

# Contents



About this book.....	4
<b>Theme 1: Religious figures and sacred texts .....</b>	<b>8</b>
A: Jesus: his birth	8
B: Jesus: his resurrection	17
C: The Bible as a source of wisdom and authority in daily life	27
<b>Theme 1: Religious figures and sacred texts .....</b>	<b>36</b>
D: The Bible as a source of wisdom and authority	36
E: The early Church (in Acts of the Apostles)	47
F: Two views of Jesus	57
<b>Theme 2: Religious concepts .....</b>	<b>66</b>
A: The nature of God	66
B: The Trinity	73
C: The Atonement	81
<b>Theme 2: Religious life .....</b>	<b>88</b>
D: Faith and works	88
E: The community of believers	95
F: Key moral principles	103
<b>Theme 3: Significant social developments in religious thought .....</b>	<b>110</b>
A: Attitudes towards wealth	110
B: Migration and Christianity in the UK	120
C: Feminist theology and the changing role of men and women	128
<b>Theme 3: Significant historical developments in religious thought.....</b>	<b>140</b>
D: Challenges from secularisation	140
E: Challenges from science	152
F: Challenges from pluralism and diversity within a tradition	163
<b>Theme 4: Religious practices that shape religious identity (1).....</b>	<b>176</b>
A: Religious identity through diversity in baptism	176
B: Religious identity through diversity in Eucharist	184
C: Religious identity through diversity in festivals	191
<b>Theme 4: Religious practices that shape religious identity (2).....</b>	<b>201</b>
D: Religious identity through unification	201
E: Religious identity through religious experience	213
F: Religious identity through responses to poverty and injustice	228
Glossary.....	240
Index.....	242
Photo credits.....	246

# About this book

With the A Level in Religious Studies, there is a lot to cover in preparation for the examinations at the end of the course. The aim of these books is to provide enough support for you to achieve success at A Level, whether as a teacher or a learner.

This series of books is skills-based in its approach to learning, which means it aims to combine covering the content of the specification with examination preparation from the start. In other words, it aims to help you get through the course while at the same time developing some important skills needed for the examinations.

To help you study, there are clearly defined sections for each of the AO1 and AO2 areas of the specification. These are arranged according to the specification themes and use, as far as is possible, specification headings to help you see that the content has been covered.

The AO1 content is detailed but precise, with the benefit of providing you with references to both religious/philosophical works and to the views of scholars. The AO2 responds to the issues raised in the specification and provides you with ideas for further debate, to help you develop your own evaluation skills.

## Ways to use this book

In considering the different ways in which you may teach or learn, it was decided that the books needed to have an inbuilt flexibility to adapt. As a result, they can be used for classroom learning, for independent work by individuals, as homework, and, they are even suitable for the purposes of 'flip learning' if your school or college does this.

You may be well aware that learning time is valuable at A Level and so we have also taken this into consideration by creating flexible features and activities, again to save you the time of painstaking research and preparation, either as teacher or learner.

## Features of the books

The books all contain the following features that appear in the margins, or are highlighted in the main body of the text, in order to support teaching and learning.

**Key terms** of technical, religious and philosophical words or phrases.

### ● Key term

**Holy Spirit:** God as he is active in the world

**Key quotes** either from religious and philosophical works and/or the works of scholars.

### “Key quote”

I ... decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account.

(Luke 1:3)

**Key person** boxes summarise essential figures.

**AO1 activities** that serve the purpose of focusing on identification, presentation and explanation, and developing the skills of knowledge and understanding required for the examination.

### AO1 Activity

Prepare a 30-second news flash on how Jesus' birth is presented in Matthew and a 30-second news flash on how Jesus' birth is presented in Luke.

This practises the AO1 skill of selecting and presenting the key relevant information.

**AO2 activities** that serve the purpose of focusing on conclusions, as a basis for thinking about the issues, developing critical analysis and the evaluation skills required for the examination.

### AO2 Activity *Possible lines of argument*

Listed below are some conclusions that could be drawn from the AO2 reasoning in the Accompanying text

**Specification content** boxes highlight exactly what is being covered in each section and how it connects to the specification.

Glossary of all the key terms for quick reference.

## AO2 skills: critical analysis and evaluation

A good way to prepare yourself for an AO2 part (b) evaluation answer is to consider the different ways to approach this. Sometimes writing frames or anacronyms may be suggested. Whilst these are useful, they are meant as 'scaffolding' or support for an answer, but the danger is that they end up restricting more natural and personal evaluation.

One useful approach is to think about some different styles of writing and relate these to 'characters' that are easily remembered.

### Strong evaluative characters

We can look at what are considered **strong evaluative character styles** that display all the qualities that avoid the pitfalls above. By this we mean different aspects, elements or ingredients of an effective critical analysis and evaluation.

If we look at the table below, we can see 7 characters, each of which has a specific strength and quality that display skills of critical analysis and/ or evaluation. The strength of each character forms a **part** of a strong evaluation. In a full AO2 answer it may be useful to vary the characters in terms of depth and breadth.

The characters can be used as a checklist not a structured plan or rigid writing frame. The best way to use them is to consider the different styles and skills **before** writing an answer and then measure your answer by checking that the critical analysis and evaluation elements are there.

Examples of this can be seen in the sample answer we provide. In these sample answers you may notice that not all the character styles have been used in the same order, detail or combination; however, generally, most are often covered.





### Key person




**Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976):**  
a German theologian who called for the 'demythologisation' of the New Testament

### Specification content

The extent to which the birth narratives provide insight into the doctrine of incarnation.

In the table below, we have attempted to demonstrate how each character may fulfil the criteria for a band 5 evaluation using the descriptors it presents. These are highlighted in bold in the third column.

Character	Strength	Application and AO2 Band descriptor link
 <b>Tennis player</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The tennis player deals with specific lines of arguments (often from either named scholars or schools of thought) and returns counter arguments.</li> <li>The tennis player manages arguments and counter arguments, making sure there is consideration of several lines of argument in response to the statement in the question.</li> <li>This is sometimes understood as 'for' or in support of an argument and 'against'; however, this does not necessarily always have to be done in an even or balanced way since some answers may wish to argue effectively towards a conclusion that is supported by several lines of reasoning, evidence and argument that support each other.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The tennis player ensures that <b>thorough, sustained and clear views are given</b> in an answer.</li> <li>The tennis player also ensures that the <b>views of scholars/schools of thought are used extensively</b>.</li> </ul>
 <b>Detective</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The detective has a forensic ability to examine, collate and clarify evidence and provide examples. The detective makes sure that the argument presented is substantial in that it is based in evidence and examples to support the reasoning presented.</li> <li>The detective selects details that are accurate and relevant in a thorough way. They make sure that there is correct reference to specialist language in the correct context.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The <b>views of scholars/schools of thought are used appropriately and in context</b>.</li> <li>There is a <b>thorough and accurate use of specialist language and vocabulary in context</b>.</li> </ul>
 <b>Philosopher</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The philosopher likes to raise and ask interesting and relevant questions.</li> <li>The philosopher often indicates that there may be problems or challenges to a specific approach and likes to suggest a solution.</li> <li>When an argument or analysis is in 'full flow' we may think of questions that we would like to raise in response to views analysed. The philosopher loves to do this.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The philosopher character is typical of <b>perceptive evaluation</b>.</li> <li>The philosopher successfully <b>identifies the issues raised by the question set</b>.</li> </ul>
 <b>News reporter</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The news reporter provides perspective, clarity, an overview of the debate. Commentary is vital in an AO2 answer as it demonstrates that the student is engaging with the debate that the statement presents. It is an easy way to demonstrate that you are thinking about the issues.</li> <li>The best way to provide yourself with an opportunity to develop a more personalised approach is to practice pausing and reflecting upon points made, developing them with evidence and examples and commenting on the qualities a line of argument possesses.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using a news reporter style ensures that a response <b>thoroughly addresses the issues raised by the question set</b>.</li> </ul>

<b>Explorer</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The explorer likes to suggest some alternative ways of answering a question. Sometimes it feels as though a debate needs a different angle, approach or perspective. The explorer often suggests new ways of attempting to arrive at a solution to the debate.</li> <li>• This can often be your own response in considering a given statement including a new suggestion or perhaps a question you would like to raise.</li> <li>• You can even try to bring in other strands and evidence beyond the immediate topic from other areas of the course.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This ensures that there is <b>confident and perceptive analysis of the nature of connections between the various elements of the approaches studied</b>.</li> </ul>
<b>Critical thinker</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The critical thinker points out more technical aspects of an argument. The critical thinker is often concerned with how an argument 'works' and 'flows'.</li> <li>• The critical thinker sometimes challenges more forensic aspects of an argument.</li> <li>• The critical thinker checks for coherence and consistency. Does the evidence support the conclusion? Is there a counter argument?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The critical thinker ensures that there is <b>extensive, detailed reasoning</b> in an answer.</li> </ul>
<b>Judge</b> 	<p>Makes an overall ruling and concludes matters. The judge in some ways is the most vital character. They cannot stand alone and rely upon others and their contributions to make a final decision. This can be in favour or against the statement, or, it may be that the statement itself is questionable.</p> <p>Often an overall judgement ends an answer; however, sometimes an overall conclusion may start the answer and then discuss, analyse and reason why this may be the case.</p> <p>Strong evaluative answers often have several judgments or mini-conclusions throughout the answer.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The judge is the final voice of an answer. They may appear anywhere in an answer but usually summarises at the end. The judge should be clear evidence of <b>confident critical analysis</b>.</li> </ul>

## Summary of a strong evaluative answer

- Offers clear, sustained and varied lines of argument (view) like the exchanges of a tennis player.
- The varied evidence of scholarly views and schools of thought are precisely examined and coherently presented like the report of a detective.
- Issues are identified to focus on, and questions may be raised like a philosopher.
- Engages with a debate by offering commentary and reflection upon the points presented like a news reporter.
- May explore some new ways of answering the question and possibly refer to other elements of the course like an explorer.
- Contains reasoning that is detailed, ordered, coherent and effective like a critical thinker.
- Ensures there is an overall judgment made that clearly links to the reasoning and evidence contained in the answer like a judge.

# Religious figures and sacred texts

This section covers AO1 content and skills

## Specification content

Consistency and credibility of the birth narratives; harmonisation and redaction

## Key terms

**Gospels:** The record of Jesus' life and teaching in the first four books of the New Testament

**Magi:** Latin for 'wise men', originally the word meant 'an oriental priest, learned in astrology' and probably from Persia (Iran)

## A: Jesus: his birth

Make sure you have read and understood the set texts:

Matthew 1:18–2:23; Luke 1:26–2:40.

### The birth narratives in Matthew and Luke

Although there are four **Gospels** (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) in the New Testament that recount the life of Jesus, only Matthew and Luke contain accounts of Jesus' birth.

#### Matthew's version

Matthew focuses on Joseph and links the events to Old Testament prophecies. This version records how Joseph intends to marry Mary. However, finding out that she is pregnant, knowing he is not the father, he intends to divorce her quietly rather than expose her to public disgrace. Then an angel appears to him in a dream telling him that Mary conceived through the Holy Spirit and he is to marry Mary and call the child Jesus.

Matthew then records that the **Magi**, or Wise Men, who have followed a star 'from the East' visit Jesus and give him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Because the Wise Men fail to report back to Herod about the child, Herod orders all boys under two years old to be killed. Joseph is warned in a dream to flee to Egypt to escape Herod and, following another dream, only returns to Nazareth after Herod dies.

#### Luke's version

Luke focuses on Mary, and the account is interwoven with the account of John the Baptist's birth. The angel Gabriel tells Mary of her pregnancy. When she questions how that is possible given she is a virgin, Gabriel tells her that it is by means of the Holy Spirit. Mary, on a visit to her pregnant cousin Elizabeth, expresses her joy in a song of praise (1:46–55). Elizabeth gives birth to John the Baptist, and her husband, Zechariah, subsequently gives a prophecy about John the Baptist's future work (1:68–79).

Luke then records how Joseph and Mary have to travel to Bethlehem to be registered for the census Caesar Augustus has called. Because there is no room for them at the inn, the baby Jesus is born in a manger (probably in a stable or outhouse). Meanwhile, some shepherds are informed by angels of Jesus' birth and go immediately to Bethlehem to visit him.

## Key quote

The fact is that we have in Matthew and Luke two independent accounts of the birth of Jesus.

(M Roberts)

On the eighth day, Jesus is circumcised and named Jesus. Then, a month later, Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving. Moved by the Spirit, Simeon recognises Jesus and refers to him as 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles'. Then Mary, Joseph and Jesus return to their home in Nazareth.



## Differences in the accounts

- Matthew writes from Joseph's perspective, Luke from Mary's.
- Only Matthew records the appearance of the star, the visit of the Wise Men, the slaughter of the boys and the flight to Egypt.
- Matthew has extensive quotations from the Old Testament. Luke does not, but has three songs of Mary, Zechariah and Simeon.
- Luke mentions that Jesus is born 'in a manger'. Matthew speaks of 'a house'.
- Only Luke records Mary's visit to Elizabeth, the birth of John the Baptist, the census of Caesar Augustus, the visit of the shepherds, the circumcision and presentation of Jesus in the Temple.

## The historicity of the accounts

Certainly, the **birth narratives** do contain references to historical figures such as Herod (Matthew's Gospel), Caesar Augustus and Quirinius (Luke's Gospel). However, they raise difficulties. Herod's massacre of the boys is not recorded anywhere else, but it is consistent with Herod's character. He murdered three of his own sons.

Luke (1:3) implies he is writing an accurate historical account, and it is true that Quirinius was governor of Syria. However, many scholars place the date of Quirinius' governorship some eight years after Herod's death, and so later than Jesus' birth. Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, refers to a census by Caesar Augustus but dates it at 6 CE. In addition, it was not the Roman practice to require people to return to their ancestral home for registration.

### “Key quote

I ... decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account.

(Luke 1:3)

Some scholars claim that Luke misleads his readers with the three songs that he includes in his narrative. They argue that the early Christian community was already singing these songs before Luke attributed them to various characters in his Gospel.

## Supernatural events in the accounts

Perhaps the biggest cause of doubt about the **historicity** of the accounts of Jesus' birth are the references to supernatural events accompanying the birth.

- **Angels:** In both Matthew and Luke, angels appear, giving messages. In Matthew, an angel appears to Joseph on three occasions and an angel appears to the Wise Men. In Luke, an angel appears to Mary, and a choir of angels visits the shepherds.
- **Supernatural knowledge:** Both Simeon and Anna in the Temple recognise Jesus as the Messiah.

### Key term

**birth narratives:** the accounts of Jesus' birth in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke



A stained glass depiction of Herod's massacre of the boys

### Key term

**historicity:** historical accuracy

- **The star:** The Wise Men are guided miraculously to Jesus by a star. The identity of this celestial phenomenon has most often been explained as a planetary conjunction (apparent close approaches of two or more planets to each other). However, it led them south, whereas celestial bodies normally move from east to west. Also, it led them directly to the place where Joseph and Mary were staying, which stellar phenomenon cannot do.
- **The virgin birth:** Both Matthew and Luke claim that Jesus was miraculously conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. For many, this is probably the most difficult challenge to belief. The narratives imply that Jesus was human by virtue of his mother and divine by virtue of being conceived by God. Jesus appears to be both human and divine.

### “Key quote”

Look, the young woman [the Greek version uses the word ‘*virgin*’] is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

(Isaiah 7:14)

### Harmonising the accounts

Another reason some people have for doubting the two accounts is the apparent differences between them. If the accounts are true, then shouldn't they be similar and consistent?

However, as the accounts do not blatantly contradict one another, there is no reason both accounts cannot be true. Why couldn't Jesus have been visited by both Wise Men and shepherds? It may be possible to explain other apparent differences. For instance, both Matthew and Luke may have selected or have had access to accounts of only some of the events. Matthew may have had access to information that was not available to Luke, and vice versa.

The time sequence may also account for apparent differences. For instance, while Luke writes about Jesus being born in a *manger*, Matthew refers to a *house*. This may be explained by the crowd for the census having left by the time the Wise Men visited, and so the family could have been able to move lodgings to a house. Similarly, Mary, Joseph and Jesus may have fled to Egypt sometime after Jesus was presented in the Temple.

There are also many similarities between the two gospel accounts. Both Matthew and Luke agree that Jesus was born in Bethlehem when Herod was King of Judea. They also agree that the name of the mother was Mary, that she was betrothed to Joseph, that she was a virgin and that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And they agree that people travelled to visit the newborn baby and that Jesus came to save not only the Jewish people, but all people, just as the prophecies had foretold.

### The approach of redaction criticism

One explanation for the differences in the birth narratives may be that the author had a particular theological perspective that he wanted to convey to his readers. For instance, Matthew's Gospel is seen as having been written for Jewish readers and so tells the story of Jesus' birth from Joseph's viewpoint. He wants to show that Jesus was connected, through Joseph, with Israel's legendary King David and that he is the fulfilment of Old Testament revelation of God. Hence, his account has six Old Testament quotations.



This approach to understanding how the account was compiled is known as **redaction criticism**. It assumes that the original traditions about Jesus circulated as independent units in the early Church. Each Gospel writer chose the material that he wanted and arranged it to suit his own theological interests, making significant additions and omissions and changing the wording to make a theological point.

### “Key quote”

Redaction criticism ... looks at the Gospels as complete documents, and sees the evangelists as individual theologians (even ‘authors’) in their own right.

(S Smalley)

In contrast to Matthew, Luke seems to be writing to non-Jewish people (*Gentiles*). He tells the story from Mary’s point of view. When he does appeal to Old Testament prophecy, he doesn’t quote from the Hebrew version, but the Greek version, the **Septuagint**. The emphasis in Luke’s Gospel is that Jesus brought salvation to poor and needy people, and that God is concerned with those who are underprivileged and downtrodden. This may account for why Luke includes the story of the shepherds, rather than the wealthy Wise Men bearing expensive gifts.

The story of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple also makes clear that Joseph and Mary were poor people. The sacrifice they make is the sacrifice of the poor (‘a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons’). On such occasions, wealthy people were expected to sacrifice a lamb. This story, together with the prominence given to the birth of John the Baptist, emphasises the connection between Jesus and the Jewish religion so that, despite the Greek flavour of his Gospel, Luke, like Matthew, is convinced that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament revelation of God. John the Baptist represents the last of the Old Testament prophets and foretold the appearance of John the Baptist, the forerunner to the Messiah, Jesus.

## The doctrine of the incarnation

The English word **incarnation** comes from the Latin, which is made up of two basic elements, *in* + *carnis* (‘flesh’). *Incarnation*, therefore, means ‘becoming flesh’.

The doctrine of the incarnation expresses the belief that Jesus Christ was God in human form. According to this belief, Jesus’ life on Earth was only a short period in the story of one who had always been and will always be. His birth at Bethlehem was not the beginning of the story, nor was his death on the cross the end. The belief asserts that while Jesus lived on Earth, people found themselves in the presence of God in the flesh. As John’s Gospel puts it (1:14), ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father’.

The most widely accepted definitions of the incarnation and the nature of Jesus were made by the First Council of Nicea in 325 CE, the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE and the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE.

### “Key quote”

We believe ... in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father ... being of one substance with the Father ... for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate and was made man.

(First Council of Nicea, 325 CE)

### Key term

**redaction criticism:** a theory that regards the author of a text as editor of source material that they adapted to suit their own theological interests

### Key term

**Septuagint:** the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible in the third to second centuries BCE; also referred to as the *LXX* in reference to a legend of 70 Jewish scholars translating the Torah

### Specification content

Interpretation and application of the birth narratives to the doctrine of the incarnation (substantial presence and the kenotic model)

### Key term

**incarnation:** God in human form in the person of Jesus

What they assert is that Jesus Christ was both fully God: begotten from, but not created by the Father; and fully man: taking his flesh and human nature from the Virgin Mary.

## The two natures

These two natures, human and divine, were united in the one person of Jesus. This is known as the *hypostatic union*.

It is important to understand that the doctrine of the incarnation does not see Jesus as half human, half God. It states that Jesus is fully God and fully human.

- He is fully God because he is believed to have existed from the beginning with God, and was God. His appearance here on Earth was only a brief period in this existence. After his resurrection, he is believed to have returned to his Father with whom he now reigns for evermore.
- He is fully human because he was a man of flesh and blood, born as any other person is born; he was a helpless baby; he had to learn to walk and talk like every child; he ate and slept and drank; he experienced hunger, weakness, temptation and disappointment; he died.

### “Key quote”

We ... confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also in manhood ... to be acknowledged in two natures ...

(Council of Chalcedon, 451 CE)

The person of Jesus, therefore, combines two natures – a divine nature and human nature. Not surprisingly, this doctrine has been challenged. For example: how could an omniscient God become a baby, and how could Jesus, if he was God, be tempted (Mark 1:13) or not know when the world was to end (Mark 13:32)?

Through the history of Christianity, there have been attempts to emphasise one nature in Jesus' person at the expense of the other, and such attempts are seen as heresy. However, the doctrine of the incarnation gives equal validity to both.

## Incarnation as kenosis

The term *kenosis* comes from Greek and means 'to make empty'. The word appears in Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:7), where Paul says that Jesus, 'who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness'.

'Made himself nothing' is sometimes translated as 'emptied himself' (*kenosis*).

Kenotic theology attempts to understand the incarnation in this light. Its main concern is to solve some of the difficulties arising from Jesus having both a divine and a human nature.

The question is: what does Paul mean when he says that Christ 'made himself nothing'? It cannot be that Jesus emptied himself of his divinity and stopped being God. If he was truly God, he must have continued to be God during his earthly ministry, maintaining the substantial presence of God, although his divine attributes were hidden.

Instead, the 'emptying' consists of:

- a preincarnate self-limitation by Jesus, agreeing to take 'the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness', therefore fully human while maintaining substantial presence as fully divine.
- the self-emptying of his own will as a human being and becoming a servant, and submitting entirely to the will of God.

## Summary

- ★ Only Matthew's and Luke's Gospels give accounts of the birth of Jesus.
- ★ The supernatural elements in the accounts and the differences between the accounts cast doubt on their historical reliability.
- ★ Others note that there is no actual contradiction between the accounts, and the Gospel writers just focus on different parts of the event.
- ★ Redaction criticism argues that the Gospel writers selected material to suit their theological interests.
- ★ Christian doctrine teaches that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine.

## AO1 Activity

- a** Explain examples from the birth narratives that support the view that:
- Matthew's Gospel focuses on Joseph.
  - Luke's Gospel focuses on Mary.

This helps consolidate your learning, by developing the skill of selecting relevant examples and explaining how they illustrate the focus of the question.

- b** Draw a diagram to illustrate the similarities between the two accounts of the birth narrative.

This helps develop your organisation skills, by selecting and ordering evidence and examples.

This section covers AO2 content and skills

### Specification content

The extent to which the birth narratives provide insight into the doctrine of the incarnation

## Issues for analysis and evaluation

### The extent to which the birth narratives provide insight into the doctrine of the incarnation

Possible line of argument	Critical analysis and evaluation
The birth narratives in the Gospels give an account of Jesus being born of a virgin.	The accounts of the virgin birth are based on ancient myths that ascribed supernatural births to a figure to turn them into a hero and are not to be understood literally.
Although there are ancient myths involving virgin births, the birth narratives in the Gospels are reliable historical accounts. Many scholars see Luke as someone who was historically accurate in his writings.	There are too many doubts about the reliability of the birth narratives. Many argue that they were written long after the events and were made up by the early Church, based on Old Testament prophecies. The epistles of Paul, which are earlier than the Gospels, do not mention the virgin birth.  The incarnation is clearly an incoherent idea – it is not possible to be fully God and fully human.
It is unscientific to dismiss the supernatural in the New Testament accounts of the birth narratives.	Bultmann argues that the birth narratives need to be 'demythologised' to understand them in the modern world.
If the accounts are reliable, they provide insight into the doctrine of Jesus being both fully God and fully human.	The word <i>virgin</i> is a mistranslation and means 'a young woman of marriageable age'. It has nothing to do with God becoming flesh.  To claim that Jesus was born of a virgin is not the same as claiming that Jesus was fully God and fully human.
It is too narrow to consider only the birth narratives.	We need to consider the whole of Jesus' life, including his death and resurrection, to gain insight into the incarnation. But again, it is necessary to decide how reliable the accounts are.

### AO2 Activity

- a** Analyse three possible conclusions that could be drawn from the critical analysis and evaluation of the extent to which the birth narratives provide insight into the doctrine of the incarnation. What are their strengths and weaknesses? Which conclusion is the strongest?
- b** Using the strongest conclusion, select three lines of argument that you might use to support this conclusion. Explain why you have selected these.

## Exam practice

### Sample question

Evaluate the relative importance of redaction criticism for understanding the biblical birth narrative.

### Sample answer

Redaction theory is the theory that New Testament writers altered existing material about Jesus to suit their own agenda. It assumes that the original stories about Jesus circulated as independent units in the early Church. Each Gospel writer selected the material that they wanted and arranged it to shape their theological message, making significant additions and omissions and changing the wording to make a theological point.

If this theory is correct, then it would mean that the Gospel writers were individual authors, each with a particular agenda, who shaped the material they received. They were not primarily concerned with writing a chronological account, and so the Gospels should be read as theology rather than history.

For instance, Matthew's Gospel seems aimed at a Jewish readership. He refers to Jesus much more in terms of a Jewish messianic context. In the birth narratives, Matthew is seen as redacting his material to include the title 'Son of David' and presents Jesus as the 'New Moses'. In particular, the birth narratives repeatedly quote from the Old Testament and show Jesus as the fulfiller of these prophecies and therefore the true Messiah.

In contrast, Luke seems to be shaping his material for a Gentile readership. He includes in his birth narrative a census that involves the entire Roman world. There are no stories about the Magi and their gifts, but instead it is lowly shepherds who first visit the baby Jesus.

This critical approach clearly raises questions about the historical reliability of the birth narratives, including the very nature of Jesus and his incarnation. It makes us interpret the birth narratives in a very different way from that of reading them as historical accounts of what actually happened. Many would argue that understanding that the authors of Matthew and Luke were influenced by pagan mythology, with heroes born of a virgin and mysterious stars in the sky appearing at their birth, makes much more sense of the birth stories. The writers were making a theological point, not a historical chronological account.

However, redaction criticism is not without its own critics. It seems questionable to assume that Matthew and Luke were not interested in recording accurate historical information but felt free to create their own material. Luke's preface explicitly states a historical interest and is consistent with historical information found in other documents of the time.

This section covers AO2 content and skills

### Specification content

The relative importance of redaction criticism for understanding the biblical birth narrative

#### News reporter

A clear explanation of redaction criticism; a good introduction to the debate of whether redaction criticism helps understanding of the birth narratives.

#### News reporter

The answer immediately addresses how redaction criticism can be seen to help understanding. The focus is on reading the accounts not as historical writing but more as theological works. A good overview of how the evaluation may go.

#### Detective

Some good examples are given to illustrate the insight that redaction criticism provides to the birth narratives.

#### Detective

Having looked at Matthew's account, the answer now considers Luke's account. This provides an excellent contrast, drawing out clearly the differences in the theology between the accounts. These examples from the birth narratives make clear how redaction criticism provides this understanding of why the narratives differ.

#### Critical thinker

Some good reflective questioning about the consequences of this approach of redaction criticism to the biblical texts.

#### Tennis player

#### Detective

The answer now develops a critical approach to the findings of redaction criticism. It gives evidence supporting alternative understandings of the birth narratives.



### Critical thinker

### Explorer

### Judge

The answer raises some good cautionary comments about redaction criticism and concludes that history and theology are not mutually exclusive. The argument has been consistent throughout and has been well evidenced.

It is a good answer that has a clear line of argument. Perhaps the conclusion regarding theology and history not being mutually exclusive could be developed further.

Redaction criticism is a useful reminder that the Gospel writers were writing theology rather than history, and that they had a variety of potential audiences. However, we should treat redaction criticism with caution as its methodology is questionable.

Why could the gospel writers not have been both theologians and historians? The two positions are not mutually exclusive.

The Christian faith has always believed that it had a historical foundation and that theology was an interpretation of history. The early Church actually appealed to historical events to demonstrate the truth of its beliefs.

## Over to you

For this first task, try using the framework/writing frame provided to help you practise the AO2 skills to answer the question below.

As the units in each section of the book develop, the amount of support will reduce gradually to encourage you to be independent and to perfect your AO2 skills.

## Question

Evaluate the view that it makes no sense to claim that Jesus was both God and man.

## Writing frame

The issue for debate here is the reasonableness or otherwise of the doctrine of the incarnation, which asserts that ...

Jewish people and Muslims, and some Christian denominations such as Unitarians, would accept the contention on the grounds that ...

Most mainstream Christian traditions would, however, reject it on the grounds that ...

It is my view that ... and I base this argument on the following reasons: