

Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

Luke's Christmas Musical, Part 2: The Loosed Tongue of Zecharias

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In the sermon, I suggested that the 490 years of Daniel 9 are an extension of the exile's 70 years prophesied by Jeremiah (after all, it's contemplating the end of Jeremiah's 70 years at the beginning of Daniel 9 that provides the context for the vision in which Daniel is told about 490 additional years).

It's interesting to consider this connection:

Matthew 1 says there are 14 generations from the exile to the Christ. 14 generations x 40 years = 560 years.

70 years of Jeremiah 25 + 490 years of Daniel 9 = 560 years.

The problem is making this work out in any reasonable with known chronologies. When does the exile begin? When the first exiles are taken away? Or when the temple is finally destroyed? And when does the exile end? When Jesus is born? When he dies on the cross? And how do the 560 years work? What decree is in view in Daniel 9:25, and can it be used to date the birth or ministry of the Messiah?

Obviously, with Matthew's 14 generations, there could be some play in the years since a generation may not be literally 40 years in every case. The Babylonian exile happened in phases, but if one dates it at 586BC, that's not too far off the 560 years, assuming we consider the end of the exile to be the birth of Christ. For Matthew's purposes, this seems to work.

But Daniel 9 is a lot more challenging. Jeremiah's 70 years seem to start in 606/5 BC with the exile of Daniel and company (though James Jordan actually says the 70 years begin in 608, with the death of Josiah). That puts the end of the 70 years of exile at 536, which fits with Cyrus' decree to rebuild the temple. If you start Daniel's 490 years there...well, that's a problem because the block of 490 doesn't seem to lead anywhere.

But what if there is a gap between the end of Jeremiah's 70 years and the start of Daniel's 490 years? This ruins the nice symmetry of 560 continuous years of exile with Matthew 1, but we already saw Matthew's 14 generations were probably a bit longer than 560 years anyway. Daniel 9:25 says there will be 483 years from the decree to rebuild Jerusalem to the coming of the Messiah, then there is a final 7 year block, in the middle of which the Messiah will be cut off (= the crucifixion).

So when does Daniel's prophetic clock start ticking? The decree Daniel 9:25 speaks of is probably *not* Cyrus' decree to rebuild the temple since this decree is to restore Jerusalem (not just rebuild the temple). It is probably the decree of Artaxerxes in

Ezra 7 or Nehemiah 1-2. Ezra 7 is the best candidate because that seems to be the decree to truly restore Israel as a nation (albeit, under Gentile rule). For example, this is the decree that gives the right to Israel to establish her own magistrates and judges, e.g., the kinds of things necessary for city life to resume in Jerusalem.

The decree in Ezra 7 can be dated at 457 BC. Fast forward 483 years and we come to about 27 AD — a plausible date for the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In the middle of the final 7 year block, after 3.5 years of ministry, Jesus brings an end to sacrifice (Dan. 9:27) through his own sacrifice of the cross. This would be the definitive of exile and the accomplishment of the new exodus (cf. Luke 9:31).

There is a lot of great information on Daniel 9 in Jordan's commentary *The Handwriting on the Wall*. Jordan shows how the details of the vision in Daniel 9 (particularly the last 7 year block) are fulfilled in Jesus' ministry, and then that of the apostles. Of course, the vision also points ahead to 70 AD and the destruction of the temple.

Ken LeBrun has some fascinating chronological material on his website. I cannot vouch for all of it, but a lot of bear directly on the question of how Daniel and other prophecies about the end of exile come to fulfillment in the ministry of Christ. For example, see:

<http://www.patmospapers.com/daniel/457.htm>

<http://www.patmospapers.com/2epulc.htm>

LeBrun writes on the decree in Daniel 9:25:

Four different decrees have been considered as the possible application of this prophecy [of Daniel 9:25]:

1. The decree of Cyrus recorded in Ezra 1:1-4.

In Jeremiah 29:10, God had promised, "After seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place."

Ezra 1:1 says, "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom...."

The royal decree went forth in the year 536 B.C., at which time nearly 50,000 Jews returned to their homeland.

Two centuries earlier, God had appointed Cyrus for this task: "That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and *to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.*" Isaiah 44:28.

Recognizing in Isaiah's prophecy a personal directive, Cyrus began his decree with these words, "The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and *he hath charged me to build him an house* at Jerusalem, which is in Judah." Ezra 1:2.

Cyrus continued, "Who is there among you of all his people? His God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and *build the house of the Lord* God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem." Ezra 1:3.

This first decree authorized the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the *temple*. Ezra chapter 3 tells us that those who returned to Judea gathered in Jerusalem to observe the feast of tabernacles in the seventh month, and the following spring, "in the second month," they "set forward the work of the house of the Lord" (verses 1, 4, 8).

After the foundation of the temple had been laid, “the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin,” “the people of the land,” being prohibited from participating in the project, “weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building, and hired 3epulchers against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.” Ezra 4:1-5.

“Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.” Ezra 4:24.

When, under the inspiration of Haggai and Zechariah, the work on the temple was finally resumed, the governor of the region, with a group of other officials, came and asked the workers, “Who hath commanded you to build this house?” Ezra 5:3.

They replied, “In the first year of Cyrus the king of Babylon the same king Cyrus made a decree to build this house of God.” Ezra 5:13.

So the governor and his officials wrote a letter to King Darius I, saying, “If it seem good to the king, let there be search made in the king’s treasure house, which is there at Babylon, whether it be so, that a decree was made of Cyrus the king to build this house of God at Jerusalem, and let the king send his pleasure to us concerning this matter.” Ezra 5:17.

2. The decree of Darius I recorded in Ezra 6:1-12.

Because of the letter Darius received from the governor of the area west of the Euphrates, a search was made, and Cyrus’ original decree was found. Darius then issued his own decree, saying, “Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God in his place.” Darius instructed his governor to supply the Jews with money or whatever else they needed, that “the building of this house of God . . . be not hindered.” Ezra 6:7, 8.

Based on Ezra 4:24, this decree was probably issued in 520 B.C., the second year of the reign of Darius. With the hinderances now removed, the temple was completed in the sixth year of Darius (516 B.C.) on the third day of the twelfth month, and in the following month they kept the 3epulche. Ezra 6:15, 19.

3. The decree of Artaxerxes I (Longimanus) recorded in Ezra 7:12-26.

King Artaxerxes, in the seventh year of his reign (457 B.C.), authorized Ezra the priest and scribe, and all who wished to join him, to go to Jerusalem. It was Ezra’s desire to instruct the Jews in the laws of God. Artaxerxes granted him large amounts of silver and gold to furnish the temple, and gave instruction that his treasurers on that side of the river should provide whatever was needed to beautify the Lord’s house.

In the decree, Artaxerxes commanded Ezra to “set magistrates and judges, which may judge all the people that are beyond the river, all such as know the laws of thy God; and teach ye them that know them not. And whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether it be unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment.” Ezra 7:25, 26.

Ezra left Babylon on the first day of the first month of Artaxerxes’ seventh year, and arrived in Jerusalem exactly four months later on the first day of the fifth month. Ezra 7:7-9. Three days later the gifts brought from Babylon were registered in the temple treasury, and sacrifices were offered to God. Ezra 8:32-35. Either at that time or shortly thereafter, “they delivered the king’s commissions unto the king’s lieutenants, and to the governors on this side the river.” Ezra 8:36.

Some time later, officials from the surrounding nations wrote a letter of skepticism to Artaxerxes, saying, “Be it known unto the king, that the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, building the rebellious and the bad city, and have set up the walls thereof, and joined the foundations.” Ezra 4:12. They went on to say that if the king would check the history of Jerusalem, he would find that it was a rebellious city which would not submit to Babylonian rule, and that is why it was destroyed. If it were allowed to be rebuilt, the king would have the same problems again. Ezra 4:13-16.

Artaxerxes checked the records, and discovered that old Jerusalem had indeed made insurrection, rebellion and sedition against kings. So he issued a new command that the work of building should stop until he gave further word. Ezra 4:17-22.

4. The decree of Artaxerxes mentioned in Nehemiah chapters 1 and 2.

The story of Nehemiah begins in the 20th year of Artaxerxes' reign. Nehemiah, a Jew, was the king's cupbearer. One day some of his brethren from Judah arrived in Shushan where king's palace was. Nehemiah inquired of them about the condition of things in Jerusalem. "The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach," they replied. "The wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire."

Nehemiah sat down and wept. For several days he mourned and fasted and prayed. His prayer is remarkably similar to that of Daniel in Daniel 9. He prayed that somehow God would "grant him mercy in the sight of" the king.

Four months later, Nehemiah was serving wine to the king, and Artaxerxes noticed a sadness on Nehemiah's countenance. "Why is thy countenance sad?" the king asked. Nehemiah explained that Jerusalem was still in ruins, the wall and the gates were still not repaired. When the king asked what he would like to do, Nehemiah answered, "If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchers, that I may build it."

Artaxerxes consented, and sent with him letters for the governors of the region, authorizing the rebuilding project. This commission was issued in the spring of 444 B.C., in Artaxerxes' 20th year of reign.

Evaluating the four decrees

Daniel 9:25 says, "Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times."

This is an important verse to understand. It is the only prophecy in the Bible which tells us precisely when the Messiah would arrive. It is extremely vital therefore to know exactly when that time period began.

The event to mark the beginning of the seventy weeks is stated to be "the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem." But to which "commandment" does it refer? We have just seen that there were four different decrees, all of which seem quite similar. If we use the wrong starting point, the whole prophecy will be off.

As always, it is essential to pay close attention to the words of the text. We are looking for a command to "*restore* and to build *Jerusalem*." The decree of Cyrus, recorded in Ezra 1, gave instruction only for the rebuilding of the *temple* in Jerusalem. It said nothing about restoring the whole city. The decree of Darius, recorded in Ezra 6, was simply his endorsement of the decree of Cyrus. It mentioned only the building of the "house of God." But in the decree of Artaxerxes, recorded in Ezra 7, provision is made for the complete restoration of the Jewish state, including the right to appoint magistrates and judges, hold trials, and pass and execute sentence upon violators of their own national laws.

This was clearly understood to be an authorization for the full reestablishment of Jerusalem and the Jewish nation; for shortly after this the enemies of the Jews wrote to the king complaining that "the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, *building the rebellious and the bad city*, and have set up the walls thereof, and joined the foundations" Ezra 4:12. That the walls had been completely set up was obviously an exaggeration, as verse 13 reveals. Yet this incident shows that for the first time there was actual work being done to rebuild the *city*. This had not been the case under the previous decrees.

The fourth decree (Nehemiah 2), the wording of which has not been preserved, was simply a reinstatement of Artaxerxes' original authorization, this time naming Nehemiah to take charge of the project.

Considering all the options, the decree which most correctly answers to the specifications of Daniel 9:25 was the decree of Artaxerxes to Ezra, recorded in Ezra chapter 7. We should therefore date the beginning of the 70 week prophecy of Daniel 9 from the time of that command.

Determining the date of the decree

The dates for Artaxerxes' reign are well documented in the ancient sources. These sources include the Greek historians, Ptolemy's Canon, the Babylonian business tablets, and the Elephantine papyri from Egypt. From these documents we know that Xerxes was killed in late December of 465 B.C., and the reign of Artaxerxes began at that time. The decree to restore and build Jerusalem was issued in the seventh year of Artaxerxes' reign (Ezra 7:7, 8).

The book of Ezra was written in Jerusalem for the Jews. It would be natural that he would use the Jewish method of reckoning in numbering the years. Whereas the Babylonians and Persians began their years in the spring, the Jews counted their civil year as beginning in the fall (See [Determining Biblical Dates](#)). This means that Artaxerxes' accession year, according to the Jewish method of reckoning, extended until the fall of 464 B.C., at which time his *first* year of reign began. His seventh year is thus determined as follows:

Artaxerxes Reign	Fall to Fall
First year	464/463 B.C.
Second year	463/462 B.C.
Third year	462/461 B.C.
Fourth year	461/460 B.C.
Fifth year	460/459 B.C.
Sixth year	459/458 B.C.
Seventh year	458/457 B.C.

Therefore, the seventh year of Artaxerxes, according to Jewish reckoning, extended from the fall of 458 to the fall of 457 B.C.

Although the Jews began their civil calendar year in the fall, and the reigns of kings were counted according to that calendar, the numbering of *months* was always in reference to the spring. Thus their civil year began in the "seventh" month and ended in the "sixth" month. As an example, notice Artaxerxes' 20th year as recorded in the book of Nehemiah. News of the condition of things in Jerusalem came to Nehemiah in Artaxerxes' 20th year, in the month of Chisleu or Kislev which was the 9th month (Nehemiah 1:1). But later, when Nisan, the 1st month, came, it was still Artaxerxes' 20th year (Nehemiah 2:1). With that understanding, we may now determine quite closely the beginning of the 70-week prophecy. Ezra 7:9 tells us that Ezra left Babylon on the first day of the first month, which was probably early April depending upon the moon and the barley harvest. He arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, which would then be early August, 457 B.C. We are not exactly certain of the date in which the king's commission was delivered to the king's lieutenants and governors, but we may be quite certain that it was at least August of that year.

As noted in our comments on Daniel 9:25, the significant point in the decree to rebuild Jerusalem was not when it was signed by Artaxerxes, but rather when it went into effect, after Ezra arrived in Jerusalem. The decree was useless until the Jews were actually made aware of it and could act upon it. Until they and the governors east of the river heard it, the decree had not fully “gone forth.” Therefore, we begin the prophecy of Daniel 9 in the late summer or early fall of the year 457 B.C.

Le Brun also explains why the exile was initially 70 years:

<http://www.patmospapers.com/daniel.htm>:

How did it happen to be 70 years? Ezekiel tells us that the years of Israel’s iniquity were 390, and the years of Judah’s iniquity were 40 (Ezekiel 4:4-6). That adds up to 430 combined years during which the two nations had evidently failed to keep God’s commandments.

How many sabbath years would have been missed during 430 years?

Rounded to the nearest whole number, 430 divided by 7 equals 61.

Also every 50th year was to be a sabbath for the land, called the year of Jubilee. On that year also the land was to rest. Assuming that for those 430 years neither the 7th year nor the 50th year was observed, we must add those 50th years into our equation.

Again rounding to the nearest whole number, 430 divided by 49 equals 9. We used 49 because it was a 49-year cycle. The 50th year was actually the first year of the next cycle.

Now we have 61 regular sabbath years missed, and 9 Jubilee sabbath years missed. That totals 70 sabbath years which the land had not received. That is why the land needed to rest for 70 years.

Peter Leithart on Luke 1:26-38:

INTRODUCTION

Advent (the word means “coming”) focuses our attention on the incarnation of the Son of God, but the incarnation of the Son of God not only tells us about the Son. The Son became incarnate so that He could reveal God to us, all of God, Father, Son and Spirit. This Advent, we will be exploring how the incarnation of the Son reveals the Trinity, and what the Trinity means for us.

THE TEXT

“Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. . . .” (Luke 1:26-38).

NEW CREATION

Before looking at this passage for what it teaches us about the Trinity, and our life in the Trinity, we should note a number of biblical allusions in the passage. First, the story begins with the angel Gabriel being sent to Mary, as he was to Zacharias (1:11, 19). The only time the angel Gabriel appears in the OT is in the book of Daniel (Daniel 8:15ff; 9:20ff). He appears again to Zacharias and Mary to announce the fulfillment of the visions and prophecies that He delivered in Daniel’s day. The “seventy weeks” or the “times of the Gentiles” are coming to a close, and a new age is coming.

Second, Gabriel says that Mary will be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, who will form the Son of the Most High in her womb (Luke 1:32, 35). Two OT passages are in the background here. In the original act of creation, the Spirit hovered over the waters in order to order the watery darkness (Genesis 1:2). Now the Spirit again hovers, this time over the womb of Mary where a new creation is taking shape. This gives us an insight into the point of the virgin birth: It shows that the new creation does not come through human effort or human creativity. The new creation, like the old, comes through a sovereign act of the Spirit.

This overshadowing also alludes back to Exodus 40:34: Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle. By overshadowing the tent, the glory-Spirit of Yahweh consecrated the tent as a holy place, just as the Spirit's overshadowing of Mary produced a holy thing begotten (Luke 1:35). Luke, like John, believes that Jesus is the tabernacle, the earthly dwelling and location of the glory of God (cf. John 1:14).

Third, Mary also fulfills all the types and shadows of barren women in the OT. Through the miracle-motherhood of Sarah and Rebekah and Rachel and Hannah, the Lord foreshadowed the eventual fulfillment of the promise of Genesis 3:15 in the miracle-motherhood of Mary. The connection of Mary's pregnancy with Genesis 3:15 is underscored by Elizabeth's later greeting to Mary, Blessed among women are you (Luke 1:42), which echoes Deborah's song: Most blessed of women is Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, most blessed is she of women in the tent (Judges 5:24). Jael is blessed, of course, because she smashed a tent peg through Sisera's skull. Through her Son, Mary does the same.

THE FATHER'S SPIRIT OF SONSHIP

From a Trinitarian perspective, the oddity of Luke 1 is that the Son comes from the Father through the Spirit. Our creeds, growing out of Matthew 28:18-20 and other biblical texts, speak of the order of the Trinity as Father, Son, Spirit, but Luke 1 suggests that it is equally biblical to say Father, Spirit, Son. Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:21-22) points to the same conclusion, especially the fact that the Father's words allude to Psalm 2 (Today I have begotten You) at the same time that Jesus receives the Spirit. This doesn't mean that Jesus was not God the Son prior to His baptism; but the public declaration of His Sonship occurs at His baptism, when He receives the Spirit. And some of Paul's statements about the resurrection show that the Father raises the Son from the dead through the Spirit (Romans 1:4; 8:11). In John's gospel, Jesus is the one born of the Spirit, whose voice is heard but whose origins and destiny are unknown (John 3:5-8).

Since God reveals His inner life in the economy of redemption, these events give us some insight into the inner life of God. The Father, according to Scripture and the creeds, eternally begets the Son; the Son is the only-begotten of the Father (John 1:14). But if the incarnation reveals the relation of the Father and Son, we can say that the Father eternally begets the

Son through the Spirit. The Spirit is the Love by which the Father begets the Son, and the Love through which the Son loves the Father. Since the Father is the Father only because He has a Son, we might even say that the Spirit through whom the Father begets the Son makes the Father the Father, even as, being the agent of begetting, He makes the Son the Son.

SO WHAT?

What does it matter? We can answer that question by noting the similarity between this Trinitarian pattern (the Father begets the Son through the Spirit) and the pattern of our redemption. Paul frequently teaches that we have received the Spirit so that we can be conformed to Christ the Son. Through Jesus, God has delivered us from the flesh and from death, to live in the Spirit (Romans 8:9). The Father raised us through the Spirit to a new life (Romans 7:6; 1 Thessalonians 4:7-8). The Spirit is the Spirit of Sonship that enables us to join in Jesus' address to His Father and conforms us to the life of the Son (Galatians 4:4-8). Through the Spirit, we are made sons, and if sons, then heirs. Through the Spirit, we are brought into the Triune community as sons, or, to change the image, as the bride of the Son.

In short, the order of the Trinity is revealed not only in the interrelations of the Persons, but in our redemption. The Father who eternally begot the Son through the Spirit now begets sons from sinners through the same Spirit. The incarnation is the presupposition and revelation of this pattern of redemption, and it shows that our salvation is not accidental or arbitrary, but is rooted in the very life of the Triune fellowship.

Leithart on the "Nestorian Shuffle":

In his book on *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* (St. Vladimir's, 2004), John McGuckin describes the Nestorian reading of the gospels. The gospels describe the birth and growth of the man Jesus, and also describe a person whose powers are beyond human powers – the power to raise the dead and to walk on the sea, for instance. At the same time, there is a unity to the character of the gospels, which Nestorius labels "Christ." McGuckin puts it this way: "For Nestorius, we are speaking about three central faith experiences: (a) Here is a man, limited by his humanness; (b) Here is also God the Logos, untrammelled in all his power; (c) Here is one and the same figure presenting this bi-polar reality to the eyes of faith and experience."

Nestorius insisted that the language of theology, piety, and worship must observe these distinctions: "Statements of type (a), for example, refer properly and strictly to the man Jesus of Nazareth. 'Jesus' should be the grammatical subject for all such sentences. Statements of type (b) refer

strictly and properly to the divine Logos. Statements of type (c) which attempt to remind the hearer of the single and yet bi-polar compositeness of the Lord, are to be referred neither to Jesus, nor to the divine Logos, but to an appropriately bi-polar set of confessional titles, which Nestorius specified to be: Christ, Only Begotten, Son, or Lord." By these rules, it would be a mistake to say that "Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead," for that is an act beyond human power; it is strictly the Logos that raised Lazarus.

As a result, "For Nestorius the language scheme of christological utterance was all revealing. Many of the traditional expressions of Christian piety such as 'God wrapped in swaddling bands' would be far better laid aside, or rephrased with regard for theological exactitude as 'Jesus was wrapped in swaddling bands' (if one wished to consider the pathetic humanness of the Lord), or 'The Son of God was wrapped in swaddling bands (if one wished to articulate a sense of the divine condescension involved in the incarnation). For Nestorius the phrase 'God wrapped in swaddling bands' was at worst blasphemous nonsense, or at best evidence of simple-mindedness and theological ineptitude."

Whatever the merits of Lindbeck's theory of doctrine as a set of grammatical rules may be in general, it offers an important perspective on the orthodox response to Nestorianism. The orthodox insistence on the "single subjectivity" of the Incarnate Son (something that Nestorius himself confessed in principle) was among other things a hermeneutical rule: Instead place of the Nestorian reading the gospels as now about the man Jesus and now about the Divine Logos, the orthodox insisted that the whole of the narrative was about none other than the Incarnate Logos. The orthodox response was an effort to correct the Nestorian shuffle, which, unhappily, is still quite popular.

And:

The Gospels obviously tell the life story of a human being. Jesus was born. He lived in subjection to his parents, grew up, learned a trade, made friends and enemies, walked the dusty roads of Judea, climbed mountains, and sailed the Sea of Galilee. He wept at the grave of Lazarus, passionately rebuked Pharisees, and lamented over Jerusalem. When Jesus got hungry, he ate; thirsty, he drank; tired, he slept; cut, he bled; crucified, he died.

The question that rocked the early Church was whether the Gospels record the human life *of God*. Arius said no. Whoever it was who was born, hungered, wept, suffered, and died, it *couldn't* be the Creator. God was too dignified to go through a birth canal or to shriek in agony from a Roman cross. Jesus must be a creature, albeit a creature so great that he deserves the honorific title "Son of God."

On the premises of ancient theology, Arius's conclusion was reasonable, but by the end of the fourth century, the Church had rejected it. Still, discomfort with the Gospel story remained even among those who confessed the creed. It reappeared in the early-fifth-century controversy that broke out when

Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, objected to calling Mary the “bearer of God” (*theotokos*).

Scholars debate whether Nestorius held the views attributed to him. Whatever Nestorius’s own beliefs, Nestorianism poses the old Arian questions at a new level. For Nestorians, Mary cannot be *theotokos* because God isn’t the kind of being who can be borne or born. Nestorians confess that Jesus is true God and true man, but they read the Gospels as the record of a double life. Jesus’s *humanity* was born of Mary, grew, and became hungry and tired and thirsty; but none of that happened or could happen to his divine nature, which has no beginning or need, cannot grow up, and cannot be acted upon. On the other hand, when the Gospels record Godlike actions such as healing the sick or driving away demons or being transfigured on the mountain, they are speaking of Jesus’s divinity.

That sounds reasonable, too, but the Church again drew the *unreasonable* conclusion that *God* was conceived and born of Mary. Arians and Nestorians kept God at a respectable distance from the all-too-human Jesus, but the Church closed the gap by insisting that, from beginning to end, the Gospels present the life of a single hero, Jesus, the incarnate Son of God. Arians and Nestorians thought they could understand divine nature without the Gospel, and then they tried to retrofit the Gospel into what they already knew. The orthodox did the opposite: They discerned that the Gospel reveals the only God who is, strange and disreputable as he may appear. If that meant revising all they thought they knew about God, so be it.

Apart from sects outside the mainstream of Christianity—Jehovah’s Witnesses being the most prominent—Arianism is no longer a viable option. Nestorianism has had more staying power. Many instinctively read the Gospels in a soft-Nestorian fashion, shifting from Jesus the man to Jesus the Son of God as seems appropriate. That “Nestorian shuffle” is a hard habit to break.

But it needs to be broken, since the good news depends on letting the Gospels re-teach us about God, the God who was “made like his brethren in all things” (Heb. 2:17). To become a sympathetic, saving priest, God the Son was born as an infant, learned to turn over and crawl; he learned to walk on human feet and to speak the language of his parents; he went through puberty, and no doubt his legs and arms were gangly for a time. God came near, entered into our weakness and misery, so that he could know and redeem human life from the inside. That is the good news of God, because it proclaims the God of the good news.

Unless we become little children, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven, Jesus said. The incarnation provides the deep rationale behind that command: We have not become like the God who is King in his kingdom until we mimic the God who humbled himself. And we don’t know the God who is until we know the God who became a baby.

Some of my favorite Christmas quotations:

The wonder of Christmas morning is that today we are summoned to look at the baby in the manger and recognise whose stamp, whose imprint, he bears. On Christmas morning we find ourselves gazing at God inside out. This baby is what you get when the stamp of divine nature leaves its exact imprint in the soft metal of a human being. Jesus is the coin that tells you whose country you are living in. Jesus is the seal that tells us whose authority the document carries. Jesus is the alphabet, Alpha and Omega, beginning and ending, Chi and Rho, the Christ, Sigma for Soter, Saviour, Tau for the cross – the letters that speak of his identity, his vocation, his victory. When the living God wants to become human, this is how he spells his name, spells it in the character, the exact imprint, of his own nature, writes it in flesh and blood, soft, vulnerable human tissue, stamps it into the innermost being of the foetus in Mary's womb, the light of the world who blinked and cried as his eyes opened to this world's light, the source of life who eagerly drank his own mother's milk. This is God inside out; O come, let us adore him. This truth is so dazzling, so nourishing, that we ourselves blink at its brightness even as we come to feed on its richness.

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N. T. Wright

The Lord held to this orderly plan in administering the covenant of his mercy: as the day of full revelation approached with the passing of time, the more he increased each day the brightness of its manifestation. Accordingly, at the beginning when the first promise of salvation was given to Adam it glowed like a feeble spark. Then, as it was added to, the light grew in fullness, breaking forth increasingly and shedding its radiance more widely. At last – when all the clouds were dispersed – Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, fully illumined the whole earth.

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John Calvin

This is the chief article, which separates us from all the heathen, that you, O man, may not only learn that Christ, born of the virgin, is the Lord and Savior, but also accept the fact that he is your Lord and Savior, that you may be able to boast in your heart: I hear the Word that sounds from heaven and says: This child who is born of the virgin is not only his

mother's son. I have more than the mother's estate; he is more mine than Mary's, for he was born for me, for the angel said, "To you" is born the Savior. Then ought you to say, Amen, I thank you, dear Lord.

But then reason says: Who knows? I believe that Christ, born of the virgin, is the Lord and Savior and he may perhaps help Peter and Paul, but for me, a sinner, he was not born. But even if you believed that much, it would still not be enough, unless there were added to it the faith that he was born for you. For he was not born merely in order that I should honor the mother.

This honor belongs to none except her and it is not to be despised, for the angel said, "Blessed are you among women!" [Luke 1:28]. But it must not be too highly esteemed lest one deny what is written here: "To you is born this day the Savior." He was not merely concerned to be born of a virgin; it was infinitely more than that. It was this, as she herself sings in the Magnificat: "He has helped his servant Israel" [Luke 1:54]; not that he was born of me and my virginity but born for you and for your benefit, not only for my honor.

Take yourself in hand, examine yourself and see whether you are a Christian! If you can sing: The Son, who is proclaimed to be a Lord and Savior, is my Savior; and if you can confirm the message of the angel and say yes to it and believe it in your heart, then your heart will be filled with such assurance and joy and confidence, and you will not worry much about even the costliest and best that this world has to offer. For when I can speak to the virgin from the bottom of my heart and say: O Mary, noble, tender virgin, you have borne a child; this I want more than robes and gold, yea, more than my body and life; then you are closer to the treasure than everything else in heaven and earth... You see how a person rejoices when he receives a robe or ten coins. But how many are there who shout and jump for joy when they hear the message of the angel: "To you is born this day the Savior?" Indeed, the majority look upon it as a sermon that must be preached, and when they have heard it, consider it a trifling thing, and go away just as they were before.

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Martin Luther

The central dogma of the Incarnation is that by which its [that is, Christianity's] relevance stands or falls. If Christ were only man, then he is irrelevant to any thought about God; if he is only God, then he is entirely irrelevant to any experience of human life.

...the outline of the official story—the tale of the time when God was the underdog and got beaten, when he submitted to the conditions he had laid down and became a man like the men he had made, and the men he had made broke him and killed him. This is the dogma we find so dull—this terrifying drama of which God is the victim and the hero.

If this is dull, then what, in Heaven's name, is worthy to be called exciting?

The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore; on the contrary, they thought him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified him 'meek and mild,' and recommended him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies....

For what it [that is, the Incarnation] means is this, among other things: that for whatever reason God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—he had the honesty and the courage to take his own medicine. Whatever game He is playing with His creation, He has kept His own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that He has not exacted from Himself. He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death. When He was a man, He played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile....

And here Christianity has its enormous advantage over every other religion in the world. It is the only religion that gives value to evil and suffering.

What do we find God 'doing about' this business of sin and evil?...God did not abolish the fact of evil; He transformed it. He did not stop the Crucifixion; He rose from the dead...

-- Dorothy Sayers

There are many of you in this congregation who think to yourselves: 'If only I had been there! How quick I would have been to help the Baby! I would have washed his linen. How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the Lord lying in the manger!' Yes, you would! You say that because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at that time you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. Childish and silly thoughts are these! Why don't you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor. You ought to serve him, for what you do to your neighbor in need you do to the Lord Christ himself.

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Martin Luther

"He came down from heaven" can almost be transposed into "Heaven drew earth up into it," and locality, limitation, sleep, sweat, footsore weariness, frustration, pain, doubt, and death are, from before all worlds, known by God from within. The pure light walks the earth; the darkness, received into the heart of Deity, is there swallowed up. Where, except in uncreated light, can the darkness be drowned?

-- C. S.

Lewis