

Christmas,  
separating fact from fiction

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It's getting to be that time of year once again. Go to any department store and you see the decorations, all the toys and gifts to buy, the carols wafting through the air. It seems that any other time of year, Christian themed music in public places like shopping malls is almost unwanted but not at this time of year. You know what, it seems like it is coming earlier and earlier every year too. I can remember when you didn't see any decorations or anything until after Thanksgiving, but now, you can go into certain department stores and one isle over from the blood and guts of the Halloween displays are the lights, trees and plastic baby Jesus figures that light up. Yes Christmas time is here once again. Buy me this, I want that, gimme, gimme, gimme that seems to be the catch phrase this time of year. Christmas has turned into such a commercialized time that we forget that the Christian holiday of Christmas started some 2000 years ago, as a song I sing at Church, with a tiny Baby's cry.

That first Christmas night is the sight of great truth and even greater misconception. In this study, I want us to look past the tinsel wrapped ideas of the Nativity that we hold to, and open our minds to the fact that the story might not be just as glamorous as the retail world wants us to think that it is.

There is a used bookstore here in town that has two bins outside with free books in them. Most of the time these are very, very out dated textbooks, damaged, or just books nobody wants, but sometimes, you can find a nugget of a good book in them. Several years back I was at that store and was outside rummaging through those bins, looking for whatever I could find and came across a small book by an obscure author, and a simple title, *First Christmas, The True and Unfamiliar Story* by Paul L. Maier. This lesson will borrow several thoughts from this book. This book was one of the Pieces to the puzzle of my quest for sound Biblical knowledge, finding out for myself the truths about God's word, not just taking for granted what others have said.

I hope you enjoy this study as we delve into one of the most cherished of Christian events.

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## Chapter One

### The Politics of the Nativity

Okay, I know what you are thinking, Keith, we just got through with the election, some of our candidates won, some lost, but we are S000 over all this political mess. You know what, I totally agree with you, but there is no better segway into the Christmas story than the political mess of the day.

Think of the current political climate, economic hardships, an unpopular government, war, crime, low population, do you think these are exclusive to our day and time? Think again.

If we could, I would go back in time to almost 2100 years ago. The scene is Rome, Italy. The great Julius Caesar is dead. His magnificent empire is in peril. Bitter foes, Mark Antony and Augustus Caesar are struggling against each other for complete control of the Roman empire, and the entire empire is feeling

the strain. The population of the Roman empire is dwindling because sexual promiscuity is rampant, marriage is getting to be a thing of the past, and war has ravaged the population. The economy is faltering because of the drop in population, the trade coming from the distant part of the empire is not coming in. Something is going to have to give and fast. Augustus seizes the opportunity and runs a campaign based on change and return to the former glory of Rome. Kind of sounds familiar doesn't it? We are going to change this country and restore it to its former glory...

Any way, history will dictate that Augustus was victorious over Mark Antony and he set to work restoring the empire to its once proud place as the ruler of the known world.

He started in Rome itself. He battled the corruption that was rampant in the senate and then went to work to fix the population problem. He passed several laws that gave economic benefits to men who fathered three or more children, made marriage a rule not an exception, in fact it became such a rule that you could not hold any high position unless you were married. Sexual promiscuity became a crime punishable by death.

Slowly the wheels of change came to the Roman empire. The population grew and the emperor wanted to know just how much his policies had an effect on the world. From here we take our first look at the scripture.

**Lu 2:1** And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.

**Lu 2:2** (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

**Lu 2:3** And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

At the end of the life of Augustus, he wrote his memoirs called the Acts of Augustus, a total of 35 items that he was proud that he accomplished during his reign. These were engraved on bronze plaques and hung outside his mausoleum after his death. Number 8 on the list was a census that was started in 28 B.C. Now this was not any ordinary census, this was a census that was used for the purpose of taxation, once again to offset the economic strain on the empire, if you will indulge me, and economic bailout that the government took money from the citizens and used it to offset the economic problems.....

Through these verses we are introduced to another man. Publius Sulpicius Quirinius. What is so special about this man? First of all Quirinius was a military leader, a business man and finally a politician. There is some debate here about Luke's account that this census took place when Quirinius was governor of

Syria. This is a topic we will look into greater detail about in another chapter, but historic record show that Quirinius was governor in 6-7 A.D. That being historically proven, scholars believe that part of Quirinius' duties as military commander in the east was to see that this census of 8 B.C. was carried out to the emperor's wishes.

So in keeping with the demands of an emperor 1500 miles away, and a wicked puppet king ruling their land whom we will talk about later, and a military leader whose only job right now is to see that the census is carried out just like the emperor, Joseph a poor carpenter in the city of Nazareth and his wife Mary who by this time is probably in the later months of pregnancy begin an 80 mile journey to the ancestral home of their mutual ancestor, King David.

Why was it necessary for Mary to go with Joseph? There are two theories. One is that every subject of the Roman empire was required to go. That really does not hold water too well because only the men were counted. Although there was a discovery on Egypt of a census edict from Rome dated around 104 A.D. that every subject, man woman, boy, or girl was to make the journey.

The other is that the journey to Bethlehem would give a cover to the fact that a baby will be born to the couple only six months after the marriage.

So the stage is set, the pieces are in motion, all the political players are in place, and a poor Jewish couple prepares to make the long, hard journey to do their civic duty.

I wonder if when the census takers, years later as they counted the names, ever notices three names listed.

Joseph Ben-Jacob

Mary Bath-Doachim

Yeshua or Jesus, first born son

Certainly they never would have guessed this poor couple and their first born son were the very vehicle that God would use to reconcile the world to Him, especially coming from a hole in the wall city like Nazareth in the land of Palestine.

Palestine, as we know it today as the Middle East, Israel in particular, has been the crossroads of civilization for thousands of years. This land gave birth to two major religions, Judaism and Islam, and set the stage for another, Christianity.

The emperor himself could never have guessed that the events set in motion by his simple decree that the whole world should be counted would alter the course of history itself.

Chapter two  
The Time, and The Place

One thing that has always puzzled me, if A.D. means in the year of our Lord and B.C. means before Christ, why do scholars say that Jesus was born in 6 or 5 B.C. instead of 1 A.D.?

Keeping that in mind we will look at the timing of the Nativity in the first section of this chapter.

I have often heard it said that God has his own timing and everything happens in His own good time, not when we think it should. The next verse I want to look at is not considered part of the traditional Christmas story, but in its obscurity, it explains a lot.

**Ga 4:4** But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law,

For centuries, prophets spoke about the birth of the Messiah, They talked about where He would be born, how He would be born, but never did they talk about when He would be born. Paul in the above verse was talking about how we become children of God, he then writes this verse above. To paraphrase, when everything was in place, when everything lined up, God sent His Son to make the way for us to become children of God for that is ultimately what the Christmas story is about.

So in this time in history, how was everything in place? They did not have satellite communications, they didn't have radio, they didn't have telephones, and they didn't even have electricity. How could God use this time to spread His message?

First of all, the Greeks who conquered the known world hundreds of years earlier gave the world a language that everyone knew.

Second, the Romans who followed the Greeks in power gave the world the infrastructure that allowed the spread of God's message. Have you ever heard the phrase, all roads lead to Rome? This was actually true in a round about way. The Romans were excellent builders with many buildings and many roads they built still in place today. The roads that the Romans built allowed easy travel from city to city without having to worry about traveling in unknown areas through uncharted territories.

Thirdly, at this time in history, there was not the overwhelming pull to a nonspiritual lifestyle. Today's society tells us that we don't need religion any more. Ancient societies put more emphasis on religion than

their own government at times. So this new religion that started spreading from this small corner of the world called Palestine that taught love and forgiveness took root and spread quickly.

So once again-Christ came in the fulness of time when God was good and ready, so when was that time? Can it be given a date? Was Jesus actually born on December 25?

Scholars tell us that Jesus was born somewhere between 6 and 5 B.C. because the scripture clearly shows that Herod the Great was alive at the birth of Christ. History tells us that Herod the Great died in the spring of 4 B.C.

So, why are our calendars off five years? In the sixth century, a Roman Catholic monk named Dionysius Exiguus was tasked with the responsibility of recalculating the calendar to revolve around the birth of Christ. Up until this time, the calendar revolved around the founding of Rome. Exiguus mistakenly dated the birth of Christ 749 years from the founding of Rome when it was actually 753 years. Exiguus' mistake still dates our calendars today.

Okay, we talked about the year, what about the season? Our traditional Christmas is in December. How many Christmas cards have you ever seen that shows Mary and Joseph trudging through snow to get to the inn in Bethlehem? Now I want to say, when we imagine the middle east, we think of desert, we think of dry and we think of hot. We usually don't think of snow. One thing you might not know is that Bethlehem is along the same line of latitude as Georgia so it is not out of the question to have snow in Israel.

But the next verse I want to look at gives us a little glimpse at what time of year the Nativity actually happened.

**Lu 2:8** And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Now I want to say up front I am not a shepherd. Never have been, never want to be, but I know what it is like to be outside at night when it is cold. I know what it is like when you wake up in the morning and have ice on your sleeping bag. It is not fun let me tell you. Being outside all night in the wintertime is an experience you would cherish.

Traditionally, the shepherds would stay with the sheep to protect them from robbers or wild animals, letting them forage as far as they could to find food. In the wintertime however, the shepherds would take the sheep out during the day and at night bring them back to be kept in pens at night.

Let's look a little deeper, was Jesus really born on December 25? Although this is not out of the realm of possibility, it is not an iron clad date. I was asked in my Sunday school class recently, did they celebrate birthdays in the Bible times like we do today. In answer to that question, I don't think so. Although the

mothers would probably remember the day, there were no real calendars kept and there was for sure not any birth certificates.

The first celebrations of the Birth of Christ were not held until about the second or third century so the exact date of the Nativity can not be determined for sure. Even at that, the early church was divided into two groups. One was the eastern church and was headquartered in Rome. The other was the western church and was headquartered in Constantinople. The east celebrated on January 6 and the west on December 25. So where did the date of December 25 get adopted as the date of Christmas?

The Romans at this time celebrated the winter solstice, called the Saturnalia Festival on December 25. The religious leaders wanting to phase out pagan rituals such as the Saturnalia and the Sol Invictus also held near the end of December.

Despite their best efforts to make a religious holiday out of a pagan holiday, many pagan traditions of these holidays hold true till today, such as the decorating of the evergreen tree, the exchanging of gifts, the Yule log and the gathering together of friends and families.

The ultimate truth of all this debate about the date can be summed up like this. Other than scattered accounts and word of mouth traditions, the exact date of the Nativity can never be determined.

As a footnote, The date of December 25 is something I will give a theory of my own when we talk about Mary.

We can't set a date for sure, so how can we set a place? The Bible leaves little doubt that the Nativity takes place in Bethlehem. The old Testament prophet Micah has this to say:

**Mic 5:2** But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.

This is a cornerstone of the Messianic prophecies. This particular prophecy was fulfilled in Matthew's version of the Nativity:

**Mt 2:1** Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

The wise men we will talk about later.

Bethlehem was an important city in Israel's history, the book of Ruth was set there and King David was born there.

Now how does Bethlehem fit into the story?

With the decree that the people must go to the city of their ancestors to be counted, David's many descendants were going to be going back there. The normally quiet and sparsely populated city of Bethlehem was now bursting at the seams with the influx of people.

So we know they were in Bethlehem, but where did they stay?

Imagine this, you and your wife have just got the chance to get away for the weekend, you get to your destination and you find that there are no rooms available, everywhere you look you see no vacancy signs. You don't want to leave, but you don't know where to stay.

Now as the traditional story goes, imagine yourself as Joseph, your wife is getting ready to give birth, you are going from door to door and you are finding no place at all to stay.

First of all, there were no Holiday Inn's in Bethlehem at this time. Inns were usually a large spare room in someone's house that was rented out.

Eventually, someone relents and allows Joseph to stay in the stable with the animals. Some will say that it was a stable, or a cave, but they did find a place to stay.

The next question is, is there any evidence as to the place where Jesus was born?

In the center of the old city of Bethlehem is a building called the Church of the Nativity. Tradition has it that it was built over the exact spot where Jesus was born. In the lower floors, now covered with white marble, is a silver star that marks the spot.

Here is what I believe, the exact site of the Nativity, like that of Golgotha, we will never know for sure, but the truth is, they happened.

Chapter three  
Shepherds and Angels

I will never forget the day that our first son, Carter, was born. It was a scary day, a long story I won't go into now. I will never forget the ones that were there, but the one thing I remember, other than the first time I held Carter, was right as they were taking Christy to the operating room was Beth running down the hallway, trying to get there before she missed seeing Christy. I remember having a list of people I was supposed to call, but I don't remember who I called first.

On the other hand, the Bible is clear who was told first.

**Lu 2:8** And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

**Lu 2:9** And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

**Lu 2:10** And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

**Lu 2:11** For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

Society had a low view of shepherds at this time in history. They were like migrant workers, nobody wanted to be around them, so why were they told first?

Here is what I think. The shepherds were told first because even though the world had a low view of shepherds, God had a pretty high view of them. Remember what the Bible says:

**1co 1:27** But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty;

**1co 1:28** And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are

You see, sometimes God does things that just does not make sense to us.

But still the question remains, why the shepherds?

Let's look at some references to shepherds.

**2sa 5:2** Also in time past, when Saul was king over us, thou wast he that leddest out and broughtest in Israel: and the LORD said to thee, Thou shalt feed my people Israel, and thou shalt be a captain over Israel.

The people of Israel called David a shepherd king. David protected and provided for his people.

**Ps 23:1** A Psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

David knew that the Lord provided for and protected him.

In the New Testament there are more references to shepherds.

**Joh 10:11** I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.

Jesus refers to Himself as the Good Shepherd

**Joh 21:15** So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs.

**Joh 21:16** He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

**Joh 21:17** He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

Jesus charges Peter with taking care of the flock here on the Earth.

**1pe 5:2** Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;

Peter exhorts those who are placed in leadership in the church to treat the church like a flock and themselves as shepherds.

The shepherds were common people. They weren't looked up to; no young Jewish boy said I want to be a shepherd when I grow up. They were outcasts, nobody wanted them around.

**Mt** But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not

**9:13** come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

I believe the reason the shepherd typify the ones that Jesus was sent here to reach. Jesus was sent here to reach those who knew they needed Him.

All of a sudden one night, probably a night like any other night, the shepherds had angelic visitors that told them of the miraculous event that was happening this very night.

**Lu** And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds  
**2:15** said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

The shepherds decided to go find the place they were told about.

**Lu** And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them  
**2:17** concerning this child.

**Lu** And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the  
**2:18** shepherds.

**Lu** And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had  
**2:20** heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

They left spreading the news, and here's the strange thing, people listened.

The shepherds give us a glimpse of our part in salvation.

We were outcasts, we were not wanted, God sends His best to us and after we have a face to face encounter, we are never the same. We tell all those we come in contact with what happened.

This is why I believe the shepherds were told first.

So let's move on, who told the shepherds, it was an angel.

Let me ask a question before we get into the Nativity. Was Jesus birth the only one announced by an angel? The answer is no.

Abram was told by God that he and Sarā would have a child of their own.

**Ge** And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name  
**17:19** Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his

seed after him.

*The parents of Samson were told about the birth by an angel.*

**Jud 13:2** And there was a certain man of Zorah, of the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah; and his wife was barren, and bare not.

**Jud 13:3** And the angel of the LORD appeared unto the woman, and said unto her, Behold now, thou art barren, and bearest not: but thou shalt conceive, and bear a son.

*So, moving on to the New Testament, A priest named Zacharias has an encounter with an angel.*

**Lu 1:13** But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.

*This was Mary's cousin's husband and we will learn later that she went to live with them for a little while.*

*Now getting into the Nativity story, Joseph had an encounter with an angel.*

**Mt 1:20** But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

*Mary had an encounter with an angel.*

**Lu 1:26** And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,

**Lu 1:27** To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

*Finally, the shepherds, as we talked about earlier had an encounter with an angel.*

**Lu 2:9** And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

*The common thread in all these encounters, I believe, is that with the exception of the appearance to Abram, the angel was the same being, Gabriel.*

So these single messengers set the stage for an angelic production that has never before been seen on this earth and will never again be seen until we get into Heaven itself.

**Lu 2:13** And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

**Lu 2:14** Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Other than these two verses, nothing else is mentioned about the shepherds encounter with the angels.

I believe that the reason that “suddenly” the other angels showed up, was the fact that they could no longer contain their exuberance. This spontaneous worship gives us a glimpse at what we should have in our lives. If these angels that had just a dim view of what was happening, by that I mean that they will never experience the salvation that Christ came to bring, why can't we, as the ones that experience God's salvation first hand have that same type of worship in our lives.

Was this the last time angels were involved in Jesus life? NO, they were there when He was tempted in the wilderness, and they were there at the resurrection.

Like the old song says, He could have called ten thousand angels.

Jesus had angels in His life and we have their presence also. The Bible teaches us in the book of Psalms that God will give His angels charge with the protection of His people.

# Chapter four

## Joseph

### The carpenter from Nazareth

Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus is a bit of an enigma in the Bible. Nothing is really mentioned of him except in the Nativity story and the story of a missing Christ child that was found in the temple. After these, it seems that he falls off the face of the earth.

Notwithstanding, Joseph was undoubtedly a major role model in the life of Jesus while He was growing up. Think of the things that we remember most from our childhood and I would dare to say the ones that stick out the most are experiences, if we are sons, with our dads.

In this chapter I want us to take a deeper look at Joseph. Our best description of him is found in the book of Matthew.

**Mt 1:18** Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.

**Mt 1:19** Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily.

This gives us our first glimpse of the man Joseph. Tradition tells us that he probably was born and grew up in Bethlehem, mostly due to the fact of that is where he had to go for the census. Joseph was a carpenter and once again tradition tells us he was a good and fair craftsman.

Now, let's go to the scripture about Joseph. The two verses above are short, but we can glean a lot of information from them.

First, it says that Joseph and Mary were espoused to each other. What in the world does that mean? To make a long story short, they were engaged. In the ancient Hebrew tradition, a young girl was usually given to an older man in an arranged marriage. Tradition tells us that Mary was probably around 12 years old, just have entered into puberty, and Joseph was anywhere from his mid 20's to early 30's. Considering the fact the couple was from a small, poor town like Nazareth, I am sure the dowry paid from Joseph's family to Mary's family was small and the wedding feast itself was small as well. Once the contract was signed between the families, the couple was legally married although no sexual contact was made until after the wedding feast itself.

Now that sets the stage for the second item I want to look at. The text says that before they came together, Mary was found to be with child. As we said earlier, Joseph and Mary were legally married. Had Joseph died now, Mary would have been considered his widow and entitled to any part of what Joseph left behind. Along those same lines, they were bound to each other by the rules of the marriage covenant including those of sexual purity.

Imagine the shock when Mary came to Joseph one day and told him surprise you're going to be a daddy.

As most all of you know, we are expecting our second child, due sometime toward the middle of June. I will not forget the morning we found out. I had National Guard that weekend and on Saturday morning as I woke up to get ready, I hear a voice through the darkness saying "the test is looking positive!!" At 5:45 am, you aren't thinking too clearly anyway and I could not get a word out, Christy looks at me, by now the light was on, and said "go ahead and fall out of the bed." It was a shock to us, a major surprise because we talked about not even trying until this time next year!!

I am sure that Joseph was just as stunned as I was, probably even more so, because he knew they had not done anything. I am sure a million thoughts went through his head. What do I do now? Do I raise this kid as my own even though I have no idea who the daddy is? If I did know, I would probably beat his head in. Do I divorce her, I do love her, but how could she do this to me.....

Joseph had some tough decisions to make. Legally he had every right to divorce her as an adulteress. According to the Mosaic Law, the penalty for this was public stoning.

**De 22:23** If a damsel that is a virgin be betrothed unto an husband, and a man find her in the city, and lie with her;

**De 22:24** Then ye shall bring them both out unto the gate of that city, and ye shall stone them with stones that they die; the damsel, because she cried not, being in the city; and the man, because he hath humbled his neighbour's wife: so thou shalt put away evil from among you.

I know that sound harsh, but that was the only choice before Joseph, or was it?

There were two other choices that Joseph had. The first was to give Mary a bill of divorce and let her go away in shame. He would be free from the wagging tongues, but still in love with his young wife.

**De 24:1** When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house.

The other option was almost unthinkable. He could take Mary as his wife, and raise this child as his own. Wow, what a man. In a society today that puts such a minute emphasis on parenthood, Joseph gives us an example we can all follow.

So Joseph decides that he will complete the marriage and start his family. I'm sure this was not an easy decision for him. He probably wavered back and forth several times, and then finally, in a vision, he receives the confirmation he was seeking.

**Mt 1:20** But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

**Mt 1:21** And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

Wow, talk about an answer to a problem you are facing!!

This effectively ends the major role of Joseph in the Nativity story proper. The second chapter of Luke mentions Joseph as almost an afterthought; the focus is on the Christ Child. The second chapter of Matthew mentions Joseph having another angelic vision to flee with his new family to Egypt to escape the terror coming from Herod which we will discuss in another chapter. Luke chapter 2 finishes with the

story of Jesus being lost from His parents and was found in the temple with the priests and scribes. Joseph is mentioned in these verses, but is found nowhere else in the scripture record.

So now the question is what happened to Joseph? On this matter the Bible is not clear. Nothing else is mentioned of him so we can infer that he probably was dead. Remember what we said earlier, Joseph was probably 15-20 years older than Mary so this is not a far fetched theory.

The Bible does however, give us a clue that Joseph did meet an end before the culmination of the teaching ministry of Christ.

When Jesus was 8 days old, He was to be presented in the temple and to be circumcised. On their way into the temple, Mary and Joseph met two people. One was a prophetess named Anna that when she saw the baby, she said this was the one who was promised to come. The next was a man by the name of Simeon. This man took the baby from Mary's arms held Him and said this is the Messiah, and now I can die in peace knowing that I have seen Him with my own eyes. He then turns to Mary and makes an interesting statement.

**Lu 2:34** And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against;

**Lu 2:35** (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

Pay attention to that phrase, a sword shall pierce your own soul also. What does this mean? Why did he say it just to Mary? I believe that God revealed to this man that Joseph would not see his Son working miracles, he would not see his Son raise the dead, heal the sick, feed 5000, and mostly not see his Son hanging from the cross. I believe that when Simeon told Mary that a sword would pierce her soul also, the idea was that Mary would feel the pain and agony any parent would feel when their child is hurting.

There is one final thing I would like to talk about concerning Joseph.

The Book of Matthew contains another aspect of Joseph's life that we tend to over look. In our lesson on Herod and the Magi, we will find that Herod is bent on the destruction of the Christ child. The magi are warned in a dream not to return to Herod.

Joseph has a dream as well. He is warned in a dream that Herod wants to kill the baby and he needs to take his family into Egypt to hide.

**Mt 2:13** And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.

Joseph went without question to protect his new family. After Herod died, he started to return to Bethlehem, but found out Herod's son, who was more evil than Herod, was ruling there. Instead they went back to Nazareth where Herod's other son was ruling. There, the young Jesus grew into a man.

Let me sum all this up like this. Joseph was a good and Godly man that God trusted to be a foster parent to His own dearly loved Son. Seems like a pretty high honor to me.

Chapter five  
Mary,  
The virgin from Nazareth

Today is December 21, 2008. Four days before Christmas. Wondering what you are getting yet, or have you already peeked and seen it?

Anyway, the Christmas season is in its final great strides. Tonight many little girls will dress up in a blue gown with a pink sash and tell the older boy dressed in his dad's bath robe that its time for the baby to be born.

Mary, what an interesting figure in the Bible, outside of Jesus, it seems that no one has more influence on Christianity than Mary. Think of the Catholic Church, they pray to Mary believing that as Jesus' mother,

she has a special inside track to Jesus. How many times have you watched the news and people have claimed to have seen the Virgin Mary on a potato chip or a bowl of soup, or in a window pane?

Let me say that Mary, like Joseph we discussed last week, was thought of well enough by God to trust His Son to them, is a fact not to be taken lightly.

I want to talk about Mary for just a little while today.

We first meet a young girl from the city of Nazareth in the first chapter of Luke. The angel Gabriel was a busy being in this chapter. Earlier, he delivered the news that Zachariah and his wife Elisabeth were to have a baby in their old age. We are not quite sure of their age, but it was advanced enough that Elisabeth was considered barren. The thing here is that Elisabeth had a younger cousin by the name of Mary.

Five months later, Mary received a strange visitor.

**Lu 1:26** And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,

**Lu 1:27** To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

**Lu 1:28** And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

**Lu 1:29** And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

**Lu 1:30** And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.

Let's stop right here for just a minute and look at one short phrase. In verse 27 it says to a virgin. What is the big deal here? We talked last week that Joseph and Mary were legally married. Why couldn't they enjoy it? Although they were legally married, they had not made it official yet. Also, if they had, then Joseph would be considered the physical father of Jesus. Also there is the issue of prophecy. In the book of Isaiah, he discusses the coming Messiah in greater detail than anyone else in the Old Testament. There is one verse I want to look at.

**Isa 7:14** Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

This is why the fact that Mary was a virgin is so important.

Now back to the text from Luke. Notice that Gabriel was "battering" Mary up. He called her highly favoured and blessed.

One thing I have learned in my years of working. If you are called to the supervisor's office, or worse, he comes to your office and right off the bat starts talking about the good job you do, how you mean so much to the company, get ready because you're not going to like what is coming next.

Mary sensed something was up. Verse 29 says that she was troubled at his saying; she was worried about what was coming next.

Now Gabriel spills it:

**Lu 1:30** And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.

**Lu 1:31** And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.

**Lu 1:32** He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David:

**Lu 1:33** And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

Ask any mother and they will tell you they only want the best for their sons. They want them to be successful, there is an old country song, mama's don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys, don't let 'em pick guitars and drive these old trucks, let 'em be doctors and lawyers and such....

The angel told Mary that her son would not be a poor carpenter from a backwoods town like Nazareth. He would be great, He would be king of Israel.

Mary brings up an interesting point to the angel:

**Lu 1:34** Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?

Mary does not make excuses as to why she can't, she does not try to find a way out, she accepts it, but she wonders how? The angel explains:

**Lu 1:35** And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

So this will not be an ordinary child, He will be the Son of God.

Now that the introduction is made, let me ask you a question, how do you think that Mary felt when she told Joseph about the vision?

I believe she was scared. She loved Joseph and he loved her, but how could he ever accept this? How would he believe her?

Once again, as we discussed last week, Joseph had his visit with Gabriel and was told the story as well.

So what now? A 12 - 14 year old girl, just betrothed now is pregnant?

Mary leaves Nazareth and goes to her cousin Elisabeth's house. The reason why we are not for sure, but tradition tells us that Elisabeth, being older than Mary, was probably a mother figure to Mary. Mary probably went with the intentions of helping them near the time of birth and possibly in the process learn a little herself.

Luke 1:46-55 is a text that is called the Magnificat. Mary spoke this praise poem in reaction to all that was happening to her with the angel and the promise of giving birth to the Son of God. For times sake, we will not get into it, but go back and read it for your self.

Now for what we have been waiting for:

**Lu 2:6** And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

**Lu 2:7** And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

These are the only two verses that mention the actual birth. I remember when Carter was born, he was a c-section baby and the doctor would not let me see a whole lot of what was happening, but when he pulled Carter out, I was totally amazed. We've all heard the stories of first time dads passing out in the delivery room, so I can only imagine what Joseph was going through. According to tradition, the dads were not allowed in the same room as the birth. So who helped Mary? Possibly a midwife was there by this time, or possibly she did it herself. The truth of the matter is, we don't know.

By the time the shepherds had arrived, the baby was here, Mary was exhausted, and Joseph was proudly watching his wife and new son. Even now 2 years later, I don't think there is a sweeter sight than to see Carter snuggled up on Christy's chest going to sleep.

We talked earlier about Joseph's absence in Jesus' latter life, what about Mary? I believe she was there every step of the way, from the wedding at Cana to the foot of the cross, to the garden tomb, to the ascension, and to the experience in the upper room.

When did Mary die and where? We are really not sure. No clear records show any time references. Tradition says that she died in Jerusalem and by a miraculous event, all of the original 11 disciples were present at her death.

The truth we need to know about Mary is that she was a willing servant of God and did His will without complaint even though it was not what she wanted.

**Lu** And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.  
**1:38** And the angel departed from her.

Chapter six  
An evil king, strange visitors, and a brilliant star

Herod, Herod the Great, King of Israel, what do we know about this man? First of all, he was only part Jew. His family traced from Edom, the descendants of Esau.

Next we know that in his younger years he was a very astute politician. His father, Antipater, supported Julius Caesar, but then was tricked into supporting those who wanted him dead and sent money to help pay for the assassination. This drew the ire of the Roman Empire and Herod was instrumental in convincing Octavian (later Augustus) and Mark Antony that his father was merely a pawn in the plot and had no real connection to the murder.

This drew favor to Herod from both sides, originally supporting Mark Antony; Herod encouraged him to make peace with Octavian and work to make Rome a stronger empire. History will tell us that no peace was made and the combined forces of Mark Antony and Cleopatra of Egypt were defeated in the naval battle of Actium. Shortly afterward Antony and Cleopatra retreated to Egypt where they decided no victory could be won, committed suicide.

This opened the door for Herod to gain the confidence of Octavian. After Octavian changed his name to Augustus and claimed control of the empire, he appointed Herod, Tetrarch of Galilee. In 37 B.C., Herod was elected king of the Jews by the Roman senate and he ruled for 40 years until his death in 4 B.C.

During his reign, Herod was actually a good king, and eventually was referred to as Herod the Great. He embarked on a building campaign that built palaces, fortresses, aqueducts, temples, cities and culminated with the crown jewel in his reign, the great Temple in Jerusalem known as Herod's Temple.

In years of famine or economic trouble, Herod would lower taxes and once even sold the wares of his own palace to ease the problems. The world outside Israel looked on this man and said "That is the kind of man we would like for a king."

To his own people, however, the fairy tale was a night mare. Yes he lowered taxes during famine, but raised them during plenty. He secretly authorized the executions of political opponents, even staging the murder of his own father. He sent requests to Rome asking for the execution papers for his own sons because he was convinced they were plotting to kill him. He had Rabbis killed for speaking against his

ways. He was convinced that everyone was out to get him, and by the time of the Nativity had morphed into a truly wicked, evil man. In fact, by this time Augustus who considered Herod a friend said that he would rather be Herod's pig than one of his sons.

So by 6 B.C. when the magi came to Herod, he was in a dangerous state of mind, ready to kill or have someone killed for any reason whatsoever.

I am sure that Herod had heard the prophecies about a coming Messiah that would set right the rule of Israel and that worked to his general paranoia as well. So in Matthew chapter 2, we take up the text:

**Mt 2:1** Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

**Mt 2:2** Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

Now this brings us to two interesting questions, who were the wise men and what about this star?

First, for the wise men. We have all heard the Christmas carol that says, "we three kings from orient are" Right off the bat the facts are wrong. The bible clearly says they were wise men. It also says that they came from the east, and gives no number as to how many. The Greek renders this phrase "magoi apo anatolon" which means magi from the east. Magi refers to the class of scholars, scientists, magicians, astronomers and astrologers that were found in the areas of what today is Iraq and Iran.

One final thought about the magi is this. They were obviously not Jewish. They probably had heard stories about how Herod was paranoid of someone taking his throne and they came right into his palace and wanted to know where the one is born to be king of the Jews.

Anything other than this about the Magi is simply legend and I will not go into it.

An interesting verse is the one that says they have seen his star in the east. I am sure these being educated men had read of the prophecies of the coming Messiah. One that I did not know about is found in the book of Numbers:

**Nu 24:17** I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth.

This was spoken by the prophet Balaam concerning Israel after Balak tried to get him to curse Israel. So they followed the star to Jerusalem and the scribes told them of the prophecy in Bethlehem. To make an already long story short, they followed the star, found the Baby and left a different way as to not go back to Herod. Herod wanted them to come back and report what they found, presumably to go and have the family executed.

The biggest thing that we have so mistaken in the Nativity story is the timing of the visit by the Magi. We have all seen the displays where the magi and the shepherds are there together, I believe this is wrong. Let's look at the text.

**Mt 2:11** And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

The text says they came to the house, not the stable and it refers to Jesus as a young child not a baby.

After the Magi left, God warns Joseph in a dream to take Mary and the Child and go to Egypt because Herod wanted to kill the Child and to stay there until they were told to come back.

So what did the paranoid maniac Herod do?

**Mt 2:16** Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wrath, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men.

This fulfilled another prophecy concerning the Messiah.

**Mt 2:17** Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying,

**Mt 2:18** In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.

This was a reference to Bethlehem for it is near the place Rachel was buried.

What about the star? What was it? Was it real?

Let me ask a question first, what is the difference in astrology and astronomy?

Astronomy is the study of the stars and I don't think there is anything wrong with it. There are many clear nights I look up at the stars and think wow, what else is out there? This has been a thought for as long as man has seen the stars. The earliest astronomers were in Babylonia. They named some of the constellations. Did you know they are mentioned in the Bible?

**Job 9:7** Which commandeth the sun, and it riseth not; and sealeth up the stars

**Job 9:8** Which alone spreadeth out the heavens, and treadeth upon the waves of the sea.

**Job 9:9** Which maketh Arcturus, Orion, and Pleiades, and the chambers of the south.

**Job 38:31** Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion?

In what scholars believe to be the oldest book in the Bible, Job mentions the constellations by name, coincidence, I don't think so.

So with the knowledge of astronomy already growing, I want us to look at some ancient events.

Every 805 years, Saturn and Jupiter travel very close together and a year later Mars fits in the path as well. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Johannes Kepler, one of the pioneers of Astronomy, discovered this phenomena and astronomers have computed that for 10 months on 7 B.C. Jupiter and Saturn were following this orbit and in May, September and December they were conjoined. In February of 6 B.C. Mars joined the picture causing a magnificent display in the constellation called Pisces or the fishes

What does all this mean?

In ancient astrology, Jupiter was the King's planet, since it is the biggest, it represented the highest god and ruler of the universe: Marduk to the Babylonians, Zeus to the Greeks, and Jupiter to the Romans. Saturn was deemed the shield or defender of Palestine, modern day Israel. The constellation of Pisces also represented Palestine in great events or times of crises. So with the King's planet, meeting the Defender of Palestine in the constellation of great news to Palestine, the planet Mars put the dot in the exclamation mark that a new King was coming to Israel. That is why the Magi went seeking the newborn King of the Jews.

Something else about the star the troubles people, stars don't move, but the Bible clearly says that the star guided them to the house.

**Mt 2:9** When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

So what was this object? Astronomers have objects called shooting stars, but these come and go too quickly to follow on a long journey.

In 1871 John Williams published a list of comets using ancient Chinese astronomical records that coincided with their animals. Number 52 on the list, has a interesting story. It appeared in March-April of 5 B.C. near the constellation of Capricorn and moved in a westward direction. It stayed visible for 70 days, giving the wise men time to make their journey from their home to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem.

Now this sets the stage for a magnificent part of the story that we tend to overlook.

Jesus Christ, Son of the Most High God, the one whose birth was proclaimed by angels, told by shepherds, worshipped by wise men from the east, wanted dead by an evil tyrant, was honored with the bright display of heavenly objects working together to spotlight God's love for mankind.