

The Infancy Gospels – “vehicles of christology” or Revelation of Christ?

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- a discussion of the introduction of R.E. Brown’s book “The Birth of the Messiah”

1. Introduction

One of the most outstanding exegetes of the last decades was Raimond E. Brown. His work “The Birth of the Messiah” (1972) was already considered a “standard work on the subject for years to come” when it first appeared; it was also said that it “synthesizes a generation of modern scholarship”¹. Therefore it seems useful to see what Brown said about the historicity of the Infancy Gospels.

2. Rough spots – Witnesses of the infancy events

The first thing Brown indicates is that the Infancy Gospels differ significantly from the main body of Gospel material, and that there are some “rough spots” left by the joining of the Infancy Gospels to the Ministry Gospels, the gospels concerning Jesus’ public ministry². During Jesus’ public life nobody knew of Jesus’ miraculous birth in Bethlehem: not his disciples or his adversaries or the people³. His mother Mary didn’t tell about it and his relative John the Baptist didn’t know Him⁴. From these “rough spots” in the Ministry Gospels – which can be harmonized with the Infancy Gospels by only one simple assumption (see below and in my article “Jesus and Moses – Mary Magdalene”, www.JesusKing.info) – Brown proceeds with a number of arguments and concludes that there are no corroborating witnesses of the infancy events that could have been the source(s) of the two Infancy Gospels. To him this supposed absence of sources raises “doubts about the historicity of the infancy narratives”: he says that they are “not necessarily history”⁵. Now, although it’s obvious that ‘not necessarily historical’ doesn’t exclude the possibility of ‘both historical’, it is nevertheless useful to see that the arguments used by Brown to arrive at his conclusion aren’t all valid.

a. Not the apostles

It seems to be true that the apostles were ignorant about Jesus’ Bethlehem birth and that therefore they can’t have been the sources of the Infancy Gospels.

b. Mary

The reasons why it is thought by some that Mary could not have been the witness and source, are the following:

¹ R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, Yale University Press 1977, back cover

² Ibid, 26, 32

³ John 7,40-43, 50-53, Matt 13,53-58, Luke 4,31-32, 36-37; Brown, *The Birth*, 33

⁴ John 1,31; their mothers Elisabeth and Mary are blood relatives, Luke 1,36, 57-63; 3,1-3

⁵ Brown, *The Birth*, 32-34

1. The Blessed Virgin Mary didn't tell about Jesus' Bethlehem birth, or about his virginal conception during Jesus' public life and therefore, according to Brown, she can not have been the source of the Infancy Gospels⁶.

But the fact that she didn't tell about it during Jesus' public life, does not preclude that she may have been one of the sources at a later stage. The reason why Mary may have acted this way can be:

a) Jesus Himself could tell about the virginal conception and birth at Bethlehem, but He didn't, and Mary may have thought that at a certain stage He would.

b) In Cana she was told by Jesus that his relation with her was not to be a public issue (yet) and that his hour had not yet come:

O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come. (John 2,4 RSV)
(Τι εμοι και σοι, γυναι NA²⁷)

This, Mary can have understood as meaning that the true relation between herself (Jesus' virgin mother) and Himself (the Son of God born in Bethlehem) was yet to be revealed at a later stage, after his hour had come.

2. According to Brown it is impossible that Mary would have been the source of the two Infancy Gospels or even of one of these Gospels. He says that it is "a priori" unlikely that Mary would have been the source of the Matthean Infancy Gospel because it "centers upon Joseph" and "she figures only on a secondary level"⁷.

This argument is not valid because it is not impossible or unlikely at all that someone would make a description of any kind in which he or she is not the central figure: actually, such a description would even be only logical when it described historical events in which he or she actually had acted on a secondary level.

Then, the reason why Brown supposes that Mary could not have been the source of the Lucan Infancy Gospel either is that he thinks that in that case she would have told the Matthean story as well⁸. This argumentation is not valid either. Mary can have been the source of only the Lucan Infancy Gospel, for after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, and after the descending of the Holy Spirit, the object of this Spirit's guidance may have been that at this stage only this part of the infancy events would be told. At the end of his earthly life Jesus told his disciples:

I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. (John 16,12-13)

Historically, it may have been e.g. Simon Peter or his successor who, driven and authorized by the Spirit of truth, asked Jesus' mother to describe how Micah's prophecy about the Messiah's coming forth from Bethlehem and his origin from everlasting could have been fulfilled⁹. Anyway, the answers to these questions are in the Lucan Infancy Gospel: Jesus was born in Bethlehem because of the decree of the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus, that "a census should be made of all the habitable world. ... And all went to be inscribed in the census roll, each to his own city: and Joseph also went up .. to David's city, the which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David" (Luke 2,1-7 Darby). And Jesus' origin was from everlasting, for after Mary had said that she wouldn't know a man, the angel told her: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most

⁶ Ibid. 33

⁷ Ibid. 33

⁸ Ibid. 33

⁹ "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, . . . from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days." (RSV) (" . . . from of old, from of everlasting" (AV)) Micah 5,2

High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God” (Luke 2,26-38).

Mary may have told or written this part of the infancy events to Luke personally. The reason why Mary didn’t reveal more about the infancy events than what happened in Bethlehem – she didn’t tell about the flight to Egypt –, may have been that she wasn’t asked and/or that she thought that she could do it later, or that Joseph could do it later, or that Jesus, when returning in glory, would do it, soon¹⁰.

c. Joseph

1. Brown wrote that Joseph seems almost certainly to have been dead at the time of Jesus’ ministry: “The failure to mention him in Mark 6,3, where the list of Jesus’ family at Nazareth is being invoked, would otherwise be inexplicable”¹¹. However, besides the death of Joseph another explanation exists. He might have lived separated from his wife and family for some reason, e.g. for work (for his successful firm of building contractors?¹²) or for an honourable function in politics or religion, for instance in or near Jerusalem or abroad. In Jerusalem people knew Jesus as “the son of Joseph”, in Nazareth as “the son of Mary”, but also as “the son of Joseph”¹³. Philip from Bethsaida, who was with Jesus at the river Jordan near Jerusalem, knew Him as “Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph”¹⁴.

2. According to Brown “it is generally agreed among scholars that Matthew and Luke wrote independently of each other, without knowing the other’s work”¹⁵. Nevertheless, the source of the Matthean Infancy Gospel may have been Joseph, who can have known that Mary had already been the source of that part of the infancy events that would be incorporated in the Lucan Infancy Gospel. The fact that of the two sources Mary may have been the first and Joseph, knowingly, the second, is enough to explain the exactly complementing Infancy Gospels. How these two Gospels are exactly complementary is shown in the new interpretation of the return of Joseph and Mary from Bethlehem to Nazareth, as explained in my article “From Bethlehem to Nazareth – And a memorial in Bethany”¹⁶.

3. Just as with Mary’s account in Luke’s Gospel also here in the case of Joseph’s account in Matthew’s Brown thinks it is impossible that Joseph would have told the events of the Matthean Infancy Gospel leaving out the material of Luke’s Infancy Gospel. He asks how it ever could have been that way¹⁷.

The most simple and thus most probable explanation is of course that Joseph knew what Mary had told or written and that he picked up the story from there. The first verse of the story of Matthew 1 after Jesus’ genealogy (1,18) states that Mary “was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit” and here one can almost hear a note say: ‘see Luke chapter 1’. For Matthew

¹⁰ Mark 8,38; Mark 13,24-30//Luke 21,25-32; Mark 14,62; 1 John 3,2

¹¹ Brown, *The Birth*, 33

¹² C. P. Thiede and M. d’Ancona, in their work “*Eyewitness to Jesus*” (New York, Doubleday, 1996, also called “*The Jesus Papyrus*” (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996) describe the possibility that Joseph and Jesus worked as stone-cutters for a new theatre. “Carpenter” in Mark 6,3 and Matt 13,55 translates τεκτων / τεκτονος (NA²⁷), which can be any kind of builder or craftsman (Strong’s).

¹³ John 6,42; Mark 6,3; Luke 4,22

¹⁴ John 1,45

¹⁵ Brown, *The Birth*, 34

¹⁶ www.JesusKing.info, January 26, 2008.

¹⁷ “how could Joseph ever have told the story in Matthew and not have reported the annunciation to Mary?” Ibid.

doesn't explain at all how they knew that the child was of the Holy Spirit. The only way one could know this was by a message from God, and this is what had been told in Luke 1. The first sentence of Matthew 2 starts with:

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, (Matt 2,1)
(Του δε Ιησου γεννηθεντος εν Βηθλεεμ της Ιουδαιας εν ἡμεραις Ἡρωδου του βασιλεως ιδου)¹⁸.

The particle δε can be an adversative or continuative particle which refers to something what already has been written¹⁹. Brown, commenting on Του δε Ιησου Χριστου in Matt 1,18, wrote that this reading (Του δε) “fits well with the thesis that the opening of the narrative is related to the last line of the genealogy (the previous part: Matt 1,1-17)” and that “the word order” του δε “indicates a reference to someone (or something) already mentioned”²⁰; he also called the words Του δε . . . , ιδου of Matt 1,20 and 2,1, and 2,13, and 2,19 a “stereotyped pattern”, used by Matthew to express “continued action”, to “mark developments in the narrative”, and as “an introductory resumptive clause”, connecting something “with what precedes”²¹.

Now, in the case of Matt 2,1, here discussed, in the previous verse, the last of chapter 1, was told that Joseph knew Mary not until she had given birth (ετεκεν) to a son; and that Joseph called his name Jesus²². So, in verse 2,1, the particle δε may refer from “When Jesus was born” to the previous verse: to “until she had given birth” and to “his name Jesus”²³. But that Jesus was born “in Bethlehem” and “in the days of Herod the king”, also told in Matt 2,1, can only refer to Luke 2,4-7 (birth in Bethlehem) and Luke 1,5 (Herod the king), which thus preceded Matthew. Besides, if this information about Bethlehem had been completely new for Matthew's readers and listeners – i.e. if they didn't know Luke's Gospel yet –, then the short remark he made about it would have been much too incidental. It would have made people wonder how come Jesus of Nazareth had been born in Bethlehem. And if it didn't refer to Luke 2 which told about the command of the emperor August to travel to Bethlehem, such an incidental remark also seems too casual for the subject of Matthew 2. For Matthew's main issue of chapter 2 was to describe the circumstances as a result of which Jesus, even though He had been born in Bethlehem and had been called “Christ the Lord”²⁴, told in Luke, nevertheless would be called merely “a Nazarene” (last verse of Mat 2), which is quite something else than the mere fact that He would only come to live in Nazareth (what already had been suggested by Luke's Infancy Gospel anyway). From “a Nazarene” one didn't know or expect that he was from Bethlehem and certainly not that he was the Christ.

So, also here, with the complementary information of Joseph's Infancy Gospel, one can say that the revelation of the person of Christ followed a certain time-table. In Mary's Infancy Gospel had been explained how Jesus was born in Bethlehem and how his origin was from everlasting, from the Holy Spirit. In Joseph's Infancy Gospel is explained, in the first chapter, that although Jesus was a child conceived of the Holy Spirit, He nevertheless was a real legal and royal Son of David through his legal father Joseph, who was appointed as such by God himself²⁵. And its second chapter relates, as already mentioned above, that, although Jesus

¹⁸ NA²⁷

¹⁹ Strong's concordance 1161

²⁰ Brown, *The Birth*, 123

²¹ Ibid. 128-129, 166, 108

²² Matt 1,25 NA²⁷

²³ or else to the concept of “the birth of Jesus Christ” in Matt 1,18

²⁴ Luke 2,11

²⁵ Matt 1,1-25; Joseph had to call the Child's name, which in Judaism was the duty of the father.

had been born in Bethlehem, He nevertheless eventually got called nothing more than “a Nazarene”²⁶.

The reason why Joseph decided to reveal another part of the infancy events – he may even have put them in writing himself – may have been the same reason as why he acted the way he did in the infancy events themselves and possibly during all his life: he may have been told to do so by an angel of God in a dream; or else he may have been driven by the authority of the Holy Spirit, just as Mary. The reason why he left out further details of Jesus’ Infancy, especially about how exactly Jesus got to be known *only* as “a Nazarene” or “of Nazareth” and *not at all* as of Bethlehem, may have been that he thought that he had already given enough clues for it in his report in Matthew 2, and/or that he or Mary could tell it later, and/or that Jesus would tell it soon, at his glorious return, for then “we shall see him as he is”²⁷.

d. Further unfolding of Revelation

Jesus, during his ministry, had already told his disciples about several things which they didn’t fully understand at that moment, for instance:

- Jesus affirmed Simon Peter who said to Him "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God", but forbid them to tell this to anyone (Matt 16,16-17.20) (would they have understood why?).
- Jesus told his apostles about his rejection by the leaders, his cruel death and his resurrection (Matt 16,21 26,2 Mark 8,31 Luke 9,43-45 a.o.) (but they didn’t understand: Luke 9,44-45).
- Jesus even told that it was necessary for man to “eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood” to have life in themselves (John 6,53,60,66) (but they didn’t understand: John 6,60.66).

But eventually, even after having said all this, He still said: “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16,12). Some of the unbearable things about which Jesus hadn’t told his disciples at all were:

- his virginal conception (Luke 1,26-38)
- his birth in Bethlehem (Luke 2,1-7)
- his royal ancestry of all the Davidic kings (Matt 1,1-17 (6-11)).

As already stated, these things eventually, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, were probably told or written by Mary and Joseph, and Joseph described the circumstances under which Jesus came to live in Nazareth. But what wasn’t explained by Joseph is

- what event had caused the fact that He was *only* known as “from Nazareth” and that nobody knew Him as from Bethlehem during his adult life (John 1,45-47.7,40-43.5053): What had happened?²⁸

²⁶ Matt 2,23

²⁷ “of Nazareth” Matt 21,11; 26,71; Mark 1,24; 10,47; 14,67; 16,6; Luke 2,4; 4,34; 18,37; 24,19; John 1,45, 46; 18,5, 7; 19,19 etc.; “we shall see him as he is” 1John 3,2

²⁸ And maybe many other things weren’t told, which we may understand later.

The thesis of this study is that the life-changing event that caused the total ignorance of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, was that the Child Jesus, after the return from Egypt, was exposed by Joseph, the husband of its virgin mother Mary, at the house of Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth, and that He was found and adopted, just as Moses, by this carpenter and his wife (see fig. 1)²⁹. This adoption would explain all the "rough spots" (= the disharmony left by the joining of the Infancy Gospels to the Ministry Gospels) mentioned by Brown in the start of his Introduction³⁰. The thesis constitutes the total harmonisation between the Infancy Gospels and the Ministry Gospels. The result is that it is not only possible but even probable that the sources of the Infancy Gospels were indeed the two eyewitnesses of Jesus' nativity themselves, just as the sources of the Ministry Gospels were the apostles, the eyewitnesses of Jesus' public life.

During Jesus' public ministry, after He had healed a great multitude He

ordered them not to make him known. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, ... he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will any one hear his voice in the streets; ... till he brings justice to victory; and in his name will the Gentiles hope." (Matt 12,16-21)

This prophecy indicates again that Jesus' life and ministry, and maybe also the understanding of them, had to follow, and maybe still have to follow, a certain time-table in which each event had to happen in its proper relation to other events. He was not to be made known before He would have brought "justice to victory" and maybe not even before the Gentiles would have hoped in his name. This would comply with Paul's statement: "I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved"³¹. This "hardening" (πῶρωσις) is also translated with "blindness" and, according to Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, "hardening" or "blindness" is a cause of "ignorance" (αγνοια)³².

3. Comparison and harmonisation of details

Brown from a detailed comparison of the two Infancy Gospels concludes that they are contrary to each other, but the details he compares are not details of the Gospel texts, but details of their interpretation (see table 1)³³.

Brown is totally unaware of the fact that the details he thinks he sees in Matthew's Gospel are only details of an harmonised interpretation of Matthew and Luke, viz. that the young family Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, moved from Nazareth to Bethlehem³⁴. He assumes, as it seems, that this old harmonisation is the only way the two stories can have been historical, and then he reads the details of this harmonisation back into the Gospels, but they aren't there. He finds that "Luke tells us that (1) the family returned peaceably to Nazareth", but in fact Luke only tells us they went on their way to Nazareth, not that they peaceably arrived. Brown then finds that what "Luke tells us" "is irreconcilable with Matthew's implication that (2) the family fled from Bethlehem to Egypt", but Matthew only says the family fled to Egypt, not that they fled from Bethlehem. Now, as already said, the old harmonisation of Luke and Matthew used to

²⁹ This has been elaborated in my article *Jesus and Moses – Mary Magdalene*, www.JesusKing.info.

³⁰ Brown, *The Birth*, 31 (last paragraph) to 32

³¹ Rom 11,25-26

³² Rom 11,25-26; Eph 4,18 (AV) NA²⁷

³³ The citations below are from the first paragraph of Brown, *The Birth*, 36

³⁴ See my article *From Bethlehem to Nazareth – And a memorial in Bethany*, solution A (www.JesusKing.info).

explain this with an unrecorded moving of the young family – Joseph, Mary, and Jesus – from their home in Nazareth to a new home in Bethlehem. So, in fact, when Brown says that the Infancy Gospels are contrary to each other (“irreconcilable”), because of the (assumed) irreconcilability of these two (read back) details (1 and 2), he only says that in his opinion the old harmonisation is impossible³⁵. But this says nothing about the reconcilability of the texts themselves. In fact, although Brown concludes from the “conflicting details” that it’s impossible that both Infancy Gospels are completely historical, is it still possible that both Gospels are exactly this, especially now a new harmonisation has been found: the family left Bethlehem heading for Nazareth, spent the first overnight stay at an inn on the way, e.g. in Bethany, and from there fled to Egypt.³⁶

And, while Brown’s and my different opinions about the sources would only result in a relative difference of opinion concerning the *likelihood* of the historicity, our two different opinions about the harmonisation constitute an absolute difference concerning the *possibility* of the historicity: impossible or possible (see fig. 2).

4. Public events

According to Brown Matthew’s account contains a number of extraordinary or miraculous public events, which, were they factual, should have left some traces in Jewish records or elsewhere in the New Testament:

1. The king and all Jerusalem upset over the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem
2. A star which moved from Jerusalem south to Bethlehem and came to rest over a house
3. The massacre of all the male children in Bethlehem³⁷.

So, Brown implies these Gospel events weren’t factual. But the absence of further traces is explicable, and the events may have been factual indeed:

1) The reason why no records exist about the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem (besides the Infancy Gospels) is connected to the reason why during Jesus’ adult life nobody knew of his birth in Bethlehem and why Jesus didn’t tell about it. As long as Jesus didn’t reveal that He Himself was the infant of thirty years ago who was laid in a manger in Bethlehem, people may have forgotten this Messiah-child and not have made or kept records, because, after Herod had killed all the baby-boys in Bethlehem, they never heard of this new born Messiah again.

2) The star that showed the way to the wise men from Jerusalem to the inn on the way to Nazareth may not have been recorded because it may have been visible only to these wise men. From apparitions of Mary and other celestial persons in the last centuries is known that one visionary can see or hear certain parts of the apparition that are hidden from another visionary, and the crowd gathered to be present at the apparitions often sees nothing extraordinary³⁸. It is also a known circumstance that the visionaries of Mary or Jesus are often exceptionally joyful and in ecstatic bliss at the time of the apparitions³⁹. Paul, while praying

³⁵ In fact, the old harmonisation seems possible, though not convincingly.

³⁶ See my article *From Bethlehem to Nazareth – And a memorial in Bethany*, solution A (www.JesusKing.info).

³⁷ Brown, *The Birth*, 36

³⁸ G. J. M. v.d. Aardweg, *Fatima, 1917* (Brugge, Tabor, 1990) 33-35

³⁹ v.d. Aardweg, *Fatima, 1917*, 16

in the temple, “fell into a trance” (εν εκστασει) and then saw Jesus⁴⁰. Something like this may have happened to the wise men at seeing the star, for Matthew especially emphasizes that “When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy”⁴¹.

3) The massacre of the baby boys under two years of age in Bethlehem and its surroundings can have been left unrecorded, both because the number of these very young boys may have been only small, as Bethlehem in that time was quite a small town, and because the atrocity of Herod was so vast that this relatively small murder was not worth mentioning in records. For example: When he realised his death was near, Herod ordered the arrest of the leading citizens of all the villages in order to have them killed when Herod would have passed away. He wanted to be sure all Israel would weep at his death. After he died, however, all the imprisoned notables were released and all Israel was festive⁴².

Then Brown proceeds by arguing that

4. “Luke’s reference to a general census of the Empire under Augustus which affected Palestine before the death of Herod the Great is almost certainly wrong . . .”
5. “. . . as is his understanding of the Jewish customs of the presentation of the child and the purification of the mother in 2,22-24”⁴³.

If these Lukan elements are “almost certainly wrong”, they may still be completely right:

4) The census may have been a two-step process: first the registrations of persons and property and later the actual tax assessment on the basis of these registrations. This is the thesis of Stauffer⁴⁴. In Palestine the first part of the census (the being registered or inscribed of Luke 2,1.3.5, see citation below) may have started in the last months or years of Herod’s reign in 7 to 4 BCE, complying with the reference to Herod in Luke 1,5 and Matt 2,1. Tertullian (c. 155-230 CE) in *Adversus Marcion* wrote that there were censuses in Judea under Augustus in the time of the governor Saturninus (9-6 BCE), and he mentions censuses under Augustus again later in this work⁴⁵. These later censuses (possibly only registrations) may have taken place in Palestine in the time of Saturninus’s successor Varus (6-4 BCE or later), so, in the time of king Herod and Jesus’ birth.

The main part of the census however (the actual taxation, “the census itself”, of Luke 2,2 based upon the registration records) only took place when Quirinius (= Cyrenius) was the governor of Syria (in 6-7 CE)⁴⁶. This taxation is also described by Josephus, as taking place only in Judea⁴⁷. So, the census in Palestine, later restricted to only Judea, may have been a process covering several years, just as the census in Gaul which took forty years⁴⁸. This interpretation is expressed in the Darby translation of 1889:

⁴⁰ Acts 22,17-18 NA²⁷

⁴¹ Matt 2,10

⁴² Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 17,6,5.8,2

⁴³ Brown, *The Birth* 36; a discussion of the census in Luke 2,1-5, B idem 547-556.

⁴⁴ E. Stauffer, “*Die Dauer des Census Augusti*” (Berlin, 1961), 9-34 (discussed in Brown, *The Birth*, p. 554, 556).

⁴⁵ “Tertullian, *Adversus Marcion* IV xix 10” and “*Adversus Marcion* IV xxxvi 8-9” (Brown, *The Birth*, 553, main text and note 18).

⁴⁶ Luke describes the taxation with, αυτη (η) απογραφη πρωτη εγενετο (εγενετο πρωτη) ηγεμονευουτος της Συριας Κυρηνιου (Κυρινιου / Κυρ(ε)ινου) (Luke 2,2 NA²⁷); here πρωτη is of πρωτος = first in time or place; first in rank, in influence, honour/chief/principal; first, at the first (Strong’s).

⁴⁷ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18,1,1 §1-10

⁴⁸ When the registrations in the time of Varus (6-4 BC or later) were the first registrations in Palestine preparing Quirinius’s census (6-7 CE), the process for Galilee will have taken ten years. The whole process for Palestine and Judea may also have taken fourteen years, from Saturninus (9-6 BCE) to Quirinius (see Stauffer).

1 But it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census should be made of all the habitable world. 2 The census itself first took place when Cyrenius had the government of Syria. 3 And all went to be inscribed in the census roll, each to his own city: 4 and Joseph also went up ... to David's city, the which is called Bethlehem, ... 5 to be inscribed in the census roll (Luke 2,1-5 Darb)

The difference between the first and second part of the census may have been expressed by Luke by the difference between the use of the verb απογραφω (to write off; to register) in the three verses 2,1, 2,3, and 2,5 for the registration in the roll, and the use of the noun απογραφη (registration; census) only in verse 2,2 for the actual taxation⁴⁹.

In several translations the verse 2,2 is between brackets, as an insertion⁵⁰, and it indeed seems an inserted or at least an additional remark, comparable to a footnote of our days. This verse may have been inserted into Luke 2,1-5 to make his verse of Acts 5,37 about “the days of the census” (της απογραφης) refer to “this / the census” (αυτη (η) απογραφη) of Luke 2,2⁵¹. This insertion in Luke’s Gospel then clarifies that the “Theudas” who rose up and boasted himself prior to “the days of the census” (as related by Luke in Acts 5,36-37), did this prior to the census under Quirinius in 6-7 CE, and thus was another person than the Theudas whose uprising took place during the reign of Fadus (44-46 CE)⁵².

So, Luke’s reference to the census is not wrong at all, but accurately right.

5)

21 And when eight days were fulfilled for circumcising him, his name was called Jesus, which was the name given by the angel before he had been conceived in the womb. 22 And when the days were fulfilled for their purifying according to the law of Moses, they brought him to Jerusalem to present *him* to the Lord . . . , 24 and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of *the* Lord: A pair of turtle doves, or two young pigeons. Luke 2,21-24 (DBY)

The reason for confusion here is in the genitive “their” in the expression “when the time came for their purification” (RSV, Luke 2,22⁵³), as only the mother needed to be purified for forty days since giving birth, not the son, who only had to be presented to the Lord.⁵⁴ But Luke’s word for “purification”/ “purifying” (the noun καθαρισμος) may, in stead of the time period required for the process of purification, also have designated the act of the purification offering in the temple, which marked the end of the purification time period⁵⁵. In that case the spouses Joseph and Mary were to bring it. And the Greek text of this verse

Then it was time for the purification offering (New Living Translation 1996),
And when the days were fulfilled for their purifying (Darby 1889)
Και ὅτε ἐπλησθησαν ἅι ἡμεραι του καθαρισμου αυτων⁵⁶ (Luke 2,22)

shows a remarkable parallel with the preceding verse:

⁴⁹ Luke 2,1 and 2,3, απογραφεισθαι, 2,5, απογραφασθαι; Luke 2,2, αυτη (η) απογραφη NA²⁷.

⁵⁰ E.g. in the New International Version, the New Living Translation, the Modern and classic KJV and the Revised and Classic Webster

⁵¹ Luke 2,2; Acts 5,37 (NA²⁷)

⁵² Theudas prior to the census (of Quirinius): Acts 5,36; other Theudas in the time of Fadus (45-46 CE): Josephus *Jewish Antiquities* 20,5,1 §97

⁵³ Besides the genitive αυτων (“their” purification), also the genitive αυτου (“his”) and also no genitive at all are in manuscripts of Luke 2,22 (NA²⁷)

⁵⁴ About the presentation (also called “redeeming”) of firstborn sons in the first century modern scholars said, “it is very probable that some did go to Jerusalem in order to perform the ceremony of redeeming their firstborn sons ‘before the Lord in the Temple of Jerusalem’”. So, there is no reason for conflict between the presentation of the son and the purification of the mother, since for both ceremonies one could come to the temple.

⁵⁵ Luke 2,22 (NA²⁷)

⁵⁶ NA²⁷; This possibility is in the NET Bible’s note 60 to Luke 2,22

And when eight days were fulfilled for circumcising him” (Darby 1889)
Και ὅτε ἐπλησθησαν ἡμεραι οκτω του περιτεμειν αυτον (Luke 2,21)

which also doesn't say that the child had to be circumcised for eight days, but that the required time had passed so the act (of the circumcision) could be done⁵⁷. Similarly, the required forty days had passed so the act of the purification offering could be done.

Now it is also remarkable that this subtle way in which Luke distinguishes the preceding purification period from the purification offering that followed and concluded it – using the noun for the concluding act –, appears to be the same as the way in which he distinguished the being inscribed in the census roll from the actual tax assessment act that followed and concluded it: by using the noun (απογραφη) for the latter in stead of the verb.

So, although Brown concludes from these five, in his opinion “quite implausible”, public events that it's “unlikely that either Infancy Gospel is completely historical”⁵⁸, this paper still maintains that the events are plausible and the Gospels completely historical.

5. Pre-figurations in the Hebrew Bible

From the above argumentations of Brown, he concludes that the elements in the Infancy Gospels that resemble scenes and themes from the Hebrew Bible, are only echoes or rewritings of narratives of the Hebrew Bible and not historical events:

Matthew's story of the magi who saw the star of the Davidic Messiah at its rising is an echo of the OT story of Balaam, a type of magus from the East, who saw the star rise out of Jacob . . . The story of Herod seeking the life of the infant Jesus and massacring the male children at Bethlehem is a reapplication of the OT story of the wicked Pharaoh who sought the life of the infant Moses and slaughtered the male children of the Israelites, even as the story of Joseph, the father of Jesus, who dreams dreams and goes to Egypt is a reapplication of the story of the patriarch Joseph who does the same thing . . . Luke's description of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of JBar, is taken, at times almost verbatim, from the OT description of Abraham and Sarah⁵⁹.

When both Infancy Gospels can be considered completely historical, as explained above, then the above listed Gospel-elements are not just echoes or re-applications of narratives of the Hebrew Bible, but historical New Testament events fulfilling these pre-figurations in the Hebrew Bible (see fig. 2).

6. Revelation of Christ and thus vehicles of christology

Brown's overall evaluation concerning the historicity of the Infancy Gospels is the sum of his two relative and thus not substantial evaluations of 'both not necessarily historical' and 'both unlikely completely historical' plus the only absolute evaluation of his that counts: 'impossibly both completely historical' (see fig. 2). It is important to note that this final evaluation ('impossibly both completely historical') is based only on his rejection of the old harmonisation of the Infancy Gospels, as has been shown above in chapter 2 (Comparison and harmonisation of details). Nevertheless, this evaluation leads to his final conclusion, “the

⁵⁷ Luke 2,21 NA²⁷

⁵⁸ Brown, *The Birth*, 36

⁵⁹ Ibid. 36

leitmotif’ of his commentary, that “the infancy narratives are primarily vehicles of the evangelist’s theology and christology” and thus not primarily history⁶⁰. He also says that he thinks of the evangelists as “truly creative authors and not mere redactors” and that “whether or not the infancy narratives were historical, whether or not they were based on eyewitness testimony, and whether or not they had a pre-Gospel existence, Matthew and Luke thought they were appropriate introductions to the career and significance of Jesus”⁶¹. But this description obscures the fact that when the Infancy Gospels were historical, and were based on eyewitness testimony of the infancy events, they are much more than only vehicles of the author’s christology. They are revelations of Christ, who fulfilled Hebrew Bible expectations. And of course the evangelist in his/her writings linked the historical events of Jesus’ Infancy to the prophecies and pre-figurations of Scripture he/she had recognized.

7. The so-called ‘christological process’

Brown in his introduction describes a pattern of christological regression, only visible when the Acts’ first sermons and the various Gospels are compared to each other in the order: the first sermons in Acts, then the synoptic Gospels, then the Infancy Gospels, and then the Gospel of John. Only if we look to these texts in this order, we see the moments in which Jesus’ mysterious divine identity was revealed in a regressing order: in the first sermons the resurrection (A) is the revealing moment; in the synoptic Gospels are at least two revealing moments: his resurrection (A) and his baptism (B) in the Jordan River; then, in the Infancy Gospels, his divine identity is revealed in his conception (C), and finally, in the Gospel of John, his divine identity is even associated with his pre-existence before creation (D)⁶². Brown alleges that this regressive christological pattern is the result of a “christological process” in the production of the texts, instead of merely the result of the order in which Brown looked to the texts. But if there ever was such a process, the first sermons, the synoptic Gospels, the Infancy Gospels, and the Fourth Gospel need to have been produced in the order chosen by Brown and in the same way of production, otherwise there could not have been a continuous “process”.

Santa Mater Ecclesia

According to the instruction *Santa Mater Ecclesia*⁶³ the way of production of the Ministry Gospels was as follows (see fig. 3 upper half):

Phase 1) the *Lord Jesus* spoke and acted in public and in the company of his apostles, who “understood the miracles and other events of the life of Jesus correctly.”

Phase 2) the *apostles* “proclaimed above all the death and resurrection of the Lord, ... (Lk 24,44-48; Acts 2,32; 3,15; 5,30-32). ... After Jesus rose from the dead and His divinity was clearly perceived (Acts 2,36; Jn 20,28), faith, far from destroying the memory of what had transpired, rather confirmed it ... (Acts 2,22; 10,37-39). ... the apostles passed on to their listeners what was really said and done by the Lord with that fuller understanding which they enjoyed (Jn 2,22; 12,16; 11,51-52; cf. 14,26; 16,12-13; 7,39), having been instructed by the glorious events of the Christ and taught by the light of the Spirit of Truth (Jn 14,26; 16,13). ... XI ... It is not right to say that they preached before they had acquired perfect knowledge. ...

⁶⁰ “*leitmotif*”, Ibid. 38; “primarily vehicles”, idem 26

⁶¹ Ibid. 26 and 38

⁶² Brown, *The Birth*, 29-32

⁶³ *Sancta Mater Ecclesia de historica Evangeliorum veritate*, is an instruction from the Pontifical Bible Commission of April 24, 1964 (AAS 56[1964]712-718). The English translation cited in this article is online at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PBCGOSPL.HTM> (accessed 10-04-09)

as the Holy Spirit came upon them, they were filled with all (His gifts) and had perfect knowledge (Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 3, 1, 1 (Harvey 2, 2; PG 7, 844)).” Thus the preaching of the apostles constituted the apostolic tradition.

Phase 3) “This primitive instruction ... was committed to writing by the *sacred authors* in the four Gospels ... with a method suited to the peculiar purpose which each (author) set for himself. From the many things handed down they selected some things, reduced others to a synthesis, (still) others they explicated as they kept in mind the situation of the churches. ... They ... adapted their narration of them to the same situation and purpose. ... the Holy Spirit, who ... (1 Cor 12,11) governed and ruled the minds of the holy (writers) in recalling what they were to write ... , permitted one to compile his narrative in this way, and another in that ... (Augustine, *De consensus Evangelistarum* 2, 21, 51-52 (PL 34, 1102; CSEL 43, 153)). ... the Gospels were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who preserved their authors from all error.”⁶⁴ (see fig. 3 3a)

Brown

Now, as regards the Infancy Gospels, the way Brown says they were realized is the opposite of the way the Ministry Gospels were realized according to the Roman instruction. According to Brown the source(s) for the Infancy Gospels were unknown (for without corroborating witnesses) and the Infancy Gospels impossibly completely historical and even composed by creative authors, Luke and Matthew, in order to express their self-made christology of Jesus’ divinity at conception (3b) (see fig. 3, lower half, at Brown (C))⁶⁵. Brown thinks the evangelists’s “growth of perception” and a “development of early christology” – “Christians reflected further” – caused the alleged growth of christology from Baptism (B) to Conception (C), which christology constituted the Infancy Gospels (3b). But this Infancy Gospel producing process, this direction from a growing christology in “Christians” to Luke and Matthew and the Infancy Gospels, is completely the opposite of the way the historical events of the Ministry Gospels, with their inherent christology, was perceived and understood correctly by the eyewitnesses, i.e. the apostles, who had perfect knowledge before they started preaching, and then was preached to other Christians, such as the evangelists (3a), as described by the Roman instruction⁶⁶.

But in order to be able to claim the same Gospel producing process for both the Infancy Gospels and the Ministry Gospels, Brown copied his alleged production process of the Infancy Gospels to the production process of the Ministry Gospels. He does this by claiming a phased regressive reflection (from A (Resurrection) to B (Baptism) to C (Birth) to D (Pre-existence)) by some undefined “Christians” as the source for both the Ministry Gospels and the Infancy Gospels, and thus by neglecting all together the experiences, inspiration, and perfect knowledge, granted to the apostles before they started to preach. Only in this way Brown could state that “the addition of these stories (the Infancy Gospels) to the Gospel proper is thus intelligible as part of a christological process”⁶⁷.

But, of course, as the apostles were inspired by the Holy Spirit while they perceived Jesus’ divinity in the ministry and resurrection events they witnessed, this perception can never have been the same process as the reflection by some “Christians” about infancy events they never witnessed.

For a first phase in Brown’s alleged ‘process’, the phase of reflection on the “divinisation” in the resurrection (A), he uses terms such as “(applying) combined ideas to the resurrection”,

⁶⁴ All citations are from the instruction *Santa Mater Ecclesia*, sections VII to XI.

⁶⁵ Brown, *The Birth*, 26, 38

⁶⁶ Ibid. 29, 30, main text and note 15

⁶⁷ Ibid. 31

which ideas were “a divine proclamation, the begetting of God’s Son, the agency of the Holy Spirit” and which application would be the “older understanding” proclaimed by “early Christian preaching” (see fig. 3 at Brown (A)). Here, in using the word “Christian”, he doesn’t distinguish between the apostles themselves and the recipients of the apostles’ instructions. And he implies that the “ideas” were not part of the revelation received by the apostles in the event of the resurrection and then taught by the apostles (who taught divinity – and not “divinisation” – at Jesus’ resurrection and baptism (A+B)), but only “ideas”, sprung from some “Christians”, applied by “Christian preaching” to the event of the resurrection. So here he turns the direction to its opposite.

Then Brown describes the second phase he needs in his ‘process’: the realization of the Gospel of Mark proclaiming Jesus’ divinity already in his baptism (B). Here he uses the same kind of terms, such as “Christians reflected further”, as a cause of which later “a more developed view was dominant”, and Mark “applied” “the same combined ideas. . . to the baptism”, i.e. the ideas of divinisation⁶⁸ (see fig. 3 at Brown (B)). Here Brown again uses the general word “Christians”, and thus again fails to distinguish between the apostles and their (christian) recipients. And he implies again that it were “Christians” who produced the “idea” of divinisation by reflection in a regressive way (so only after the start of “early Christian preaching”) as if Jesus’ divinity had not been revealed by the events of the resurrection and baptism themselves and by the Holy Spirit who made the apostles remember and understand everything (A + B) correctly before they started preaching.⁶⁹

And then, as already said, only if the first two christologies (on resurrection and baptism) were the result of Brown’s first two phases in reflecting “Christians”, and not of the apostolic teaching and authority, one would be led to believe Brown’s third phase, which says that the christology of the Infancy Gospels was the fruit of this same “Christian growth of perception”, this so-called “christological process”⁷⁰: that the idea of divinisation would have been applied to Jesus’ conception (C) by Matthew and Luke.

But as already mentioned above, according to the Roman instruction, the subject of apostolic teaching and of the Ministry Gospels – Jesus’ divinity and the salvation He brought – had been divinely revealed to the apostles, the eyewitnesses. And the subject of the Infancy Gospels – divinity at conception– was not a christology ‘grown’ from earlier Christology either, but divinely revealed to the eyewitnesses (Jesus’ parents) too.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 30-31

⁶⁹ Brown even thinks that Mark not only applied “ideas” to the baptism, but also applied a voice from heaven, for Brown holds that there was no audible voice at this event, though all synoptic Gospels tell us so.

“and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”” Matt 3,17. Brown says “On the one hand, it is simplistic to think that a divine voice spoke audibly at the baptism and was heard by those who stood around – no human being in Mark seems to be aware of what was revealed. . . . The evangelists are interested only in telling the reader who Jesus is . . .” (Ibid. 30, note 16). But maybe the voice was only heard by Jesus, John the Baptist and Andreas and the unnamed disciple, just as the moving star was only visible for the wise men).

Brown also alleges that the difference between the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, as regards the understanding of Jesus’ divinity by his apostles, is an aspect of the “christological process”. But this difference in reporting apostle-understanding is not a christological difference between Mark and Matthew, for both of them (just as Luke) proclaim the same christology: the revelation of Jesus’ divinity in both his resurrection and baptism (A + B). Mark and Matthew have only made different selections from the apostolic material: Mark, as a secret disciple, disregarded the understanding of some apostles and didn’t mention it, and Matthew, as an apostle himself, did mention some signs of understanding by (some of) his fellow-apostles.⁶⁹ So, in stead of Brown’s two different phases in christology (divinisation applied to A and then to B), there may have been only one phase in the ministry of Christ (constant divinity, so at A + B).

⁷⁰ Brown 31.

My study

As regards the production of the Infancy Gospels this article shows that their source may have been Mary and Joseph, the eyewitnesses. The occasion, which led to the production of these Gospels may have been the (regressive) questions of curious disciples and sceptical Jews about Jesus' birth and place of birth, which the apostles couldn't answer and for which they sought testimonies. As a reply to these questions Mary and Joseph may have given authentic descriptions, which Luke and Matthew heard or received in written form, directly or via other people. Then these evangelists could edit the infancy testimonies and add them to their Ministry Gospels (see fig. 3 3c). Luke says that Mary "kept all sayings (of the angels, of the shepherds, of Jesus and herself, and possibly also of Joseph's dreams and considerations) in her heart" (Luke 2,19.51). This verse is the last of Luke's Infancy Gospel, as an indication of its source. The next verse (2,52) joins the Infancy Gospel to the Ministry Gospel (3,1). Also the story about Zechariah and Elizabeth, in Luke 1, Mary may have heard from these two people themselves when she was there for about three months. And in the forty days after Jesus' birth in Bethlehem the young family may have visited Zechariah and Elisabeth in their Judean town again (possibly Ein Karem, about 6 miles from Bethlehem⁷¹) and also then and there they may have been informed about the events that happened at the birth of John the Baptist. So, Mary (and Joseph) may have known, and told or written down, all the details of the two Infancy Gospels, especially Mary's own hymn sung to Elizabeth, the so-called "Magnificat".

After the Infancy Gospels had been added to 'their' ministry Gospels, the christology inherent to and taught in the Infancy Gospels, i.e. Jesus is the Bethlehem born Messiah, becoming a Nazarene, whose origin was from a virgin and of everlasting, was complying with the christology which was already known before and taught in the Ministry Gospels, i.e. Jesus is the Son of God, authorized by the Father (at Jesus' baptism), and the God-man raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, who will return in divine glory.

So, one might speak of a 'christological regression' as a regressive pattern only visible if one compares the texts in a particular order, but it seems not right to speak of a 'christological process'. The conclusion is that, in fact, the Infancy Gospels may have been the cause and not the result of the later more profound understanding of Jesus as the Bethlehem born Messiah and virgin born Son of God.⁷²

8. Discussion and conclusion

As already shown in my article "From Bethlehem to Nazareth – And a memorial in Bethany"⁷³, the Infancy Gospels of Luke and Matthew can be completely historical, for a simple harmonisation of Luke 2 and Matthew 2 is possible by letting them touch on one another in an inn ("the house") on the way from Jerusalem to Nazareth. Besides in the (in his time and opinion) absence of a solution of the harmonisation problem of the Infancy Gospels, Brown saw no other substantial difficulties for the historicity of both Infancy Gospels,

⁷¹ The Jerusalem Calendar (dated before 638) mentions the village Ein Karem by name as the place of a festival in memory of Elizabeth celebrated on the twenty-eighth of August. A medieval tradition says that "the home of the priest Zachariah and Elisabeth was below Mount Orah in Ein Karem, the 'Gracious Spring'" (R. Brownrigg, *Who's who – the New Testament* (Dent, London 1971, repr., Dent, London, 1993)). Ein Karem is approximately 8 km southwest of Jerusalem.

⁷² That the Blessed Virgin Mary and the beloved disciple were the authors of the Gospel of John is discussed in my article *John Mark – Author of the Gospel of John with Jesus' mother*, www.JesusKing.info.

⁷³ www.JesusKing.info

although he had many doubts about its probability. Now there is a new and easy harmonisation, the question is whether it should be proved that this harmonisation was historical or it should be proved that the, now harmonic, Infancy Gospels were only, not necessarily historical, narratives made by freely creative authors. What is the default value: that the Infancy Gospels are completely historical as now has been shown possible (and their authors inerrant just as the authors of the Ministry Gospels) unless proven otherwise, or that the Infancy Gospels are only, not necessarily historical, narratives of freely creative authors unless proven otherwise? Implicitly Brown held the first default value, for he only concluded that the Infancy Gospels weren't both completely historical, after he had found no harmonisation between Luke and Matthew. So, now a simple harmonisation has been found, also the historicity of the Infancy Gospels is restored to its default value: they are historical revelations of Christ and as such also vehicles of this revelation's inherent christology.

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BROWN speaking of Matthew	Text of Matthew
No hint of a coming to Bethlehem.	Jesus was born in Bethlehem (2,1)
Joseph and Mary are in a house at Bethlehem (2,11).	The wise men saw Mary and the Child in a house (2,11), but Matthew doesn't say it was in a house at Bethlehem.
Their native Bethlehem (2,22-23)	Jesus was born in Bethlehem (2,1), but Matthew doesn't say it was Mary's and Joseph's native city.
The child was almost two years old when the family fled from Bethlehem (2,16).	Matthew doesn't tell the age of the Child, but only the age of the boys to be killed (2,16). And Matthew doesn't say the family fled from Bethlehem either.
The family moved to Nazareth.	Matthew neither says the family lived in Bethlehem, nor that it moved to Nazareth.
BROWN speaking of Luke	Text of Luke
The family returned "peaceably" to Nazareth.	Luke neither says the family returned "peaceably" nor that it arrived in Nazareth immediately.

Table 1. Comparison of details

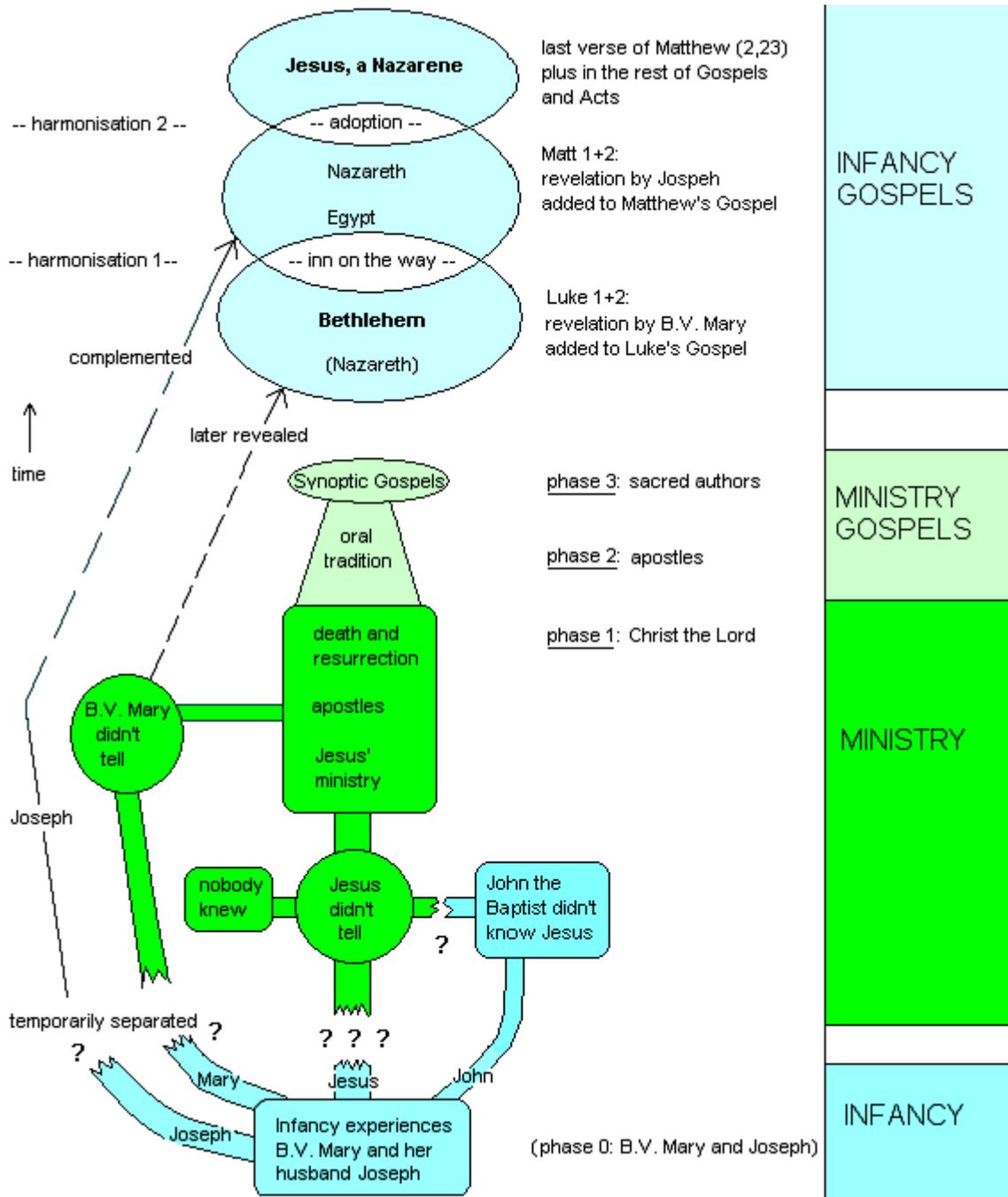


Fig. 1. (Unfolding) Revelation of infancy events

Phases 1, 2 and 3 are distinguished as regards the Gospels of Jesus' ministry (and not as regards the Infancy Gospels) in the "Instructio *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* de historica Evangeliorum veritate", an instruction from the Pontifical Bible Commission of April 21, 1964 (AAS 56[1964]712-718).

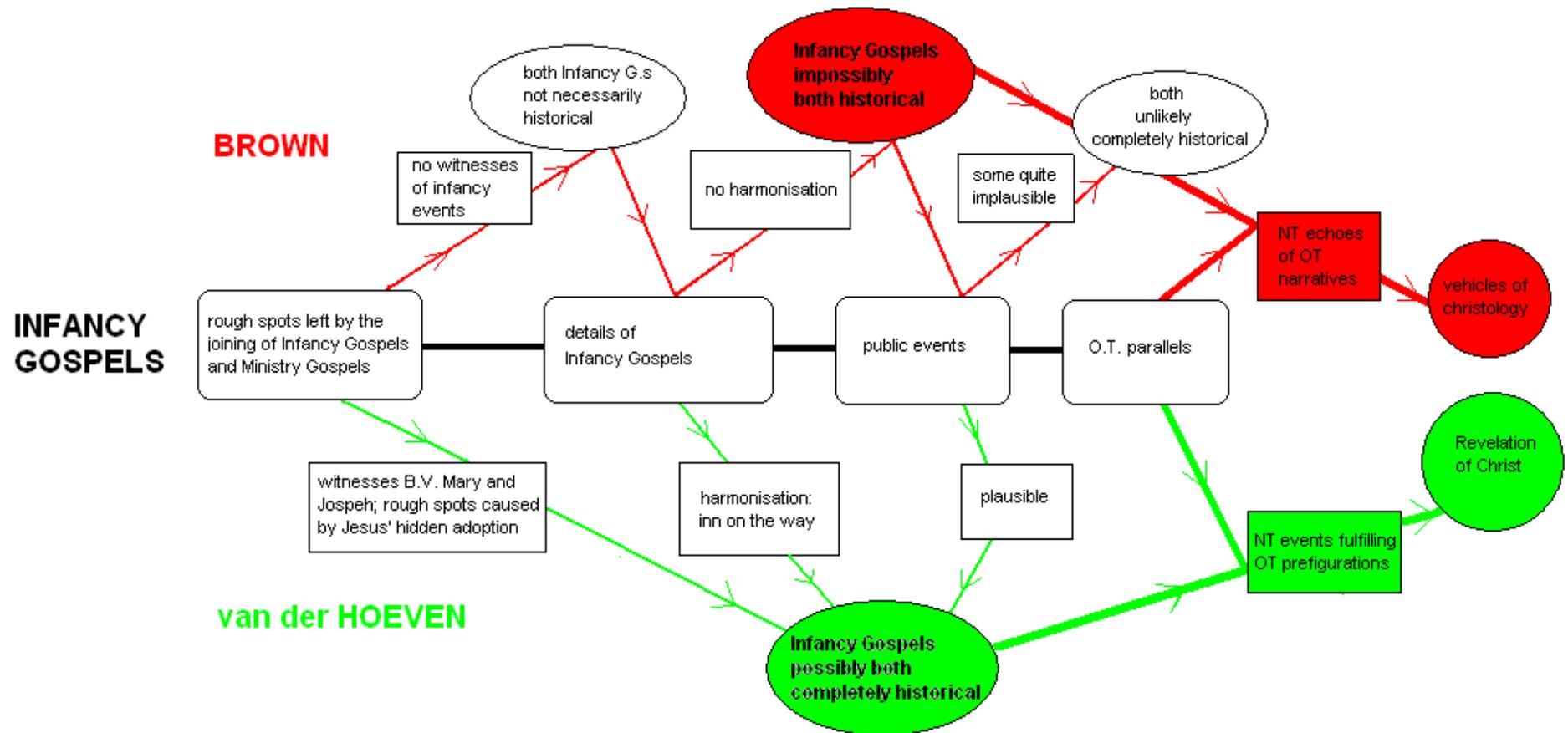


Fig. 2. Evaluation of historicity by Brown (upper half) and this article (lower half)

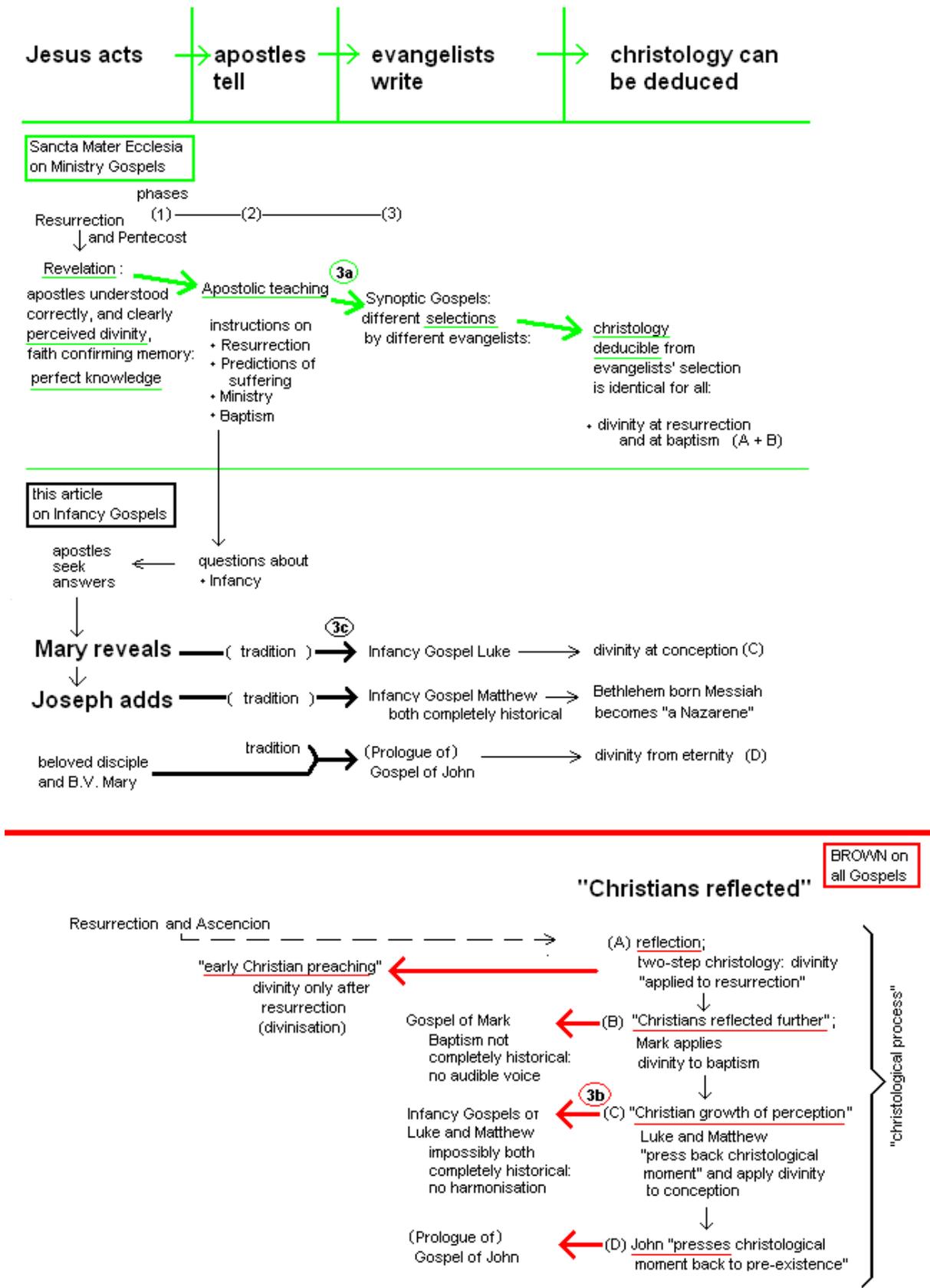


Fig. 3. Divine Revelation or a "christological process"?