An Unconventional GOD

THE SPIRIT according to JESUS

JACK LEVISON
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Glance at the number of times the word spirit occurs in the New Testament, and you will understand why Christians tend to look to the letters of Paul for their understanding of the Holy Spirit. References to pneuma (the Greek word usually translated as “spirit”) in his letters are, by the numbers, more conspicuous than in the Gospels. For every thousand words he writes, Paul refers to pneuma 4.78 times in his letter to the Romans, 5.85 times in 1 Corinthians, and a whopping 8.05 times in Galatians—nearly 1 percent of the words in this letter, counting even conjunctions such as kai and de.¹

With these numbers from Paul’s Letters in mind, turn now to the Gospels. In the Gospel of Matthew, pneuma makes up just over one (1.03) in a thousand words—one-tenth of a percent. In the Fourth Gospel, the word pneuma occurs just 1.53 times out of every thousand words. Luke’s Gospel contains 1.85 occurrences out of a thousand—surprisingly low, given that it is often identified as the Gospel of the Spirit. In the Gospel of Mark, pneuma occurs 2.03 times out of a thousand.²

¹. At times, I will refer to pneuma, but since this is a Greek word, it is subject to case declensions (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative), which result in a change of form. Occasionally I will refer to pneuma in the singular genitive case as pneumatos and in the singular dative case as pneumati.

². These numbers are based on the analysis of Accordance software, using Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., Novum Testamentum Graece, 28th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft: 2012).
The disparity between Paul’s Letters and the Gospels becomes particularly conspicuous when we consider that most of the references to pneuma in the Gospels are not to the Holy Spirit. Of the nearly two dozen references to pneuma in Mark’s Gospel, for instance, only six refer to the Holy Spirit, while thirteen—more than twice as many—refer to unclean spirits. Paul’s Letters, then, are far denser when it comes to the Holy Spirit.

Numbers are hardly inspiring, but they are indicative. A batting average of .350 is far more impressive than a batting average of .225. A shooting percentage in basketball of 50 percent, rather than 30 percent, can be the difference between advancing to the championship game and taking a long ride home. And most readers of this book know the difference between a 95 percent and a 65 percent on an exam. By the numbers, pneuma features much more prominently in the letters of Paul than the Gospels.

Yet numbers do not tell the whole story. The Holy Spirit, grasped from the vantage point of the Gospels, is uncommon, astonishing, unconventional even, because the Spirit becomes enmeshed in the tortured—literally, tortured—life of Jesus of Nazareth. The Spirit is part of a lifelong drama, consisting of conflicts whose flames Jesus fans.

As they remember his story, the authors of the four Gospels recollect that the uncommon presence of the Holy Spirit spanned Jesus’s life. The Spirit is, in a real sense, the tensive presence that holds together their narratives. Before Jesus even takes a step, some recall that the Holy Spirit inspired Elizabeth, Mary, Zechariah, and John the Baptist (still in Elizabeth’s belly) to pray or praise or find themselves—Mary, at least—pregnant. They remember the descent of the Holy Spirit at Jesus’s baptism, the force of the Holy Spirit in the wilderness, Jesus’s dire warning about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, his assurance of the Holy Spirit for martyrs, and even the promise of the Holy Spirit after his death.

4. Mark 1:23, 26, 27; 3:11, 30; 5:2, 8, 13; 6:7; 7:25; 9:17, 20, 25. Two references are to Jesus’s spirit (2:8; 8:12), and one is to Jesus saying that the spirit is willing, though the flesh is weak (14:38).
The four Gospels, of course, are not homogeneous. No one ironed out the creases in the story so that all four Gospels speak with one voice, but the presence of the Spirit with Jesus is decisive in all four Gospels. It is almost inconceivable, for example, to imagine Jesus’s life without the descent of the Holy Spirit at his baptism. So crucial, so critical was that moment for what was about to unfold that the descent of the dove is one of those rare scenes that appear in all four Gospels.

The impact of the Holy Spirit on Jesus is pivotal to all four Gospels, and recognizing that the life of Jesus gives the Holy Spirit a unique tenor that occurs nowhere else in the annals of early Christian literature is just as essential. The impact of Jesus’s story on the portrayal of the Holy Spirit in the Gospels is dramatic: there is just one moment in the whole of Jesus’s life when he rejoices in the Holy Spirit, and this in only one of the Gospels (Luke 10:21). One moment of joy. One glimpse of gladness. When the Holy Spirit is taken up in the currents that would lead to Jesus’s death, a certain grimness, a foreboding emerges. Jesus never engenders a naive hope of tranquility. Determined rather to ensure the fidelity of his followers after his death, Jesus understands the Holy Spirit in terms other than joy and gladness. Faithfulness to the point of death, yes. Reliability, to be sure. An exacting imitation of Jesus, absolutely. These are a few of the unmistakable marks of the Holy Spirit in the Gospels.

The Gospels offer what is not presented elsewhere in the New Testament, where the fruits of the Holy Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23) and where the gifts of the Spirit are an utterance of wisdom, an utterance of knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, the discernment of spirits, various kinds of tongues, and

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5. My assumption is that the Gospel of Mark is the earliest Gospel and that the authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke had access to Mark’s Gospel as they wrote their own. The Gospel of John—the Fourth Gospel—may be related to the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), though what I have written in this book is not dependent on a decision about whether the author of the Fourth Gospel knew any or all of the others.

6. The birth stories of Luke 1–2 present the Holy Spirit as the source of blessing and praise, but these are about the impact of the Spirit before Jesus is an adult. You will find an analysis of these birth stories in chap. 1.
the interpretation of tongues (1 Cor. 12:8–10). There is, of course, some overlap between the letters of Paul and the stories of Jesus. For instance, there is the inspiration of a message focused on the cross (1 Cor. 2:1–5). There is the association of joy with the Holy Spirit in the Pauline Letters (Rom. 14:17; 15:13; Gal. 5:22; 1 Thess. 1:6) and words that express joy early in Luke’s Gospel (Luke 1:41, 67), as well as Jesus’s single instance of rejoicing in the Spirit (Luke 10:21). There is also a connection between the Holy Spirit and healing (1 Cor. 12:9), as in the Gospels and Acts (e.g., Matt. 12:9–21; Acts 10:37–38).

Yet those who remembered the impact of the Holy Spirit on Jesus did not transform the Spirit wholesale into a source of abiding joy and peace and patience and kindness or anything that resembles speaking in tongues. Nor could they, bound as they were by the memory of Jesus—a memory that gave the Holy Spirit a dimmer tenor, a darker hue, overshadowed as it was by the long obedience of Jesus.

Refracted through the prism of Jesus’s life and death, therefore, the Holy Spirit shows up in the oddest situations and the most baffling teachings of Jesus—in desert sojourns, in a strange saying about scorpions and snakes, in puzzling adages about birth from above and springs from below. The Gospels disclose an alien world of the Spirit, a world that mystifies, challenges, and invigorates. This is the unconventional yet ultimately inspiring world of the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of the Gospels—that fills the pages of this book.

7. In 1 Cor. 2:1–5, Paul writes, “When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.”

1

Spirit and the Swell of Expectation
This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn’t want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carried was conceived by the Holy Spirit.”

Matthew 1:18–20 CEB

The angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the Lord’s eyes. He must not drink wine and liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Luke 1:13–17 CEB

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David’s house. The virgin’s name was Mary. When the angel came to her, he said, “Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!” She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob’s house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom.”

Then Mary said to the angel, “How will this happen since I haven’t had sexual relations with a man?”

The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God’s Son. Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled ‘unable to conceive’ is now six months pregnant. Nothing is impossible for God.”

Then Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

Luke 1:26–38 CEB
When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, “God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her.”

Luke 1:41–45 CEB

John’s father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied,

“Bless the Lord God of Israel because he has come to help and has delivered his people.”


A man named Simeon was in Jerusalem. He was righteous and devout. He eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn’t die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area. Meanwhile, Jesus’ parents brought the child to the temple so that they could do what was customary under the Law. Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. He said,

“Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word, because my eyes have seen your salvation. You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples. It’s a light for revelation to the Gentiles and a glory for your people Israel.”

His father and mother were amazed by what was said about him. Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your innermost being too.”

Luke 2:25–35 CEB

Two Stories, One Source

The story of Jesus’s birth is really two stories. The first two chapters of Matthew’s Gospel could hardly be more different from the first two of Luke’s Gospel.
Matthew’s birth stories are taut with mathematical precision, like the work of the ancient astrologers who navigated deserts and seas, oceans and mountains, by calculating the stars and their movements. One miscalculated degree could bring devastation and disaster. Matthew writes of magi and a brilliant star settling over a nondescript house; he writes, too, as if he were one of the magi, with astronomical fastidiousness, with immense control, as if life depended on it, which it did for ancient sailors and nomads. Even Matthew’s genealogies occur in three precise sets of fourteen generations each, as if to say, “You should have known this would happen! You could have counted on it.” The stories he tells are crisp and methodical. He tells five of them—this number evoking the five books of Torah, the Pentateuch—each one bristling with accuracy. These are not random stories collected ad hoc but stories collated, specially selected, gauged to drive home one point: the events surrounding Jesus’s birth, five in all, happened to fulfill what had been spoken earlier by Israel’s prophets. When we read Matthew’s genealogies and birth stories, which open the curtain to the drama ahead, we are audience to an algorithm, captives to theological calculation. Numbers don’t lie—at least not these numbers. Matthew points this out with forty-two generations, five stories, two parents, and one child.

Compare this with Luke’s take on the action surrounding Jesus’s birth, which, so unlike Matthew’s Gospel, bursts with the unfathomable. The birth of a baby to an old couple is so shocking that the old man is struck dumb until his son’s birth; he simply cannot fathom what has happened through his own rumpled frame or what is happening to his wife’s geriatric body, in which the Holy Spirit has concocted a strange alchemy of life. Then there is the young unmarried woman, who is just as shockingly pregnant. “How can this be?” she asks. It’s a wonder that leaves one wondering. All of these people, old Zechariah and Elizabeth, along with young Mary—Joseph is nowhere to be seen (not yet, anyway)—are shocked and elated at this pair of births. Each of them also has something to say—something full of praise and blessing and joy and glee. So does Simeon, another old man who has waited and waited for this day—Simeon, who meets the poor young parents in the temple and thanks God that his eyes have finally seen God’s salvation. This is a time of yearning and surprise,
expectation and bewilderment. It is a time of birth and babies, of pregnancies and praise. Angels sing above; shepherds scuttle below. The joy is immeasurable.

Luke’s Gospel begins with an infinity of grace, Matthew’s with the calculus of hope. At the center of both sets of stories—Matthew’s measured five and Luke’s rush of canticles—lies an uncannily similar perspective. Not just the baby Jesus, whose birth is the glue. There is also a hue, an atmosphere, an ambience. For both Matthew and Luke, the Jewish Scriptures are essential, indispensable for grasping what went on in those early, heady days. They are the leaven, the bread that is baking in the oven. They are a background scent, yes, rich and undeniable and welcoming. Yet there is something more to these stories. The Holy Spirit is also essential, indispensable for grasping what went on with the first glimmer of inspiration. And here is the rub: the Spirit is essential not because something altogether new was happening—the birth of Christianity, let’s say—but because something old, ancient, yet timeless was coming to fruition. The Holy Spirit is central to the birth of Jesus not so much to spawn something new as to spark something old, not so much to invent as to ignite.

Born of Holy Spirit

In Matthew’s Gospel, there is no gush of the Spirit, no filling, no songs of celebration. There is, however, political intrigue: a paranoid king destined to destroy his family and anyone else who gets in his way—the Jewish historian Josephus tells us as much. There is propriety too: the impulse to divorce a woman like Mary, who seems patently promiscuous to her betrothed. There is urgency as well: the struggle to survive as refugees in Egypt. Whereas angelic canticles in heaven, the poetry of wonder on earth, and an uncommon concatenation of praise and prayer belong in the Gospel of Luke, Matthew’s Gospel features unforgiving lines of political and personal scandals.

It is here, at risk of personal scandal, that a staid Matthew introduces the Holy Spirit. Matthew’s Jesus dots his i’s and crosses his t’s: he claims that not a jot or tittle will pass away from Torah.
So does Joseph before him. Joseph, too, wants to get it right in the face of potentially ruinous scandal. He will dismiss Mary properly, inconspicuously—but Joseph’s plans are shattered. Enter the Holy Spirit, who changes everything by transforming a disgraceful pregnancy into a virtuous birth. The Holy Spirit does not just avert scandal; the Holy Spirit converts scandal into virtue. When Joseph resolves to dismiss Mary quietly—itself an exercise in constraint—“an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘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’” (Matt. 1:20 alt.).

There is something surprisingly eerie and inexact about Matthew’s language here. He does not say that what is conceived is from the Holy Spirit but “from holy spirit” (Greek, ek pneumatos estin hagion). At no time in this short scene does he deploy the definite article so that we can say, “Oh, that Holy Spirit.” Matthew could just as well be saying, “The child conceived in her is from a holy spirit.” It may be that mystery has eclipsed accuracy, and we should leave it at that. Probably not—because lying in the background of this story wafts the inevitable scent of the Old Testament.

Two passages in the Old Testament—and only two—refer to “holy spirit.” They are so different from each other that they call for entirely different interpretations of Jesus’s birth, depending on which one you think lies behind Matthew’s Gospel. Both Old Testament passages endow this story with richness and resonance—without them our understanding of Jesus’s birth sounds tinny by comparison.

The first passage occurs in a lament in Isaiah 63, where the prophet pleads, “Where is the one who put within them his holy spirit?” (Isa. 63:11). The prophet is perplexed by the absence of the Spirit in his day, especially when he looks back to the exodus, the story of Israel’s liberation, when God put God’s Holy Spirit within Israel. At that distant time, he believes, God led the people from Egypt into the promised land by means of God’s Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit took on the role of the pillars of cloud and fire and of the angel God authorized to lead the people to safety.1

1. You will find an interpretation of this poem in the eighth chapter of my A Boundless God: The Spirit according to the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020). Key biblical texts include Exod. 13:21–22; 14:19; 23:20–24. For a
Is it any surprise that the Holy Spirit, who inspired the exodus, should now show up to inspire the birth of the Messiah? After all, Matthew himself sees the parallel between Israel’s secure ascent from Egypt over a thousand years earlier and the ascent of Jesus’s family from Egypt in safety (Matt. 2:13–23). Imagine this: Mary’s pregnancy is not due to happenstance or infidelity—not at all! The Holy Spirit in her is the same Holy Spirit that liberated Israel from an irascible tyrant; Herod the Great stands no chance against the sway of this Holy Spirit. From the vantage point of Isaiah 63, the birth of Jesus, occasioned by the Holy Spirit within Mary, is the culmination of a long story of leading, designing, and delivering. Is it too much to say, in light of Isaiah 63, that the water of Mary’s womb, awake now with the Holy Spirit, is like a latter-day Red Sea, through which Israel, alert to the Holy Spirit within them, can be liberated? This is a great deal to invest in a single birth, but this is the birth of the Messiah (as Matthew puts it), after all.

The lament in Isaiah 63, then, is a perfect backdrop to Jesus’s birth—or is it? Psalm 51 also refers to holy spirit, but this poem from the Old Testament understands this spirit in a dramatically different way from Isaiah 63. The psalmist begs God,

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit. (Ps. 51:10–12)²

The sacrifice acceptable to God is “a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart” (Ps. 51:17).

In this Old Testament poem, the spirit is something within a human being—a new spirit, a right spirit, a willing spirit, a holy spirit. From this perspective, the holy spirit in Mary may be her own

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² You will find a more thorough analysis of this psalm in my Filled with the Spirit (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 28–33.

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holy spirit; Mary could be pregnant because of the sanctity of her spirit. This reading is possible because the original Greek twice lacks the definite article, *the*; Mary is pregnant because of a holy spirit—*her* holy spirit. Had Matthew intended to refer to the Holy Spirit, he might easily have said so with the definite article, but he does not. His grammar, which is usually cautious and careful, leaves open the possibility that Mary’s sanctity makes her the right woman to bear the Messiah, Jesus. She was pregnant due to a holy spirit, or as the angel puts it, the child conceived in her is the product of a holy spirit. Joseph need not worry; Mary’s spirit remains holy, appearances to the contrary.

There is irony here. According to tradition, David wrote Psalm 51 after his ill-conceived affair with Bathsheba. (Bathsheba, remember, is one of the sexually suspect women—along with Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and Mary—who populate the genealogy that opens Matthew’s Gospel.) Guilty, the adulterous king begs for a willing, upright, and holy spirit. Where is the irony? Mary, whose pregnancy looks like the product of an illicit tryst, has the willing, upright, and holy spirit for which a chastened David pleaded.

With this particular Old Testament foreground, we are a long way from the traditional Christian belief that Jesus was “conceived by the Holy Ghost.” That interpretation fits the birth stories if Isaiah 63 lies in the background—if the Holy Spirit who led Israel from within now works within Mary to bring about a new exodus through the leadership of the Messiah. That interpretation does *not* fit the birth stories if Psalm 51 lies in the background—if Mary has the sanctity of spirit that makes her the perfect mother of the Messiah. The angel assures Joseph, therefore, that this pregnancy arises not from Mary’s infidelity or a lapse in discipline but from her peculiar holiness.

This discussion is not an effort to undermine a cherished Christian belief. It is an attempt to give grammar its due. The brevity of Matthew’s prose permits a variety of interpretations but also prevents us from holding any one too tightly. This story may set Mary’s pregnancy into Israel’s narrative of exodus (Isa. 63), or it may recall Psalm 51, in which a fallen king begs for a willing, upright, and holy spirit. Whatever we make of Matthew’s telling of the story, the scent of the Jewish Scriptures is there, taking us back to a distant past.
The birth of the Messiah “from holy spirit” evokes the thrill of the exodus and the chill of a contrite king.

But it is not a birth at all—not exactly. Matthew begins the story in this way: “Now the genesis of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way” (Matt. 1:18, my translation). His selection of a single Greek word, genesis, translated too often and too blandly as “birth,” takes us back over the entire span of the Spirit in Scripture to the poetry of creation. The majestic poem of creation concludes, “This is the book of the origin [genesis] of heaven and earth” (Gen. 2:4 NETS). The cadence of creation rises with this solitary word. By writing so economically, so efficiently, Matthew opens the curtain to the entire scope, the breathtaking compass, of Israel’s Scriptures.

The birth of Jesus, therefore, is less an impregnation than a cosmic creation—a genesis—that evokes the Spirit’s hovering over the water: “Yet the earth was invisible and unformed, and darkness was over the abyss, and a [spirit of God swept] over the water” (Gen. 1:2 NETS). Already in some of Scripture’s first words, the Spirit is active, even before a word is spoken. Now, that Spirit swirls in Mary’s womb.

The Birth of the Baptist

An economy of words opens to the divine economy in Matthew’s Gospel. The Spirit may not rush or clothe or pour or rest, as the Spirit does throughout the Jewish Scriptures. The Spirit may not fill the faithful, as in the book of Acts. Yet in a measured and meaningful way, the Spirit evokes the entire sweep of Israel’s history—creation, exodus, kingship—in spare but significant words: genesis and from holy spirit.

Luke’s Gospel is less tidy when it comes to the Spirit—less spare, certainly less measured, more unkempt, and altogether imbalanced. Praise gushes untrammeled in the wake of both Zechariah’s and Mary’s bewilderment. Whereas the Holy Spirit appears in only one scene, though a notable and puzzling one, in the Gospel of Matthew,
that Spirit—not a spirit—dominates the drama in the Gospel of Luke, from gestation to Jesus’s guest appearance as a young man in his hometown synagogue. This is no pedestrian drama. In this Gospel, the Holy Spirit is hard at work before Jesus’s birth, inspiring pregnancy, praise, and promise.

John the Baptist is the first to fall prey to the Spirit’s power, not in the guise of something new but in the garb of something old. The angel’s predictions are bathed in the Jewish Scriptures: “For he [John] will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even from the womb of his mother he will be filled with holy spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:15–17 alt.). Virtually every ingredient of this prediction enhances the prophetic character of John’s vocation. Like both the Israelite judge Samson (Judg. 13:4–5) and the seer Samuel, who anointed David (1 Sam. 1:9–15), the Baptist will abstain from wine. Like the famed prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 1:5), the Baptist will be set apart before birth (Luke 1:15). Living in “the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17), the Baptist will follow in the steps of Elisha, who received a double portion of Elijah’s spirit when his mentor ascended in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:9–15). And his ability to “turn the hearts of parents to their children” (Luke 1:17) will identify him as Elijah returned; this is what the prophet Malachi predicted in what are the last words of the last prophet in the Old Testament: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse” (Mal. 4:5–6). Finally, the angel’s last words to Zechariah, “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17), are the ones that stick. They appear in one form or another in each of the four Gospels. Like so much in the angelic announcement, they too erupt from the Old Testament—from Isaiah 40 to be exact:

5. This order represents the Christian Old Testament. The order in the Jewish Scriptures ends with 2 Chronicles.
A voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight the paths of our God.” (Isa. 40:3 NETS)

Extract the Old Testament phrases from the angel’s announcement, and you have virtually nothing left. No threads. No fabric. Nothing. And at the heart of this announcement is the Spirit. Before birth the Baptist will be filled with the Spirit. He will live in the spirit and power of Elijah—the grand stream of the prophetic Spirit.

The Gospel of Luke dispels the myth that the Holy Spirit was not at work until Pentecost, until the birth of Christianity. These were not Christians who received the Spirit; these were Jews. They were the first to play a role in the story of Jesus, who was yet another in a line of Jews filled with the Spirit.

We should hardly be surprised that the Spirit erupts months before Jesus’s birth or years before Pentecost. These are faithful people, good people. Zechariah and Elizabeth, long in the tooth but childless, were not willing to shirk the disciplines of faith for that reason; they were both “righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord” (Luke 1:6). Even after the angel spoke and chastised Zechariah with speechlessness for not believing on the spot—in a moment of ill-founded unfaith, Zechariah happened to raise the problem of their age to the angel Gabriel—Zechariah continued to serve in the temple. Only “when his time of service was ended,” that day, and not a moment before, did he go “to his home” (1:23). No excuses for the old man, no eluding the necessary work of the righteous, no shirking or skulking away from daily trudges to the temple.

And the old couple might have found a reason to give up on God. Their barrenness had cost them dearly in a culture that prized the production of heirs. After hearing about the angelic promise, Elizabeth would say only this (that we know of) in five months of seclusion: “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people” (Luke 1:25). God did not just look favorably; God also took away disgrace. Disgrace may not yet be forgotten, but it lingers in the shadow of grace.
A Burst of Inspired Blessing

It is difficult to imagine what Elizabeth felt as she cradled a baby. Luke does not describe her experience in terms of a swollen belly, an aching back, seasons of gestation, the glow of pregnancy, or the precarious straits of birth. Luke describes her experience in terms of the Holy Spirit. Then, six months after Zechariah was told Elizabeth would bear a prophet, Mary visits with the news of her own pregnancy: “When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord’” (Luke 1:41–45). Praise and blessing gush, inspired, from Elizabeth. Twice she calls her younger cousin “blessed” (eulogēmenē) and once more, “blessed” (makaria). Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, blesses, blesses, and blesses again.

This is not a tame telling, a whispered word of encouragement or murmured sisterly advice. Elizabeth “was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud voice” (Luke 1:41 alt.). For a sense of the intensity of that experience, we need to pause over these words.

Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the word translated “fill” (mālē’) means absolute fullness. A pregnancy that comes to term is filled (Gen. 25:24). A period of purification that is completed is filled (Lev. 12:4, 6). Spaces, too, are filled. When Egyptian houses are filled with swarms of flies, more than a few flies can be expected (Exod. 8:21; 8:17 MT). When the

7. Jacob’s wait for Rachel was filled when it was over (Gen. 29:21). A vow is fulfilled (Num. 6:5). Banquets that end are filled (Esther 1:5). When the Babylonian exile ended, it was filled (Jer. 25:12).

8. Frequently the verse numbers in the Hebrew are different than in English because they were added long after the original writings were penned and at a time when many versions existed. The process, in other words, was not seamless or controlled. My friend Ben Wright, editor of an English translation of the Septuagint (an early Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament that contains many other books besides), wrote that verses differ for different reasons in different books: “With books like Joshua and Judges different translations were preserved. In
hem of God’s robe fills the temple, more than a tip of the garment occupies the inner sanctum (Isa. 6:1). When Jeremiah protests that the land is filled with idols, he means to say the land is polluted to the full (Jer. 16:18). When the Jordan fills its banks, the river floods those banks (Josh. 3:15).9 Birthing, swarming, polluting, flooding, filling. Elizabeth was filled to the brim with the Holy Spirit.

Filled with the Spirit, Elizabeth exclaims (anaphônein). This Greek word occurs only five times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, all in the books of Chronicles, where worship is raucous, riotous, and rambunctious. In the very last use of this word, the Israelites gathered in unison with trumpets and harps and singing and acclamation, and “raised a sound with trumpets and cymbals and instruments of songs. . . . And the house was filled with a cloud of the Lord’s glory” (2 Chron. 5:13 NETS). Just as the house was filled with a cloud of God’s glory in a moment of unbridled praise, so now Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit in a moment of unbridled—perhaps even raucous, riotous, and rambunctious—praise.

Finally, Elizabeth exclaims with a loud voice (kraugê megalê). If this seems at odds with her persona as the righteous, blameless, elderly, dutiful wife of Zechariah, it is. Luke adopts this phrase in just one other instance, toward the close of the book of Acts, where he describes a violent confrontation between Pharisees and Sadducees prompted by none other than the apostle Paul. The skirmish grows so violent that the Romans send in soldiers to squelch it (Acts 23:9–10). Perhaps Elizabeth, after five months of seclusion with a baby in her
belly, can’t help but shout blessings at the top of her lungs, filled as she is with the Holy Spirit.

The Birth of a Savior

Surprises mount in Luke’s story of wondrous births, and so does bewilderment. This time it is not an old married man but a young single woman who is baffled by an angel’s words. The angel Gabriel visits Mary, announces her pregnancy, and then responds to her question, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?,” with still another pronouncement: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God” (Luke 1:34–35). Mary is doubly bewildered, both by being told she is favored (1:28, 30) and by being told she will conceive a son.

It is difficult to know what a Galilean peasant girl would have understood about sex and conception, but we do know that, in the annals of ancient Greek physiology, the man was thought to have the power of conception, since *pneuma*—spirit-breath—vitalized his sperm. The woman’s uterus, in essence, was thought to function as a vessel for his vitality. The angel might have said, along the lines of ancient biology, “A *pneuma* will enter you and create a son inside you.” Now *that* a Galilean girl might have understood.

However, Mary understands enough to know that the angel is not saying that Joseph’s *pneuma*/sperm will become vital in her. That is why she asks, “How can this happen, since I don’t know a man?” (Luke 1:34, my translation). Something else is being promised—or threatened—here. Mary, young and unsophisticated, knows this full well.

This explosive conversation between angel and virgin has cast a spell over centuries of Christian thought. But is it a conversation about the virgin birth? Not necessarily. Gabriel does not say, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and you will be pregnant.” Gabriel does say, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God” (Luke 1:35). Understood in
this way, the pronouncement is less about the mechanics of Mary’s pregnancy than about the character of her son. The “therefore” that links the first and second halves of the promise connects the Holy Spirit with the holiness of the child and the power of the Most High with the Son of God. When the Greek is read in this way, the Holy Spirit will not cause Mary to become pregnant; the Spirit will ensure that her child will be holy. Holy Spirit, holy son.10

We have seen this move before. When the angel talked to Zechariah about his soon-to-be son, nearly everything in the promise, a kaleidoscope of Old Testament phrases, was about that son. The focus was not on conception; the accent did not fall on a miraculous birth. That is why when Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesies later, he waxes eloquent not about the conception or birth of John the Baptist, as marvelous and miraculous as they may be, but about God’s decisive action in the world, about raising up a savior, about remembering promises and covenants and oaths, about making space for a people who will worship in holiness and justice all their days. Zechariah knows that his son will be pivotal to this grand plan, so he concludes his prophecy with a word to his son that is, as we have come to expect, full of Old Testament hopes and dreams:

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:76–79)

Luke does not paint a picture of Zechariah adoringly rubbing Elizabeth’s distended belly. It is not the conception that matters so much as the impact this child will have as a prophet preparing the way

10. This discussion does not dispense with belief in the virgin birth; it does suggest that the Greek syntax can be read in different ways, at least one of which may not have a virgin birth in view at all.
of the Lord (Isa. 40:3), breaking the dawn (Isa. 58:8), bringing light to those who sit in darkness (Isa. 42:7), doing the hard labor of God’s work. There is not an ounce of soppiness or a whiff of sentimentality in Zechariah’s prophecy—as if Luke is daring us to romanticize this pregnancy, which is itself pregnant with political impact.

The angel’s announcement to Mary follows the same pattern: “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” (Luke 1:31–33). There is no promise here of the glow of a second trimester or the cooing of a baby in the soft light of dawn. Mary’s son will be Joshua by name, a military leader and Moses’s successor; her son will occupy the throne of David and rule over the house of Jacob with an eternal kingdom. Small wonder that Mary is bewildered by what she hears. So Gabriel explains, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God” (Luke 1:35). Again, he responds to her question not with the mechanics of birth but with a description of her son. In both Gabriel’s initial promise (1:31–33) and his response to her question (1:35), the weight of angelic words rests heavily on the upcoming rule of Mary’s unborn child.

It is not the biology of conception, even inspired conception, that grabs the spotlight in Luke’s Gospel—or Matthew’s, for that matter. It is not the physiology of birth, even a miraculous one, nor anatomy, even inexplicable anatomy, that lies at the center of this story. It is the scope of God’s story—a story about a remembering, rescuing, redeeming God who catalyzes these births to reshape history.

In Matthew’s Gospel, the genesis of Jesus from holy spirit recalls a story that spans the magnificence of creation, the miracle of exodus, and the misery of an errant king. In Luke’s Gospel, the Holy Spirit is joined at the hip to the power that will overshadow Mary. This verb “overshadow” (episkiazesthai) is an evocative one because it, like so many of the nouns and verbs that cluster around the Holy Spirit in Matthew and Luke, is embedded in Israel’s history. Israel’s poets, the psalmists, lay claim to this power. They know that God’s pinions can...
overshadow those who live in the shelter of the Most High (Ps. 91:4; 90:4 LXX). The psalmist claims that God is a strong deliverer who “overshadowed my head in the day of battle” (Ps. 140:7 alt.; 139:8 LXX). And most poignant of all, when Israel, fresh from the exodus, builds a tabernacle—a sacred tent in which Moses meets God—they recognize the cloud of God’s glory, which overshadows the tabernacle in the wilderness so forcefully that “Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Exod. 40:35).

Divine rescue. Divine guidance. Divine glory. All of this was palpable in those earliest days of liberation from Egypt, long before the advent of Rome, which overshadowed Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph. Later in Luke’s Gospel, the verb overshadow reinforces another renewal of God’s glory. At the transfiguration of Jesus, “a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’” (Luke 9:34–35). This is tabernacle language. The overshadowing cloud, coupled with the divine voice that reiterates what Jesus heard at his baptism, communicates that God is present with Jesus, Elijah, and Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration, just as God safeguarded Israel in the mountain at Sinai.

For now, the power of God, the Holy Spirit, will overshadow a girl from Galilee who receives a straightforward if unsettling promise. The Holy Spirit again descends on a sacred space—not a tent in an unforgiving wilderness but the belly of a suddenly pregnant woman.

The Spirit and Simeon

The Holy Spirit appears next at the fringes of the temple, in the world of widows and old men and peasants from Galilee. Luke describes an old man with unusually lavish language, including three rapid-fire references to the Spirit: “Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see
death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple” (Luke 2:25–27). Though it is invisible to the powers that be, Simeon is inspired—three times inspired. The Spirit rests on him. The Spirit reveals to him. The Spirit guides him.

What he says as the result of the inspiration is surprising only to those who have failed to read what precedes Simeon’s story in the Gospel of Luke. When Simeon sees the child, he lifts the baby in his arms and praises God in words known to the church as the Nunc Dimittis:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;
A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel. (Luke 2:29–32 KJV)

Like every canticle, every promise, and every prediction about John the Baptist and Jesus, this prayer, too, drips with the Old Testament. Simeon’s song, though it seems extemporaneous and unplanned, is in fact deliberately suffused with the dream of the Old Testament—Isaiah 40–55 to be exact. If his song were a jigsaw puzzle and every phrase of it a separate piece, we would likely discover that each piece of the puzzle is a snippet of Isaiah 40–55. Take those phrases away and, like Gabriel’s promise to Zechariah, nothing would be left on which to hold.

This is not surprising; Simeon has waited for the consolation of Israel. This is a shorthand reminder of Isaiah 40:1–2, which begins, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” Simeon, like Zechariah and the angel before him, understands that the advent of the baby is the inauguration of the liberation that this ancient prophet anticipated. Simeon’s belief that Jesus will be “a light to lighten the Gentiles” stems from Isaiah 42:6, “I have given you as . . . a light to the nations.” Even Simeon’s belief that Jesus comes “for glory to your people Israel” echoes Isaiah 46:13: “I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory.”

Simeon’s private words to Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed” (Luke 2:34), also grow from the soil of Isaiah 40–55.
Opposition will be the hallmark of the child’s destiny. He will become, in short, the suffering servant, whose uncompromising expansion of God’s reign to all nations—not just Israel—leads him to personal anguish (Isa. 42:2–3), to the torment of having his beard torn out and his back beaten (50:4–7), and to an early, ignominious death (53:7–12). With the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Simeon captures the majesty of Jesus’s ministry—he will be a light to the nations—and the misery of his death, like the servant long before him. This is a remarkable perception, a truly astute—Luke would say inspired—observation about Jesus’s destiny, a destiny that would thrust a sword through Mary’s soul.

When we realize that Simeon’s song is a collage of words and ideas originally lodged in Isaiah 40–55, we learn something important about the Holy Spirit. Simeon, who receives guidance and revelation because the Spirit rests on him, is a figure of epic inspiration. We know nothing else about him—except that he was a student of the book of Isaiah. Simeon is ripe to lift this peasant son in his arms because the whole of his being is saturated by the prophetic vision of Isaiah 40–55. Simeon is inspired, in other words, because he is vigilant, because he is regular in devotion, and because he has studied the poignant prophecies of Isaiah 40–55, which he now sees taking shape in a small Galilean boy who will be a light to the nations and offer salvation to all the world’s peoples.

Though set against the backdrop of Jewish kings (Luke 1:5) and Roman emperors (2:1), the characters occupying the stage of John the Baptist’s and Jesus’s birth are negligible. No lucre need be prised from their clenched fists; they are not the stuff of Plutarch’s Lives. They are inconspicuous—but faithful, too—disciplined in prayer and study, and committed to a regimen of Jewish fidelity. If these first stories in Luke’s Gospel teach nothing else, it is that an experience of the Holy Spirit rises from regular devotion. Prophecy and blessing arise from singular dedication. Such discipline, such devotion, such dedication—the crucible of inspiration—angle toward that single significant moment, when all that has been learned will come together in a dazzling, long-awaited, yet still unexpected salvation of God, as surprising as a Nazarene baby carried to the temple by his peasant parents with two turtledoves in tow.