kokkinos, ‘Star of the Magi’, 380–5. Although Jesus consistently overshadows John in the NT, a theme of the two lives together occasionally peaks through: the light and the witness to the light (John 1.6–8), two sons (Matt 21.28–32, John is explicit in v. 32), two witnesses (Rev 11.3), etc.

the dead, makes sense as a son perpetuating his father's old antipathy.¹¹⁷ Separating the assorted data into births of two different figures allows us to dispel various chronological tensions without rejecting pertinent data outright.¹¹⁸ Our thesis challenges the standard three-year ministry of Jesus and raises afresh the question of the location of Jesus' birth, but such refinements belong to the broadly conciliatory solution that the competing gospel birth narratives reflect two messianic figures, John and Jesus, themselves held in differing positions of authority by their followers and consequently by those who wrote about them nearly two millennia ago.¹¹⁹

Competing interests. The author declares none.

¹¹⁷ Since Herod Antipas fears that Jesus is John *redivivus* (Mark 6.14–16 || Matt 14.1–2 || Luke 9.7–9), it stands to reason that there is a chronological gap between the two figures. W. Wink explains: 'Mark 6.14 shows conclusively that the activities of Jesus and John were both chronologically and spatially separated. Jesus is taken for John the Baptist raised from the dead. Those who expressed this opinion could not have seen the two of them working together, or known of Jesus' baptism by John or even of a period of Jesus' discipleship under John' (*John The Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (SNTSMS 7; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968) 9).

¹¹⁸ We add here that Kokkinos's proposal ('Crucifixion in A.D. 36', 153–6) of Jesus' age as forty-six and thus 'not yet fifty' (John 8.57) and as equivalent to the age of the temple (John 2.20) could apply to John. Kokkinos regards the latter as a pun (155). Cf. Kotansky's review of this argument ('Star of the Magi', 383–4). Cf. also John 1.6–8. As for Lukan *Sondergut*, noting the absence of proper nouns in the passage (Luke 2.41–51), the tradition of Jesus as a twelve year old in the temple makes more sense as a story about Zechariah's son. Furthermore, Islamic tradition seems to regard Luke 2.52 as a tradition about John: "'O John! Hold firmly to the Scriptures (Torah).'" And We granted him wisdom while he was still a child' (*Sūr.* 19.12).

¹¹⁹ R. E. Brown comments, 'Some scholars consider them [Passover references] to have merely symbolic value; others accept them as time indications and posit that Jesus had a ministry lasting at least two years' (*The Gospel according to John I–XII* (AB 29; Garden City: Doubleday, 1966) 114). Brown counts himself in the second group. On our reading, the Johannine Passover references – John 2.13, 6.4, 11.55 – collectively represent less than a single year as all three emphasise the Passover's *nearness* (ἐγγύς) without acknowledging its arrival. John 13.1 specifies that the Passover has not yet arrived and will (thus) coincide with Jesus' death: 'Now *before* the festival of the Passover (πρὸ δὲ τῆς ἑορτῆς τοῦ πάσχα), Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world.' The Johannine Passover references, therefore, predict and heighten the anticipation of Jesus' death. If they denote three Passovers (a period of more than two but less than three years) then they refer to ca. 34–36 CE, a part of which period Jesus' ministry overlapped with John's. Concerning such an overlap, Murphy-O'Connor observes, 'How long Jesus spent with John should not be underestimated. At least sufficient time has to be allowed for some of the Baptist's disciples to transfer their allegiance to Jesus' ('John the Baptist and Jesus', 362). G. R. Beasley-Murray argues that the indications of time in John 2.1, 23; 3.22; and 4.1 suggest that Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a Passover in the period when the ministries of Jesus and John overlapped (*John* (WBC 36; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000²) 39).