

Unwrapping the Mystery of Christmas:  
25 Questions Answered  
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Unwrapping the Mystery of Christmas:  
25 Questions Answered  
Dr. Matthew Webster  
1<sup>st</sup> [edition]

1. Religion 2. Holidays 3. Christmas and  
Advent

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## Preface-

What comes to mind when you hear the word "Christmas"? Is it thoughts of family, food, laughter, decorations, church, or presents? This book will reveal a deeper meaning of Christmas that will fill your heart with joy as you contemplate the greatest gift that God has given to humanity: His Son, Jesus Christ. By receiving Jesus as the Lord and Savior of your life, you will not only enrich your life, but you will also experience a new, abundant, and everlasting life of grace.

Many Christmas traditions are followed without understanding their origins or significance, while many incredible events surrounding the Christmas story go untold. In "Unwrapping the Mystery of Christmas: 25 Questions Answered," you will discover the impact of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and why the precious gift God gave us is a year-round reason to celebrate!

-Pastor Matt



## Introduction:

Get ready to discover the fascinating story of Christmas like never before! In "Unwrapping the Mystery of Christmas: 25 Questions Answered," Dr. Matthew Webster takes us on an exhilarating journey to answer some of the most pressing questions surrounding the holiday. From the religious and historical origins of Christmas to the customs and traditions associated with it, this book leaves no stone unturned. Delve into the intriguing prophecies surrounding the Messiah's birth and explore whether Jesus fulfilled them all. Learn about the virgin birth and why it was necessary. Follow Mary and Joseph on their journey to Bethlehem, and discover the symbolism behind the manger and swaddling cloths. But that's not all! This book also examines the shepherds and the Magi, and their crucial roles in the Christmas story. Find out why the Magi knew the Messiah had been born and how the star of Bethlehem guided them to Jesus. In the end, Dr. Webster reflects on the incredible sacrifice that Jesus made by taking on human form and dwelling among us, and what that sacrifice tells us about His love for us. This book is an indispensable resource for anyone looking to gain a deeper understanding of the true meaning of Christmas. So, what are you waiting for? Start unwrapping the mystery of Christmas.

## Chapter 1 The Origin, Meaning, and Traditions of Christmas



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<sup>1</sup>What Is the Origin of Beloved Christmas Traditions? Christianity.com November 22, 2021. <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/holidays/what-is-the-origin-of-beloved-christmas-traditions.html>

## **Question 1: What is the meaning of Christmas?**

Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Christ. The term Christmas in English comes from "mass on Christ's day". Mass is the main liturgical (worship) service of the Catholic church. The word is recorded as Crīstesmæsse in 1038 and Cristes-messe in 1131.<sup>2</sup>

The holiday season of Christmas is often associated with symbols like bright lights, decorated trees, and the exchange of presents. However, the deeper meaning behind Christmas lies in the story of Jesus Christ. As the light of the world, Jesus sacrificed His life on the cross, offering the gift of salvation to all who believe in Him. Christmas serves as a celebration of the arrival of the Messiah and the fact that He is now present among us. So, you can say that Christmas is about lights, trees, and gifts. Jesus is the light, died on a tree, and gave us the gift of salvation.

By giving His life as a ransom for ours, Jesus opened the door for all who have faith in Him and His atonement for our sins to receive eternal life. The significance of Christmas may differ from one individual or culture to another,

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<sup>2</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas>

but for many, it is often seen as a time of hope, love, and renewal for most.

The clearest representation of the Christmas meaning, in my opinion, was portrayed through the 1965 animated TV special titled "*A Charlie Brown Christmas.*"

Retrieved from *A Charlie Brown Christmas*:

"I guess you were right, Linus. I shouldn't have picked this little tree," said Charlie Brown.

"Everything I do turns into a disaster. I guess I don't really know what Christmas is all about. Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?"

"Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about," said Linus. [*Linus walks to center stage.*]

"Lights, please."

"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

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.

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

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on Earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:8-14 KJV).

[Linus picks up his blanket and shuffles off-stage.]<sup>3</sup>

Linus' response to the news of Christ's birth is particularly noteworthy. When he says "fear not," he does something significant: he drops his security blanket. Although he is always seen with it, the good news that the Messiah has arrived brings Linus immense comfort through the Holy Spirit, and he relinquishes his blanket as a symbol of his newfound joy and freedom from fear.

## **Question 2: What is the reason we give gifts during Christmas and adorn evergreen trees with decorations?**

There are several reasons why we exchange gifts during Christmas to commemorate the birth of Christ. Christians believe that the

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<sup>3</sup>Charles M. Schulz. A Charlie Brown Christmas. 1965.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Charlie\\_Brown\\_Christmas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Charlie_Brown_Christmas)

Biblical account of the wise men, or Magi, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Baby Jesus in the manger serves as the basis for giving presents during the Christmas season. The valuable items presented by the Wise Men were a demonstration of their deep respect and reverence for the Son of God. Similarly, Christians today give gifts to family, friends, and those in need as a way of honoring the Wise Men's act of worshipping the Christ Child. Another modern interpretation of the tradition is that Christmas is essentially Jesus' birthday, but since it is not possible to give Jesus material presents, people exchange gifts with each other as a way of commemorating the day.<sup>4</sup> Beyond just giving gifts to one another to celebrate Jesus' birthday, Jesus conveyed that serving others is akin to serving Him. "And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is My disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward" (Matthew 10:42).

Gift-giving at Christmas is a Christian tradition that is widely practiced around the world. However, the practice is not exclusive to Christianity, as several other religions mark the end of the year with a similar custom, such as

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<sup>4</sup>Sally Painter. Why Do We Give Presents at Christmas? Historical Traditions. July 22, 2021.  
[https://christmas.lovetoknow.com/Why\\_Do\\_We\\_Give\\_Presents\\_at\\_Christmas](https://christmas.lovetoknow.com/Why_Do_We_Give_Presents_at_Christmas)

the Jewish festival of lights known as Hanukkah, the Hindu celebration in honor of Ganesha, and Kwanzaa in African American culture.

“At the end of the monthlong fast of Ramadan, many Muslims celebrate Eid al-Fitr, the festival of breaking the fast, by giving gifts to each other and giving charity before Eid prayers. Buddhists exchange gifts at certain times of the year and during certain festivals, but these exchanges typically come in the form of donations to institutions such as monasteries and temples, rather than presents to an individual.”<sup>5</sup>

Gifts given at Christmas are symbolic of this passage of Scripture.

“On coming to the house, they saw the Child with His mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh” (Matthew 2:11).

What is the historical tradition of holiday gift-giving?

The act of gift-giving has been practiced since ancient times, well before the emergence of Christianity. Its origins can be traced back to the festivals of the ancient Romans, particularly the

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<sup>5</sup>Jack Austin. A History on the Tradition of Gift-Giving Around the World. The Daily Californian. November 17, 2017. <https://www.dailycal.org/2017/11/17/history-tradition-gift-giving-around-world>

festival of Saturnalia where people gave thanks for the agricultural god's blessings. The festival, which occurred from December 17th to 23rd, featured public banquets, sacrifices, and private gift exchanges. During this time, social hierarchies were temporarily abolished, and slaves were treated as equals to their masters, fostering a lively and wild atmosphere that embraced free speech.

After Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in AD 312, pagan celebrations in the Empire gradually declined. However, Christian leaders were not able to simply eliminate the popular Saturnalia festival without facing public opposition. Instead, it is believed that they incorporated some of its aspects into a new Christian celebration: Christmas, commemorating the birth of Jesus. One of the elements carried over from the old festival was the tradition of gift-giving.

The real message of Christmas is not the gifts that we give to each other. Rather, it is a reminder of the gift that God has given to each of us. Christmas is a commemoration of God's ultimate gift, the perfect gift of Jesus to us!

During the Christmas season, we typically give gifts to those we care about, who have shown kindness to us throughout the year, or who have given us a gift first. We do not typically give gifts to people who have spoken ill of us or to hostile neighbors who never have a kind word to offer. However, God's gift to us was given when

we were His enemies, and it was not because we had earned or deserved it. On the contrary, the Bible teaches us that "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8 NKJV).

A gift can reveal a lot about the giver. When we decide to give someone a gift, we typically plan it out beforehand, with the hope of discovering what the person wants or needs. In the same way, when God chose to bless us with the gift of eternal life, it was not a spur-of-the-moment decision. Long before the existence of a garden called Eden, the existence of a town called Bethlehem, and even a planet called Earth, a decision was made in eternity that God would send His Son, who would be born of a woman and be subject to the Law, to redeem those who were also subject to it. The Bible states that Jesus was "slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8).

"I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:10b).

The angel brought good news of great joy to whom? "All the people." This means that God's gift of Jesus is a gift of joy and Jesus is given for everyone. "God so loved the world that He gave" (a gift) His only-begotten Son."

Jesus is a gift that is available to all, but accepting this gift is not compulsory, and one can choose to reject the gift. Perhaps up until this point you haven't had the chance to hear the good news that God has given His Son as a gift for you to receive.

If you have rejected the gift of God's grace, it's still not too late for you to reconsider and repent (meaning to change your mind) and receive Jesus as your Savior.

How might I receive the gift of God's Son and the salvation that He offers to me? One can receive the gift of God's Son and salvation by placing their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. This involves acknowledging one's need for salvation due to their sinfulness and recognizing that Jesus, through His death and Resurrection, paid the penalty for those sins and offers forgiveness and eternal life to those who believe in Him.

The Bible makes it crystal clear in John 14:6 that the path to God and everlasting life is through Christ alone. Furthermore, Romans 10:9-11 explains that we can obtain salvation and eternal life by believing in our hearts that Jesus died for our sins and was resurrected, and confessing with our mouths that He is our Lord and Savior.

If you would like to receive Jesus into your life as your Lord and Savior, please pray this prayer of salvation.

Gracious Heavenly Father, I am grateful for the precious gift of Your Son, who was born in a humble manger over 2,000 years ago. Your love for me is immeasurable, as shown by Your decision to send Jesus Christ to sacrifice Himself on the cross for my sins. Through His precious blood, I have been washed clean, and I acknowledge that You raised Him from the dead, and He lives today. I am overjoyed that all my sins have been forgiven, and I am made righteous by His atoning sacrifice. By placing my faith in Jesus Christ, I am now forever under Your favor, and I trust that Your goodness and mercy will accompany me all the days of my life. I offer this prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.

Even though the history of gift-giving during the holidays is well documented, there is still considerable curiosity surrounding the origins of the Christmas tree and its adornment. Some individuals associate the Christmas tree with pagan practices, pointing out that ancient Egyptians worshipped Ra, a god with a hawk's head and a sun-crowned disk. As Ra began to recover from his illness during the solstice, the Egyptians would decorate their homes with green palm rushes, symbolizing the triumph of life over death. A palm rush is a narrow stem or leaf from a palm tree that can be braided or woven into various decorative shapes or objects. Within the context of the ancient Egyptians' solstice practice, palm rushes were likely used to

create wreaths or garlands to adorn their homes.<sup>6</sup>

The use of evergreen trees as a symbol of life during the winter months dates back to other ancient pagan cultures, who would decorate trees with candles, fruits, and other ornaments during the winter solstice to celebrate the return of the sun.

“Early Romans marked the solstice with a feast called Saturnalia in honor of Saturn, the god of agriculture. The Romans knew that the solstice meant that soon, farms and orchards would be green and fruitful. To mark the occasion, they decorated their homes and temples with evergreen boughs.”<sup>7</sup>

“In Northern Europe, the mysterious Druids, the priests of the ancient Celts, also decorated their temples with evergreen boughs as a symbol of everlasting life. The fierce Vikings in Scandinavia thought that evergreens were the special plant of the sun god, Balder.”<sup>8</sup>

The use of evergreens in pagan rituals for celebration and worship differs from the modern practice of decorating an entire Christmas tree. In the 16th century, German Christians began adorning trees in their homes for Christmas. As wood became scarce, some individuals created

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<sup>6</sup>History of Christmas Trees. December 8, 2021.  
<https://www.history.com/topics/christmas/history-of-christmas-trees>

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

wooden pyramids and adorned them with evergreens and candles instead of using a full tree. Legend has it that Martin Luther, a 16th-century Protestant reformer, was inspired to add lighted candles to a tree after being moved by the beauty of stars shining among evergreens on his way home one winter evening while composing a sermon. Luther then decorated a tree with lighted candles in the main room of his home to recreate the stunning scene for his family."<sup>9</sup>

**Question 3: What were the prophecies of the Messiah's birth and did Jesus fulfill all of them?**

The prophecy in Genesis 22:18 states that all nations on Earth will be blessed through Abraham's offspring, which Christians believe to be fulfilled in Jesus. As a descendant of Abraham, Jesus is from the line of Jacob and Jesse, as well as King David, as foretold in Numbers 24:17, Isaiah 11:1, Jeremiah 23:5-6, and 2 Samuel 7:12-13. The Messiah was also prophesied to be born in Bethlehem to a virgin, as mentioned in Micah 5:2 and Isaiah 7:14, respectively. Additionally, Psalm 72:9-10 predicts that foreign kings would present gifts to Him and shepherds would worship Him, and Jeremiah 31:15 foretells the slaughter of children which was done by King Herod in an attempt to kill Jesus. Hosea 11:1 also

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

prophecies that Jesus would go to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath, as Joseph was warned in a dream.

Messianic Prophecies About the Messiah's Birth  
Fulfilled in Jesus:

**Messiah's Lineage**

Seed of Isaac:

Prophecy: Genesis 17:19, Genesis 21:12

Fulfillment: Matthew 1:2–16, Luke 3:23–38

Seed of Judah:

Prophecy: Genesis 49:10

Fulfillment: Luke 3:33

A rod/son out of Jesse:

Prophecy: Isaiah 11:1

Fulfillment: Luke 3:23–32

Descendant of David:

Prophecy: Ezekiel 34:23–24

Fulfillment: Matthew 1:1

**The Messiah's Birth**

The Messiah would be preceded by a forerunner who would turn many to righteousness:

Prophecy: Malachi 4:5-6, Isaiah 40:3–4

Fulfillment: Matthew 3:1–2, John 1:19–23, Luke 3:7–22

The Messiah would be born of a young maiden who is a virgin:

Prophecy: Isaiah 7:14, Genesis 3:15

Fulfillment: Luke 1:35, Matthew 1:18–20

The Messiah would be known as “God with us”:

Prophecy: Isaiah 7:14

Fulfillment: Matthew 1:23, John 1:1–4, 14

The Messiah would be born in Bethlehem:

Prophecy: Micah 5:2

Fulfillment: Luke 2:1–7

The Messiah would be worshipped by shepherds and foreign kings would present gifts to Him:

Prophecy: Psalm 72:9,10, Isaiah 60:3,6

Fulfillment: Matthew 2:2,11, Luke 2:15–17

Due to King Herod’s death decree aimed at trying to kill the Messiah, Rachel would mourn for her children. Ramah is located in the Benjaminite region near Bethlehem, which aligns with Herod’s directive to put to death all the male children who were two years old or younger in Bethlehem and its surrounding areas (Matthew 2:16b).

Prophecy: Jeremiah 31:15

Fulfillment: Matthew 2:16

The Messiah would be called out of Egypt:

Prophecy: Hosea 11:1

Fulfillment: Matthew 2:19-20

Jesus' birth fulfilled all of the prophecies about the birth of the Messiah.

Have you ever wondered what God said or did right before the announcement of the birth of His Son? The announcement of Jesus' birth was heightened by the fact that there was a 400-year period of silence from God. There were no new revelations or prophetic messages recorded in the Scriptures. This is why it is referred to as a "silent" period in which God did not speak to His people through prophets as He had done in the past. However, this does not mean that God was inactive or absent during this time.

Historical and cultural developments, such as the rise and fall of empires, the establishment of the Jewish Diaspora, and the spread of the Greek language, among others, were unfolding during this time and were significant in preparing the world for the coming of the Messiah.

During these 400 years, several nations overtake Israel. Although Israel managed to rebel successfully against some, such as during

the Maccabean revolt, the Romans had already seized power by the time Jesus was born.

Similar to their 400 years in Egypt, the Israelites wanted a Savior. No wonder why they clamored for Jesus to topple Rome, just as the Red Sea had toppled the Egyptians.<sup>10</sup>

“The 400 years of silence began with the warning that closed the Old Testament: “Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse” (Malachi 4:5-6). The silence ended with the coming of John the Baptist, the Messiah’s forerunner.”<sup>11</sup>

During the period between Malachi and the arrival of the Messiah, numerous prophecies were fulfilled, including the 2,300 days of desecration from 171 to 165 B.C. as prophesied in Daniel 8:14. However, the people did not utilize these fulfilled prophecies or the 400 years given to them to study Scripture, seek God (Psalm 43-44), and prepare for the coming of the Messiah. Instead, those years blinded and deafened the nation, to the extent that most Jews could not even fathom the idea of a

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<sup>10</sup>Hope Bollinger. 8 Interesting Facts About the Birth of Jesus. December 2, 2020. <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/bible-study/interesting-facts-about-the-birth-of-jesus.html>

<sup>11</sup>What were the 400 Years of Silence? <https://www.gotquestions.org/400-years-of-silence.html>

humble Messiah (Zechariah 9:9; Isaiah 6:10; John 12:40).<sup>12</sup>

**Question 4: Was Jesus born on December 25<sup>th</sup> and in which year did His birth take place?**

Despite attempts to use Jesus' birthdate of December 25<sup>th</sup> as evidence that He never existed, overwhelming evidence supports the existence of Jesus Christ. Thousands of eyewitnesses witnessed His life and teachings, and archaeological discoveries, including ancient coins, inscriptions, and writings, mention Jesus and the early Christian movement. Additionally, non-Christian writers from the first and second centuries, such as Josephus, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger, also wrote about Jesus and His followers. The Gospel of Luke traces Jesus' lineage back to Adam, the first man, through 76 generations, including the line of David, as Jesus is described as the son of David. Luke's genealogy includes names such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and King David, as well as lesser-known figures.

Since many false gods are said to have been born on December 25, the legitimacy of Jesus' real birth has been questioned. However, there is a substantial amount of misinformation circulating online regarding this topic. It is claimed that deities like Horus, Osiris, and Attis

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

were born on December 25 before 1,000 B.C., while Mithra, Hercules, Dionysus, Tammuz, Adonis, and various others were also purportedly born on the same date before 200 B.C.<sup>13</sup>

Several false deities believed to be “born” on December 25th were not actually born on that day. The celebration of Jesus’ birth on the same date as these mythical beings could have created skepticism about His existence if they had been. However, this argument loses even more credibility when we acknowledge that December 25th is not actually Jesus’ birthday, as we will demonstrate shortly.

#### Horus’ and Osiris’ birthdays:

The exact date of their births is not clearly stated in ancient Egyptian mythology. While there are some depictions of Horus’ birth in Egyptian texts and art, they do not provide a specific date for his birth.

#### Attis’ birthday:

Attis was a Phrygian deity associated with vegetation, fertility, and rebirth. In the ancient Phrygian religion, Attis’ birthday was celebrated on March 22nd, during the festival of Hilaria.

#### Mithra’s birthday:

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<sup>13</sup>Garrett S Griffin. Other Gods Born to Virgins on December 25 Before Jesus Christ. December 8, 2016. <https://gsgriffin.com/2016/12/08/other-gods-born-to-virgins-on-december-25-before-jesus-christ/>

Mithra was an ancient Indo-Iranian deity worshipped in the Roman Empire as a god of the sun, justice, contract, and war. However, the exact date of Mithra's birth is not known, and there is no specific day in the Roman calendar designated for his birthday. Mithraism celebrated several festivals throughout the year, including the winter solstice on December 25th, which was believed to be the birth of the sun god. Some Mithraic sects may have celebrated Mithra's birth on this date as well, although there is no definitive evidence to support this. "Many Roman soldiers did worship a mythical god named Mithras, but there is no record of any ancient tradition involving a December 25th birth date for Mithras."<sup>14</sup>

### Hercules' birthday:

There is no specific day designated as his birthday. In Athens, the Heracleia (festival) was celebrated in late July or early August, while in Thebes, it was held in early August. During these festivals, people would make offerings to Hercules, hold athletic competitions, and perform plays and other artistic works related to his stories. However, these festivals were not specifically tied to Hercules' birth, but rather to his overall importance as a hero and god in Greek mythology.

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<sup>14</sup>Was Mithra born of a Virgin, In a Stable, on Dec. 25?  
<http://www.aboutbibleprophecy.com/q10.htm>

### Dionysus' birthday:

Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, fertility, and theatre, had several festivals and celebrations in ancient Greece, but his exact birthdate is not known. In Athens, the festival of Dionysia was held annually in late March.

### Tammuz's birthday:

Tammuz is a mythological figure from Mesopotamian mythology, he does not have a birthday in the traditional sense. The Mesopotamians did not celebrate birthdays as we do today, and the exact origins and dates of their myths and deities are not always clear.

However, Tammuz was an important deity in the ancient Near East, particularly in Sumerian and Babylonian mythology. He was associated with vegetation, fertility, and the cycle of life and death. The Festival of Tammuz, also known as the "Month of the Festival of Tammuz," was celebrated in his honor during the month of Tammuz in the Babylonian calendar, which usually corresponds to June or July in the Gregorian calendar.

### Adonis' birthday:

There is no date associated as being Adonis' birthday.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Birthdates of listed mythical gods taken from <https://openai.com/blog/chatgpt>

Just a reminder: these gods are not real and their birthdays could have been assigned arbitrarily. It's important to mention that the claim that Jesus was born on December 25 (which is also false) would not make Him a mythical figure if it were true.

There is no mention in Scripture that Jesus was born on December 25th, and in fact, evidence from Scripture proves that Jesus was not born on December 25th. Unlike the mythical figures said to be born on December 25th, Jesus was a real historical person, the Son of God who interacted with people and had a verifiable lineage.

How did we arrive at December 25<sup>th</sup> as the day we celebrate Jesus' birthday? "The church in Rome began formally celebrating Christmas on December 25 in 336, during the reign of the emperor Constantine. As Constantine had made Christianity the effective religion of the empire, some have speculated that choosing this date had the political motive of weakening the established pagan celebrations. However, for another fifty years, the date was not commonly acknowledged in the eastern parts of the empire, where the occasion was celebrated on January 6<sup>th</sup>.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Why Is Christmas in December? <https://www.britannica.com/story/why-is-christmas-in-december>

Other sources attribute December 25<sup>th</sup> as the date of Jesus' birth by Sextus Julius Africanus in 221 because he established the universally accepted date. He was the first Christian historian known to produce a universal chronology.<sup>17</sup>

We know that Jesus could not have been born in December and the most likely month of His birth can be discovered from Scripture.

To easily eliminate December as the month of Jesus' birth consider the following: "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night" (Luke 2:8).

According to Bible commentator Adam Clarke, it was customary for the Jews to send their sheep to pasture from the spring until early October. As the cold winter months began, the flocks would return from the fields for shelter and warmth. Since the shepherds were still tending their flocks in the fields around Bethlehem it can be concluded that the angels announced the news of Jesus' birth no later than October and probably much earlier than that.<sup>18</sup>

With one verse we have narrowed the possible months of Jesus' birth from late March until

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<sup>17</sup>Hans J. Hillerbrand. March 27, 2023.  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christmas>

<sup>18</sup>Adam Clarke Commentary.  
<https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/acc/luke-2.html#verse-8>

early October. Is it possible to eliminate even more potential months of His birth?

Luke 1 tells of Zachariah, who was from the priestly order of Abijah, and his barren wife, Elizabeth, becoming pregnant with John the Baptist after his days of service in the temple.

“When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion” (Luke 1:23-24).

When did the priestly order of Abijah serve in the Temple?

	1st Month Abib - Nisan (March - April)	2nd Month Zif - Iyyar (April - May)	3rd Month Sivan (May - June)
First Week	Jehoiarib (1)	Seorim (4)	<i>All Priests (Pentecost)</i>
Second Week	Jedaiah (2)	Malchijah (5)	<b>Abijah (8)</b>
Third Week	<i>All Priests (Feast of Unleavened Bread)</i>	Mijamin (6)	Jeshuah (9)
Fourth Week	Harim (3)	Hakkoz (7)	Shecaniah (10)

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Jewish priests were divided into 24 courses that ministered throughout the year in the temple. The order of Abijah was the eighth priestly course (1 Chronicles 24:6-19) which served in the temple during the 10th week of the priestly cycle. The start of the 10th week coincided with

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<sup>19</sup>Things Paul and Luke.  
<https://thingspaulandluke.wordpress.com/2018/11/02/the-course-of-abijah/>

the second Sabbath in the month of Sivan, which runs approximately from mid-May to mid-June. Soon after Zechariah returned from his priestly duties Elizabeth became pregnant with John the Baptist.

Elizabeth would have become pregnant with John the Baptist in around June. Why is this important for discovering the birth month of Jesus?

“In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:26-28).

We can approximate the month and date of Jesus’ birth to be around the time of Tishri (mid to late September). To arrive at this date, start at the conception of John the Baptist, Sivan (June), count forward six months to arrive at Gabriel’s announcement of the conception of Jesus, Kislev (December), then count forward nine more months, the time it takes for human gestation, to reach Tishri (September), when Jesus was born.

Can we trust the birth narrative from Scripture? The virgin birth of Jesus Christ was documented by a physician and a world-class historian by conducting interviews with eyewitnesses, including Mary, which resulted in a detailed account of this significant event. Among all

biblical writers, Luke mentions Mary 12 times and provides the most comprehensive narrative of the Nativity. Apart from Christ's birth, he also devotes meticulous attention to the birth of John the Baptist, possibly due to his medical background.

Luke's accuracy as a historian was affirmed by the renowned historian A.N. Sherwin-White, who meticulously scrutinized the writings of Luke in the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts and the references to 32 countries, 54 cities, and nine islands that Luke made and did not find a single error. Sir William Ramsay, who dedicated years to studying and investigating Luke's description of Paul's travels in Asia Minor, stated in his work in *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, "You may press the words of Luke in a degree beyond any other historian's and they stand the keenest scrutiny and the hardest treatment."<sup>20</sup>

Luke himself, wrote, "I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:3b-4).

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<sup>20</sup>Eddie Hyatt. Historical Evidence for the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ. March 9, 2016. New York Apologetics. <https://www.newyorkapologetics.com/historical-evidence-for-the-virgin-birth-of-jesus-christ/>

Who was Theophilus who received the account of the birth of Christ from Luke? In the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, Theophilus is mentioned as the recipient of these two books. It is unclear who exactly Theophilus was, but it is speculated that he may have been a high-ranking Roman official or a wealthy benefactor who supported the early Christian movement. Some scholars also suggest that "Theophilus" may have been a pseudonym representing any potential reader or believer in the Christian faith. The reason is that the name "Theophilus" literally means "loved by God," but carries the idea of "friend of God." This has led some to believe that "Theophilus" is just a generic title that applies to all Christians.<sup>21</sup>

I believe Theophilus was a real person because Luke addresses him as "most excellent," a title often used when referring to someone of honor or rank, such as a Roman official. Paul used the same term when addressing Felix (Acts 23:26, Acts 24:2) and Festus (Acts 26:25).

Theories of who Theophilus could have been:

- "Most excellent Theophilus" (Luke 1:3b) possibly a Roman officer or high-ranking official in the Roman government.
- A wealthy and influential man in the city of Antioch. There are second-century

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<sup>21</sup>Who Was Theophilus at the Beginning of Luke and Acts?  
<https://www.gotquestions.org/Theophilus-Luke-Acts.html>

references to a man named Theophilus who was “a great lord” and a leader in the city of Antioch during the time of Luke.

- The Jewish High priest named Theophilus ben Ananus. Theophilus ben Ananus was a High priest in Jerusalem in A.D. 37-41. He was the son of Annas and the brother-in-law of Caiaphas.
- The Roman lawyer who defended Paul during his trial in Rome. Those who hold this theory believe that Luke’s purpose in writing Luke and Acts was to write a defense of Christianity, somewhat akin to a legal brief. If this theory is correct, Luke’s writings were designed to defend Paul in court against charges of insurrection and, at the same time, to defend Christianity against the charge that it was an illegal, anti-Roman religion.<sup>22</sup>

There are several reasons to trust the accuracy of the Bible's account of the birth of Jesus. Here are five main reasons why we can trust the accuracy of Scripture in detailing the birth of Christ.

1. Historical Context: The Bible provides an accurate historical context for the birth of Jesus, including the rule of Herod the Great and the Roman occupation of Judea.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

2. Eyewitness Accounts: The New Testament was written by people who were eyewitnesses to the events they describe including the birth of Jesus (Luke 1:2).
3. Archaeological Evidence: Archaeological discoveries have corroborated many of the details in the Bible's account of Jesus' birth. Archaeological excavations in Bethlehem have uncovered ancient artifacts and structures, including a Byzantine-era church that was built over a cave believed to be the site of Jesus' birth.
4. Prophecies Fulfilled: The Old Testament contains prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, which Jesus fulfilled. This is evidence of the Bible's accuracy.
5. Consistency: The accounts of Jesus' birth in the different Gospels are consistent with each other and with other historical sources of the time.

The Bible does not provide the exact day or even the exact year in which Jesus was born in Bethlehem. However, some verses in Scripture give us a timeframe of the year.

Matthew 2:1 says that Jesus was born during the days of Herod the King. Since Herod died in 4 B.C., we have a parameter to work with. Further, after Joseph and Mary fled Bethlehem with Jesus, Herod ordered all the boys 2 years old and younger in that vicinity killed. This indicates that Jesus could have been as old as 2

before Herod's death. This places the date of His birth between 6 and 4 B.C. Luke 2:1-2 notes several other facts to ponder: "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria." We know that Caesar Augustus reigned from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14.

Quirinius governed Syria during this same period, with records of a census that included Judea in approximately 6 B.C. Some scholars debate whether this is the census mentioned by Luke, but it does appear to be the same event. Based on these historical details, the most likely time of Christ's birth in Bethlehem is 6-5 B.C.

Luke mentions another detail concerning our timeline: "Jesus, when He began His ministry, was about thirty years of age" (Luke 3:23). Jesus began His ministry during the time John the Baptist ministered in the wilderness, and John's ministry started "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the High priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas" (Luke 3:1-2).

The only time that fits all of these facts is A.D. 27-29. If Jesus was "about thirty years of age" by A.D. 27, a birth sometime between 6 and 4 B.C. would fit the chronology. More specifically, Jesus would have been approximately 32 years

old at the time He began His ministry, still  
"about thirty years of age".<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>What Year Was Jesus Christ Born? <https://www.gotquestions.org/what-year-was-Jesus-born.html>

## **Chapter 1 Small Group Guide**

Title: The Origin, Meaning, and Traditions of  
Christmas

Primary Questions:

Question 1: What is the meaning of Christmas?

Question 2: What is the reason we give gifts during Christmas and adorn evergreen trees with decorations?

Question 3: What were the prophecies of the Messiah's birth and did Jesus fulfill all of them?

Question 4: Was Jesus born on December 25<sup>th</sup> and in which year did His birth take place?

Group Discussion:

1) Have you ever wondered why we exchange gifts in celebration of Jesus' birthday? What was your influence on giving gifts to others on Christmas?

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2) The story of the Magi bringing gifts to Baby Jesus is a familiar one, but do you know what those gifts symbolize and why they were so significant?

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3) Christmas is widely celebrated around the world, have you ever wondered how other religions and cultures observe the birth of Christ, and have you ever celebrated Christmas in another country before?

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4) Did you know that the tradition of gift-giving during Christmas has its roots in the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia? How is this festival connected to our modern-day Christmas celebrations? What is the biblical reason found for why we give gifts in celebration of the birth of Christ? Other than gift giving, how else might you celebrate the birth of Christ with others?

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5) For many, the true gift of Christmas is the birth of Christ. But why is this event considered the ultimate gift and how does it impact your celebration of the holiday season?

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6) Early religious leaders often incorporated pagan traditions into Christmas celebrations. Why might they have done this and what value is there in doing so?

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7) Have you ever stopped to think about why we decorate evergreen trees during Christmas? What is the significance behind this tradition? Do you have any special decorating traditions that you do? How did those traditions start?

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8) In the beloved Christmas classic, "A Charlie Brown Christmas", Linus famously drops his security blanket during a pivotal scene. Do you know the symbolism behind this moment?

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9) There are several prophecies related to the birth of the Messiah in the Bible. Which prophecies do you remember from this chapter?

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10) The exact date of Jesus' birth is a subject of debate, but many celebrate Christmas on December 25th. Do you know why this date was

chosen and what month Jesus might have been born?

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Closing Thoughts: Christmas is a holiday with rich history and meaning. The true meaning of Christmas is not found in the commercialization of the holiday but in the story of the Nativity and the gift of salvation offered by Christ. The accuracy and trustworthiness of the Bible's account of the Nativity are supported by historical evidence, eyewitness accounts, and the meticulous attention to detail given by Luke, a physician and historian. As we celebrate Christmas, let us cherish the love and grace God has bestowed upon us and spread the gift of Christ to others across the world.

## Chapter 2: Mary's Found Favor

"The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:28,30).



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<sup>24</sup>Wayne Stiles Blog. When Finding Favor with God Makes Life Tough. <https://waynestiles.com/blog/when-finding-favor-with-god-makes-life-tough>

## **Question 5: Why was Mary chosen to be the mother of Jesus?**

Mary was a peasant woman from the tribe of Judah and in the line of King David. She became the wife of Joseph, son of Heli (Luke 2:7). Mary, who shared the same name as Moses' sister, was called Miriam in Hebrew, and her name has several possible interpretations. In Hebrew Miriam has the meanings of "bitterness" or "rebellion".<sup>25</sup> This meaning would not be fitting of the one who carried the Messiah in her womb. There is another meaning of the name that fits with the Biblical narrative.

"The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28).

MR in Middle Egyptian means love and MRY means beloved. Mary is the beloved of God.<sup>26</sup> Mary would live in Egypt with Joseph and Jesus relatively shortly after giving birth (Matthew 2:14-15). During the time of Mary, Egypt had a significant influence on the region of the Levant, where Mary lived. The Egyptian Empire had extended its reach into the region, and there were frequent cultural exchanges between the two areas, including trade, diplomacy, and migration.

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<sup>25</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g3137/niv/mgnt/0-1/>

<sup>26</sup>Chaim and Laura. Hebrew Word Study-Mary. November 2, 2014. <https://www.chaimbentorah.com/2014/11/hebrew-word-study-mary/>

Furthermore, the Semitic languages of the Near East, including Hebrew and Aramaic, have many similarities to the ancient Egyptian language, indicating that there was a degree of linguistic exchange between the cultures.

Given these historical and cultural connections, it is plausible that the Egyptian word "mari" could have influenced the Hebrew name Miriam, which is the equivalent of Mary.

Another possibility is that her name could be linked to the Ugaritic/Canaanite word "mrym," meaning "the exalted one."<sup>27</sup>

In the Bible, there are references to Mary and Joseph making offerings of two doves or pigeons, which was a sacrifice allowed for those who could not afford a lamb (Luke 2:24). Mary and her husband Joseph were from the town of Nazareth, which was not a wealthy or influential place at the time. Joseph was a carpenter, which was a humble profession. All of this suggests that they were not wealthy.

Mary's life was characterized by the following traits of courage, faith, obedience, and purity.

Mary's story was a part of God's plan to send His Son to be the Savior of the world (1 John 4:14). But why Mary? Was Mary powerful? No. Was she wealthy? Absolutely not. Was she influential as a socialite? Not at all.

“God chose Mary because she was of the right lineage, she was from Nazareth, she was engaged to a man whose lineage set up a trip to Bethlehem, she was a virgin, and she was a young woman of good character.”<sup>28</sup>

Matthew traces Jesus’ lineage through Joseph, identifying Joseph as the son of Jacob in his genealogy (Matthew 1:16). On the other hand, Luke presents a genealogy of Jesus through Mary’s family line, designating Joseph as the son of Heli (Luke 3:23).

Was Joseph the son of Jacob or the son of Heli? This can easily be cleared up as the Hebrew word “son” was used in various ways, as seen in 1 Samuel 24:16 and 26:17 where it refers to a son-in-law. Thus, Joseph was considered Heli’s son-in-law in the context of Luke’s genealogy, which means Joseph was the son of Jacob.<sup>29</sup>

Matthew’s genealogy deviates from Jewish tradition by including the names of four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. This practice of naming women in genealogy was contrary to Jewish custom. The Talmud states that a mother’s family should not be considered a family. Matthew’s genealogy of Yeshua (Jesus), the women mentioned were not the

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<sup>27</sup>Father Johann Roten, S.M. Myriam and Mary.

<https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/m/myriam-and-mary.php>

<sup>28</sup>Dawn Wilson. Why Did God Choose Mary to Give Birth to Jesus? December 14, 2022. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/why-did-god-choose-mary-to-give-birth-to-jesus.html>

<sup>29</sup>The Gospel of Christ. Was Jacob or Heli the Father of Joseph?

<https://www.thegospelofchrist.com/knowledge-base/tgoc-kb--dh6hx>

most prominent figures. Matthew had a specific reason for naming these four women.

Three of the four women (Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth) were known to be Gentiles. It is possible that Bathsheba who was not specifically mentioned by name but as having "been Uriah's wife" (Matthew 1:6b) was a Gentile too. Her first husband was a Hittite. Bathsheba and her father Eliam (2 Samuel 23:34) might have been Jews, as Eliam's father Ahithophel was a Gilonite, and Eliam may have been from the town of Gilo in Judah (Joshua 15:51).

Matthew is hinting at the fact that although Jesus' main purpose was to save the lost sheep of Israel, His coming would also benefit Gentiles.

Matthew's genealogy strongly asserts that Jesus was born of a virgin and that Joseph was not His biological father. This is important because Jeremiah 22:24-30 introduced a stricter requirement for messianic lineage. Before his proclamation, being from the house of David was the primary prerequisite for claiming a right to the throne. However, with Jeremiah's declaration, the descendants of Jeconiah were excluded from this lineage, meaning that to be considered for the messianic throne, one had to be from the house of David but not from the lineage of Jeconiah.

Matthew's genealogy shows that Joseph had the bloodline of Jeconiah, rendering him ineligible to ascend to David's throne as the rightful heir.

Consequently, any biological son of Joseph would also be ineligible to claim the throne of David. This implies that if Jesus was indeed Joseph's biological son, He too would be disqualified from sitting on David's throne. Additionally, Jesus could not claim the right to David's throne by virtue of His adoption by Joseph since Joseph was not the rightful heir. The purpose of Matthew's genealogy, then, is to show why Jesus could not be king if He were Joseph's son.<sup>30</sup> Jesus' blood title to the throne of David was through Mary.

### **Question 6: How did Mary become pregnant and what was her age at the time?**

We don't know exactly how old Mary was when she was pregnant and gave birth to Jesus but we do know from Scripture that she would have been young. Jewish girls would have been betrothed (engaged) to their husbands as early as the age of 12 years old. Scholars believe Mary would have been somewhere between 13-16 years old when she had Jesus.<sup>31</sup>

How could a virgin give birth?

The Gospel of Matthew tells us, "This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was

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<sup>30</sup>The Genealogy of the Messiah. Jews for Jesus.

<https://www.jewsforjesus.co.za/faq/the-genealogy-of-the-messiah>

<sup>31</sup>Vivian Bricker. Do We Know How Old Mary Was When She Had Jesus? December 3, 2021. Christianity.com

found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18).

Luke’s account says, “The angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

These verses tell us two important details:

#1 She was a virgin.

#2 She was pledged to be married.

“How did the miracle of the Virgin Birth take place? We don’t know the how, but we know the Who. The Holy Spirit is the answer to the question, how did the Word become flesh?”<sup>32</sup>

Mary became pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit, without having sexual relations with a man. This event is known as the “Virgin Birth” or “Immaculate Conception.”

One thing we do know is that it was through the Holy Spirit that Mary received Jesus. The same is true for all who believe in Him. Without the Holy Spirit, none of us would receive the Savior.

“No one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3b). But once we believe (through the work of the Holy Spirit), we

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<sup>32</sup>Paul Ellis. The Grace Commentary.  
<https://thegracecommentary.com/matthew-1/#matthew1v18>

find that Christ lives in us (Galatians 2:20b) as He did in Mary's womb.

Contrary to what some may believe, Mary did not remain a virgin throughout her entire life. She would have other children which means that Jesus had half-brothers and sisters.

"Isn't this the carpenter's Son? Isn't His mother's name Mary, and aren't His brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all His sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things" (Matthew 13:55-56, see also Mark 6:3).

Galatians 1:19: "I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother."

"After this He went down to Capernaum with His mother and brothers and His disciples." The fact that the words "brothers" and "disciples" are both used means that John was not referring to "spiritual" brothers but to familial relationships. The "brothers" and the "disciples" were different groups.

Matthew 12:46 records a time when "While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, His mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to Him."

Also, consider the following verse that proves that Mary and Joseph would have consummated their marriage at a later date: "But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth

to a Son. And he gave Him the name Jesus” (Matthew 1:25).

The term “until” (heōs)<sup>33</sup> signifies that something took place up to a certain point in time and implies that an action occurred thereafter. In Matthew's account, he does not conclude the sentence by stating that Joseph did not consummate their marriage. Instead, he uses the phrase “He did not consummate their marriage until...” which suggests that the consummation did take place after the birth of Christ. Additionally, Matthew highlights the fact that Joseph “took Mary home as his wife” (Matthew 1:24).<sup>34</sup>

### **Question 7: Why was the virgin birth necessary and did it happen?**

The most straightforward answer to the necessity of the virgin birth is if Jesus were born of Joseph, He would have had original sin—He would have been born physically corrupted, spiritually dead, sinful, and cursed.

There is an argument that the prophecy of the virgin birth in Isaiah 7:14 does not speak of a virgin but a young woman.

“Many have pointed out that the Hebrew word in Isaiah is “almah” and not the technical term for

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<sup>33</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2193/niv/mgnt/0-1/>

<sup>34</sup>Did Mary Have Any Other Children? <https://www.gotquestions.org/did-Mary-have-other-children.html>

virgin, "bethula". It is true that *almah* has a wider semantic range than *bethula*, but there are no clear references in the Old Testament where *almah* does not mean virgin. The word *almah* occurs nine times in the Old Testament, and wherever the context makes its meaning clear, the word refers to a virgin. More importantly, the Septuagint translates *almah* with the Greek word "parthenos" (the same word used in Matthew 1:23 where Isaiah 7:14 is quoted), and everyone agrees that "parthenos" means "virgin." The Jewish translators of the Septuagint would not have used a clear Greek word for virgin if they understood Isaiah 7:14 to refer to nothing more than a young woman."<sup>35</sup>

In his genealogy, Matthew carefully avoids calling Joseph the father of Jesus; rather, he speaks of "Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah" (Matthew 1:16).

Jesus' enemies among His contemporaries denied His virgin birth. They went so far as to publicly accuse Jesus of being a Samaritan, i.e., a person of mixed race (John 8:48).

Was the story of the virgin birth of Jesus a fable borrowed from earlier religions?

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<sup>35</sup>Kevin DeYoung. Why Does It Matter that Jesus Was Born of a Virgin? December 21, 2020. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/why-does-it-matter-that-jesus-was-born-of-a-virgin/>

"The Persian god Mithra was made the "Protector of the Empire" by the Romans in 307 AD, right before Christianity was declared the official religion. Some versions of Mithra's story, predating Christianity, make him the son of a human virgin."<sup>36</sup>

"As far as the virgin birth of Mithra it can't be. Mithra was born of a rock, not a virgin."<sup>37</sup> "As for the "virgin birth" of Mithras, even if one decides to claim that the rock from which Mithras was hatched was a virgin, or that the being or entity that laid the egg or rock was a virgin, any comparisons between his birth scenario and the virgin birth of Jesus, through a human and mortal mother, would be absurd and undignified."<sup>38</sup>

It is incorrect to assert that the myth of Mithras shares the same birth narrative as Jesus, where He was born in a stable or manger. The story of Mithras describes his emergence from an egg made of rock before the beginning of time. Franz Cumont's book, "The Mysteries of Mithras," provides an example of this. It is worth

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<sup>36</sup>Garrett S Griffin. Other Gods Born to Virgins on December 25 Before Jesus Christ. December 8, 2016. <https://gsgriffin.com/2016/12/08/other-gods-born-to-virgins-on-december-25-before-jesus-christ/>

<sup>37</sup>Joshua J. Mark. February 11, 2020. Mithra. <https://www.worldhistory.org/Mithra/>

<sup>38</sup>Was Mithra born of a Virgin, In a Stable, on Dec. 25? <http://www.aboutbibleprophecy.com/q10.htm>

noting that Cumont, a non-Christian scholar, was critical of Christianity.<sup>39</sup>

Dionysus: like so many of the pagan “parallels,” was born when a god (in this case Zeus) disguised himself as a human and impregnated a human princess. This is not a virgin birth and not like the Holy Spirit’s role we read about in the Gospels.

Buddha: his mother dreamed that Buddha entered her in the form of a white elephant. But this story doesn’t appear until five centuries after his death, and she was already married.

But what about the Egyptian god Horus mentioned before the book of Isaiah was written that would prophesy the virgin birth?

Osiris ruled the land of Egypt but had a jealous brother, Seth, who tricked him and killed him. Seth threw Osiris’ coffin into the Nile where it was then lost out to sea. Isis, the sister, and wife of Osiris, finds the coffin and brings it back to Egypt. When Seth hears about this, he steals the corpse of Osiris and chops it into 14 pieces, and scatters them across the land. Isis goes and finds all the pieces and puts Osiris back together. The challenge is that she can’t find his male body part because it had been eaten by fish in the river. Unperturbed by this setback, Isis makes a replica of the missing part and sews that onto the rest of the body. She is then

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

able to revive her husband just long enough to mate with him (in the form of a bird) and have him sire their child Horus.”

Having sex with your husband, whether alive or dismembered and reconstituted, and using your magic to get impregnated isn't quite the same as being a virgin. No matter how you want to slice it, this event is no “virgin conception.”<sup>40</sup>

Krishna: “Another god that fits this category is the Hindu deity, Krishna. According to the religious Hindu text, Vishnu Purana, Krishna was mentally transmitted from the mind of the god Vasudeva (an incarnation of Krishna himself) into the womb of the princess Devaki. This appears at first glance to be a striking parallel, but it cannot be classified a virgin birth because Devaki and Vasudeva had previously borne seven children together.”<sup>41</sup>

Here are some additional reasons why the virgin birth of Jesus was not taken from another ancient religion.

□ Timing: The earliest written accounts of the virgin birth in the New Testament predate any other known account of a virgin birth in other religions. The virgin birth of Jesus was

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<sup>40</sup>Craig Hamilton. Can We Believe in the Virgin Birth? December 24, 2019. <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/can-believe-virgin-birth/>

<sup>41</sup> Jon Sorensen. Was the Virgin Birth of Jesus Grounded in Paganism? December 2, 2013. <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/was-the-virgin-birth-of-jesus-grounded-in-paganism>

prophesied in the Old Testament several centuries before it occurred, indicating that it was not a borrowing from other religions.

□ Jewish Roots: The Jewish people did not have a tradition of virgin births, so it is unlikely that early Christians would have borrowed this concept from their own religious heritage.

□ Uniqueness: How the virgin birth is presented in the New Testament is unique and distinct from other stories of divine births in other religions. The story of the virgin birth in Christianity involves a virgin conceiving by the power of the Holy Spirit, whereas other divine birth stories involve gods having intercourse with human women. The narrative of the virgin birth of Jesus in the Bible is a unique and distinct story that cannot be found in any other religious text.

□ Emphasis on Mary: The role of Mary in the story of the virgin birth is unique to Christianity, with no other religion placing such emphasis on the mother of a divine figure.

□ Theological Significance: The virgin birth is integral to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, which holds that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who became human to save humanity from sin. This doctrine is central to Christianity and its development, and its roots cannot be traced to any other religion or belief system.

### **Question 8: Which angel visited Mary?**

Many times, in the Bible, when an angel appears to someone, the angel's name is not mentioned and is simply referred to as "an angel of the Lord." However, when an angel is specifically referred to as "The Angel of the Lord," it is referring to Jesus Himself. The Angel of the Lord speaks as God, identifies Himself with God, and exercises the responsibilities of God. The Angel of the Lord is mentioned in various places throughout the Old Testament but does not appear after the incarnation of Christ. This makes sense because the angel of the Lord is a theophany, an appearance of God in physical form and this is not needed after the Incarnation. It is also worth noting that "angel" in Hebrew (*mal'āk*) can be translated as a messenger such as a prophet, priest, or teacher or an ambassador, angel, or king.<sup>42</sup>

According to Luke 1:19, an angel appears to Zechariah and identifies himself as Gabriel. Six months into Elizabeth's pregnancy, Gabriel is sent to Nazareth to inform Mary that she is pregnant with the Messiah. Although Gabriel is not mentioned by name during his interaction with Mary, we are told it is him in Luke 1:26. It is unknown why Gabriel chose to introduce himself to Zechariah and not to Mary. However, given the shocking news that Mary received, it is unlikely that obtaining the angel's name was a priority for her at that moment.

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<sup>42</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h4397/niv/wlc/0-1/>

The Bible records at least four instances of the appearance of the angel Gabriel, but he may have appeared in other instances where he is not explicitly identified by name.

- “And I heard a man’s voice from the Ulai calling, “Gabriel, tell this man the meaning of the vision” (Daniel 8:16).
- “While I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice” (Daniel 9:21).
- “The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news” (Luke 1:19).
- “In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee” (Luke 1:26).

So, Gabriel delivered a message from God to at least three people, Daniel, Zechariah, and Mary.

The name Gabriel translated from Hebrew means: “God is my strength” or “God is my hero”.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Sarah Garone. Gabriel Name Meaning. September 26, 2021.  
<https://www.verywellfamily.com/gabriel-name-meaning-origin-popularity-5118182>

When Gabriel appeared to Daniel, Zechariah, and Mary, all three were stricken with awe.

- Daniel says, "As he came near the place where I was standing, I was terrified and fell prostrate" (Daniel 8:17).
- Zechariah "was startled and was gripped with fear" (Luke 1:12).
- And Mary "was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be" (Luke 1:29).

Gabriel had to reassure each of them before continuing with his messages, raising Daniel back to his feet and telling Zechariah and Mary, "Do not be afraid" (Luke 1:13,30).

## **Chapter 2 Small Group Guide**

Title: Mary's Found Favor

Primary Questions:

Question 5: Why was Mary chosen to be the mother of Jesus?

Question 6: How did Mary become pregnant and what was her age at the time?

Question 7: Why was the virgin birth necessary and did it happen?

Question 8: Which angel visited Mary?

Group Discussion:

1) Why was Mary the right choice in God's plan to bring forth the Messiah?

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2) What impact would Joseph's bloodline have had on Jesus if there would not have been a virgin birth? Do you think it was part of God's divine plan that Joseph would be of the bloodline of Jeconiah?

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3) What do we know about Mary's probable age when she became pregnant and gave birth to Jesus? Does this give you a new perspective on the challenges she faced at such an early age?

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4) What is the argument made against the virgin Birth taken from Isaiah 7:14, and how is it refuted?

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5) What is the argument the Virgin Birth was mythical and borrowed from stories like Mithra, and how is it refuted?

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Closing Thoughts: Mary was a humble peasant woman from the tribe of Judah and the lineage of King David. She and her husband Joseph were not wealthy or powerful people, and they made offerings of two doves or pigeons as a sacrifice in the temple. Mary's life was characterized by courage, faith, obedience, and purity. She was chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus, the Savior of the world, because of her lineage, her engagement to Joseph, her virginity, and her good character. The genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke serve different purposes but both show that Jesus was born of a virgin and that Joseph was not His biological father. Mary's age at the time of Jesus' birth is uncertain, but she was likely between 13 and 16 years old. The Bible tells us that Mary became pregnant through the Holy Spirit and gave birth to Jesus as a virgin. While we do not know exactly how the miracle of the Virgin Birth took place, we know that it was through the power of the Holy Spirit.

### **Chapter 3: Joseph's Reaction to Mary's Pregnancy and the Journey to Bethlehem**

“So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David” (Luke 2:4).



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<sup>44</sup>Joseph Brickey. Journey to Bethlehem.

**Question 9: What was Joseph's reaction to finding out Mary was pregnant and who changed his mind?**

"Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly" (Matthew 1:19).

According to the Mosaic Law, Joseph had only one choice on how to appropriately deal with Mary's pregnancy.

The first option for dealing with adultery was death by stoning. Under the Mosaic Law, pregnant women were not exempt from the penalty of stoning if they committed certain offenses. The unborn child would have died with the mother. This option was off the table because according to the Mosaic Law, an execution could only be carried out if there were two or more witnesses to the crime (Deuteronomy 19:15), and one witness was not enough to invoke the death penalty (Deuteronomy 17:6).

It's worth mentioning that Mary was betrothed to Joseph, a traditional Jewish engagement ceremony that legally binds a man and a woman as future spouses. In Jewish culture, betrothal is considered almost equivalent to marriage, but the couple is not permitted to live together or engage in sexual relations until the completion

of the second part of the ceremony, called Nissuin. Because of this, if Mary had been unfaithful to Joseph, it would have been regarded as adultery and not fornication, which carries a different penalty under the Mosaic Law. If an unmarried woman was not betrothed, and a man had sexual relations with her, he was required to marry her and pay her father a fine (Exodus 22:16-17). If a man had sexual relations with a virgin who was not betrothed, he was also required to pay her father a fine, marry her, and was not allowed to divorce her (Exodus 22:16-17).

Mendel Fogelman was asked whether it was permissible for a man to marry someone to whom he was betrothed but who had committed adultery. In response, he wrote: "If she is betrothed to her husband and there are two witnesses to adultery, then he is not permitted to remain married to her. However, it must be pointed out that for this even strong, circumstantial evidence would not be sufficient, but it would have to be directly confirmed through eye-witness testimony. See the Laws of Sotah Chapter 2, Law 13, and on."<sup>45</sup>

Note:

A different set of rules apply if her husband first

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<sup>45</sup>Mendel Fogelman. Ask the Rabbi. <https://www.chabad.org/960639>  
Reference Ref. No. 5958618. April 19, 2023.

warned her not to seclude herself with this man. In such a case, she could become prohibited from her husband even with a lower bar of evidence.<sup>46</sup>

According to the Mosaic Law Joseph's only option with Mary's pregnancy was to issue a certificate of divorce to his wife (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

"He had in mind to divorce her quietly" (Matthew 1:19b).

This meant that Joseph would initiate a legal process to end their betrothal, but without publicly exposing her sin. By choosing this option, Joseph demonstrated kindness and compassion towards Mary, while also upholding the letter of the Law.

"A Jewish marriage is bookended by two ceremonies, a betrothal (erusin) and the wedding (nissuin) itself. These two ceremonies may be separated by as much as a year. At the betrothal ceremony, the groom signs a contract or tena'im binding him to his intended wife. This is a serious contract that can only be broken by death or divorce. This is why Joseph, who was betrothed to Mary had in mind to divorce her upon learning that she was pregnant. Joseph could not simply break off the engagement. He

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

had to follow the legal procedure for undoing the betrothal."<sup>47</sup>

At this juncture, Joseph was unaware that what had occurred was the "Immaculate Conception." Mary had remained faithful to him, not having been with any other man, and he could still proceed with their marriage.

The only Old Testament example of an unfaithful spouse being taken back by one who lived under the Mosaic Law was the story of Hosea and Gomer. However, his marriage to her was arranged by God as a sign of the unfaithfulness of God's people.

"Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the LORD" (Hosea 1:2).

During the time of the prophets, there was often a lack of obedience to the Mosaic Law, and the people were frequently criticized for their disobedience and sin. The prophets were sent to call the people back to God and to remind them of their covenant with Him. They also spoke about God's judgment and the coming of the Messiah who would save His people which is why God instructed Hosea to marry an unfaithful

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<sup>47</sup>Paul Ellis. The Grace Commentary.  
<https://thegracecommentary.com/matthew-1/#matthew1v19>

woman and to buy her back out of her adulteress relationship.

“God asked him to take back a woman who, by the laws of the times, should have been stoned to death. And not only take her back but buy her back. The Law allowed Hosea to punish Gomer harshly, but instead, he received her back into his home and paid the man she went with “fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethek of barley” (Hosea 3:2).<sup>48</sup>

Hosea’s payment of 15 shekels of silver for Gomer not only freed her from slavery but also symbolically redeemed her from her life of sin and unfaithfulness, as that amount was the cost of a slave during that time.

Overall, the story of Hosea and Gomer provides a powerful illustration of God’s love and redemption for His people and points to the redemption that Jesus would provide for humanity through His death and Resurrection.

What changed Joseph’s mind about Mary and her pregnancy?

Joseph received a divine message from God through a dream, which is distinct from a vision. A vision takes place when someone is awake

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<sup>48</sup>Netta Marie Woods. Who Were Hosea and Gomer in the Bible? Christianity.com. June 28, 2019.  
<https://www.christianity.com/wiki/people/who-were-hosea-and-gomer-in-the-bible.html>

and fully conscious, whereas a dream occurs during periods of sleep. The fact that Joseph was asleep is emphasized in Matthew 1:24a where it states, "When Joseph woke up."

According to the Bible, Joseph received three significant dreams from God with the first one resulting in a change in mind about taking Mary as his wife, found in Matthew 1:19-20:

"But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

In the second dream, an angel instructed Joseph to flee to Egypt with Mary and Jesus to escape King Herod's wrath (Matthew 2:13-15).

Following King Herod's death, in a third dream, an angel of the Lord informed Joseph that it was safe to return to Israel (Matthew 2:19-21). Joseph and his family eventually settled in Nazareth, fulfilling yet another prophecy that Jesus would be called a Nazarene (Matthew 2:22-23).

**Question 10: Why might Mary travel with Joseph to Bethlehem when she was so far along in her pregnancy?**

In Luke's Gospel, Joseph and Mary's trip to Bethlehem is undertaken to satisfy an imperial

command that all individuals return to their ancestral towns “that all the Roman world should be taxed” (Luke 2:1).

“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register” (Luke 2:1-3).

The Jewish historian Josephus confirms that a general taxation was indeed overseen by Cyrenius (Quirinius). Luke indicates that this was the “first” census. Meaning, he knew of a later census. And it just so happens that he refers to that later census (AD 6-7) in Acts 5:37 – the one which led to a Jewish revolt.

The census described in Luke chapter 2 has been a source of controversy among some individuals. One issue is the apparent discrepancy between the reigns of Quirinius and Herod the Great. According to historical records, Herod died in 4 BCE, while Publius Sulpicius Quirinius was not appointed as the governor of Syria until 6 CE. This could mean that Quirinius did not hold any ruling authority until a decade after Herod’s death and the banishment of his son and successor, Archelaus, as the ruler of Judea. Therefore, it seems impossible for Quirinius to have conducted a census during

Herod's reign, as he had been deceased for 10 years.

At one point, some claimed that Luke's account of the events surrounding the birth of Christ in Luke 2:1-5 was inaccurate. Critics argued that there never was a census. However, archaeological discoveries have since refuted these claims. It has been uncovered that Quirinius served two separate terms as governor, with the first term beginning around 7 B.C., which coincides perfectly with the time of Christ's birth.<sup>49</sup> According to historical records, Quirinius served as the governor of Syria twice, but the dates of his governorship are a matter of debate among historians. The first term was likely from 6-4 BCE, and the second term was from 6-9 CE.

Another solution to this conundrum is found in that historical data leaves a governorship gap between 4-1 BC. Which means, we don't know who served as governor of Syria during that time. The challenge with this particular view is that even if Quirinius filled the historical gap, his rule most likely would have come after Herod's death. Yet this explanation could still work. Censuses were known to take several years. If the census began while Herod still reigned over

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<sup>49</sup>Eddie Hyatt. Historical Evidence for the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ. March 9, 2016. New York Apologetics. <https://www.newyorkapologetics.com/historical-evidence-for-the-virgin-birth-of-jesus-christ/>

Judea, the results might not have emerged until Quirinius' reign so that his name was attached to the census.

It's worth noting that Luke never explicitly referred to Quirinius as the "governor" of Syria, as some English translations suggest, but rather as someone who held authority at that time. This interpretation is based on the Greek word used in Luke's account, which is a verb meaning "to rule, command, or lead,"<sup>50</sup> rather than the noun typically translated as "governor." According to Luke's account, Quirinius was proposed to have played a leading role during the census. Considering the large scale of such an undertaking, it would be reasonable for someone to be assigned to supervise it. It's typical for those in positions of political influence to take on multiple roles as they climb up the ladder. Consequently, we are aware that Quirinius ultimately assumed the formal position of governor of Syria in AD 6.<sup>51</sup>

Another perspective is to examine the text itself and propose that the Greek word "prote" should be translated as "before" instead of "first." In this case, Luke would be indicating that the census took place before Quirinius became governor of Syria. However, this interpretation is considered a bit of a stretch and lacks support from the majority of scholars. Moreover, it seems odd for Luke to mention an event about

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<sup>50</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2230/niv/mgnt/0-1/>

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

someone who was not even the governor at the time. Therefore, it is generally accepted that the translation of “first” is more appropriate.<sup>52</sup>

F.F. Bruce, a well-respected scholar of the New Testament, observed that while modern critics have challenged Luke's accuracy, archaeology has consistently validated Luke's account and disproven the critics.<sup>53</sup>

The census in Luke 2 has a second issue. The Romans did not require their subjects to go back to their ancestral homes to be counted. Instead, they were supposed to return to their current homes so that their possessions and people could be evaluated for taxation purposes. Individuals needed not to be “out of town” during the census and tax collection. Going to one's ancestral home would not allow pilgrims to attend to their farming duties. The residents under Roman authority were expected to go back to their present homes so that they could be counted and taxed along with their possessions.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Ryan Leasure. October 5, 2020. Was Luke Wrong About the Census? <https://crossexamined.org/was-luke-wrong-about-the-census/>

<sup>53</sup>Eddie Hyatt. Historical Evidence for the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ. March 9, 2016. New York Apologetics. <https://www.newyorkapologetics.com/historical-evidence-for-the-virgin-birth-of-jesus-christ/>

<sup>54</sup>Robert Cargill. Can You Explain the Problem with the Census in the Gospel of Luke's Story of the Birth of Jesus? June 8, 2022. <https://bam.sites.uiowa.edu/faq/can-you-explain-problem-census-gospel-luke>

The assumption behind this objection is that Rome did not permit local regions to follow their own traditions. Nevertheless, we have evidence that Rome frequently permitted Israel to adhere to their customs as long as they did not pose a significant challenge to Roman authority. For instance, they could practice the Sabbath, sustain their temple, and decline activities that conflicted with their Jewish principles. Given this, it appears entirely plausible that Rome would have allowed the Jewish community to perform a customary ancestral census, such as the one described in 2 Samuel 24.

“A papyrus was discovered in Egypt containing the text of a proclamation from 104 AD regarding a local census. In it, Gaius Vibius Maximus, prefect of Egypt, commanded the men of the province to return to their “place of origin” to be registered.”<sup>55</sup>

Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem corresponds with the time of Herod the Great’s reign. This is evidenced by the fact that if the census had taken place in AD 6, Joseph would not have had to leave Herod Antipas’ territory (Nazareth) for Archelaus’ territory (Bethlehem). It is reasonable to assume that the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem for registration purposes would only have made sense during a time when both towns were under the same jurisdiction.

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<sup>55</sup>Jo-Ann Shelton, *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History* – 2nd edition (Oxford University Press, 1998) 143-144

The territories were divided after Herod's death.<sup>56</sup>

We know that the census is why Joseph made the difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It was required that Joseph go to Bethlehem, the city of his ancient ancestor, King David, to register. As the Scriptures say, "he belonged to the house and line of David" (Luke 2:4). This still doesn't give us an answer as to why Mary accompanied him on this journey. With Mary being well into her pregnancy, she could have remained in Nazareth. Nevertheless, God had foreknowledge of the birthplace of His Son and had prophesied about it in the Scriptures.

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for Me One who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times" (Micah 5:2).

Mary persisted in her journey to Bethlehem, fulfilling the commitment she had made when Gabriel announced her mission, saying, "I am the Lord's servant ... may it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38). She was willing to do whatever God wanted. Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem because it was God's plan for Jesus to be born there. God employed

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<sup>56</sup>Ryan Leasure. October 5, 2020. Was Luke Wrong About the Census? <https://crossexamined.org/was-luke-wrong-about-the-census/>

individuals and situations to accomplish His desired outcome, demonstrating His ultimate sovereignty over everything.

**Question 11: What would the journey have been like for Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem? How far did they travel and how long would it have taken?**

According to biblical scholars, it is believed that traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem would have taken four days, covering a distance of approximately 90 miles at an average speed of 2.5 mph. However, taking into account the necessary stops for rest, meals, and personal needs, as well as Mary being in her third trimester, a more realistic timeframe would be closer to a week. A more leisurely pace of 2 mph for six hours a day would result in a journey of one week to reach Bethlehem.



One possible timeline for their journey could be:

## Day 1: Nazareth to Beth Shean

The journey from Nazareth to Beth Shean in biblical times would have been a challenging one, as the two places were located about 28 miles apart and the terrain was mostly hilly and rugged.

Assuming the journey was made on foot or by donkey, travelers would have had to navigate through narrow and rocky paths, cross streams and valleys, and climb steep slopes. The route would have taken them through the lower Galilee region, passing by several small villages and towns along the way.

“Mary and Joseph had to bring their own provisions. “In wineskins, they carried water,” “And they carried a lot of bread. Breakfast would be dried bread, lunch would be oil with bread, and herbs with oil and bread in the evening.”<sup>57</sup>

The journey would have also involved crossing the Jordan River, which could be a dangerous and challenging task depending on the season and water level. Once they reached the other side of the river, they would have traveled through the fertile Jordan Valley, which would have been a welcome relief after the difficult terrain of the Galilee.

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<sup>57</sup>A Long, Cold Road to Bethlehem: Nativity: Gospel accounts of Mary and Joseph’s journey gloss over the arduous reality of life and travel in ancient Galilee, scholars say. December 23, 1995.

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-12-23-me-17102-story.html>

Beth Shean was a strategic city in ancient times, situated at the intersection of several major trade routes. As such, it would have been a bustling center of commerce and activity. Around 130 CE, a Roman-style amphitheater known as Scythopolis was built in Beth Shean, capable of seating up to 7,000 people. Another impressive architectural feature was the Roman Bridge built over the Jordan River constructed in 63 BC.

Overall, the journey from Nazareth to Beth Shean would have been a challenging but rewarding one, filled with natural beauty, cultural and historical significance, and the opportunity to connect with other travelers along the way.

### Days 2 and 3: Beth Shean through the Jordan River Valley

The journey from Beth Shean through the Jordan River Valley would have been a significant route in biblical times. This journey was taken by many people, including traders, pilgrims, and armies, and it is mentioned in various biblical texts.

Beth Shean was an important city in ancient Israel, situated at the junction of the Jezreel Valley and the Jordan River Valley. The city was a significant trading center, connecting the Mediterranean coast with the East. The journey from Beth Shean through the Jordan River Valley would have taken travelers through a lush and fertile region, full of vegetation and wildlife.

The Jordan River Valley offers freshwater, edible plants (e.g., date palms), and safety from the Samaritans. Mary and Joseph would have most likely camped out near the river bank.

The journey would have been challenging due to the rugged terrain, but it would have offered breathtaking views of the surrounding landscape.

According to biblical accounts, this journey was often taken by groups of people, including the Israelites during their wanderings in the wilderness. The journey was also significant for early Christian pilgrims, who saw the Jordan River as a sacred site, as it was the place where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist.

#### Day 4: Jordan River to Jericho

The journey from the Jordan River to Jericho is significant in the Bible as it is the route that the Israelites took when they entered the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua. It is also the setting for the parable of the Good Samaritan in the New Testament.

The terrain between the Jordan River and Jericho is characterized by steep hills and rocky terrain. The climate is hot and dry, with temperatures reaching up to 120 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer. The route from the Jordan River to Jericho descends 3,300 feet in elevation over a distance of about 17 miles.

The journey would have been challenging, especially for those on foot. The steep terrain,

combined with the intense heat, would have made the journey physically exhausting. The path would have been narrow and winding, with many rocky outcroppings and steep drops. There would have been many opportunities for bandits to attack travelers, which is likely why the road is known as the "Way of Blood".<sup>58</sup>

One of the most terrifying dangers in ancient Palestine was the heavily forested valley of the Jordan River. Lions and bears lived in the woods, and travelers had to fend off wild boars. Archeologists have unearthed documents warning travelers of the forest's dangers.

Despite these challenges, the journey would have been a significant one for the Israelites. It would have been a tangible reminder of the trials they had endured in the wilderness and a symbol of the new beginning that awaited them in the Promised Land.

#### Days 5 and 6: Jericho to the north-end of the Dead Sea

The journey from Jericho to Jerusalem would have taken Mary and Joseph two days because it's an ascent the entire way. The Dead Sea is the lowest place on the face of the Earth. Jerusalem is in the hill country. The biblical journey from Jericho to the north end of the Dead Sea would have been a challenging one.

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<sup>58</sup>Parable of the Good Samaritan.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parable\\_of\\_the\\_Good\\_Samaritan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parable_of_the_Good_Samaritan)

The distance between the two locations is about 17 miles (27 km), and the terrain is hilly and rugged.

As the traveler approached the north end of the Dead Sea, the terrain would have become increasingly harsh and barren. The Dead Sea is located in a deep, arid valley that is extremely hot and dry, with temperatures often reaching over 100°F (38°C). The landscape is dominated by rocky cliffs and hills, with little vegetation or water sources.

The journey would have been particularly challenging during biblical times because of the risk of bandits and thieves. The area around Jericho was known for its banditry, and travelers would have had to be constantly vigilant to avoid being robbed or attacked.

Despite these challenges, the journey from Jericho to the north-end of the Dead Sea would have been a significant one for biblical travelers. The Dead Sea is mentioned several times in the Bible and was a site of great spiritual significance for many ancient peoples. For example, it was believed to be the site of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which were destroyed by God for their wickedness. Additionally, the area around the Dead Sea was known for its bountiful agricultural produce, particularly dates and balsam, which were highly prized in biblical times.

Day 7: Jerusalem to Bethlehem

This is the shortest leg of the journey. It's five miles downhill. They would have passed by the city of David, which lay to the south of Herod's Jerusalem.<sup>59</sup> The path would have been a dusty, unpaved road that was likely narrow and winding in places. The journey could take several hours, depending on the speed of travel and the condition of the traveler.

The road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem was not always safe, as the area was also known for bandits and thieves. Travelers had to be cautious and prepared for any danger they might encounter along the way. It is possible that Mary and Joseph traveled with a group of other pilgrims for safety.

Along the way, travelers would have seen a variety of landscapes, including rocky hills, fields, and vineyards. They may have passed by small villages or towns, where they could stop for rest and refreshment. The journey would have been physically demanding, especially for Mary, who was pregnant.

Overall, the journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem would have been a challenging and arduous one, but also a meaningful one for Mary and Joseph as they made their way to the birthplace of Jesus.

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<sup>59</sup>The Bell: News and Stories From Gordon College. 5 Things You Didn't Know About the Christmas Story. December 18, 2020. <https://stories.gordon.edu/5-things-you-didnt-know-about-the-christmas-story/>

“The hardships did not end when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem.

Under normal circumstances, the pair would have expected to stay in the spare bedroom of a relative or another Jewish family. However, an overcrowded Bethlehem would have forced Joseph and Mary to seek lodging at a primitive inn where there was no room for them there.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>A Long, Cold Road to Bethlehem: Nativity: Gospel accounts of Mary and Joseph’s journey gloss over the arduous reality of life and travel in ancient Galilee, scholars say. December 23, 1995.  
<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-12-23-me-17102-story.html>

## **Chapter 3 Small Group Guide**

Title: Joseph's Reaction to Mary's Pregnancy and  
the Journey to Bethlehem

Primary Questions:

Primary Questions answered in the chapter:

Question 9: What was Joseph's reaction to finding out Mary was pregnant and who changed his mind?

Question 10: Why might Mary travel with Joseph to Bethlehem when she was so far along in her pregnancy?

Question 11: What would the journey have been like for Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem?  
How far did they travel and how long would it have taken?

Group Discussion:

1) What option did Joseph have according to the Mosaic Law in properly handling Mary's pregnancy?

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2) How harsh was the punishment for adultery if there were multiple witnesses under the Mosaic Law? Why would this have not been an option for Joseph with Mary's pregnancy?

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3) What was the reason Joseph didn't consider of why he could still marry Mary?

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4) What emotions do you think Joseph felt immediately after he woke up from his divine dream?

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5) If you were a Roman official, why might you want your subjects to return to their present homes rather than their ancestral homes to be counted in a census?

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6) Which day of the journey to Bethlehem would you have enjoyed the most?

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7) Which day of the journey to Bethlehem would have been your least favorite and why?

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Closing Thoughts: The story of Joseph and Mary in Matthew 1:19 highlights the cultural and legal

context of Jewish betrothal and marriage. Joseph, as a righteous man, had only one option in dealing with Mary's pregnancy according to the Mosaic Law, which was to issue a certificate of divorce. However, an angel revealed to him that Jesus was conceived in Mary through the Holy Spirit and that the Child would be the Son of God so he could take Mary as his wife. The journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem was a challenging one, filled with uncertainty, fear, and hardship. However, it was also a journey of faith, hope, and perseverance, as they trusted in God's plan for their lives and remained obedient to His will.

Their journey reminds us of the power of faith in times of difficulty and uncertainty. It also teaches us to trust in God's timing and to have faith that He will provide for us, even during our struggles. As we reflect on Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem, let us be inspired by their unwavering faith and commitment to God's plan for their lives. May we also learn to trust in God's goodness and faithfulness, even when our circumstances may seem overwhelming.

## Chapter 4: The Response to the News of the Coming Messiah



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<sup>61</sup>Adam Piekarski. CNS illustration/courtesy Vatican Philatelic and Numismatic Office

## **Question 12: What were the different responses to the news of Jesus' birth or impending arrival?**

There were 12 different responses to Jesus' coming birth or arrival recorded in Scripture.

- 1) Mary's response was at first bewilderment but then she glorified God for His mercy.

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin" (Luke 1:34)?

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47).

- 2) John the Baptist responded with joy as he leaped in his mother's womb.

"When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy" (Luke 1:41,44).

Elizabeth was the mother of John the Baptist, and her relative Mary was the mother of Jesus making Jesus and John the Baptist related to each other. Some translations will render (syngenēs) as "cousin" in Luke 1:36 which would make Mary and Elizabeth first cousins but it is a general term that means of the same

family.<sup>62</sup> Mary and Elizabeth may have been first cousins, or they may have been fourth cousins. All we know for sure from Scripture is that they were related.

“And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren” (Luke 1:36).

“Mary and Elizabeth could have been from different tribes and still have been first cousins. It may be that their mothers were sisters. Their mothers could have been from the tribe of Judah or Levi.”<sup>63</sup> As commentator Matthew Henry noted: “Though Elisabeth was, on the father’s side, of the daughters of Aaron (verse 5), yet on the mother’s side she might be of the house of David, for those two families often intermarried, as an earnest of the uniting of the royalty and the priesthood of the Messiah” (1997).”<sup>64</sup>

In the descendants of Jacob, tribal heritage was passed down through fathers rather than mothers. Therefore, regardless of their mothers' tribal heritage, Elizabeth and Mary were considered to be descendants of Aaron and David, respectively, based on their fathers' ancestry. This was a common practice among the Israelites, as evidenced in Ruth 4:18-22,

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<sup>62</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g4773/kjv/tr/0-1/>

<sup>63</sup> Eric Lyons. How Were Mary and Elizabeth Related? Apologetics Press. <https://apologeticspress.org/how-were-mary-and-elizabeth-related-2532/>

<sup>64</sup> Henry, Matthew (1997), *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Electronic Database: Biblesoft).

and ensured that children were always considered to be of their father's tribe.

John the Baptist was sent as the forerunner to Christ, tasked with preparing the way for Jesus. John had a unique bond with Jesus and recognized Him as the Messiah. As depicted in the Gospel of John, John exclaimed, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29), acknowledging Jesus as the Savior.

John knew that his role was to pave the way for Jesus and declared himself as the voice calling in the wilderness to "make straight the way for the Lord" (John 1:23). When Jesus approached John to be baptized, John initially objected, feeling unworthy to perform the task. However, Jesus insisted, stating that it was necessary to fulfill all righteousness.

After Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit descended on Him like a dove, and a voice from Heaven proclaimed, "This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). This momentous event marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and showcased the special relationship between John and Jesus. John's baptism of Jesus signified his submission to God's plan and his recognition of Jesus as the Messiah.

- 3) Elizabeth filled with the Holy Spirit prophesied and showed humility.

“In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the Child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill His promises to her” (Luke 1:42-43,45)!

Elizabeth is described as being “well advanced in years” and previously unable to conceive a child (Luke 1:7), but miraculously became pregnant with John the Baptist, who would go on to play a significant role in the life and ministry of Jesus.

What is often overlooked is that Mary spent her first trimester with Elizabeth (Luke 1:56). They both had supernatural pregnancies and their time together was an opportunity for a deepening of their faith in what God was doing through them.

Mary was probably eager to visit Elizabeth to offer her support and to spend time with Elizabeth during her pregnancy, especially since Elizabeth had been isolated (Luke 1:24). Elizabeth was in the sixth month before Mary came (Luke 1:36), Mary stayed three months (Luke 1:56), and most scholars believe that she stayed to witness the birth of John.

Why was Elizabeth secluded for five months? It seems like the opposite thing you’d want to do if you were the subject of a miracle baby.

The reason for her seclusion is revealed in Luke 1:25. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days He has shown His favor and taken away my disgrace among the people." This same Greek word for God "taking away"<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth's reproach or shame in her barrenness is used for taking away our sins in Romans 11:27.

"We should see her behavior as an extension of Zachariah's silence (Luke 1:22), but in a positive manner. She waited in the days of her pregnancy, while the Lord was working, looking forward to the day when she could present her babe as the joyful gift of God that he was."<sup>66</sup> Additionally, seclusion during pregnancy was not uncommon in ancient times. It was seen as a way to protect the expectant mother and her unborn child from outside influences and potential harm. By staying in seclusion, Elizabeth could rest and focus on her pregnancy without distractions or stress. When she gave birth, all marveled at the work of God and asked: "What manner of child will this be?" (Luke 1:57-58, 63-66).

- 4) Zachariah's response was to thank God for His salvation.

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<sup>65</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g851/niv/mgnt/0-1/>

<sup>66</sup>Edward L. Bromfield. Things Paul and Luke: The Servant Must Be Apt to Teach. November 9, 2018.

<https://thingspaulandluke.wordpress.com/2018/11/09/why-did-elizabeth-hide/>

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has come to His people and redeemed them” (Luke 1:68).

Zechariah was a priest of the division of Abijah, who served in the temple in Jerusalem. In Luke 1:13, the angel Gabriel tells Zechariah, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.” This statement indicates that Zechariah had indeed been praying for a child, and his prayers had been heard by God, who had chosen to bless him and Elizabeth with a son. Zechariah was initially skeptical of the angel’s message, questioning how it could be possible given their age. As a result, Gabriel struck him mute until the child was born.

Zechariah’s muteness was significant because it served as a sign of the angel’s message and highlighted the miraculous nature of the child’s conception. It also forced Zechariah to communicate with others using gestures or writing, emphasizing the importance of listening to God’s message and being open to His plans.

After Elizabeth gave birth to their son, Zechariah’s speech was restored, and he praised God, prophesying about the future of his son and the role he would play in preparing the way for the Messiah.

- 5) Joseph responded in faith

“When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a Son. And he gave Him the name Jesus” (Matthew 1:24-25).

- 6) The angels responded with praise

“Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest Heaven, and on Earth peace to those on whom His favor rests”  
(Luke 2:13-14).

- 7) The shepherds responded with excitement and they told everyone the good news and they returned glorifying and praising God.

“When the angels had left them and gone into Heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the Baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this Child. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told” (Luke 2:15-17,20).

After seeing Jesus and then spreading the word to others about the Messiah's birth the shepherds returned to their fields.

- 8) The people responded with amazement or were disturbed by the news. People in the world today respond the same way, they either reject Jesus or they receive Him.

"And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them" (Luke 2:18).

"When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him" (Matthew 2:3).

- 9) Simeon's response was praise, hope, and peace.

"Simeon took Him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as You have promised, You may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel" (Luke 2:28-32).

Simeon is a character in the Gospel of Luke, who is described as a righteous and devout man who was eagerly awaiting the coming of the Messiah. In Luke 2:25-35, it is said that the Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

- 10) Anna responded by giving thanks and speaking about Him to many.

“Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the Child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38).

Anna, is also known as Anna the Prophetess. Luke 2:36–38 tells us that she is the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.

The list of female prophets mentioned in the Bible in addition to Anna is as follows:

1. Miriam - She was a prophetess and the sister of Moses and Aaron (Exodus 15:20).
2. Deborah - She was a prophetess and judge of Israel (Judges 4:4).
3. Huldah - She was a prophetess who lived in Jerusalem during the reign of King Josiah (2 Kings 22:14-20).
4. Noadiah - She was a false prophetess who opposed the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 6:14).
5. The daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9), prophesied in the early Christian church.

Anna was a devout Jewish woman who lived in Jerusalem and was a widow. According to the Gospel of Luke, Anna was very old and had been married for seven years before her husband died. After her husband’s death, Anna devoted herself to worshiping God and spent her days and nights in the temple, fasting and praying.

When Mary and Joseph brought Baby Jesus to the temple to present Him to the Lord, Anna was there and recognized Jesus as the Messiah. She gave thanks to God and spoke to those around her about the Child and His significance.

- 11) The Magi responded with worship and they gave gifts.

“Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him. On coming to the house, they saw the Child with His mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh” (Matthew 2:2b,11).

The fate of the gifts presented to Jesus by the Magi remains a matter of uncertainty. It is unclear what happened to the gifts as Jesus was either two years old or younger at the time of the Magi’s visit, making it unlikely that He could have made immediate use of them (Matthew 2:16). One possibility is that His family utilized the gifts for practical reasons, such as financial support during their escape to Egypt to evade Herod’s persecution.

- 12) Herod’s response was worry and wrath.

“When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in

Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi" (Matthew 2:3,16).

**Question 13: What do we learn from the song Mary wrote when she was pregnant? What do we learn from the song Zechariah wrote?**

**All portions of Mary's song will be underlined:**

Mary's song is known as the Magnificat. The Magnificat is Latin for "My soul magnifies the Lord".<sup>67</sup>

"And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is His name" (Luke 1:46-49).

To understand the meaning of holiness, we must observe God who is holy, and whose name is holy. The notion of God's holiness encompasses completeness, richness, splendor, and an overflowing abundance of life within the Godhead. God lacks nothing. He is unbroken, undamaged, unfallen, completely complete, and entire within Himself. He is the indivisible One,

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<sup>67</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magnificat>

wholly self-sufficient, and the picture of perfection.<sup>68</sup>

“Holy is the Lord” signifies the all-encompassing perfection that characterizes God's nature (Isaiah 6:3). To worship God in the splendor of His holiness is to be overwhelmed by the vastness and grandeur of His sublimity, and to be captivated by the boundless expanse of His beauty.

His mercy extends to those who fear Him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty (Luke 1:50-53).

Good things are a reference to Jesus as Hebrews 10:1a says, “The Law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves.”

He has helped His servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as He promised our ancestors” (Luke 1:54-55).

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<sup>68</sup>Paul Ellis. The Grace Commentary.  
<https://thegracecommentary.com/luke-1/#luke1v49>

"Life is too big for any of us to handle, but the good news is that God is our very great Helper (Deuteronomy 33:26, John 14:16). "Because You are my help, I sing in the shadow of Your wings" (Psalm 63:7). To a nation burdened with the heavy yoke of Law, the cry for mercy was never far away. The Law makes us acutely aware of our shortcomings and needs. Mercy is God's help in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16)."<sup>69</sup>

**All portions of Zechariah's Song  
will be underlined:**

Zechariah's song is also known as the Benedictus. Benedictus means "blessed", "praise" in Latin.<sup>70</sup>

"His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has come to His people and redeemed them, He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David" (Luke 1:67-69).

The horn is a sign of strength and a means of victory. "Jesus is the horn of salvation because He is a deadly weapon and tremendous power which, according to verse 71, God uses to save His people from their enemies and all who hate them. Zechariah means primarily; that the

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<sup>69</sup>Paul Ellis. The Grace Commentary.

<https://thegracecommentary.com/luke-1/#luke1v53>

<sup>70</sup><https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Benedictus>

Messiah will one day destroy His enemies and gather His people into His land and rule them in peace. And indeed, He will when He comes a second time. But Zechariah's words necessarily imply more than that."<sup>71</sup>

"As He said through His holy prophets of long ago, salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—" (Luke 1:70-71).

"Our enemies include sin and the evils of the present age (Galatians 1:4). But our greatest enemy is death (1 Corinthians 15:26). Jesus is the Savior who rescues our souls from death (Psalm 33:19, 116:8)."<sup>72</sup>

"To show mercy to our ancestors and to remember His holy covenant, the oath He swore to our father Abraham, to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve Him without fear in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him, to give His people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins" (Luke 1:72-77).

"The original word "rhyomai" in verse 74 means deliverance or rescue, to draw one to one's

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<sup>71</sup>John Piper. Jesus is the Horn of Salvation. December 14, 1980.  
<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/jesus-is-the-horn-of-salvation>

<sup>72</sup>Paul Ellis. The Grace Commentary.  
<https://thegracecommentary.com/luke-1/#luke1v71>

self.<sup>73</sup> Jesus is the great Deliverer who rescues us from our enemies."<sup>74</sup>

Verses 74 and 75 show that the goal of God's redemption in raising up a horn of salvation is to "grant that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our lives." God's aim in raising a horn of salvation is not merely to liberate an oppressed people, but to create a holy and righteous people who live in no fear because they trust Him."<sup>75</sup>

Zechariah's song primarily focuses on the salvation that the Messiah would bring, rather than his own son. Only two verses (76 and 77) mention John the Baptist explicitly.

We can attain the understanding of salvation by acknowledging the Savior who liberates us from sin. According to the angel's words, Jesus will "save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Salvation and liberation from sin come as we comprehend that our sins have been completely and eternally forgiven in accordance with the riches of His grace (Ephesians 1:7).

The original word for forgiveness (aphesis) is a noun that is sometimes translated as remission

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<sup>73</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g4506/kjv/tr/0-1/>

<sup>74</sup>Paul Ellis. The Grace Commentary.  
<https://thegracecommentary.com/luke-1/#luke1v69>

<sup>75</sup>John Piper. Jesus is the Horn of Salvation. December 14, 1980.  
<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/jesus-is-the-horn-of-salvation>

and means a letting go or dismissal (Luke 24:47).<sup>76</sup>

During the night of His Resurrection, Jesus instructed His disciples to preach about the remission of sins or the good news of complete and unconditional forgiveness (Luke 24:47). In Christ, God will not remember your sins anymore (Hebrews 8:12, 10:17), and He no longer holds your sins and trespasses against you (2 Corinthians 5:19). It is only through Christ that we can receive the forgiveness of sins (Ephesians 1:7, Colossians 1:14).

“Salvation often appears to us as the forgiveness of sins, but salvation is much more than forgiveness. The word which is commonly translated as save in the Bible (sozo), means to deliver, protect, heal, preserve, and make whole. It covers not only salvation, but healing, deliverance, and prosperity. God does not merely forgive us of our sins; He provides everything we need for health and wholeness today” (Ephesians 1:3, 2 Peter 1:3).<sup>77</sup> However, in Zechariah’s song the Greek word used in verse 77 is “soteria” which is closely related to sozo and means deliverance, preservation, safety, salvation.<sup>78</sup>

“Because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from

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<sup>76</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g859/kjv/tr/0-1/>

<sup>77</sup>Paul Ellis. The Grace Commentary.

<https://thegracecommentary.com/luke-1/#luke1v77>

<sup>78</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g4991/kjv/tr/0-1/>

Heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace” (Luke 1:78-79).

“When we proclaim the gospel of peace (Ephesians 6:15) we are revealing the way of peace (Isaiah 59:8) which leads us to the God of peace (Romans 15:33) who gives us life and peace (Romans 8:6).”<sup>79</sup>

### **Question 14: Why did the angels appear to shepherds?**

I believe the angels appeared to shepherds to convey the message that the Gospel is for everyone. In the Old Covenant, God’s covenant was with the Israelites, but with the initiation of the New Covenant through Jesus Christ’s death, the good news declared Jesus and His finished work is for “all the people” (Luke 2:10b). The New Covenant was established between God the Father and Jesus the Son, allowing anyone who believes in Jesus, including Gentiles, to be welcomed into God’s family. This fulfills God’s covenantal promise to Abraham, which precedes the Old Testament Law and remains valid even today.

How did the New Covenant come to be? “For this reason He is the Mediator and Negotiator of a New Covenant [that is, an entirely new

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<sup>79</sup>Paul Ellis. The Grace Commentary.  
<https://thegracecommentary.com/luke-1/#luke1v79>

agreement uniting God and man], so that those who have been called [by God] may receive [the fulfillment of] the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has taken place [as the payment] which redeems them from the sins committed under the obsolete first covenant” (Hebrews 9:15 AMP).

“That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Galatians 3:14).

“That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ by the Gospel” (Ephesians 3:6).

Peter received a revelation of what God had done for the Gentile people recorded in Acts 10:36. “You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36).

The question remains: why were the shepherds chosen for this special encounter? These were not your ordinary shepherds. As Luke describes, these shepherds were fulfilling Temple duties, and according to the Mishnah, (a collection of documents that recorded oral traditions governing the Jewish people during the time of the Pharisees), only priests were allowed to perform these duties. The Mishnah includes a regulation that expressly prohibits the keeping

of flocks throughout the land of Israel, except in the wilderness. Therefore, the only flocks that were kept in other areas would have been those for the Temple services.<sup>80</sup>

These shepherds were in the fields surrounding Bethlehem, not out in the wilderness where regular sheep were kept. So, they must have been priests."<sup>81</sup>

Why would priests perform menial shepherding duties for the Temple? It's because the sheep were intended to be sacrificed for Passover. It was the priests' job to make sure the lambs were without blemish and completely unharmed before being sacrificed.

The priests who tended to the sheep were responsible for the animal sacrifice system of the Temple, including preparing the sheep for Passover and other Jewish ceremonies.

Suddenly, amidst the silent night, an angel from Heaven appeared to them with news that would soon fulfill Moses' Law. Although the shepherds may not have fully understood the significance of the angel's message, it was a revelation that the time for animal sacrifice was coming to an end, and they were the first to hear of it.

The initial statement by the angel "Don't be afraid" demonstrates that the shepherds were

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<sup>80</sup>Mishnah Bava Kamma7:7; 80a.

<sup>81</sup>Steppes of Faith. The Real Truth About the Shepherds on That First Christmas Night. <https://stepsoffaitth.medium.com/the-real-truth-about-the-shepherds-on-that-first-christmas-night-c32296181a27>

visibly terrified. The angel acknowledges that his sudden appearance has startled the shepherds, who are typically accustomed to facing danger. These shepherds have been trained to fend off predators that pose a threat to their sheep, often attacking during the night. Therefore, upon encountering the angel, the shepherds would have already been on high alert.

“Shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified” (Luke 2:8-9).

The origin of the word phobia comes from the Greek term “phobeo,” meaning terrified.<sup>82</sup> Given the numerous things in our world that can instill fear in us, it’s understandable that we may experience terror at times too. The angel had a word to remove their fear, a message of love and one of grace. This same message can liberate you from all your fears. “I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. For there is born to you today, in David’s city, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10b-11).

The arrival of our Savior marks the fulfillment of the prophecy that foretold the coming of the perfect and ultimate sacrifice, whose death and Resurrection would pay for our sins once and for

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<sup>82</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5399/kjv/tr/0-1/>

all. Therefore, with the Savior's arrival, there is no need to be afraid (Luke 2:10). Since Jesus has entered our world, we no longer need to be held captive by fear.

**Question 15: What was the sign for the shepherds to find the Messiah?**

“This will be a sign to you: You will find a Baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger” (Luke 2:12).

What is the sign that the shepherds would find that would reveal who the Messiah is?

- #1 “You will find a Baby”. This is no ordinary Baby. You will find the Son of God, the Messiah (Luke 2:11).

The shepherds were told that they would discover the Son of God - a divine manifestation of God in human form. They would have the privilege of seeing and touching Him, and in Jesus, they could behold the glory of God Himself. In John 14:9, Jesus declared that anyone who had seen Him had also seen the Father. Thus, through Jesus, we too can behold the magnificence of God. As John 1:14b states, “We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

- #2 “You will find a Baby wrapped in cloths”. We will explore this sign further in question #18.

According to Mosaic Law, the shepherds who grazed their flocks on the nearby hillside were responsible for providing the “lambs without blemish” for the temple sacrifice during Passover. To protect the first newborn lamb from blemish, it was swaddled in cloth and placed in a manger, separate from the other sheep. This was a remarkable sign because the Savior, Jesus Christ, would also be wrapped in swaddling cloth, just like their own precious sacrificial lamb after its birth and He too was placed in a manger.

This act of swaddling was the first demonstration of Christ's binding of love. The second binding occurred when He was apprehended by His adversaries and bound with cords in the Garden of Gethsemane. The third binding took place when His body was wrapped in funeral shrouds. Mary removed the first bands, His executioners removed the ropes of the second binding so that He could carry the cross of salvation, and on Resurrection Sunday, the Glorified Christ Himself cast off the cloths that had enshrouded His Body.<sup>83</sup>

- #3 “Lying in a manger”. We will explore this sign further in question #19.

This remarkable sign was essential to identify the newborn Savior from all others. Without the angel’s guidance, the shepherds would never

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<sup>83</sup>Brian Kelly. Another Point of View on Swaddling Clothes. Catholicism.org <https://catholic-link.org/matter-jesus-wrapped-swaddling-clothes/>

have thought to seek Him out, let alone find Him in such an unassuming location. It is astounding to imagine that the Messiah, of all people, was born in such a modest setting, and yet there He was, lying in a manger.

After the shepherds spread the word about Jesus' birth it is said, "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:18-19).

What does it mean that Mary treasured these things in her heart (Luke 2:19)? The word translated "treasured" (*syntēreō*) means "to preserve knowledge or memories (as for later use)."<sup>84</sup> Mary's reaction can be understood as a deep reflection on the significance of Jesus' birth and the events that followed. As the mother of Jesus, Mary likely felt a sense of awe and wonder at the miracle of His birth and the attention that the shepherds brought. Mary may have also been contemplating the angel's message to her that her Son would be the Messiah, the Savior of the world. In essence, Mary's reaction reveals her deep faith and trust in God's plan, as well as her willingness to reflect on and ponder the miraculous events surrounding her Son's birth.

During a Passover celebration, when Jesus was twelve years old, His parents departed for home and accidentally left Him behind. Mary and Joseph soon realized their mistake and returned

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<sup>84</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g4933/niv/mgnt/0-1/>

to Jerusalem, where they found Jesus engrossed in a deep discussion about Scripture with religious scholars in the Temple courts. The onlookers were astounded by the depth of Jesus' knowledge and understanding (Luke 2:41-47). However, Mary reacted differently yet again, choosing to treasure all these experiences in her heart (Luke 2:51).

The manger serves as a significant spiritual symbol, as it provided physical food for animals, while Jesus lying on the hay offers us spiritual sustenance. Jesus feeds us with His Word and by way of receiving communion. Jesus wants us to devour His Word (Jeremiah 15:16; Ezekiel 3:1; Revelation 10:9-10), chew on it, slowly ruminate on its meaning, swallow and digest it, and make it part of the fabric of our being. Jesus' Word is like no other food, it has the power to save us (James 1:21). Not only that, the infant in the feeding trough is the Bread of Life (John 6:35), the true bread that came down from Heaven, and whoever eats this bread will live forever (John 6:51). If a person wants to be spiritually well-fed, it is important to read Scripture and receive communion often. The manger was a sign that Jesus is the Bread of Life that we feed on.

## **Chapter 4 Small Group Guide**

Title: The Response to the News of the Coming  
Messiah

Primary Questions:

Question 12: What were the different responses to the news of Jesus' birth or impending arrival?

Question 13: What do we learn from the song Mary wrote when she was pregnant? What do we learn from the song Zechariah wrote?

Question 14: Why did the angels appear to shepherds?

Question 15: What was the sign for the shepherds to find the Messiah?

Group Discussion:

1) How many different responses to Jesus' birth are recorded in Scripture, and what do these responses tell us about the diversity of human reactions to God's grace given in our world?

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4) How did John the Baptist respond to the news of Jesus' birth, and what does this tell us about the special relationship between the two?

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5) When Joseph learned of Mary's unexpected pregnancy, how did he react, and what can we learn from his willingness to trust God's plan despite any doubts and fears he might have had?

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7) What was the shepherds' response to the announcement of the birth of the Messiah, and how did their immediate action to see the newborn Savior reflect their faith and hope?

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8) Why did King Herod feel threatened by the possibility of a new king? How did his fear and jealousy lead to violence and tragedy?

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9) When Simeon saw the Baby Jesus in the temple, how did he respond, and what can we learn from his faith and patience in waiting on God to fulfill His promise?

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10) How did Anna, a prophetess in the temple, respond to the news of Jesus' birth, and what can we learn from her devotion to God and her recognition of Jesus as the Messiah?

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11) When the Magi heard about the birth of a new king, how did they respond, and what can we learn from their journey of faith and their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh?

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12) What does Mary's song, also known as the Magnificat, teach us about God's character, His mercy, and His concern for the marginalized and oppressed?

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13) What can we learn from Zechariah’s song, the Benedictus, about God’s faithfulness, His promise of salvation through Jesus, and the role of John the Baptist in preparing the way for the Lord?

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14) What is the significance of the ancient Jewish tradition of wrapping the first-born lamb in swaddling cloth, and how does it foreshadow the sacrificial death of Jesus, the Lamb of God?

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Closing Thoughts: The different responses to the birth of Jesus in the Bible demonstrate the multifaceted nature of the event and the complex ways in which people can respond to it. Some, like the shepherds and the Magi, responded with joy and wonder, recognizing the birth of a Savior who would bring hope and salvation to the world. Others, like King Herod, responded with fear and hostility, recognizing the potential threat to their power and control.

These different responses highlight the transformative power of Jesus' birth and how it challenged and disrupted the status quo. The birth of Jesus was not just another historical event, but a moment of profound significance that would change the course of human history.

As we reflect on these different responses, we think of how the world today responds similarly to the good news of Jesus Christ. Some respond with joy and wonder, recognizing the message of hope, love, and redemption that He brings. Others respond with fear and hostility, clinging to the illusion of power and control they think they have. The choice is everyone's to make, but the consequences of our individual responses are profound.

## **Chapter 5: The Birth of the Messiah**

“And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7).



Stone Manger found in Tel Megiddo in Israel<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>What was the Birth of Jesus Like? Redeemer of Israel. December 24, 2020. <http://www.redeemerofisrael.org/2016/12/what-was-birth-of-jesus-like.html>

## **Question 16: In which town was Jesus born, and what was the reason behind God's choice of this location?**

The profound significance underlying Bethlehem's modest size (archaeologist W.F. Albright estimates the population to have been around 300)<sup>86</sup> is that Jesus' birth there serves as a proclamation that God grants the blessings of the Messiah (i.e., salvation) not based on our greatness, merit, or accomplishments.<sup>87</sup>

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for Me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times" (Micah 5:2).

What significant events unfolded that shaped the political landscape of Israel that Jesus was born into?

During the 8th century BC, at the same time as his contemporary Micah wrote about the Messiah being born from a humble town of Bethlehem, Isaiah prophesied about the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of

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<sup>86</sup>Dr. Fred Baltz. Patterns of Evidence. Was Jesus Born in Bethlehem? December 24, 2021.

<https://www.patternsofevidence.com/2021/12/24/was-jesus-born-in-bethlehem/>

<sup>87</sup>John Piper. Why Bethlehem? Christianity.com June 14, 2010.

<https://www.christianity.com/jesus/birth-of-jesus/bethlehem/why-bethlehem.html>

Israel and the subsequent exile of its people. Isaiah's prophecies regarding Israel's captivity are recorded in several passages throughout the book of Isaiah.

In Isaiah 7, the prophet foretells of an impending invasion by the Assyrians against Judah and Jerusalem. In verse 8, Isaiah refers to the "head of Syria" and "the son of Remaliah," which are believed to be references to the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III and the Israelite king Pekah, respectively. Isaiah warns that the Assyrians will overrun the northern kingdom of Israel and its capital city of Samaria, and that Judah will also be threatened by Assyrian aggression.

Isaiah also speaks about the Assyrian conquest of Israel and the exile of its people in Isaiah 9:1-2, where he foretells of a time of darkness and distress for the people of Israel. In Isaiah 11, he describes the regathering of the exiled Israelites from Assyria, and the reunification of the northern and southern kingdoms under a future Messianic king.

Despite the despair of being ripped from their homeland, Isaiah's prophecies also contain a message of hope and restoration for God's people, pointing to the ultimate victory of God and the coming of a Messiah who would bring salvation to Israel and to the nations.

The history of Israel between the time of the Assyrian conquest and the birth of Jesus is

marked by a series of political, social, and religious changes and developments.

After the fall of Samaria in 722 BCE, the northern kingdom of Israel was largely depopulated and its people were exiled by the Assyrians to various locations within the Assyrian empire. This event marked the end of the independent existence of the northern kingdom of Israel, and the beginning of a period of Assyrian domination over the region.<sup>88</sup>

In the southern kingdom of Judah, the period following the Assyrian conquest of Israel was marked by political instability and religious reforms. The reign of King Hezekiah (715-686 BCE) saw a revival of Judah's religious practices and a strengthening of its political power. However, the subsequent reign of his son Manasseh (686-642 BCE) was marked by a return to idolatry and social injustice, which led to the decline of Judah's fortunes.

During this period, the region of Judah also came under the control of various empires, including the Babylonians and the Persians. On August 25, 587 BCE or July 18, 586 BCE, the Babylonians took Jerusalem and destroyed the first Jewish Temple, known as Solomon's Temple, that was built in the 10th century BCE. This led to the Babylonian captivity of the Jews. This event marked another major turning point

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<sup>88</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assyrian\\_captivity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assyrian_captivity)

in the history of Israel, and the beginning of a period of exile and Diaspora for the Jewish people.<sup>89</sup>

In the centuries that followed, the region of Israel was controlled by various powers, including the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. By the time of Jesus' birth, Israel was a province of the Roman Empire, and the Jewish people were under Roman occupation.

Rome conquered Israel in 63 BCE during the Roman Republic era, under the general Pompey's command. This marked the end of the Hasmonean dynasty, which had ruled Israel since the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucid Empire in 164 BCE.

The Roman conquest of Israel brought significant changes to the region. The Romans imposed their system of governance, which included appointing local rulers, imposing taxes, and enforcing their laws. The Jewish people faced restrictions on their religious practices.

The period following the Roman conquest was marked by several Jewish rebellions against Roman rule, including the First Jewish-Roman War (66-73 CE), which resulted in the destruction of the Second Temple which had been rebuilt after the Babylonian exile and stood for several centuries.

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<sup>89</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege\\_of\\_Jerusalem\\_\(587\\_BC\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jerusalem_(587_BC))

The First Jewish-Roman War, led to the dispersion of the Jewish people throughout the world, known as the Diaspora.<sup>90</sup>

Today, only a portion of the Western Wall, which was part of the retaining wall surrounding the Temple Mount, remains standing and is considered a sacred site by Jews worldwide.

Matthew 2:1-5 records the following events:

- Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea during the reign of King Herod.
- Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking where the newborn King of the Jews was, as they had seen His star rising and came to worship Him.
- This news troubled Herod and all of Jerusalem, prompting him to gather the chief priests and scribes of the people to ask where the Christ was to be born. Had King Herod been attentive to Scripture and obeying the Law, he would not have required assistance in locating the birthplace of the Messiah.

They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet."

The location of the Messiah's birth was known to the Jews, as evidenced in John 7:42, where they

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<sup>90</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_the\\_Jews\\_in\\_the\\_Roman\\_Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_the_Roman_Empire)

questioned whether the Christ was not prophesied to come from the offspring of David, specifically from Bethlehem – David’s village. This knowledge was shared by the chief priests, scribes, and the people, who were aware of Micah 5’s prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

Bethlehem might seem like an unusual selection for the birthplace of the Messiah because it lacked grandeur, wealth, and power. It was a small and modest town that hardly merited recognition among the clans of Judah. Nevertheless, God chose this humble town to bring forth His magnificent Messiah.

One reason God chose Bethlehem is the Messiah was from the lineage of David and David was from Bethlehem. However, the main emphasis of Micah 5:2 is not on David’s birthplace or greatness, but rather on Bethlehem’s smallness. It’s important to note that David’s origins were modest as he started as a humble shepherd boy. God often chooses those who are considered lowly or unimportant, so that we cannot take credit for our accomplishments, but must rely on His grace, mercy, and strength so that we might glorify Him in all that we do.

John 7:25-31 portrays some confusion regarding Jesus’ birthplace. People were anticipating the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem, but the religious leaders incorrectly assumed that Jesus was born in Nazareth due to His father’s carpentry business and home being there.

While Jesus was raised in Nazareth, His family had moved there after returning from exile in Egypt after King Herod's death. Consequently, Jesus was commonly referred to as "the Nazarene" or being from Nazareth. It's worth noting that one's hometown doesn't necessarily have to be the place where they were born.

In John 1:46, Nathanael expressed doubt about Jesus being the Messiah, saying, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" However, Jesus later clarified that His origin was divine, as He came from Heaven (John 6:38). Nevertheless, His birth also fulfilled the prophecy as God orchestrated for Joseph and his expectant wife to travel to Bethlehem for the census.

### What do we know about Bethlehem?

Bethlehem was located in the Ephrathah district, and it is important to note that there are two towns with this name. The town where Jesus was born is located near Jerusalem, rather than the other Bethlehem in the northern region of the land, specifically in the tribe of Zebulun as mentioned in Joshua 19:15.

You will discover from the map that the location of Bethlehem found in the north was very close in proximity to Nazareth. This has led some to believe that Jesus was born in a different Bethlehem than that of Bethlehem of Judea. This cannot be the case as the Bible specifically states the place of Jesus' birth was Bethlehem of Judea.

“Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a Child” (Luke 2:4-5, NRSV). And in the Old Testament, there is a prophecy about Jesus being born in Bethlehem of Judea also known as Bethlehem of Ephrathah (Micah 5:2).



Ephrathah means “fruitful place,”<sup>92</sup> as stated in Genesis 48:7. Unfortunately, the town also became associated with sorrow when Rachel, Jacob’s wife, died while giving birth to Benjamin, and was buried there as per Genesis 35:19.

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<sup>91</sup>Ray Hermann. There are Two Bethlehems- In Which was Jesus Born? June 4, 2021. <https://outlawbiblestudent.org/there-are-two-bethlehems-in-which-one-was-jesus-born/>

<sup>92</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h672/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

Before Rachel passed away, she named her newborn son Ben Oni, meaning "son of my sorrow,"<sup>93</sup> but Jacob later changed his name to Ben Yamin, meaning "son of the right hand,"<sup>94</sup> since Benjamin was the only son born in Canaan, which is south of Paddan Aram.

The birth of Benjamin in Bethlehem was symbolic of the forthcoming birth of Jesus. The name change of Ben Oni to Ben Yamin, meaning "son of the right hand," was fitting because the infant born in a manger would later be known as the "Man of Sorrows," as prophesied in Isaiah 53:3: "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from Him; He was despised, and we esteemed Him not."

Additionally, Bethlehem played a significant role in the story of redemption through the account of Ruth and Boaz. Boaz, the kinsman redeemer, served as a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ, our ultimate kinsman redeemer. Charles Spurgeon said: "It was at Bethlehem that Ruth went forth to glean in the fields of Boaz; it was there that Boaz looked upon her, and she bowed herself before her lord; it was there her marriage was celebrated; and in the streets of Bethlehem did Boaz and Ruth receive a blessing which made them fruitful so that Boaz became the father of Obed, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David to the birth of Jesus. That

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<sup>93</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h1126/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

<sup>94</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h1144/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

last fact gilds Bethlehem with glory—the fact that David was born there—the mighty hero who smote the Philistine giant, who led the discontented of his land away from the tyranny of their monarch, and who afterward, by full consent of a willing people, was crowned king of Israel and Judah.”<sup>95</sup>

We already discovered that Ephrathah means “place of fruitfulness” but Bethlehem itself means “house of bread”.<sup>96</sup>

When you place the two Hebrew words Bethlehem Ephrathah together this is what you get:

House of Bread, Place of Fruitfulness

- Bethlehem “House of Bread”<sup>97</sup>
- Ephrathah “Place of Fruitfulness”<sup>98</sup>

Jesus was born in Bethlehem as the Bread of Life (John 6:35) to provide for the needs of humanity. As Christ's followers, we are called to feed on Him daily, not just during Advent. By doing so, we allow Him to bear fruit through us and nourish us through His Word.

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<sup>95</sup>Charles Haddon Spurgeon. The Incarnation and Birth of Christ. New Park Street Pulpit Volume 2. December 23, 1855.  
<https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-incarnation-and-birth-of-christ/>

<sup>96</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h1035/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

<sup>97</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h1035/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

<sup>98</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h672/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

The Bread of Life living in us enables us to become fruitful, as Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

What is Advent?

Advent is a Christian season of preparation and expectation leading up to Christmas. It typically starts on the fourth Sunday before Christmas and lasts for four weeks.

During Advent, Christians focus on the coming of Jesus Christ, both in His birth as a Baby in Bethlehem and in His eventual return at the end of time.

Advent is often marked by the lighting of candles on an Advent wreath, with each candle representing different themes such as hope, love, joy, and peace. The last candle to be lit on Christmas Eve is the Christ candle. The Christ candle represents the light of the world that came into the darkness, as Jesus Himself said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Because Christ lives in us, we can display the light of Christ. Jesus Christ said to His followers, "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14).

God deliberately chose Bethlehem as the birthplace of His Son, not because of any impressive human achievements or merits, but to emphasize that our only source of pride should be in God's glorious mercy. It's not appropriate for us to credit Bethlehem's significance to any human glory it may have attained.

The apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:27–31: "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before Him. It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."

John Piper said, "God chose a stable so no innkeeper could boast, "He chose the comfort of my inn!" God chose a manger so that no woodworker could boast, "He chose the craftsmanship of my bed!" He chose Bethlehem so no one could boast, "The greatness of our city constrained the divine choice!"

And He chose you and me, freely and unconditionally, to stop the mouth of all human boasting."<sup>99</sup>

God's selection of cities and individuals is not based on their fame, status, or achievements. Rather, He exercises His free will to choose those whom He wills to showcase the magnificence of His mercy, rather than to glorify what we might consider important and want to esteem.

**Question 17: Did the inn where Mary and Joseph sought shelter during Jesus' birth belong to a relative or was it a lodging facility? Also, is there any prior mention of this inn in the Bible?**

The scene is Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago: Joseph and Mary arrive at a little sleepy village where all is quiet, not a creature is stirring not even a mouse. The children were nestled all snug in their beds; while visions of sugar plums danced in their heads. Right away, you know that is not the Biblical story.

The story in which we might have been told is one in which Joseph is frantically seeking a place for Mary to give birth, and the innkeeper whose heart is two sizes too small, tells them they are all booked. Eventually, Mary and Joseph find shelter in a stable.

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<sup>99</sup>John Piper. Why Bethlehem? Christianity.com June 14, 2010. <https://www.christianity.com/jesus/birth-of-jesus/bethlehem/why-bethlehem.html>

After giving birth, angels appear and announce His birth to nearby shepherds, who come to see Jesus for themselves. They then spread the good news to others. Does this story match your recollection of the Christmas story? You may be surprised to learn that it did not happen exactly like that either.

When we think about the story of Jesus' birth, the image that comes to mind is that Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem just in time for Mary to give birth to baby Jesus. Joseph is portrayed as frantically searching for a place to stay, checking with the innkeeper while Mary is in labor. However, here is the real story:

"So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered."

Mary and Joseph had already arrived and then the birth came after they were already there (Luke 2:6). It changes the image we might have had of the traveling couple just arriving in town as Mary has already gone into labor.

Was there an innkeeper? There is no account of an innkeeper mentioned in the nativity story. The innkeeper can be easily inferred from what we are told in Luke 2:7. Because we are told there was no room in the "inn" someone must have told Joseph there was no room available.

In Luke 2:6-7:

"So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she

brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”

The popular message going around today is that the inn never existed. That it wasn't an "inn" Mary and Joseph visited but a relative's home.

The Greek word in Luke 2:7 used for "inn" is (kataluma). Kataluma means "inn" or "lodging place".<sup>100</sup>

Some interpret the term "inn" of Luke 2:7 as a completed upper room of a house, which would suggest that the "innkeeper" was likely a relative of Joseph. The same Greek word is used to describe the space where Jesus and His disciples had the Passover meal (Luke 22:11 and Mark 14:14). This argument is further supported by the fact that in Jewish culture, it was customary to stay in a guest room in a family member's home, especially if the family member was pregnant.

Nevertheless, a passage in the Bible describes the establishment of an actual inn in Bethlehem for travelers, which suggests that the location visited by Mary and Joseph was not the dwelling place of a relative. This is supported by the fact that the word "kataluma" is used only three times in the Bible, twice in reference to the Upper Room and translated as "guest chamber,"

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<sup>100</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2646/kjv/tr/0-1/>

and separately translators use the word “inn,” in Luke 2:7. Additionally, the identity of the inn’s builder is revealed in the Old Testament book of Jeremiah 41:17, providing further insight into the specific place where Mary and Joseph might have sought a place to stay.

“And they went on, stopping at Geruth Kimham near Bethlehem on their way to Egypt” (Jeremiah 41:17).

Geruth Kimham is an interesting reference to a little-known location near Bethlehem that has no bearing on the story being told in Jeremiah 41.

But as we study the reference to Geruth Kimham, an amazing picture begins to unfold for us. What is the Hebrew word for lodging place since Jeremiah 41:17 was written in Hebrew?

Geruth “lodging place”<sup>101</sup>.

Geruth Kimham of Jeremiah 41:17 is not an ancient village near Bethlehem, as you will not find it on any map. Geruth Kimham is the “Lodging Place of Kimham” or “Kimham’s Lodge” and it was established near Bethlehem as a place for travellers to find shelter.

Information regarding Kimham’s identity and the source of his wealth to construct such a lodging place for travellers is also available in the Bible.

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<sup>101</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h1628/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

In the aftermath of Absalom's rebellion, David makes his way back to Jerusalem to reclaim the throne of Israel. Accompanying him on this journey are many of the men who supported him during his exile, including Barzillai the Gileadite, who holds a special place in David's heart. In 2 Samuel 19:33, we learn that David wants to reward Barzillai generously for his loyalty. However, when David offers him the reward, Barzillai declines and instead sends a substitute to receive it on his behalf. "Your servant will cross over the Jordan with the king for a short distance, but why should the king reward me in this way? Let your servant return, that I may die in my own town near the tomb of my father and mother. But here is your servant Kimham. Let him cross over with my lord the king. Do for him whatever pleases you." The king said, "Kimham shall cross over with me, and I will do for him whatever pleases you. And anything you desire from me I will do for you" (2 Samuel 19:36-38).

Within the details of this story lies a significant piece of information, a picture of blessing and covenant that led to the establishment of the Inn of Bethlehem.

"So all the people crossed the Jordan, and then the king crossed over. The king kissed Barzillai and gave him his blessing, and Barzillai returned to his home. When the king crossed over to Gilgal, Kimham crossed with him" (2 Samuel 19:39-40 NIV).

The story of Kimham illustrates what can happen when a person chooses to leave their past behind and walk into a relationship with a king. All of this points toward Jesus, who was born in the manger outside of the inn that Kimham established. By leaving our past behind and walking in a relationship with the King of kings, we can find blessings and favor with God forever.

King David blessed Kimham, whose only qualification for receiving the blessing was his willingness to say "yes" when the invitation was extended. This is a perfect illustration of grace, which is available to all who possess it by faith and say yes to the blessings found in Christ. The only requirement for becoming a child of God and inheriting a heavenly inheritance is to say yes to Jesus.

A young man and woman, traveling to be counted in the Roman census, would travel to Bethlehem and find no room in the inn. But they would seek shelter in the stable near the inn. And the King of Heaven would be born in a stable built by a man whose only recorded action was that he said "yes" at the right time.

How could the manger still be around after 1,000 years? "The baby Jesus was laid, not in a nice wooden cradle built by His carpenter father, but on stone. No wonder why Mary wanted to wrap her son in strips of cloth. Though probably lined with clean straw, this stone had been slobbered on by cattle.

From the moment of His birth, Christ was wrapped in rock, emerging from a womb of flesh into a womb of stone, prefiguring the tomb in which this king who was born to die would be buried. Yet even His stone tomb would open for yet another birth beyond all conception."<sup>102</sup>



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### 1<sup>st</sup> Century Manger

Jeremiah 41:17 tells us that the real inn is connected to the royal family of David, which gives Jesus the right to stay there. Despite this, God humbly chose Jesus to be born in a manger. The story of Christmas is about God coming down to live among us.

When Jesus was conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit, He willingly took on flesh, knowing that He would suffer greatly. Yet He still chose to be born. Love can inspire amazing actions, but God's love surpasses them all. He humbled Himself to become one of us and then died intentionally to take away the sin of the world.

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<sup>102</sup>Mike Mason. A Stone Manger (Chapter 4 of Jesus: His Story in Stone). May 11, 2015. <https://www.mikemasonbooks.com/a-stone-manger/>

<sup>103</sup>1<sup>st</sup> Century Manger located at the Convent of the Sisters of Zion in Jerusalem

The story of the Inn of Kimham is truly remarkable, as it speaks to us on many levels. Did Kimham have any inkling that the manger near his inn would serve as the birthplace of the Messiah? Did David realize that his generosity toward Kimham would establish the birthplace of the Messiah from his lineage?

It's astonishing to consider the far-reaching power of our acts of willingness and generosity. Even today, mangers are being built all over the world that will welcome the King of Glory into the hearts of men.

Jesus was the only Child in all of humanity born with the purpose of dying. Once we realize this, we can start to understand the depth of God's love for us. He gave up His Son for this one purpose, and His Son willingly came to die for our sins and the sins of all mankind.

He lived to die so that we could live and enjoy life abundantly today! The Inn is a real place, and the message of the birth of our Savior is just as real. "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given" (Isaiah 9:6).

**Question 18: What is the significance behind Jesus being wrapped in swaddling cloths, and how does this relate to the purpose of His birth?**

"She wrapped Him in cloths" (Luke 2:7b).

The infant Jesus was wrapped in swaddling cloths that were not ordinary, but rather, was

the same cloths used by the shepherd priests in the church to keep the lambs clean and free of blemishes for sacrifice. This detail is significant because it foreshadows Jesus' sacrificial death, which would ultimately "save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21b), as the angel had foretold to Joseph. As we read in the Bible, after Jesus' crucifixion and death, His body was wrapped in linen by Joseph of Arimathea and placed in a rock-hewn tomb (Mark 15:43-46).

By entering the world as a vulnerable human infant, Jesus identified with our humanity and demonstrated His love for us. He chose to enter the world in this way to show that He came not to conquer through power and might but through humility and sacrifice. As it says in Philippians 2:7-8, "But He emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

**Question 19: Why was Jesus born in a manger and what did the manger birth foreshadow?**

A manger is essentially a livestock feeding trough, typically made out of a large rectangular stone block with a hewn-out trough.

Jesus was born and after His birth was placed in a manger. Royalty in a trough. Luke is the only writer in the Bible to use the word manger

(phatnē)<sup>104</sup> in the New Testament and the emphasis on the manger in the story is rather significant.

Manger comes from the Old French mangier meaning “to eat”, from Latin mandere meaning “to chew”.<sup>105</sup> It refers to a trough where horses and donkeys and cattle ate. Mangers were located wherever livestock were kept, places like stables, corrals, or caves.

Joseph and Mary did their best to make the manger as comfortable as possible by padding it with straw, but it remained a feeding trough for animals. The fact that the Son of God was laid in such a humble and lowly place highlights His sacrifice and departure from the splendor of Heaven. During the time of Jesus, stables and animal pens were commonly attached to homes or built into hillsides. The manger was likely located in one of these structures and made of mud bricks or stone, with a low roof and openings for ventilation. The floor would have been covered with hay or straw, and the animals would have had their own feeding troughs. Although it may seem like an unfortunate circumstance that Jesus was born in a stable, it was part of God’s divine plan. The prophet Micah had predicted that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem centuries earlier, and God orchestrated the events that led Joseph and Mary there. Despite the lack of available rooms,

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<sup>104</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5336/niv/mgnt/0-1/>

<sup>105</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manger>

God could have provided a place for them to stay if that was His plan. Given the cold and hard nature of the stable's stone floor, the manger was a practical alternative for Mary to lay her newborn. The hay was soft and the box provided a safe and elevated space for Jesus to rest.

By being born in a stable and placed in a manger, Jesus demonstrated that He came not for the wealthy or the powerful, but for all people, regardless of their social status or background. The fact that Jesus was born in a stable and placed in a manger indicates that He is the Lamb of God (John 1:29) who would be sacrificed for the sins of the world. This is significant because in Jewish culture, lambs were often kept in stables and fed from mangers before they were sacrificed for sin offerings.

## **Chapter 5 Small Group Guide**

Title: The Birth of the Messiah

Primary Questions:

Question 16: Where was Jesus born and why would God choose this town?

Question 17: Did the inn where Mary and Joseph sought shelter during Jesus' birth belong to a relative or was it a lodging facility? Also, is there any prior mention of this inn in the Bible?

Question 18: What is the significance behind Jesus being wrapped in swaddling cloths, and how does this relate to the purpose of His birth?

Question 19: Why was Jesus born in a manger and what did the manger birth foreshadow?

Group Discussion:

1) What is the significance of Jesus being born in Bethlehem placed in a manger?

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2) Why is Micah 5:2 important in proving the real location of Jesus' birth?



4) How does the story of Benjamin's birth in Bethlehem foreshadow the birth of Jesus?

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5) Can you imagine walking around 90 miles, the same distance as Mary and Joseph did while being pregnant? What is the farthest you have traveled on foot or by animal before?

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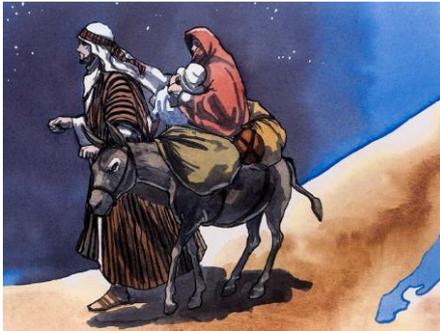
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## Chapter 6: The Murderous Plan and the Great Escape

“Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him.” Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the Magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the Magi”  
(Matthew 2:13,16).



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<sup>106</sup>Escape to Egypt. <https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/gnpi-009-flight-egypt/>

**Question 20: Who were the Magi, and how were they aware of the Messiah's arrival? Additionally, what was the reason for presenting the specific gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh?**

The Bible doesn't record the names of the Magi but tradition holds that they were called, Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthazar.<sup>107</sup>

Although we may be curious about their identities, the actual number of wise men who visited is uncertain. The commonly held belief that there were three wise men is based on the number of gifts they presented, but the truth is that there could have been five, seven, twelve, or even more who traveled to pay homage to the Lord. What we do know is that the word Magi is plural because the Greek term "magos" is used.<sup>108</sup>

The Magi, also known as the wise men, were individuals who belonged to diverse educated classes. The word "magician" comes from the Latin word "magus," which means "wise man" or "learned person." The term was originally used to refer to a kind of subclass of Persian priests, known for their knowledge of astrology and other esoteric arts. Later, the term was adopted by Greek and Roman writers to refer to people

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<sup>107</sup>Three Wise Men: What were their names?

<https://www.bibleinfo.com/en/questions/what-were-names-three-wise-men>

<sup>108</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g3097/kjv/tr/0-1/>

who claimed to have supernatural powers or the ability to perform magic. Cicero describes the Magi as being “wise and learned men among the Persians”.<sup>109</sup>

These three men could have been servants to kings, not kings themselves as Herod treats the Magi as servants, “Go and search diligently for the Child, and when you have found him, bring me word that I may also go and pay Him homage” (Matthew 2:8). And the Magi, being warned in a dream, do not report back to Herod (Matthew 2:12).

The Magi are said to have traveled to Jerusalem on their own, without an entourage or any other signs of royal status. If they were kings, it seems likely that they would have traveled with an army or a retinue of servants. It also would have been unusual for a king to travel to a foreign land in search of another king.

The tradition of depicting the Magi as kings did not emerge until several centuries after the Gospel of Matthew was written. In early Christian art, the Magi were often shown wearing Persian clothing and carrying gifts, but they were not portrayed as monarchs. It was not until the Middle Ages that they began to be depicted as kings. Later Christian tradition begin

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<sup>109</sup>Chad Ashby. Magi, Wise Men, or Kings? It's Complicated? Christianity Today. December 16, 2016.  
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2016/december/magi-wise-men-or-kings-its-complicated.html>

to refer to the three wise men as kings, this comes based on Old Testament prophecies that spoke of kings bringing gifts to the Messiah, however, this is speaking of the future reign of God's Kingdom on Earth.

1. Psalm 72:10-11: "May the kings of Tarshish and of distant shores bring tribute to Him. May the kings of Sheba and Seba present Him gifts."
2. Isaiah 60:3,6: "Nations will come to Your light, and kings to the brightness of Your dawn... All from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord."

Isaiah 60 is a vision of the glory of Zion, the restored city of Jerusalem, which is said to shine with the glory of God. Psalm 72 includes phrases such as "He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; He will crush the oppressor" (verse 4), which are seen as pointing to the Messianic reign of Christ. Other verses in the Psalm, such as "All kings will bow down to Him and all nations will serve Him" (verse 11), also support this interpretation.

The Magi were not Jews, but rather Gentiles who came to worship the King of the Jews (Matthew 2:2).

The Magi's speech before the king caused him to be disturbed. One particular phrase would have caused Herod to be outraged, "King of the Jews". In 40 BCE, Herod was granted the title

“king of the Jews” by the Roman senate.<sup>110</sup> There was only one problem: the Jews already had a king on the throne, Antigonus, who was from the old, royal Hasmonean family. In fact, the title “king of the Jews,” proved to be marred by another problem to Herod’s Jewish subjects: Herod was only “half-Jewish”; his father was an Idumean from south of Judea, who had converted to Judaism<sup>111</sup> and his mother the Arab princess, Cypros, from Nabatea<sup>112</sup>.

“Just prior to Herod’s coronation in Rome, Antigonus, backed by the Parthians, Rome’s enemy in the East, conquered Jerusalem, which sent Herod on the flight out of the country.

Deprived of his army, friends, family, and all good fortune, it seemed, Herod put all his hopes on the Romans. The Romans, for their part, were looking for a strong, resolute leader that could match the growing threat of the Parthians and reconquer Israel.”<sup>113</sup>

“This convergence of interests secured Herod, only an Idumean “half-Jew” in the eyes of many Jews, the ringing title, “king of the Jews.” His first official deed was to climb the steps to the temple of Jupiter in the Roman forum, where he sacrificed and deposited his vows of allegiance to Rome.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup>Josephus, War, 1.284.

<sup>111</sup>Josephus, The Antiquities of the Jews.14.403.

<sup>112</sup>Josephus, War 1.181

<sup>113</sup>Morten Hørning Jensen. Bible Odyssey.

<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/main-articles/herod-the-great/>

<sup>114</sup>Josephus. War. 1.285.

“Three more years and a bloody battle would pass before Herod finally conquered Jerusalem in 37 BC. There was no welcome committee. Herod’s Roman allegiance and the brutal capture of Jerusalem foreshadowed the real problem of his reign: Would he be able also to capture the hearts of the Jews?”<sup>115</sup>

The new threat to Herod’s reign and title was the birth of Jesus, reinforced by the Magi who came to worship the “King of the Jews” seeking where they might find Him from the one who held the title “king of the Jews”.

Three gifts were given, each of them unique.

- As per tradition, gold was presented to the infant King to signify His royalty.
- Frankincense, a fragrant incense used in sacrificial offerings, represented Jesus’ deity and was a foreshadowing of His ultimate sacrifice for our sins.
- Myrrh, a perfume or ointment, was given as a symbol of His future suffering for our sins.

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<sup>115</sup>Morten Hørning Jensen. Bible Odyssey.  
<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/main-articles/herod-the-great/>



**Gold**



**Frankincense**



**Myrrh**

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Gold is a highly valued precious metal that has been used for currency, jewelry, and decoration for thousands of years. Gold is a dense, soft, yellow metal that is relatively unreactive, making it resistant to corrosion and tarnishing.

Frankincense is a resin obtained from the Boswellia tree, which is native to the Arabian Peninsula and parts of Africa. The resin is extracted from the bark of the tree by making incisions and allowing it to bleed out and harden. Frankincense has been used for thousands of years in various religious and cultural ceremonies, as well as for medicinal purposes.

Frankincense is known for its distinctive fragrance, which is woody, spicy, and slightly sweet. It has been used as incense, perfume, and in aromatherapy. In ancient times, frankincense was considered a valuable commodity and was often traded along the famous Silk Road.

Myrrh is a resin obtained from the Commiphora tree, which is native to the Arabian Peninsula

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<sup>116</sup><https://www.twinkl.com/resource/gold-frankincense-and-myrrh-information-posters-t-tp-1670844330>

and parts of Africa. The resin is extracted by making incisions in the bark of the tree and allowing the sap to harden into a reddish-brown gum. Like frankincense, myrrh has been used for thousands of years in various religious and cultural ceremonies, as well as for medicinal purposes.

Myrrh has a bitter and slightly sweet taste and a fragrant aroma that is often described as earthy, balsamic, and slightly spicy. It has been used in incense, perfume, and aromatherapy. In ancient times, myrrh was considered a valuable commodity and was often used as a gift for kings and other important figures. In Mark 15:23, Jesus is offered wine mixed with myrrh before His crucifixion which was used as a painkiller but Jesus refused to take it.

The Magi, who hailed from the East, were astrologers who must have been acquainted with the Scripture that proclaimed, "A Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel" (Numbers 24:17, NKJV). Otherwise, they would not have made the connection between the Star of Bethlehem and the birth of the Messiah.

Which prophet's prophecy did the Magi follow?  
"The prophecy of Balaam son of Beor, the prophecy of one whose eye sees clearly, the prophecy of one who hears the words of God, who has knowledge from the Most High, who sees a vision from the Almighty, who falls

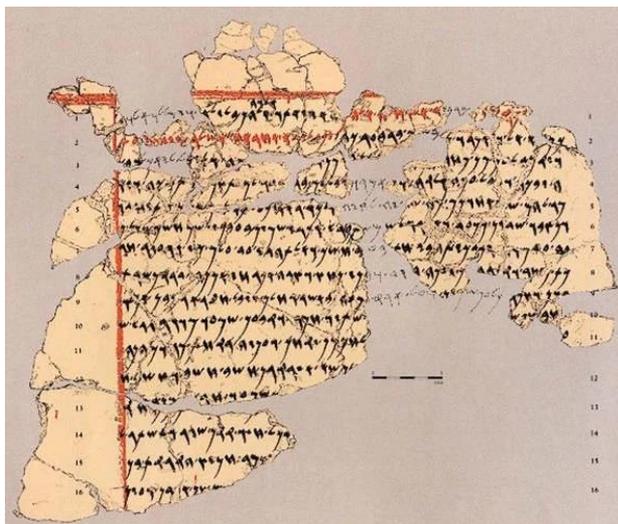
prostrate, and whose eyes are opened”  
(Numbers 24:15b-16).

Who was Balaam and why did the Magi from the East seem to have knowledge of his prophecies instead of other prophets and prophecies mentioned in the Scriptures?

Balaam was a diviner and prophet and the biblical text, of Numbers 22:5 tells us that Balaam’s hometown “Pethor”, which is by the Euphrates” has been identified with the Mesopotamian city of Pitru and lies at some distance from Moab. He was summoned by Balak, the king of Moab to curse the Israelites (Numbers 22:41). Both Persia and Babylon are located in Mesopotamia so Balaam was a prophet of the people the Magi belong to.

Archaeologists unearthed a temple in Jordan in 1967 that was not of Hebrew origin and has been estimated to date back to between 840 BC and 760 BC. The temple was located at Succoth or Tel Deir’alla, which happens to be the first Bronze Age city excavated in Jordan. Notably, the temple contains a fascinating inscription that specifically names Balaam. This discovery represents the earliest known instance of Aramaic literature worldwide and was dedicated to none other than the ‘seer of the gods, Balaam, son of Beor.’” Part of the Aramaic inscription reads: “The misfortunes of the Book of Balaam, son of Beor.” “A divine seer was he. The gods came to him at night ...”

Professor Meyer believes the pagan temple may have been a school of prophets that began in the tradition of Balaam's prophecies.<sup>117</sup>



Fragments of the recovered Balaam inscription

There is also a possibility the Magi knew of Daniel 9:25-26 regarding the appearance of the Messiah and came to the conclusion that His coming was near. However, it is noteworthy that the Magi did not have a comprehensive understanding of Scripture, as they were unaware of Micah 5:2, which indicated that the Messiah, the King of the Jews, would be born in Bethlehem. Like Abraham, they knew not at first where they were to go (Genesis 12:1-4), and

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<sup>117</sup>Sebastian Kettley. Bible Bombshell: Expert Claims 2800-Year Inscription Proves Bible Character 'Historical'. September 28, 2020. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/science/1340185/Bible-archaeology-Balaam-inscription-Jordan-proof-Bible-historical>

they sought information from King Herod in Jerusalem regarding the location of the newborn Baby (Matthew 2:2). They related the "star" to the arrival of the "King of the Jews" (Matthew 2:2) so they went to Jerusalem the capital of Judea to find out where He might be so they could go and worship Him.

### **Question 21: What was the star of Bethlehem?**

"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the East came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him. After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was" (Matthew 2:1-2,9).

What was the Star of Bethlehem?

The Star of Bethlehem is a celestial phenomenon described in the Bible as guiding the Magi, to the birthplace of Jesus in Bethlehem. The star is only mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew, and the description of the star is somewhat vague and open to interpretation.

We can be certain that the "Star" of Bethlehem was not a star, as the description of the celestial body followed by the Magi indicates that it was

capable of vast movement. Specifically, it “went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.” Although stars do technically move, their movements are not discernible to the naked eye due to their vast distance from Earth. Sensitive equipment is required to detect their movements.

Why did the Bible call it a star if it wasn’t a star?

The term “star” found in the text is a translation of the Greek word *aster*, which typically refers to a celestial body.<sup>118</sup> This word appears 24 times in the New Testament, with most instances denoting a heavenly body. However, in Revelation 12:4, it is also used to refer to angels. In biblical symbolism, “stars” often represent angels.<sup>119</sup>

The fundamental principles of Biblical interpretation stipulate that the ordinary meaning of a word should be accepted unless there is compelling evidence to suggest otherwise. This is why many Bible scholars suggest a natural explanation for the Star of Bethlehem, their theories ranging from a supernova to a comet to an alignment of planets. Something in the heavens provided a brighter-than-normal light in the sky.<sup>120</sup> The problem with this theory is that none of the

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<sup>118</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g792/kjv/tr/0-1/>

<sup>119</sup>Forerunner Commentary. John W. Ritenbaugh.

<https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Topical.show/RTD/cgg/ID/5507/Stars-as-Symbols-Angels.htm>

<sup>120</sup>What was the Star of Bethlehem? <https://www.gotquestions.org/star-of-Bethlehem.html>

natural explanations match the Biblical narrative.

Could it have been a supernova? Supernovae typically occurs in the final stages of the evolution of a massive star or when a white dwarf is triggered into explosive nuclear fusion. However, telescopes have failed to discover any evidence of a supernova remnant that aligns with the timing of the Star of Bethlehem. The only supernova visible from Earth during the period of Christ's birth occurred in the year 185 A.D. and was documented by Chinese astronomers.<sup>121</sup>

It has been suggested that the Star of Bethlehem may have been a comet. This is supported by Chinese astronomical records from the year 5 B.C., which document the sighting of a "Broom Star" that many experts believe was a comet. One possible advantage of this theory is that comets are known to traverse the sky, which aligns with the description in the Gospel that the star "moved" and guided the Magi.<sup>122</sup>

The Magi are believed to have journeyed from either Persia or Babylon, which would be either present-day Iraq (Babylon) or Iran (Persia). If they came from Babylon, they would have covered a distance of 700- 900 miles, to visit Jesus in Bethlehem. If they made the journey

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<sup>121</sup>Eric Betz. The Star of Bethlehem: Can Science Explain What It Really was? December 18, 2020. <https://astronomy.com/news/2020/12/the-star-of-bethlehem-can-science-explain-what-it-really-was>

<sup>122</sup>Ibid.

from Persia, it would have been around 1,200-1,500 miles.

The Magi were known as the priestly-political class of the Parthians who lived to the east of Palestine. It is estimated that people and camels carrying a heavy load could travel approximately 30 kilometers per day. Based on this average, the journey would have taken several months to complete. This raises the question of whether it is possible to observe a comet for such an extended period.

Halley's Comet is a famous periodic comet that is visible from Earth approximately every 76 years. When it is visible, it can be seen from Earth for several weeks to several months, depending on its position in the sky and how close it is to Earth. Typically, the comet is visible for a few weeks only, about three to six months at most. Because of this reason, many scholars assume that the Star of Bethlehem was a comet. However, the problem remains with this verse: "After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was" (Matthew 2:9).

Was it a meteor? This is what some refer to as a shooting star.

Meteors, even the tiniest ones, can be seen from several kilometers away due to their high speed and brightness. The fastest meteors travel at a speed of 71 kilometers (44 miles) per second.

The larger and faster the meteor, the brighter and longer it will glow. The smallest ones only glow for about a second, while the bigger and faster ones can remain visible for several minutes. However, this still poses a challenge regarding the distance that the Magi had to cover to reach Jesus. Even the biggest meteors last only a few minutes and they do not stop over a place in the sky.

Perhaps the Star of Bethlehem was a Great Conjunction where planets make a close approach to each other in the Earth's night sky.

"A triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn occurred in 7 B.C. At first glance, these illustrations look the same, but compare the positions of the planets with the background stars. On May 29, Jupiter passed Saturn (both moving right to left) for the first time. Jupiter passed Saturn again on September 30 with both moving to the right (west). Finally, the planets resumed eastward motion, and Jupiter passed Saturn for the third time on December 5."





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The argument against the Star of Bethlehem being a triple conjunction is that Jesus was most likely born between 6 BC and 4 BC, (some scholars argue as early as 7 BC). Also, we have to factor in that the Magi came to visit Jesus after His birth adding more time to the timeline making the triple conjunction unlikely to have occurred when the Magi went to visit Jesus. We also have the problem of how the sky's anomaly moved in Matthew 2:9 and that it "stopped over the place where the child was".

I wonder if the Star of Bethlehem was something entirely different.

The fact that the star of Bethlehem seemed to appear only to the Magi indicates that this was no ordinary star. "Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared" (Matthew 2:7).

When Jesus appeared to Saul on the Road to Damascus only Paul was able to see the Lord.

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<sup>123</sup>Ibid.

"As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from Heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," He replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone" (Acts 9:3-7).

Also, celestial bodies normally move from east to west due to the earth's rotation, yet the star of Bethlehem led the Magi from Jerusalem south to Bethlehem. Not only that, but it led them directly to the place where Joseph and Mary were staying, stopping overhead. There is no natural stellar phenomenon that can do that. Because of this evidence, I believe the "Star" of Bethlehem to either be an angel or a manifestation of the Shekinah Glory. The Shekinah, which means "dwelling of God," was the visible presence of the Lord.

Consider this: The pillar of cloud that guided the Israelites by day and the pillar of fire that guided them by night (Exodus 13:21) was the most significant manifestation of the Shekinah before this. Clearly, the Shekinah can lead individuals to particular destinations, and it was

also observed in association with the ministry of Christ (for example, Matthew 17:5; Acts 1:9).<sup>124</sup>

## **Question 22: Why did Herod want to kill Jesus and how was his plan thwarted?**

To answer the question of why King Herod wanted to kill Jesus, we need to learn more about who King Herod was as a ruler first.

Herod the Great was a Roman Jewish client king of Judea. Herod the Great, the Jewish ruler under the patronage of the Roman Empire, oversaw numerous ambitious construction projects in Judea. These included the renovation of the Second Temple in Jerusalem and the expansion of the Temple Mount towards the north, the construction of a port at Caesarea Maritima, the enclosure around the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, the fortress at Masada, and the construction of Herodium.<sup>125</sup>

Herod was despised by his people and he disregarded the Old Testament Law to curry favor with Rome. His excessive taxation, which funded extravagant projects, placed an unjust burden on the Jewish populace. Additionally, Herod the Great was notorious for his brutality; he murdered his father-in-law, ten wives, and two sons. Despite ruling over the Jews of Israel before the time of Christ, Herod was not fully Jewish. Born in Ashkelon in 73 BC to an

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<sup>124</sup>Ibid.

<sup>125</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod\\_the\\_Great](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_the_Great)

Idumean man named Antipater and an Arab sheik's daughter named Cypros, he was a shrewd operator who capitalized on political turmoil within the Roman Empire to rise to power. Herod earned the favor of Octavian during a civil war, ultimately becoming king and initiating a grandiose construction campaign.<sup>126</sup>

Why did Herod the Great try to kill Jesus?

Herod the Great attempted to kill Jesus because he was a ruthless and power-hungry ruler who would eliminate anyone he perceived as a threat to his reign including multiple family members whom he suspected of conspiring against him.<sup>127</sup> When a group of wise men (known as Magi) arrived in Jerusalem after Jesus' birth and inquired about the whereabouts of the newborn King of the Jews, Herod became troubled, and the news also unsettled the people of Jerusalem.

The people were likely distressed because they were afraid of Herod's response to the news of Jesus' birth, which was not unfounded as he would soon order the execution of all male children under the age of two in the vicinity of Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16).

If we consider the population estimate of Bethlehem to be approximately 300 people and

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<sup>126</sup>Jack Zavada. Learn Religions: Meet Herod the Great: Ruthless Ruler of the Jews. October 7, 2019. <https://www.learnreligions.com/herod-the-great-enemy-of-jesus-christ-701064>

<sup>127</sup>Billy Graham Association of Canada.

<https://www.billygraham.ca/answer/why-did-king-herod-try-to-kill-jesus-shortly-after-his-birth-after-all-what-difference-could-a-tin/>

expand it to include the surrounding area (vicinity), we can conservatively estimate that the total population would be approaching maybe one thousand people. Assuming that males under the age of two make up approximately 2% of the total population (high estimate), we can conclude that the number of children killed by King Herod's decree was likely twenty or less.<sup>128</sup> To compare with a larger sample size, the 2020 U.S. census data showed that 1.18% of the total population was aged two and younger. Given that males make up 49.1% of the population, it can be estimated that males aged two and younger make up approximately 0.59% of the total population. However, it is important to note that in the first century, the proportion of males aged two and younger may have been higher than it is today. This is because historians and scholars suggest that the population of Palestine during the first century AD was young, with a high birth rate.<sup>129</sup>

The Magi informed Herod that they had seen a star in the East and had come to pay homage to the newly-born King.

When King Herod inquired about the birthplace of the Messiah, he consulted the chief priests and teachers of the Law.

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<sup>128</sup>R.T. France's "Herod and the Children of Bethlehem," *Novum Testamentum* 21:98-120

<sup>129</sup><https://usafacts.org/data/topics/people-society/population-and-demographics/our-changing-population/>

The “chief priests” were the highest-ranking officials in the Jewish religious hierarchy and were responsible for overseeing the daily operations of the Temple and conducting religious ceremonies. They were drawn primarily from the Sadducees, a Jewish sect that rejected the following Jewish traditions and beliefs.

1. **Belief in the Resurrection:** The Sadducees rejected the belief in the resurrection of the dead, which was a central tenet of Pharisaic and later Rabbinic Judaism.
2. **Belief in angels and spirits:** The Sadducees denied the existence of angels, demons, and spirits, which were widely accepted by other Jewish sects.
3. **The Oral Law:** The Sadducees rejected the authority of the Oral Law, which was a set of interpretations and explanations of the written Torah that had been passed down through the generations.
4. **Strict observance of the Sabbath:** The Sadducees were less strict in their observance of the Sabbath than other Jewish sects, such as the Pharisees.
5. **The concept of Divine providence:** The Sadducees did not believe in the concept of Divine providence, which holds that God is actively involved in the world and controls events.

It is important to note that the Sadducees were a relatively small and elitist sect within Judaism and their beliefs and practices were not representative of the broader Jewish community.

On the other hand, the “teachers of the law” (also known as scribes) were experts in the Jewish Scriptures and were responsible for interpreting and teaching the Law to the people. They were drawn primarily from the Pharisees, a Jewish sect that placed great emphasis on the importance of following Jewish Law and traditions.

So, while the chief priests were primarily responsible for overseeing the temple and conducting religious ceremonies, the teachers of the Law were responsible for interpreting and teaching Jewish Law and traditions to the people.

Both groups of people the “chief priests” and the “teachers of the Law” agreed that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem reciting the prophecy of Micah 5:2 recorded in Matthew 2:5-6.

“Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find Him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship Him” (Matthew 2:7-8).

Herod was lying to the Magi, his real goal was to kill Jesus, because he feared that in time Jesus would take over his throne.

Herod the Great's life and death worked to fulfill two Old Testament prophecies: Jeremiah 31:15 was fulfilled when he ordered the murder of all babies two years and younger in Bethlehem, causing Joseph to flee with Mary and Jesus to Egypt. After Herod's death, Hosea 11:1 was fulfilled when they returned.

"Herod Antipas, who followed in his father's footsteps, continued this pattern of violence. He murdered John the Baptist and allowed Jesus to be crucified to eliminate any threats to his throne."<sup>130</sup>

Joseph, Mary, and Jesus escaped Herod's murderous plot with the help of a warning they received in a dream. The Magi who had visited them were also warned in a dream not to reveal Jesus' location to Herod and they returned to their country by a different route (Matthew 2:12). Despite the Magi's avoidance of Herod, he remained a threat to Jesus' safety which is why God had them remain in Egypt until after his death.

"When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he

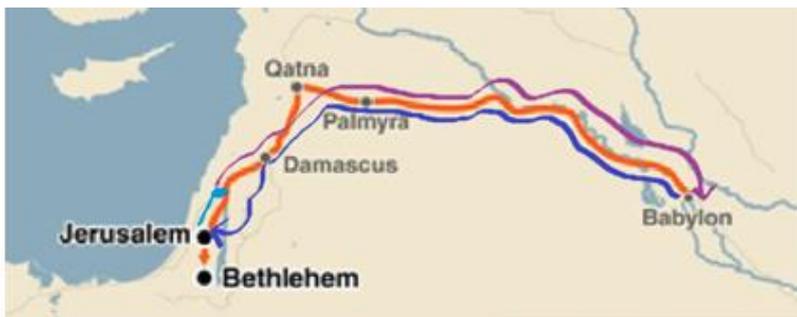
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<sup>130</sup>Jack Zavada. Learn Religions: Meet Herod the Great: Ruthless Ruler of the Jews. October 7, 2019. <https://www.learnreligions.com/herod-the-great-enemy-of-jesus-christ-701064>

said, "take the Child and His mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the Child to kill Him."

"So he got up, took the Child and His mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called My Son," (Matthew 2:13-15).

Which path did the Magi follow to arrive in Jerusalem and subsequently Bethlehem? The Magi would have likely used the Royal Road, an ancient trade route that was reconstructed by the Persian king Darius I in the 5th century BCE, to travel from Persia or Babylon. The Royal Road intersects with the Silk Road in certain areas of the central plateau of Iran. Although the Royal Road extends well north of Israel and even Damascus, Syria, it would not have been the entirety of the Magi's journey. Instead, they would have probably traveled on the King's Highway, another well-known ancient road, for most of the remainder of their trip.



Most Biblical scholars assert that the Magi followed the path Abraham took from Ur to Canaan marked by the middle line. However, DePue thinks they went straight to Jerusalem from the Bashan gateway, through modern-day Jordan marked by the bottom line.

A more complex and intriguing question regarding their voyage pertains to the path they took on their return trip home. DePue posits they returned to Babylon by way of the top line on the map, departing from Nazareth instead of Bethlehem.<sup>131</sup> It's possible that they traversed the coastal path along the Mediterranean Sea until they were beyond Herod's reach, which is probably the most likely scenario. Alternatively, they may have opted to cross the Arabian Desert.<sup>132</sup>

How old was Jesus was the Magi visited Him?

After realizing that the Magi had not returned to reveal the location of Jesus, Herod became enraged and gave orders to slaughter all male children aged two years or younger in Bethlehem and its surrounding areas. Jesus was not an infant when the Magi visited Him. According to scholarly estimates, Jesus was

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<sup>131</sup>5 Things You Didn't Know About the Christmas Story. The Bell News and Stories from Gordon College. December 18, 2020. <https://stories.gordon.edu/5-things-you-didnt-know-about-the-christmas-story/>

<sup>132</sup>Dave Armstrong. Route Taken by the Magi: Educated Guess. December 28, 2020. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/davearmstrong/2020/12/route-taken-by-the-magi-educated-guess.html>

between 13 months and two years old at the time the Magi visited Him. Herod based his decree on the information he had received from the Magi (Matthew 2:16). Therefore, Herod ordered the execution of all male children aged two years or younger in Bethlehem's vicinity to ensure that he eliminated any potential competition for his throne.<sup>133</sup>

Furthermore, it is evident that Jesus was not a newborn as Herod instructed the Magi to "Go and search carefully for the **Child**. As soon as you find Him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship Him" (Matthew 2:7-8).

The Greek word "paidion" was used to describe Jesus as a "young child"<sup>134</sup> when the Magi found Him. This term was used seven more times when referring to Jesus, as the Magi came to see Him and when Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fled to Egypt.

"After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the **Child** was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the **Child** with His mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him. "Get up," he said, "take the **Child** and His

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<sup>133</sup>Daniel Isaiah Joseph. How Old Was Jesus When the Wise Men Came? October 4, 2022. <https://christianityfaq.com/jesus-age-when-the-wise-men-came/>

<sup>134</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g3813/niv/mgmt/0-1/>

mother and escape to Egypt. So he got up, took the **Child** and His mother during the night and left for Egypt. "Get up, take the **Child** and His mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the **Child's** life are dead. So he got up, took the **Child** and His mother and went to the land of Israel (Matthew 2:9-11a, 13b,14, 20b, 21).

In the Gospel of Luke, upon the shepherds' arrival to see the newborn Jesus, He is referred to as "the Baby".

"You will find a Baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the Baby, who was lying in the manger" (Luke 2:12,16).

The term "brephos", which is translated as newborn baby<sup>135</sup> is used in Luke 2:12,16 to refer to Jesus as a newborn Baby. This is different from the term used to describe Jesus as a young Child "paidion" when the Magi visited Him.

In the Gospel of Matthew, it is stated that the wise men came "into the house" to see Jesus. This implies that by the time the wise men arrived, Jesus' family had secured a home. Given the time required for the wise men to observe the star, research its significance, travel a long distance, locate Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, and for Herod to issue his decree to kill all male children two years old and younger, it is

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<sup>135</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1025/niv/mgnt/0-1/>

reasonable to deduce that Jesus was around two years old when the wise men arrived.<sup>136</sup>



A customary nativity scene is comprised of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, along with an angel, shepherds, the three wise men, and farm animals. However, it's important to mention that the actual scene at the manger did not have this exact cast of characters. As previously mentioned, the wise men arrived up to two years later and were not present at the manger. Additionally, it's interesting to observe that there is no mention of animals being present in the stable where Jesus was born.

The donkey is the most frequently depicted animal in nativity scenes, inspired by the popular image of Mary riding on its back while being led by her husband Joseph. However, the Bible does not explicitly mention the mode of transportation used by the couple. Scholars suggest that Mary may have ridden a donkey, considering their limited financial resources, but

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<sup>136</sup>Adrian Rogers. Love Worth Finding. How Old was Jesus when the Wise Men Came? <https://www.lwf.org/questions-and-answers/how-old-was-jesus-when-the-wise-men-came>

it is also probable that they traveled in a caravan, which was a common and safer option compared to traveling alone. While the depiction of Jesus being born amidst nature and other creatures promotes a message of harmony among all living beings, it is also plausible that no animals were present during the event.<sup>137</sup>

God continued to protect and guide Joseph, Mary, and Jesus even after King Herod's death.

"After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the Child and His mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the Child's life are dead."

"So he got up, took the Child and His mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that He would be called a Nazarene" (Matthew 2:19-23).

What was the cause of Herod's death? He met a wretched end. According to medical experts, more than 2,000 years after Herod the Great's

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<sup>137</sup>Jonathan Merritt. Your Christmas Nativity Scene is a Lie. The Atlantic. December 13, 2015.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/12/christmas-nativity-scene-flaws/419634/>

death at the age of 69, it has been determined that he died from chronic kidney disease, which was further complicated by a highly uncomfortable case of gangrene infested with maggots in his genitals.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup>Amanda Onion. Researchers Diagnose Herod the Great. January 25, 2002. <https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/story?id=98107&page=1>



2) How did the Magi know that the Messiah was coming? Which prophet would they have known his prophecies and why might that be?

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3) What lessons can we learn from the story of the Magi and how can we apply it to our own lives?

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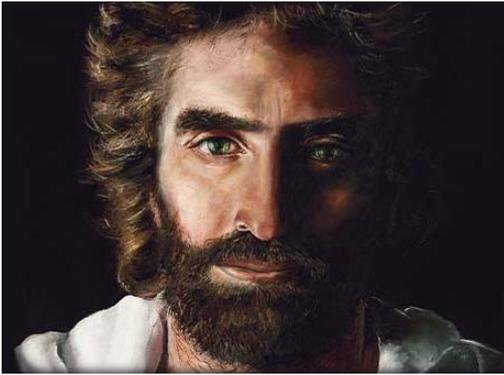
Closing Thoughts: The story of Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem and their subsequent escape from Herod's wrath is a powerful reminder of God's protection and faithfulness to His promises. Despite facing numerous obstacles and challenges along the way, God's hand was always at work, guiding and protecting them.

Moreover, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies in the birth and life of Jesus is a testament to the divine plan and purpose that God had for His people. From the prophecy of the virgin birth to the predictions of Jesus' suffering and death, these prophecies demonstrate God's omniscience and His deep love for humanity.

As we reflect on this story, we are reminded of God's ability to guide and protect us. We can take comfort in the knowledge that just as God protected Mary and Joseph, He is with us in our own journeys, providing the strength and guidance we need to fulfill His plan for our lives.

## Chapter 7: The Impact of Jesus

“And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written”  
(John 21:25).



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<sup>139</sup>Akiane Kramarik. Image of Jesus in “Heaven is for Real” December 9, 2015.

**Question 23: Who named Jesus and what does His name mean and reveal?**

**Mary's visit from an angel:**

"But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a Son, and you are to call Him Jesus" (Luke 1:30-31).

**Joseph's visit from an angel:**

"But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a Son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21).

Have you ever wondered why Jesus was not named Immanuel?

"Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14).

Matthew 1:22-23 provides clarity on why Jesus was not given the name Immanuel.

"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will

conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”) [Matthew 1:22-23].

The prediction by Isaiah was in reference to who the Messiah would be “God with us”, not necessarily what He would be named. The prophecy told us that God would come to be with humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is both fully God and fully human, and through His life, death, and Resurrection, He made a way for humans to be reconciled with God.

Immanuel was only one of many names used about Jesus. Isaiah 9:6 also taught, “His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Each of these names reveals important information regarding the nature and work of the Messiah. However, Jesus was not called these names during His early life. Jesus’ birth name, in Hebrew, is יְשׁוּעָה (Yēshūā), a compound word that means “Yahweh Saves.” Saves is defined as saves, delivers, gives victory, and helps.”<sup>140</sup> Yēshūā is a form of Joshua who was one of Israel’s most celebrated heroes. In Greek, His name is Ἰησοῦς (Iesous), and in Aramaic, it is (Yeshu).

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<sup>140</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h3444/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

That He bears this name is no coincidence, but the plan of God. God's plan of salvation was Jesus, revealed in His name- and foretold immediately after sin entered the world in Genesis 3:15.

This is why the angel said to Joseph, "And you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21b).

"On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the Child, He was named Jesus, the name the angel had given Him before he was conceived" (Luke 2:21).

If the angel had already told Mary and Joseph the name of the Messiah, why did they wait until the eighth day to name Jesus?

The Jewish culture places great significance on a person's name, as it is considered to be their identity. Therefore, the naming and circumcision ceremony known as the brit milah held for Jesus was a momentous occasion. Jesus had to be circumcised to become an "official Jew." In terms of Jewish Law, He was not officially declared Jewish until this practice of removing the foreskin was accomplished. In Leviticus 12:3, God commanded that all male infants should be circumcised on the eighth day after birth as a sign of their belonging to the Jewish people. Joseph and Mary saw to it that on the eighth day, in keeping with the covenant of

circumcision that God made with Abraham in Genesis 17, the Messiah was circumcised, and “His name was called Jesus.”

John the Baptist was also circumcised and named on the eighth day too.

“On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John” (Luke 1:59-60).

The family members assumed that the child would be named after his father, Zechariah.

“They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name” (Luke 1:61).

Naming children after their Jewish fathers has been a common practice in Jewish culture for centuries. In traditional Jewish Law and custom, it is customary to name a child after a deceased relative, usually a parent or grandparent. This is why the family questioned the child’s name of John since he was not being named after a relative.

Elizabeth declared that his name would be John, as instructed by the angel Gabriel during her husband’s visitation to the temple (Luke 1:13).

Zechariah, who had been rendered mute by the angel due to his disbelief, confirmed Elizabeth’s statement by writing on a tablet that the child’s name was to be John. Immediately after this,

his ability to speak returned, and he praised God.

The naming of the child caused a stir among the neighbors, who recognized that something special was happening. They wondered what kind of child John would grow up to be, and some believed that God's hand was upon him (Luke 1:59-66).

"On the eighth day," (Luke 2:21a). The number eight is important because it symbolizes a new creation, new life. In Hebrew numerology, each letter of the Hebrew alphabet also has a numerical value. The numerical value of the Hebrew letter "n" (pronounced "chet") is eight, and this letter is associated with the concept of "chai" (חַי), which means "life."

In Jewish tradition, the number eight is also associated with new beginnings because in the Bible, God rested on the seventh day after creating the world, and on the eighth day, He began a new week. The circumcision of a male child, marks the beginning of his life in the Jewish community done on the eighth day.

Therefore, the number eight in Hebrew culture is associated with new beginnings, fresh starts, and the continuation of life.

The Hebrew word for eight "שְׁמוֹנֶה" (sh'moneh) means to make fat. Becoming "fat" is having more than enough, full to overflowing, and

moving from natural to supernatural.<sup>141</sup> Eight is also symbolic of an entity that is one step above the natural order, higher than nature and its limitations.<sup>142</sup> Eight is considered to be the number of Jesus. In Greek, His name adds up to 888.<sup>143</sup>

The Tabernacle the Israelites used during their journey in the wilderness was erected on the eighth day of its consecration (Leviticus 8:33). This was a sign that the presence of God had come to dwell among His people. The Tabernacle served as a precursor to the Temple, which provided a more lasting abode for God's presence. However, with the birth of Jesus, the ultimate realization came to fruition - that God would permanently reside with His people. Upon the inception of the New Covenant, believers in Christ became the temple through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The apostle Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 3:16 that "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" This means that our bodies are now the dwelling place of God's presence, and we have been made holy and set apart for His purposes. Christ lives in us (Galatians 2:20).

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<sup>141</sup>K.Gallagher. Hebrew Numbers 1-10. June 15, 2015.

<https://graceintorah.net/2015/06/15/hebrew-numbers-1-10/>

<sup>142</sup>Eliezer Posner. What is the Spiritual Significance of the Number Eight? Chabad.org

[https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/606168/jewish/Whats-the-Significance-of-the-Number-Eight.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/606168/jewish/Whats-the-Significance-of-the-Number-Eight.htm)

<sup>143</sup>Meaning of Numbers in the Bible; The Number 8.

<https://www.biblestudy.org/bibleref/meaning-of-numbers-in-bible/8.html>

The number 8 for believers symbolizes circumcision of the heart through Christ and the receiving of the Holy Spirit as mentioned in Romans 2:28-29 and Colossians 2:11-13. Through Christ, those who are in Him become a new creation, with godly character being created by the power of God's Spirit, as referenced in 2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 2:10, and 4:23-24.

Jesus was raised from the dead on the first day of the week, which was the eighth day of the Jewish calendar. After His Resurrection from the dead, Jesus appeared eight times. The first person to see Him was Mary Magdalene, as recorded in Mark 16:9-11. Jesus then showed Himself to two disciples who were traveling to Emmaus (Luke 24), followed by an appearance to all the disciples except Thomas (John 20:19-24). A week later, he appeared to all of them, including Thomas (John 20:26-29). According to the apostle Paul, Christ was also seen by 500 believers at one time (1 Corinthians 15:4-7). Jesus also met with His disciples at the appointed place in Galilee (Matthew 28:16-17) and on the shores of Galilee (John 21:1-24). His final meeting took place on the Mount of Olives, where He gave His followers instructions before ascending to Heaven (Acts 1). So, the number eight has the significance of representing being born again and resurrected from spiritual death into an eternal new life in Christ.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup>Ibid.

## **Question 24: Who does God's favor rest upon and what does that mean for those who have it?**

The story of the immaculate conception and birth of Christ contains what appear to be three mentions of God's favor. However, upon closer examination, the word "favor" is only used twice when the angel is speaking directly to Mary.

"The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28).

"But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:30).

The other apparent reference comes again from the great heavenly hosts who appeared with the angels and they said, "Glory to God in the highest Heaven, and on Earth peace to those on whom His favor rests" (Luke 2:14).

Who are the heavenly hosts? "The word host refers to a great number of individuals or an army. Modified by the word "heavenly", hosts now are taken to mean a great number of angelic beings forming a celestial army under God's command."<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup>What are the Heavenly Hosts? <https://www.gotquestions.org/heavenly-hosts.html>

Highly “favored” from Luke 1:28 is “charitoō” to honor with blessings.<sup>146</sup>

Found “favor” from Luke 1:30 is “charis” which is grace.<sup>147</sup>

“Favor rests” from Luke 2:14 is “eudokia” which means whom He is pleased or has delight. This is closely related to favor but in the nine times it is used in the New Testament in the King James Version it is never translated as “favor” in the nine instances where it appears. Instead, it is rendered as “good pleasure” four times, “good will” two times, “seem good with” twice, and “desire” once.<sup>148</sup>

Luke 2:14 reveals to us the blessings, grace, and delight we have from God because we are in Christ. What we discover from Mary’s story is that favor with God comes by grace and what do we know about grace?

“The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. Out of His fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:14,16-17).

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<sup>146</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5487/kjv/tr/0-1/>

<sup>147</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5485/kjv/tr/0-1/>

<sup>148</sup><https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2107/niv/mgnt/0-1/>

When we go back to the announcement that Mary was highly favored by God the reason is clear, "The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28b). "You will conceive and give birth to a Son, and you are to call Him Jesus" (Luke 1:31).

Things were changing. Mary who lived under the Law doesn't understand how or why she could be favored by God. She doesn't understand what we know today.

"Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be" (Luke 1:29).

Mary, you are highly favored because you are carrying the Messiah. As Mary discovered and we're still learning, we too in Christ are highly favored. You cannot have the Lord and be anything other than highly favored. God's favor rests with those who have received Christ. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, God's favor rests on your life. "Nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39). When you know this and believe this your life will be filled with great hope and anticipation for what God might do in your life because Jesus is a magnet to the favor of God.

It is so hard to believe that God's favor rests upon our lives in Christ when troubling things happen to us. But it does. God is delighted in those who have received His Son. We have

peace with God forever. "And on Earth peace among men with whom He is pleased" (Luke 2:14b NASB).

Peace on Earth was the Baby Jesus Himself on Earth (Micah 5:5). That is why it says- "to those on whom His favor rests". The delight of God is for those who are in Jesus forever (Luke 2:14). Micah 5:5 prophecies: this One (the Messiah) will be our peace.

God delights in you and His benevolence is towards you. This is why Paul could say the following: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28). Paul would also write a few verses later, "He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things" (Romans 8:32)?

Could it be that God's delight is in us always, that we have His favor, and that we have been given the peace of Jesus? That would be good news!

Jesus told His disciples, "I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Jesus also said, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the

world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27).

What does the favor of God look like? It looks exactly like Jesus. God’s favor and Jesus the Savior are synonymous.

**Question 25: What sacrifice did Jesus make in taking on human flesh and dwelling among us and what does that tell us about His love for us?**

Jesus left the comforts of Heaven to be with us. Paul wrote to the Philippians in Philippians 2:5-8, “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. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!”

Oh, the love of Jesus who came to Earth to save us. He left Heaven to come and die in our place. So, Paul will say, “Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in Heaven and on Earth and under the Earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-10).

Jesus experienced all the joys and sorrows of human life, including hunger, thirst, pain, and death.

Jesus' sacrifice showed us the depth of God's love for humanity, as He sent His only Son to take on our human condition and suffer in our place. It teaches us that God's love for us is sacrificial and unconditional and that He desires a relationship with us that can only be obtained through faith in Jesus Christ.

What does Scripture teach about the life that Jesus entered into?

#### **Jesus' Humble Birth**

"She wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). Jesus had every right to come as a bold and powerful king arriving in pomp with an entire heavenly entourage of angels. It's remarkable that Jesus, who had the authority to come as a grand and mighty king with a celestial retinue of angels, deliberately chose to be born in humble circumstances among ordinary people, in a small village. He wasn't born into a life of riches and status. Instead, He was born in obscurity, where even the wicked king of the land would stop at nothing to kill Him as a Baby.

Fully God and fully human, Jesus made the conscious decision to embrace the limitations and vulnerabilities of human existence, which included suffering, rejection, and eventually, death on the cross. This selfless act

demonstrated Jesus' profound love and empathy for humanity, while also providing a means for people to be reconciled with God. By assuming human form, Jesus experienced the highs and lows of human life, gaining an intimate understanding of the pain and suffering of others. His willingness to take on these vulnerabilities and ultimately sacrifice Himself for the sake of humanity is considered the ultimate expression of sacrificial love.

### ☐ **His Sacrifice**

Although He had every right to rule as a king, Jesus chose to come to Earth as a meek and humble sacrificial lamb, offering Himself to be killed to pay the penalty for the sins and transgressions of humanity, even though He was entirely blameless (John 1:29). This selfless act of love and sacrifice is truly remarkable and demonstrates the depth of Jesus' compassion for us. He willingly took on the weight of our sins and suffered the consequences of our wrongdoing, despite having committed no wrongs Himself. What an extraordinary display of humility, selflessness, and love!

### ☐ **Humble Circumstances**

- During His early Childhood, Jesus lived as a refugee in hiding in a foreign land ruled by pagans (Egypt).
- He spent his youth in an area characterized by poverty and a bad reputation (Nazareth).

Nathanael doubted whether anything good could come from there (John 1:46).

- As a young man, Jesus worked as a lowly carpenter, toiling long hours and experiencing physical pain and discomfort while refraining from using His miraculous powers to make the work easier (Mark 6:3).
- He did not have any particularly exceptional physical appearance or possessions (Isaiah 53:2), choosing instead to live as a humble Jew with no personal transportation, home, or known Earthly belongings.
- During His ministry years, Jesus was virtually destitute. Jesus demonstrated that we do not live by bread alone when He was tempted by Satan in the wilderness right after His baptism and just before His public ministry began. In Matthew 4:1-11, Satan tempted Jesus by telling Him to turn stones into bread to satisfy His hunger and to prove His power as the Son of God. Jesus replied, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every Word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

By this response, Jesus was emphasizing that our physical needs are not the only things that sustain us. We also require spiritual nourishment and guidance from God's Word to truly live and thrive. Jesus was illustrating that our ultimate sustenance will be found in Him.

- Despite being the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, Jesus willingly endured disrespect,

false accusations, and rejection from those around Him. He was even physically attacked and plotted against, ultimately being executed as a criminal.

- Jesus also endured mental and physical agony, being tempted by Satan and experiencing the pain and humiliation of torturous execution.
- He was buried in a simple, borrowed tomb rather than receiving any grand monument or burial.

The National Christian Foundation said:

No greater gift has ever been given, no example of generosity so selfless, no act in human history so important: Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Way back in Genesis, God proved Himself generous, creating a world of abundance, then choosing Abraham to become the father of the many nations through whom He would show His blessings to the whole Earth. When Abraham's children had become an entire nation, God rescued them from captivity in Egypt. He provided for their daily needs and gave them a Law to live by and a rich and bountiful land in which to live. All of these are the hallmarks of a good king. God was a better king than any nation had ever had, and He made the Israelites His people. But, throughout the Old Testament, with few exceptions, His people rejected Him and preferred a king

they could see. Mankind has continued the pattern Israel set through centuries: We reject the eternal, invisible, immortal, only wise King and desire to rule ourselves. But He loves us, despite all this. And He knows our needs better than we do. So, instead of abandoning us or retaliating against us, He offers us a gift, the best gift that has ever been given: His Son, crucified and raised to life again. And He promises He will reign over us in an eternal Kingdom that is far better than any of us could ever ask for or imagine.<sup>149</sup>

Though we did not honor God as we should, in His unbounded generosity, He gave the very best and most valuable thing He had.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Jesus let go of the perfection of His heavenly community. He emptied Himself and entered our sin-marred world when we didn’t even know Him, while we were still sinning and we set ourselves up as enemies of God (Romans 5:8)!

In John 3:16, it is emphasized that Jesus made a way so we “should not perish”. Sin leads us to death, perishing, and separation from a holy,

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<sup>149</sup>Jill Foley Turner. National Christian Foundation. Why Jesus is God’s Greatest Gift. April 9, 2020. <https://www.ncfgiving.com/stories/the-gift-of-our-generous-god-and-king/>

perfect God, but we have been given a great gift. God gave His Son so that whoever believes in Him would receive eternal life. The first chapter of the book of John reveals that Jesus existed with God from the beginning and was God from the beginning (John 1:1). Through Jesus, everything was created, and He holds the keys to life and light. Jesus came to Earth to bring that light to us (John 1:9).

The gift of Jesus is the epitome of a perfect gift that we all need because He meets all the criteria. Firstly, Jesus is the reflection of God the Father, who gave Him. Secondly, God's decision to give His Son displays His profound knowledge of our needs. Lastly, the gift of Jesus possesses a nature and quality that will remain invaluable as time goes on. Jesus' worth is infinite!

In Colossians 1:15, it is stated that "The Son reflects God's own glory, and everything about Him represents God exactly." Jesus is the image of the invisible God and the firstborn over all creation. Moreover, Jesus Himself claimed that whoever saw Him had seen the Father (John 14:9).

The Father's words were spoken through Jesus' lips, His mercy and compassion were evident in Jesus' actions, and His abundant provision was showcased through Jesus' generosity. Therefore, through Jesus, we witness the Father's great power and love. Jesus is the ultimate and ideal gift, who perfectly reflects the One Who gave Him.

Jesus became our substitute. We had a debt we could never pay, but Jesus paid a debt He didn't owe. Because of Jesus, you and I can experience freedom and an abundant life.

If our greatest need was information, technology, money, or pleasure, God would have sent us an educator, a scientist, an economist, or an entertainer. However, our most significant need was redemption, and God sent a Redeemer! God knew what we needed, and He sent the perfect Gift.<sup>150</sup>

We should receive Jesus as the gift He is to us every day of our lives and share God's love with others, which is the greatest gift we can give. Every day, we can treasure the celebration of God's presence with us. This is why Jesus' parting words were a reminder that God will always be with us. "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20b).<sup>151</sup>

As I bring this book to a close, I am struck by the overwhelming truth that God is with us forever. From the very beginning of our creation in our mother's womb to the present day and beyond, God has been guiding us, loving us, sustaining and protecting us through every moment of our lives.

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<sup>150</sup>Max Lucado. Grace for the Moment Volume 1. God Sent a Savior.  
<https://maxlucado.com/listen/god-sent-a-savior-3/>

<sup>151</sup>Kenneth Hagin. Jesus is the Perfect Gift.  
[https://www.rhema.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1020:jesus-is-the-perfect-gift&catid=52&Itemid=140](https://www.rhema.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1020:jesus-is-the-perfect-gift&catid=52&Itemid=140)

May this book serve as a reminder that no matter what challenges we face, no matter how many mistakes we might make, in Christ, God is always with us. We can trust in the finished work of Jesus on the cross for the total forgiveness of sins and the abundant life He purchased for us to have. May we trust in His infinite wisdom and love, and live our lives in a way that honors and glorifies Him. We do this by living in a state of grace through faith in Jesus Christ. As we keep our minds fixed on Jesus, we will experience the peace and joy that comes from knowing Him and receiving His love for us.

## Chapter 7 Small Group Guide

Title: The Impact of Jesus

Primary Questions:

Question 23: Who named Jesus and what does His name mean and reveal?

Question 24: Who does God's favor rest upon and what does that mean for those who have it?

Question 25: What sacrifice did Jesus make in taking on human flesh and dwelling among us and what does that tell us about His love for us?

Group Discussion:

1) Why was Jesus not named Immanuel despite the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14?

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2) What does the name Jesus mean in Hebrew and what does it tell us about Jesus' reason for leaving Heaven to be with us?

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3) What does the prophecy in Micah 5:5 say about our peace?

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4) What sacrifice did Jesus make by taking on human likeness?

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5) Why did God have Jesus to be born in a manger rather than in a palace? What did this tell us about this "good news"?

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6) How did Jesus' sacrificial death pay for the sins of humanity?

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Closing Thoughts: God's gift of Jesus to humanity is an incredible demonstration of His love and grace. Through Jesus, God showed us the depth of His love and His desire to have a relationship with us. Jesus came to Earth, lived among us, and ultimately sacrificed His life on the cross so that we could be forgiven and reconciled to God.

Jesus took on the sins of the world, bearing the weight of our guilt and shame. Through His death and Resurrection, Jesus could offer to us the opportunity to have a new life in Him, freedom from the burden of sin and death.

By putting our faith in Jesus, we can have a hope that goes beyond this life, with the assurance of eternal life with God. Let us honor and glorify God every day by celebrating the precious gift of Jesus to us.