We are all familiar with the chapters from Matthew and Luke, so familiar that I suspect we often read them or hear them read without paying a lot of attention to them. It is as if we go on autopilot when we read them. However, there is a great deal in these two chapters. I hope these questions will help you see some things in them that you’ve not noticed before.

Luke 1

Verses 1–4: Luke is the only writer who begins his Gospel by telling us why he is writing it. Why does he do that? We don’t know who Theophilus was, but in Greek the phrase “most excellent” is a title, comparable to “your honor” in our culture, so he was probably a civil official of some kind.

Verses 5–25: Why does Luke begin with John the Baptist’s birth rather than with Jesus’s birth?

Notice the parallels between his description of the two births: the parents are introduced (verses 5–7 and 26–27), an angel appears to announce the birth (verses 8–23 and 28–30), a sign is given (verses 18–20 and 34–38), and a woman who has had no children becomes pregnant miraculously (verses 24–25 and 42). Why has Luke taken so much care to make these two stories parallel?
Zacharias was chosen to burn incense on the incense altar, the holiest place in the temple, just outside the holy of holies. Since the priests making the offering were chosen by lot and there were only two times a year when any particular group (“course”) of priests was eligible, the chances of this happening at all were slim; the chances of it happening to the same person twice were null. Why do you think the Lord chose that occasion to make the announcement of John the Baptist’s birth?

What did the burning incense represent? Is that relevant to understanding this event?

Do you think that John was a Nazirite (verse 15)? (Read about the Nazirites in your Bible Dictionary.) If so, why do you think he was?

How does Gabriel describe John the Baptist’s mission in verse 17? How does his mortal mission relate to his post-mortal mission?

Joseph Smith tells us that Gabriel, the angel who made these announcements, is Noah (History of the Church 3:386). Why is it significant that Noah/Gabriel make these announcements? Does 1 Peter 3:20–22 suggest any reasons for Gabriel being the one to make the announcements?

How does this story compare to the story of Abraham and Sarah and the birth of Isaac? What is the significance of that comparison?

Verses 26–38: What do you make of Gabriel’s address to Mary in verse 28? How ought we to think of her?
Compare Mary’s response to the angel to Zacharias’s. What does that tell you about each?

Gabriel describes Jesus’s mission in verses 32–33. Do those verses describe both his mortal ministry and the ministry that will begin with his second coming? How so, or not so, for each case?

**Verses 39–56:** Why might Elisabeth’s reaction (verses 42–45) have been reassuring to Mary?

How does Elisabeth know that Mary will be the mother of the Lord? What is Elisabeth saying in verse 45?

Given your reading of the Old Testament, can you explain the importance of the themes of Mary’s hymn in verses 50–54? What do those themes have to do with the birth that she is expecting?

**Verses 57–66:** Zacharias’s name means “whom Jehovah remembers” and John’s name means “favored by Jehovah.” Does the meaning of those names tell us anything about why the angel told Zacharias to name the child John and why the family and friends wanted to name him after his father?

How would the family have understood the name Zacharias to be meaningful for this birth? How is the name John meaningful?

**Verses 67–80:** What does Zacharias tell us about Jesus in his blessing of John? How does what he says about Jesus reflect what we saw the prophets of the Old Testament saying?

Zacharias specifically says that Jesus has come to make it possible for Israel to perform the mercy that was promised
and to remember the covenant. Reread Exodus 19:5–6 to recall the promise of the covenant. Given that promise, what does Zacharias foresee Jesus restoring?

The Greek word translated *serve* in verse 74 specifically refers to temple service. What do you make of the fact that the priest who has been serving in the temple is prophesying that Jesus will come and make temple service possible?

What does Zacharias tell us about John in this blessing? Why does Zacharias call Jesus “the dayspring,” in other words, the dawn? Be sure to consider the connection between verses 78 and 79.

Does Herod’s decree (Matthew 2:16) perhaps explain why John was raised in the desert? Some have speculated that he was raised by Essenes or a similar group. If John were raised by such a group, what might that suggest about his family’s relation to the temple and its priesthood? Why would it be appropriate that the forerunner of the Savior be raised among those who felt that way?

**Matthew 1**

To help illuminate the context better, I will provide study questions for all of Matthew 1 rather than just for the reading assignment.

**Verses 1–16:** It is clear that Matthew is not giving an exact genealogy. For example, he tells us that there were fourteen generations between each of the three important events in Israel’s history—from Abraham, to David, to the Babylonian captivity, to the coming of Christ: three groups
of fourteen generations each, culminating in the birth of Christ. But if we compare this genealogy to the other genealogies in the Old Testament we can see that this is incorrect. Why would Matthew knowingly give us a genealogy that isn’t accurate? (Notice that Ezra does something similar: he omits six generations of priests from his genealogy. Compare Ezra 7:1–5 to 1 Chronicles 6:3–15.)

Notice that Matthew says that there are fourteen generations in each of the three groups (verses 17–18), but he puts only thirteen in the last group. It is unlikely that Matthew didn’t know that he had only thirteen in that group, so how do you explain that oddity?

Genealogies in the Bible rarely mention women, but this one mentions three: Tamar (spelled “Thamar” here, verse 3), Rachab (verse 5), Ruth (verse 5), and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah (spelled “Urias” here—verse 6). Why would Matthew mention these women? What are the stories about these women? Do those stories have anything to do with the story of Mary and Joseph? If Matthew’s audience is the Jews, why might he include these particular women in the genealogy?

**Verse 1:** By using the phrase “book of the genealogy,” Matthew deliberately imitates passages such as Genesis 2:4 and 5:1. Why? What is he trying to tell us about what follows?

In Jewish thinking at the time of Christ, the “number” of David’s name is fourteen. (Jewish numerologists added up the number values of the consonants in names and believed that those numbers were significant. The Hebrew letter that we transliterate as $d$ is the fourth letter in the
Hebrew alphabet, and the letter that we transliterate as ν is the sixth letter, so the number of David’s name is 4+6+4, fourteen.) Does that tell us anything about why Matthew has constructed his genealogy as he has?

**Verses 18–25:** What does *espoused* (verse 18) mean? What does *privily* (verse 19) mean? Jewish divorce law, unlike the laws and customs of other people at the time, required that divorce be formal: a man wishing to divorce his wife (to do so, he had to find “some uncleanness in her” or “something indecent about her”—Deuteronomy 24:1) had to give her a document contradicting their marriage contract. She was then free to remarry. What does this story tell us about Joseph’s character? Why do you think that Matthew focuses on Joseph but Luke says very little about him?

Is it significant that Joseph is a dreamer, like Joseph of old? Is the meaning of Joseph’s name significant, “to take away my reproach”?

The angel says that Mary’s child’s name should be “Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins” (verse 21). How does the fact that he will save us explain his name? If the child is to be named “Jesus,” then why does verse 23 say his name will be “Emmanuel”?

Why does Matthew end this part of his story with a quotation from Isaiah?