Two canonical gospels, Matthew and Luke, contain infancy narratives. Matthew’s narrative compares Jesus with the traditions about Moses’ early life (e.g., Magi speak of the birth of a Jewish king; the current ruler attempts to kill all the Jewish male babies; the key baby is saved so he can be the future savior of the people; there is a flight from or to Egypt; after the ruler’s death there is a message to return from whence the child had fled). This typology (i.e., viewing the earlier material as the prototype or foreshadowing of the latter) functions as part of Matthew’s Christology (Jesus is the new Moses of Deut 18:15–18), and it adds authority to what Jesus will say in five teaching sections (chs. 5–7; 10; 13; 18; 24–25). Luke’s material about the birth and early life of Jesus functions within the ancient genre of prophecies of future greatness. Prophecies, portents, and other material foreshadow the future greatness of the child.

The two infancy narratives share a tradition that says Jesus was miraculously conceived by the Spirit. According to Matthew 1:20, the angel says to Joseph: “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.” Luke 1:34 has Mary ask the angel who has told her she will bear the Son of the Most High: “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel answers in 1:35: “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.”

The question to be asked is: How would the authorial audience have heard this material in Matthew and Luke? What cultural assumptions did auditors bring?

Ancient Mediterranean peoples did tell stories of miraculous conceptions and births. There were accounts, set in the mythic past, of

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1 My translations that follow are made from Greek and Latin texts found in the Loeb Classical Library and Migne’s Patrologia.

In the *Iliad* 20.199–209, Aeneas and Achilles meet in battle. As custom dictated, they taunted one another before fighting:

Aeneas said: “Son of Peleus, do not try to frighten me with words, as if I were a child, since I too know how to taunt. We know each other’s parents and lineage for we have heard the ancient stories... They say that you [Achilles] are the son of Peleus and that your mother was Thetis, a daughter of the sea. I am the son of Anchises and my mother is Aphrodite.”

Those believed to be the offspring of a god and a human mother included Asclepius (son of Apollo and the mortal Coronis—so the first-century B.C.E. Diodorus Siculus 4.71.1); Hercules (son of Zeus and the human Alcme—*Il.* 14.315–28; Diodorus Siculus 4.9.1, 3); Dionysus (son of Zeus and Semele-*Il.* 14.315–28); Perseus (son of Zeus and Danae—*Il.* 14.315–28); Aristaeus (son of Apollo and Cyrene—Diodorus Siculus 4.81.1–3); Romulus (son of Mars and the mortal Ilia, or Rhea, or Silvia—so the first-century B.C.E. Cicero, *Resp.* 1.41; 2.2; Plutarch, *Rom.* 2.3–6).

Diodorus Siculus 4.2.1–4 relates what the Greeks say about Dionysus. Cadmus was sent from Phoenicia to search for the maiden Europa. During his travels, in obedience to an oracle, he founded the city of Thebes and settled there. He married Harmonia and had a number of offspring, one of whom was Semele:

Now with Semele, because of her beauty, Zeus had intercourse, doing it without speaking... Whereupon she asked him to treat her as he did Hera. Zeus, therefore, encountered her as a god with thunder and lightning, making himself manifest as they came together. Semele, who was pregnant, was not able to bear the god’s power. So she gave birth prematurely and was herself killed by the fire.

Zeus then had Hermes take the child to the Nymphs to raise. As a result of his upbringing, Dionysus discovered wine and taught humans how to cultivate the vines.

Diodorus Siculus says: “Aristaeus was the son of Apollo and Cyrene, the daughter of Hypseus, son of Peneius” (4.81.1). According to myth,