

**“What Child Is This?”**  
Matthew 1:18-25 (NRSV)

Years ago, people used their Bibles to record the births and deaths of their great grandparents, grandparents, parents and other family members. Sometimes they'd use the blank front pages or the pages at the end. Some Bibles actually provide several pages in the middle of the book for this purpose. I suppose people thought it was **the “holiest” place to record their family genealogy**. Interestingly enough, as we learned last week, the first chapter of Matthew begins with a genealogy of the Lord Jesus Christ, followed immediately by an account of his birth. It's all very human and down-to-earth. Excluding that genealogy, the first words of the first book in the New Testament are these: “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 1:18).

What a remarkable beginning to the account of Jesus' life! There is no doubt that **Jesus was human, as we are**. The listing of his genealogy is ample proof of that; he was descended from Abraham, through Abraham's great descendent, King David, and through the family line of many other interesting, even scandalous, people. Jesus was as human as we are. Yet, if the words in verse eighteen are true, as I believe they are, then something more needs to be said. Matthew is writing about a man, but a man born without benefit of a human father. The male part in the conception of Jesus was taken over by the Holy Spirit of God. No one in the whole history of the human race was ever conceived that way. Yet, here Matthew is writing of one who was as distinguished from us by the beginning of his earthly life as we know he also was by the end.

**Who is he? Who is Jesus Christ?**

What child is this, who laid to rest,  
on Mary's lap is sleeping?  
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,  
while shepherds watch are keeping?

**Where shall we go for an answer?** Should we ask the theologians? They may not help us much, for they disagree on their answers, as we may know. Some speak of “the myth of God incarnate.” I once heard **J. I. Packer** of Regent College, in Vancouver, pray, “O Lord, deliver us from theological notions.” I said “Amen” to that, for notions are precisely what many theological opinions are. They are like the “notions” counter in a department store -- random collections of more or less

whimsical objects. Shall we go, then, to the Pharisees or the scribes of the Christmas story? Shall we ask King Herod? These all are also mere men, no better (and perhaps less) informed than our so-called contemporary theologians. Let's be done with these lesser personages and turn to those who ought to know, and who, in fact, appear in each of the three most similar gospel instalments of the Christmas story for the exact purpose of answering our question.

**Let's turn to the angels.** I don't know about you but I'm fascinated by the Christmas angels. I have **no idea what they looked like**; the Bible doesn't tell us much about that. But it sure tells us **what they said**. These heavenly beings, or messengers of God, give us unique insights into the birth of the baby born in Bethlehem.

### 1. The angel Gabriel (Lk. 1:5-25; 26-38).

Let's go back, first of all, to **the angel Gabriel** who appears in the gospel of Luke. Gabriel appears twice in the Christmas story, once to announce the birth of John the Baptist to John's father, the aged Zechariah, and then, again, to announce the birth of Jesus to Mary. It is the second annunciation that bears on our question -- "What child is this?" for, having appeared to Mary and having greeted her as a highly "favored one," the angel went on to say,

"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

(Lk. 1:30-33)

These pronouncements must've struck the young virgin woman as remarkable. It was remarkable that **her son would be "great,"** she being of humble origin. It was remarkable that **he would "reign" on the throne of David forever.** Everyone knew that, someday, David might have an heir to reign on his throne; but, that hadn't happened, and it sure didn't look like it would happen soon with the occupying Roman forces around! In Mary's day, the house of David had been cast down, and foreigners ruled the land. If Gabriel was right, the long waiting of the Jewish people was over and their Messiah had come. The idea was preposterous. Mary's future child was to be the Messiah.

All that was remarkable enough. But the most astonishing thing was that this child was to be **"the Son of the Most High"** (Lk. 1:32a). Were it not for the context, a

person might be inclined to take this in a **minimal sense**, that is, as speaking of an ordinary person chosen by God to fulfill a special task, such as a prophet or king, as some others in Hebrew history had been. In this case, however, the context has to do with the conception of Mary's child without a human father. His father would be "the Lord God" himself (Lk. 1:32b). In other words, we need to take the angel Gabriel's reference to Jesus as "the Son of the Most High" in a **maximal sense**, for the child was to be God's offspring in a way no other person either before or since has been.

If we had only the context of Gabriel's annunciation to Mary, the promise would've been remarkable enough. But that isn't our only context. We have the whole of the New Testament in which **this title is picked up and explained**.

Think, for example, of **Peter's confession of faith in Christ**, found in each of the gospels. Jesus had asked his disciples who they thought he might be, and Peter replied, "**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God**" (Matt. 16:16; cf. Mk. 8:29b; Lk. 9:20b; and Jn. 6:69b). This was no mere earthly sonship, for Jesus himself indicated Peter's insight was remarkable; it hadn't come Peter's own powers of observation, but by revelation from God. "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:17). By the very illumination of God, Peter had perceived that Jesus was no mere man, but very God. He was God incarnate.

We find the fullest New Testament treatment of this in **John's first letter**. The Christians to whom John wrote had been shaken by teachers who claimed to be believers but who were denying Jesus was God "come in the flesh" (1 Jn. 4:2-3). Naturally, they were troubled by those denials, and John wrote to them to assure them that they, rather than the false teachers, were God's children. False teachers tend to deny Christ's divinity, John says. Christians can know that they are "from God" by their conviction that **Jesus is indeed God's Son**. He put it into a formula: "God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us" (1 Jn. 4:15-16). Thus that "Jesus is the Son of God" becomes a confession by which one can tell whether or not one is actually a Christian.

When the angel Gabriel told Mary that the future child would be "the Son of the Most High" he was saying that the child was God incarnate.

2. **Joseph's angel** (Matt. 1:18-25).

The angel who appeared to Joseph, the carpenter “engaged to Mary,” is described in Matthew 1:18-25. **This angel may have been Gabriel, but he isn’t named.** He is only “an angel” who appears and says, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:20b-21).

This revelation is similar to the one given to Mary, for **the title “Jesus,”** just as “Son of God,” **has a general and human as well as specific and divine application.** The name “Jesus” means “Jehovah is salvation” or “Jehovah saves.” It’s a testimony to the truth that “salvation is of the Lord” (Jonah 2:9). “Joshua” is a variant of the same name. It’s a popular name. For example, Spanish-speaking people still frequently use this name for their sons. But such human connotation cannot be the full meaning of the name in Matthew, for here the angel is explaining the divine power of Christ. The name is, in part, an mighty explanation of what is happening. It is a case of God at work. Note, for example, that immediately after giving the child the name “Jesus” -- meaning “Jehovah saves” -- the angel goes on to say, **“he will save his people from their sins.”** In other words, “the child is and has the power of Jehovah, the Lord.”

This angelic revelation to Joseph is confirmed by Matthew as he continues the narrative, for he says that it happened to fulfill what God had prophesied through the prophet, Isaiah: “Look, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him, Immanuel” (cf. Isa. 7:14 NIV), which means, as Matthew points out, “God with us” (Matt. 1:23).

### 3. **The shepherds’ angel** (Lk. 2:10-11).

If anyone should know who Mary’s child is, it is certainly **the angels, God’s messengers.** You will remember **an angel appeared to the shepherds** as they were watching their flocks of sheep in the fields surrounding Bethlehem. This angel said, “Do not be afraid; for see -- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah [or Christ], the Lord” (Lk. 2:10-11).

This last phrase, even as the television special of Charlie Brown’s telling of the Christmas story exhibits, is one of the most significant texts in the New Testament. When the angel said to the shepherds that the child who had been born in Bethlehem was “Christ the Lord,” the implication is that Jesus is the Messiah, or the “Christ, who is the Lord.” This means that Jesus, who by this time was already born of Mary,

was not merely the anointed one of God; he was actually **God “veiled in flesh,” God manifest in human form.**

Gabriel appeared to Mary and announced that the child was to be **God’s Son**. The angel who appeared to Joseph said he would be **Jehovah who saves**. The angel who told the shepherds of Christ’s birth called him **the Lord God himself**. Three angels; three testimonies! And the testimonies agree that **Jesus is God**.

#### 4. **God, the Father** (Matt. 3:14, 17).

There is one more person we want to ask about this child born in a manger, and that is God, the Father. You can imagine a case in which the parentage of a child is disputed -- apparently there are more and more of these cases today and we have learned that DNA can offer conclusive evidence in these matters. But the question may also be put to the alleged father, **“Are you the father of this child?”** Jesus was declared to be **the unique child of God** by three appearances of an angel. But what of God, the Father himself? What does he say? Does he acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as his Son? That direct word is not given in the Christmas story, though everything in it may be rightly said to have come from God. Instead we have to wait for 30 years until the Lord began his public ministry.

After the events of those early years, which included the murder of the innocents and the flight into Egypt, Jesus was brought back to Nazareth, where he lived in Joseph’s home and presumably learned Joseph’s trade. Luke tells us Jesus grew to “in wisdom and in years [or stature], and in divine and human favor” (Lk. 2:52). One day he appeared at the Jordan River, where his cousin, John had been preaching and baptizing. Jesus presented himself for baptism, which John was reluctant to do. And John said, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Matt. 3:14). But Jesus said that it was proper for John the Baptist to do this since he had come to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15).

So John baptized Jesus. And as Jesus came up out of the water, at that very moment the clouds in the sky parted, the Spirit of God descended like a dove upon him, and **a voice from heaven was heard saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”** (Matt. 3:17; cf. Mk. 1:11b; Lk. 3:22b; and Jn. 3:32-34). This is my Son! This is the voice of God, God’s own testimony. Angels had announced this truth; now God, the Father, himself confirmed it.

#### 5. **Our own testimony.**

Only one more thing remains: not to seek further witnesses, but meekly to add **our own confession of faith to God's affirmation**. Is this child of Christmas “the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father ...” as the Nicene Creed affirms? Is Jesus Christ God with us? Then let us acknowledge him as such. Let us worship him and show by the obedience of our lives that he is indeed who he is declared so clearly to be.

That is what you and I must do. We must confess Jesus to be God, and more than that, to be our God, and our Lord. We must say, wonderingly, with the centurion who was present at the crucifixion, “Surely he was the Son of God!” (Matt. 27:54). We must conclude with Thomas who conducted his own investigation after the crucifixion, “**My Lord and my God!**” (Jn.20:28). Like the apostle Paul, we must acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord (Acts 9:5).

Our question began, in the words of **William Chatterton Dix**'s lovely carol, with theological accuracy:

What child is this, who laid to rest,  
on Mary's lap is sleeping?  
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,  
while shepherds watch are keeping?

The answer is found in Scripture, in a clear affirmation of faith, announced by the angels at Christmas, and confirmed by believers throughout history, as the carol goes on to say:

This, this is Christ the king,  
whom shepherds guard and angels sing;  
haste, haste to bring him laud,  
the babe, the son of Mary.

Why lies he in such mean estate  
where ox and ass are feeding?  
Good Christians fear, for sinners here  
the silent Word is pleading.

Nails, spear shall pierce him through,  
the cross be borne for me, for you.

Hail, hail the Word made flesh,  
the babe, the son of Mary.

So bring him incense, gold and myrrh,  
Come peasant, king to own him;  
The king of kings salvation brings;  
let loving hearts enthrone him.

Raise, raise the song on high;  
the virgin sings her lullaby.  
Joy, joy for Christ is born,  
the babe, the son of Mary.

Amen

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