

The Story Behind the Story

Between the Testaments - International Timeline:

- Exile to Babylonia (587 BC)
- Babylonia falls to Persia – Cyrus II the Great (539 BC)
- Repatriation of Exiles begins & decree to restore the Temple
- Alexander the Great conquers Palestine (332)
- Alexander’s death and division of Empire (323BC)

Daniel 8: *“In the third year of the reign of Belshazzar the king a vision appeared to me, Daniel, subsequent to the one which appeared to me previously. And I looked in the vision, and it came about while I was looking, that I was in the citadel of Susa, which is in the province of Elam; and I looked in the vision, and I myself was beside the Ulai Canal. Then I lifted my gaze and looked, and behold, a ram which had two horns was standing in front of the canal. Now the two horns were long, but one was longer than the other, with the longer one coming up last. I saw the ram butting westward, northward, and southward, and no other beasts could stand before him, nor was there anyone to rescue from his power; but he did as he pleased and magnified himself... While I was observing, behold, a male goat was coming from the west over the surface of the whole earth without touching the ground; and the goat had a conspicuous horn between his eyes. And he came up to the ram that had the two horns, which I had seen standing in front of the canal, and rushed at him in his mighty wrath. And I saw him come beside the ram, and he was enraged at him; and he struck the ram and shattered his two horns, and the ram had no strength to withstand him. So he hurled him to the ground and trampled on him, and there was none to rescue the ram from his power. Then the male goat magnified himself exceedingly. But as soon as he was mighty, the large horn was broken; and in its place there came up four conspicuous horns toward the four winds of heaven.... [The angel Gabriel interprets: “The ram which you saw with the two horns represents the kings of Media and Persia... “And the shaggy goat represents the kingdom of Greece, and the large horn that is between his eyes is the first king. “**And the broken horn and the four horns that arose in its place represent four kingdoms which will arise from his nation, although not with his power.**”*

“Now **Alexander**, when he had taken Gaza, made **haste to go up to Jerusalem**; (326) and **Jaddua the high priest**, when he heard that, was in an agony, and under terror, as not knowing how he should meet the Macedonians, since the king was displeased at his foregoing disobedience. He therefore ordained that the people should make supplications, and should join with him in offering sacrifices to God, whom he besought to protect that nation, and to deliver them from the perils that were coming upon them; (327) whereupon **God warned him** in a dream, which came upon him after he had offered sacrifice, that he **should take courage, and adorn the city, and open the gates; that the rest appear in white garments, but that he and the priests should meet the king in the habits proper to their order**, without the dread of any ill consequences, which the providence of God would prevent. (328) Upon which, when he rose from his sleep, he greatly rejoiced; and declared to all the warning he had received from God according to which dream he acted entirely, and so waited for the coming of the king. (329) **And when he understood that he was not far from the city, he went out in procession, with the priests and the multitude of the citizens.** The procession was venerable, and the manner of it different from that of other nations. It reached to a place called Sapha... (331) **for Alexander, when he saw the multitude at a distance, in white garments, while the priests stood clothed with fine linen, and the high priest in purple and scarlet clothing, with his mitre on his head having the golden plate on which the name of God was engraved, he approached by himself, and adored that name, and first saluted the high priest.** (332) The Jews also did all together, with one voice, salute Alexander, and encompass him about: whereupon the kings of Syria and the rest were **surprised at what Alexander had done,**

and supposed him disordered in his mind. (333) However, **Parmenio alone went up to him, and asked him how it came to pass, that when all others adored him, he should adore the high priest of the Jews? To whom he replied, “I did not adore him, but that God who hath honored him with that high priesthood;** (334) **for I saw this very person in a dream, in this very habit, when I was at Dios, in Macedonia,** who, when I was considering with myself how I might obtain the dominion of Asia, exhorted me to make no delay, but boldly to pass over the sea thither, for that he would conduct my army, and would give me the dominion over the Persians; (335) whence it is, that having seen no other in that habit, and now seeing this person in it, and remembering that vision and the exhortation which I had in my dream, I believe that I bring this army under the divine conduct, and shall therewith conquer Darius, and destroy the power of the Persians, and that all things will succeed according to what is in my own mind.” (336) And when he had said this to Parmenio, and had given the high priest his right hand, **the priests ran along by him, and he came into the city; and when he went up into the temple, he offered sacrifice to God, according to the high priest’s direction, and magnificently treated both the high priest and the priests.** (337) **And when the book of Daniel was showed him, wherein Daniel declared that one of the Greeks should destroy the empire of the Persians, he supposed that himself was the person intended;** and as he was then glad, he dismissed the multitude for the present, but the next day he called them to him, and bade them ask what favors they pleased of him: (338) whereupon the high priest desired that they might enjoy the laws of their forefathers, and might pay no tribute on the seventh year. He granted all they desired: and when they entreated him that he would permit the Jews in Babylon and Media to enjoy their own laws also, he willingly promised to do hereafter what they desired: (339) and when he said to the multitude, that if any of them would enlist themselves in his army on this condition, that they should continue under the law of their forefathers, and live according to them, he was willing to take them with him, many were ready to accompany him in his wars.” [Josephus, *Ant* 11.325-339].

- Palestine under Ptolemaic (Egypt) control beginning 301 BC.
- Palestine under Seleucid Control (Babylon) beginning 198 BC.
- Palestine changes hands five times between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid Empires!
- Antiochus IV Epiphanies starts the persecution 167/166 BC.

“Out of one of them came another horn, a little one, which grew exceedingly great toward the south, toward the east, and toward the beautiful land. 10 It grew as high as the host of heaven. It threw down to the earth some of the host and some of the stars, and trampled on them. 11 Even against the prince of the host it acted arrogantly; it took the regular burnt offering away from him and overthrew the place of his sanctuary. (Da 8:9

“Syria, one of the four divisions into which Alexander the Great’s empire fragmented, was governed by Seleucus Nicator, head of the Seleucid dynasty from which Antiochus IV emerged in 175 bc. He took the title Theos Antiochus Epiphanes (Antiochus, the Illustrious God). Others referred to him as Epimanes (‘the madman’). In his expansionist policy he overran Palestine (the Beautiful Land; 9) and sacked Jerusalem amid terrible bloodshed. He abolished the daily morning and evening sacrificial offerings (11; cf. Ex. 29:38–43) and committed the blasphemy of sacrificing a pig on the altar of burnt offering, later placing a statue of Zeus in the temple and making human sacrifices on the altar. He forbade circumcision and profaned the Sabbath (cf. vs 11–12). [*New Bible Commentary*].

- Maccabean Revolt against Seleucid Government (168-164 BC)
- Judean Independence under the Maccabees (152 BC).
- Sects develop: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes
- Sectarian writings: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls

- Roman conquest of Palestine (63 BC)
- Rise of Herodian dynasty via Antipater (54-43BC)
- Parthian invasion and Hasmonean resurgence (40BC)
- Herod the Great (son of Antipater) re-conquers Palestine w/Roman help (37BC)
- Jesus' birth: 6-4 BC

31bc Augustus (Octavian) 14 ad		Tiberius 37 ad	
37BC Herod the Great 4BC	Archelaus (Judea) 6AD	(4 Roman Govrs)	26AD Pilate (Judea) 36AD
Herod Antipas (Galilee) 39AD			

Messianic Expectations

Current expectations about the messiah (from prophecies of Daniel and others) placed the coming of the messiah in this period (although they were said to refer to the Roman Emperor Vespasian, as opposed to a Jewish messianic figure!!!!). The ancient world was well acquainted with the expectations of the Jewish people of the day, and this shows up in several ancient historians:

- "The majority firmly believed that their ancient priestly writings contained the prophecy that **this was the very time when the East should grow strong and that men starting from Judaea should possess the world.** This mysterious prophecy had in reality pointed to Vespasian and Titus, but the common people, as is the way of human ambition, interpreted these great destinies in their own favour, and could not be turned to the truth even by adversity"; trans. C. H. Moore, *Tacitus III* (LCL 249; London: Heinemann; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1931) 199. [Tacitus: 55-120AD]
- "There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, **that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judaea to rule the world. This prediction, referring to the emperor of Rome, as afterwards appeared from the event, the people of Judaea took to themselves; accordingly they revolted . . .**"; trans. J. C. Rolfe, *Suetonius 11* (LCL 38; London: Heinemann; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1914) 289. [Suetonius: 69-130AD]
- "Now portents and dreams had come to Vespasian pointing to the sovereignty long beforehand ... and Nero himself in his dreams once thought that he had brought the car of Jupiter to Vespasian's house. These portents needed interpretation; but not so the saying of **a Jew named Josephus**; he, having earlier been captured by Vespasian and imprisoned, laughed and said: 'You may imprison me now, but a year from now, when you have become emperor, you will release me ...'; trans. E. Cary, *Dio's Roman History VIII* (LCL 176; London: Heinemann; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1925) 259-6 1. Cf. Josephus, *J. W.* 3.8.9 §399-408. [This was said to be a prophecy by Josephus, in correspondence with public Jewish expectation.] [Dio Cassius: 155-235AD]

Josephus' passage is here:

- *Jewish War* 6.312-13: "What more than all else incited them to the war was an ambiguous oracle, likewise found in their sacred scriptures, to the effect that at that time one from their country would become ruler of the world. This they understood to mean someone of their own race, and many of their wise men went astray in their interpretation of it. The oracle, however, in reality signified the sovereignty of Vespasian, who was proclaimed Emperor on Jewish soil." [Josephus: 37-100AD]

And the ancient rabbinic writings of the second through fourth centuries AD indicated that they KNEW that **the expected time for the Messiah had come and gone...**

- "Rav said: **All times set for redemption have passed**, and the matter now depends only on repentance and good deeds" (All time calculations had been fulfilled). *B. San* 97b
- "R. Samuel bar Nahmani said in the name of R. Jonathan: Blasted be the bones of those who presume to calculate the time of redemption. For they are apt to say, '**Since redemption has not come at the time expected**, it will never come.' Rather, one must wait for it...what then delays its coming? The measure of justice delays it..." *B. San* 97b

The Genealogies

- Both Matthew and Luke have genealogies: Matthew goes in Hebrew fashion, from ancestor forward ("*A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob...*"), while Luke goes in Greco-Roman fashion, from child backward ("*He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli, the son of Matthat...*")
- At least partial genealogical records of important (especially priestly) families were kept in the temple. After the temple was destroyed in 70, anyone could have claimed to be of Davidic descent, but the claim for Jesus was made before 70, when it still could have been checked (Rom 1:3). Even after 70, the evidence for his Davidic descent was still sufficient to provoke trouble for some of Jesus' relatives with the Roman government.¹
- Women did not need to be recorded in ancient genealogies, but Matthew includes four women (1:3, 5–6), three of them Gentiles (Gen 38:6; Josh 2:1; Ruth 1:4) and the other also a Gentile or at least the wife of a Gentile (2 Sam 11:3)—even though he omits the matriarchs prominent in Jewish tradition, Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel. Thus he hints from the Old Testament that God has always planned missions to all peoples (Mt 28:19).²
- Matthew omits some names, as was customary in genealogies (in this case perhaps following the Greek translation of the Old Testament); creating patterns like three sets of fourteen made lists easier to remember.³
- Another interesting fact about Matthew's genealogy is the inclusion of four Old Testament women: **Tamar** (Matt. 1:3), **Rahab** (v. 5), **Ruth** (v. 5), and Solomon's **mother** (v. 6), Bathsheba. All of these women (as well as most of the men) were questionable in some way. Tamar and Rahab were prostitutes (Gen. 38:24; Josh. 2:1), Ruth was a foreigner, a Moabitess (Ruth 1:4), and Bathsheba committed adultery (2 Sam. 11:2-5). Matthew may have included these women in order to emphasize that God's choices in dealing with people

are all of His grace. Perhaps also he included these women in order to put Jewish pride in its place.⁴

Galilee, Nazareth, Bethlehem

- “In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to **Nazareth**, a town in **Galilee**, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.” (Luke 1.26f)... “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ... And everyone went to his own town to register. 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 2.1ff]
- Galilee, taken from the Heb., *galil* ‘ring, circle’, hence a ‘district, region’, this is the regional name of part of N Palestine, which was the scene of Christ’s boyhood and early ministry. The origin of the name as applied here is uncertain. It occurs occasionally in the OT (e.g. Jos. 20:7; 1 Ki. 9:11), and notably in Is. 9:1. The latter reference probably recalls the region’s history: it originally formed part of the lands allocated to the twelve tribes, but, owing to the pressure from peoples farther N, its Jewish population found themselves in a kind of N salient, surrounded on three sides by non-Jewish populations—‘the nations’. Under the Maccabees, the Gentile influence upon the Jews became so strong that the latter were actually withdrawn S for half a century. Thus Galilee had to be recolonized, and this fact, together with its diversity of population, contributed to the contempt felt for the Galileans by the S Jews (Jn. 7:52) [*New Bible Atlas*]
- Nazareth in this period was an insignificant village of an estimated sixteen hundred to two thousand inhabitants.⁵
- The fact that the family moved to Nazareth was once again said to be in fulfillment of prophecy (Matt. 2:23). However, the words **He will be called a Nazarene**, were not directly spoken by any Old Testament prophet, though several prophecies come close to this expression. Isaiah said the Messiah would be “from [Jesse’s] roots” like “a Branch” (Isa. 11:1). “Branch” is the Hebrew word *netzer* which has consonants like those in the word “Nazarene” and which carry the idea of having an insignificant beginning... Since Matthew used the plural **prophets**, perhaps his idea was not based on a specific prophecy but on the idea that appeared in a number of prophecies concerning Messiah’s despised character. Nazareth was the town which housed the Roman garrison for the northern regions of Galilee. Therefore most Jews would not have any associations with that city. In fact those who lived in Nazareth were thought of as compromisers who consorted with the enemy, the Romans. Therefore to call one “a Nazarene” was to use a term of contempt. So because Joseph and his family settled in Nazareth, the Messiah was later despised and considered contemptible in the eyes of many in Israel. This was Nathanael’s reaction when he heard Jesus was from Nazareth (John 1:46): “Can anything good come from there?” This concept fit several Old Testament prophecies that speak of the lowly character of the Messiah (e.g., Isa. 42:1-4).⁶

- Archaeological evidence in the region of Nazareth indicates that many people had moved there from Judea, from the area near Bethlehem. Joseph may have had friends or relatives in Nazareth (cf. Lk 2:4). Nazareth was on a major road from the coast to Syria and only a few miles from the culturally diverse city of Sepphoris, which was being rebuilt at this time. Though small, Nazareth would not have been isolated from broader cultural currents of antiquity.⁷
- **2:4.** Pottery samples suggest a recent migration of people from the Bethlehem area to Nazareth around this time; Joseph's legal residence is apparently still Bethlehem, where he had been raised.⁸
- Micah 5:2 predicted Bethlehem as the Messiah's birthplace, because the Messiah was to be a descendant of David, and Bethlehem had been David's hometown. It was a small town less than a ten-mile walk from Herod's capital, Jerusalem. The Magi had come to Jerusalem because that was where they expected to find any Judean king—perhaps one of Herod's sons. What is remarkable is that the scribes would know where the Messiah would be born yet not act on that knowledge either positively (Mt 2:11) or negatively (2:16).⁹

Betrothal and Marriage

- *This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: **His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.** 19 Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man **and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly...** [Matthew]*
- **1:18.** Betrothal (*erusin*) then was more binding than most engagements are today and was normally accompanied by the groom's payment of at least part of the bride price. Betrothal, which commonly lasted a year, meant that bride and groom were officially pledged to each other but had not yet consummated the marriage; advances toward anyone else were thus regarded as adulterous (Deut 22:23–27). Two witnesses, mutual consent (normally) and the groom's declaration were necessary to establish Jewish betrothals (in Roman betrothals, consent alone sufficed). Although rings were used in the Roman world, it is not clear whether Palestinian Jews used them in this early period... Mary would have probably been between the ages of twelve and fourteen (sixteen at the oldest), Joseph perhaps between eighteen and twenty; their parents likely arranged their marriage, with Mary and Joseph's consent. Premarital privacy between betrothed persons was permitted in Judea but apparently frowned upon in Galilee, so Mary and Joseph may well not have had any time alone together at this point.¹⁰

The Annunciation

- *In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "**Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.**" [Luke]*

- Greetings (like “hail”) were normal, but rank and status within society determined whom one should greet and with what words. As both a woman and a young person (perhaps twelve or fourteen years old) not yet married, Mary had virtually no social status. Neither the title (“favored” or “graced one”) nor the promise (“The Lord is with you”) was traditional in greetings, even had she been a person of status.¹¹
- Mary here joins the list of those in the Bible who found favor before God (Gen 6:8; 19:16, 19; Ex 33:13).¹²
- **1:21.** The name Jesus (Aramaic *Yeshua* Greek *Iesous*) means “God is salvation” in Hebrew. Parents often intended the names they gave children to have some meaning, but if God gave the name, it had special significance. The Old Testament taught that God’s people would be saved in the time of the Messiah (Jer 23:5–6), and Jewish readers in the first century would have understood this salvation to mean more than just personal forgiveness. They prayed for the day when God would deliver his people from the consequences of their sins—from subjugation beneath their enemies; many believed that this deliverance would occur when their people as a whole reformed and turned wholeheartedly to God. Jesus came to deliver his people from personal sin and thus to deliver them from its judgment as well... **1:22–23.** Matthew cites Isaiah 7:14 and indicates a broad familiarity with Isaiah’s context. In that context, Assyria would lay waste Israel and Aram before “a son” was grown (Is 7:14–17); “a son” thus seems to refer to Isaiah’s own son (8:3–4). But all the names of Isaiah’s children were meant as signs pointing beyond themselves (8:18), and to whom would “Immanuel,” or “God with us” (7:14), more aptly point than to the son of David rightly called “Mighty God” (9:6; cf. 10:21; 11:1)?¹³
- **He will be called the Son of the Most High** (cf. v. 76). The Septuagint often used the term “Most High” (*hypsistou*) to translate the Hebrew *elyon* (cf. v. 76). Mary could not have missed the significance of that terminology. The fact that her Baby was to be called the “Son of the Most High” pointed to His equality with Yahweh. In Semitic thought a son was a “carbon copy” of his father, and the phrase “son of” was often used to refer to one who possessed his “father’s” qualities (e.g., the Heb. trans. “son of wickedness” in Ps. 89:22 [KJV] means a wicked person).¹⁴
- **His kingdom will never end.** These promises must have immediately reminded Mary of the promise of Yahweh to David (2 Sam. 7:13-16). David understood the prophecy as referring not only to his immediate son (Solomon) who would build the temple, but also to the future Son who would rule forever. David stated that Yahweh had spoken of the distant future (2 Sam. 7:19). Mary would have understood that the angel was speaking to her of the Messiah who had been promised for so long.¹⁵

Mary’s Response: a Question, an Acceptance of the Call, (a trip), and a Psalm

- *Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. 31 You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the*

throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." "**How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"** The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. 37 For nothing is impossible with God." ... "**I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said."** Then the angel left her. [Luke]

- The point of 1:36–37 is that God, who acted for Elizabeth as he did for Sarah, could still do anything. On 1:36, cf. Genesis 18:14 (on Sarah having a child); Mary has more faith than her ancestor (Gen 18:12–15).¹⁶
- Luke here contrasts the simple faith of a teenage girl, Mary, with the genuine but less profound faith of an aged priest, Zechariah (cf. the severer contrasts between Hannah and Eli in 1 Sam 1–2; though the story line is quite different, in both cases God uses a humble and obscure servant to bear an agent of revival to the coming generation). This section has parallels not only with Old Testament birth annunciations but also with Old Testament call narratives: Mary was called to fill the office of Jesus' mother.¹⁷
- **1:39–40.** The journey from Nazareth to the hill country of Judea may have taken three to five days, depending on the precise location of Elizabeth's home. In view of bandits on the roads, young Mary's journey was courageous, although she may have found a caravan with which to travel; otherwise her family may not have allowed her to go.¹⁸
- The Magnificat," as the song is called, consists almost entirely of Old Testament allusions and quotations. The same is true of the songs of Zechariah and Simeon (vv. 1:68-79; 2:29-32).¹⁹
- Verses 46–55 emphasize the exaltation of the poor and humble and the casting down of the proud and wealthy. This emphasis of Mary's song strongly resembles the praise song of Samuel's mother, Hannah, in 1 Samuel 2:1–10; Hannah celebrated when the Lord opened her barren womb. (Luke omits the imagery of military triumph that Hannah had applied to her rivalry with Peninnah.)²⁰

46 "My soul magnifies the Lord,	O magnify the Lord with me, And let us exalt His name together. (Ps 34:3.); I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, My soul will exult in my God; (Is 61:10)
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,	Yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation (Hab 3:18)
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;	And she made a vow and said, "O Lord of hosts, if Thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of Thy maidservant and remember me, and not forget Thy maidservant, but wilt give Thy maidservant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life (1 Sa 1:11) ;

	<p>Then Leah said, “Happy am I! For women will call me happy. (Ge 30:13);</p> <p>And all the nations will call you blessed, for you shall be a delightful land,” says the Lord of hosts. (Mal 3:12</p>
<p>49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.</p>	<p>Then they said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.” The Lord has done great things for us; (Ps 126:2);</p> <p>For Thy righteousness, O God, reaches to the heavens, Thou who hast done great things; (Ps 71:19). ;</p> <p>Who is like Thee among the gods, O Lord? Who is like Thee, majestic in holiness, Awesome in praises, working wonders? (Ex 15:11)</p>
<p>50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.</p>	<p>But the lovingkindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, And His righteousness to children’s children, (Ps 103:17).</p>
<p>51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.</p>	<p>“Thy right hand, O Lord, is majestic in power, Thy right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy. (Ex 15:6);</p> <p>The Lord has bared His holy arm In the sight of all the nations, That all the ends of the earth may see The salvation of our God. (Is 52:10). ;</p>
<p>52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;</p>	<p>Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise, exalt, and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are true and His ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride.” (Da 4:37);</p> <p>So that He sets on high those who are lowly, And those who mourn are lifted to safety. (Job 5:11);</p> <p>He pours contempt upon princes, And makes them wander in a pathless waste. But He sets the needy securely on high away from affliction, And makes his families like a flock. (Ps 107:40)</p>
<p>53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.</p>	<p>For He has satisfied the thirsty soul, And the hungry soul He has filled with what is good. (Ps 107:9);</p> <p>Therefore, thus says the Lord God, “Behold, My servants shall eat, but you shall be hungry. Behold, My servants shall drink, but you shall be thirsty. Behold, My servants shall rejoice, but you shall be put to shame. (Is 65:13).</p>
<p>54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,</p>	<p>“But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, Descendant of Abraham My friend, (Is 41:8);</p> <p>He has remembered His lovingkindness and His faithfulness to the house of Israel; (Ps 98:3).</p>
<p>55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”</p>	<p>Thou wilt give truth to Jacob And unchanging love to Abraham, Which Thou didst swear to our forefathers From the days of old. (Mic 7:20);</p> <p>But God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. (Ge 17:19).</p>

The Angel, Joseph, and Tough Choices

- *This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man **and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly**... 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. 21 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."... All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" --which means, "God with us."... When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and **took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son.** And he gave him the name Jesus. [Matthew]*
- **1:19.** The penalty for adultery under Old Testament law was death by stoning, and this penalty applied to infidelity during betrothal as well (Deut 22:23–24). In New Testament times, Joseph would have merely been required to divorce Mary and expose her to shame; the death penalty was rarely if ever executed for this offense. (Betrothals were so binding that if a woman's fiancé died, she was considered a widow; betrothals could otherwise be terminated only by divorce.) But a woman with a child, divorced for such infidelity, would be hard pressed ever to find another husband, leaving her without means of support if her parents died... But because divorces could be effected by a simple document with two witnesses, Joseph could have divorced her without making her shame more widely known. (It was necessary to involve a judge only if the wife were the one requesting that the husband divorce her.)²¹
- As soon as **Joseph** awakened from this dream, he obeyed. He violated all custom by immediately taking **Mary** into his **home** rather than waiting till the one-year time period of betrothal had passed. Joseph was probably thinking of what would be best for Mary in her condition. He brought her home and began to care and provide for her. But there was **no** sexual relationship between them **until** after the **birth** of this Child, Jesus. Matthew simply noted the birth of the Child and the fact that He was named **Jesus**, whereas Luke, the physician (Col. 4:14), recorded several details surrounding the birth (Luke 2:1-7).²²

The Census

- *"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a **census** should be taken of the entire Roman world. ... And everyone went to his own town to register. 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 2.1ff]*

- By A.D. 6 wide-scale censuses were taken every fourteen years; before that time, periodic censuses seem to have occurred at less regular intervals. A tax census instigated by the revered emperor Augustus initiates the contrast between Caesar's earthly pomp and Christ's heavenly glory in 2:1–14.... **2:1**. Censuses were important for evaluating taxation; they were generally conducted locally, so all local governments in all regions probably did not simultaneously implement Caesar's decree. **2:3**. Although Egyptian census records show that people had to return to their homes for a tax census, the home to which they returned was where they owned property, not simply where they were born (censuses registered persons according to property). Joseph thus must have still held property in Bethlehem; if the tax census of A.D. 6 is any indication, he might not have had to register for any property in Galilee... Joseph is courageous to take his pregnant betrothed with him, even if (as is quite possible) she is also a Bethlehemite who has to return to that town. Although tax laws in most of the empire required only the head of a household to appear, the province of Syria (then including Palestine) also taxed women. But Joseph may simply wish to avoid leaving her alone this late in her pregnancy, especially if the circumstances of her pregnancy had deprived her of other friends.²³
- " A sixth reason for placing the nativity of Jesus in 3 or 2 B.C. is the coincidence of this date with the New Testament account that Jesus was born at the time when a Roman census was being conducted: "There went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the [Roman] world should be registered" (Luke 2:1). Historians have not been able to find any empire-wide census or registration in the years 7-5 B.C., but there is **a reference to such a registration of all the Roman people not long before 5 February 2 B.C. written by Caesar Augustus himself**: "While I was administering my thirteenth consulship [2 B.C.] the senate and the equestrian order **and the entire Roman people** gave me the title Father of my Country" (*Res Gestae* 35, italics added). This award was given to Augustus on 5 February 2 B.C., therefore the registration of citizen approval must have taken place in 3 B.C. Orosius, in the fifth century, also said that Roman records of his time revealed that a census was indeed held when Augustus was made "the first of men"--an apt description of his award "Father of the Country"--at a time when all the great nations gave an oath of obedience to Augustus (6:22, 7:2). Orosius dated the census to 3 B.C. And besides that, Josephus substantiates that an oath of obedience to Augustus was required in Judea not long before the death of Herod (*Antiquities* 17:41-45). This agrees nicely in a chronological sense with what Luke records. But more than that, an inscription found in Paphlagonia (eastern Turkey), also dated to 3 B.C., mentions an "oath sworn by all the people in the land at the altars of Augustus in the temples of Augustus in the various districts." And dovetailing precisely with this inscription, the early (fifth century) Armenian historian, Moses of Khoren, said the census that brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem was conducted by Roman agents in Armenia where they set up "the image of Augustus Caesar in every temple.". The similarity of this language is strikingly akin to the wording on the Paphlagonian inscription describing the oath taken in 3 B.C. These indications can allow us to reasonably conclude that the oath (of Josephus, the Paphlagonian inscription, and Orosius) and the census (mentioned by Luke, Orosius, and Moses of Khoren) were one and the same. All of these things happened in 3 B.C." [Martin, CKC:89-90]

- The story begins with the action of the Roman Emperor in holding a census, as a result of which Mary and Joseph found themselves in Bethlehem. The census thus serves an important function in the development of the story, but at the same time it serves to place the birth of Jesus in the context of world history and to show that the fiat of an earthly ruler can be utilised in the will of God to bring his more important purposes to fruition.²⁴

The Birth of the Savior

- *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. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 **and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.** She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. [Luke]*
- By the early second century A.D. even pagans were widely aware of the tradition that Jesus was born in a cave used as a livestock shelter behind someone's home, and they reported the site of this cave to the emperor Hadrian. The manger was a feeding trough for animals; sometimes these may have been built into the floor. The word traditionally translated "inn" probably means "home" or "guest room"; with all Joseph's scattered family members returning home at once, it is easier for Mary to bear (or care for the child after birth) in the vacant cave outside.²⁵
- The newborn in a *phatne* will be the sign for the shepherds (see at vv 12, 16). A *phatne* is generally an animals' feeding trough, but sometimes by extension can mean a stall. The former will be intended here. The explanation given for this unusual resting place is cryptic and carries no great weight in the story, *kataluma* is a flexible word and can denote any kind of place where one might stay, from a primitive inn (Exod 4:27; 1 Kgdms 1:18) to a guest-room of a house (cf. Luke 22:11) to a totally unspecified place where one might stay (Sir 14:25; and cf. Exod 15:13). If we are to understand that Mary and Joseph were excluded from the *kataluma*, then the definite article favors reference to the public inn at Bethlehem (cf. Jer 41:17), though the guest-room of the family home remains possible... There is better correspondence, however, between the explanation clause and what is explained, if the explanation clause is understood as excluding not Mary and Joseph, but only the child from the *kataluma*. The sense is then, "There was no space available to them [for him] in the *kataluma*." (*topos* means "space" also at Luke 14:22.) The child could not be fitted in the *kataluma*, so he was placed in the nearby manger. On this reading it is best to think of an overcrowded Palestinian peasant home: a single-roomed home with an animal stall under the same roof (frequently to be distinguished from the family living-quarters only by the raised platform floor of the latter). The manger could be free-standing in the stall or attached to the wall (it could also be on the floor of the living area adjacent to the stall area, but this would not fit with the exclusion of the child from the living quarters), *kataluma* will, then, refer to the living quarters provided by a single-roomed Palestinian home in which hospitality has been extended to Mary and Joseph." [WBC]

- The point is rather that at his birth Jesus had to be content with the habitation of animals because there was no room for him in human society (9:58). *kataluma*, ‘lodging’, can be used of a guest-room (22:11; Mk. 14:14), so that the reference may be to a room rather than to an inn (*pandocheion* 10:34), and to a room in a private house rather than to a room in an inn. It has even been suggested that Bethlehem may not have had an inn for travellers. In any case no private room was available for the birth, and Mary and her child were deprived of normal comfort ... A tradition which can be traced back to the second century located the birth of Jesus in a cave (*Protev. Jac.* 18f.; Justin, *Trypho*, 78:4; Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1:15). Constantine erected a basilica at Bethlehem over a cave, and this has been excavated under the present Church of the Nativity. Jerome and Paulinus of Nola both mention the desecration of a cave in Bethlehem by the erection of a shrine for Adonis during the reign of either Hadrian or Decius; this probably implies desecration of a site sacred to Christians in the second or third century. Hence Jeremias and Finegan claim that the identification of a cave at Bethlehem with the birthplace of Jesus is early. This tradition is not dependent on the NT, which knows nothing of a cave. Hengel, however, claims that it was originally separate from the manger story, since in *Protev. Jac.* the manger appears only later in the story as a hiding place for the young child from Herod. But caves were sometimes used to provide accommodation for animals, and houses were built near them, so that they might be used for this purpose. [NICGNT]
- There is no mention of the presence of the animals which normally used the manger; these found their way into the Christmas story from Is. 1:3; Hab. 3:2 LXX.²⁶

The Message to the Shepherds: A Real Savior is born!

- *And there were **shepherds** living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a **Savior has been born to you**; he is Christ the **Lord**. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth **peace** to men on whom his favor rests.""* [Luke]
- An announcing **angel** and other angels appeared **at night** to a group of **shepherds** and heralded the birth of the **Savior** in **the town of David**, that is, Bethlehem (v. 4). The shepherds may have been caring for lambs which were destined for sacrifice during the time of Passover.²⁷
- Due to the proximity to Jerusalem, some scholars have suggested that the flocks here are the temple flocks raised for sacrifice. This narrative would have challenged the values of many religious people, who despised shepherds; shepherds’ work kept them from participation in the religious activities of their communities. Pasturing of flocks at night indicates that this was a warmer season, not winter (when they would graze more in the day); Roman Christians later adopted December 25 as Christmas only to supersede a pagan Roman festival scheduled at that time.²⁸ [But see next quote...]

- "In regard to the day of Jesus' birth, as early as Hippolytus (A.D. 165–235) it was said to be December 25, a date also set by John Chrysostom (A.D. 345–407) whose arguments prevailed in the Eastern Church. There is nothing improbable about a mid-winter birth. Luke 2:8 tells us that the shepherds' flocks were kept outside when Jesus was born. This detail might favor a date between March and November when such animals would normally be outside. But the Mishnah (m. s̄ueqal. 7.4) suggests that sheep around Bethlehem might also be outside during the winter months (Hoehner). Therefore, though there is no certainty, it appears that Jesus was born somewhere between 4–6 B.C., perhaps in mid-winter. **Both the traditional Western date for Christmas (Dec. 25) and the date observed by the Armenian Church (Jan. 6) are equally possible. The biblical and extra-biblical historical evidence is simply not specific enough to point decisively to either traditional date.** The celebration of the nativity is attested in Rome as early as A.D. 336 and this celebration also involved recognizing January 6 as Epiphany, the day the Magi visited Jesus." [NT:DictJG, s.v. 'birth of Jesus']
- "Good news" could refer to the proclamation of God's salvation (Is 52:7), but pagans applied it also to celebrations of the cult of the emperor among all people in the supposedly worldwide empire. Particularly in celebration of his birthday (pagans publicly celebrated deities' birthdays), the emperor was hailed "Savior" and "Lord." But Jesus' birth in a lowly manger distinguishes the true king from the Roman emperor, whose loyalists in Luke's day would have bristled at (and perhaps responded violently to) the implicit comparison.²⁹
- It is likely that a first-century Hellenistic reader would find in the configuration created by good news (v 10) concerning the birth of one who is to be savior and bringer of peace (v 14) an echo of the language in which Augustus had been honored. It is Christ who in truth and at a deeper level offers the golden age that human aspiration connected with the reign of Augustus. In no sense, however, are Caesar and Christ to be seen as political antagonists in the power structure of the ancient world (Luke 23:2 and Acts 17:7 report patently false accusations).³⁰
- This choir contrasts with the earthly choirs used in the worship of the emperor. The current emperor, Augustus, was praised for having inaugurated a worldwide peace.³¹
- The shepherds probably checked the animal stables till they found the one with the baby; Bethlehem was not a large town.³²
- After seeing the Baby, the shepherds were the first messengers to proclaim the arrival of the Messiah: **they spread the word. Those who heard . . . were amazed** (*ethaumasán*).³³

The Visit of the Magi—waking the World up!

- 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 in the east and have come to worship him." When King **Herod** heard this he was **disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him**. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them **where the Christ was to be born**. 5 "In **Bethlehem** in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "

'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.' "... Then **Herod called the Magi secretly** and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."
[Matthew]

- Though not all scholars agree on the timing of the arrival of the **Magi from the East**, they apparently came some time **after** the birth of **Jesus**. Jesus and Mary and Joseph, though still in Bethlehem, were now in a house (v. 11), and Jesus was called a Child (*paidion*, vv. 9, 11) rather than a newborn Infant (*brephos*, Luke 2:12)... The exact identity of the Magi is impossible to determine, though several ideas have been suggested. They have been given traditional names and identified as representatives of the three groups of peoples that descended from Noah's sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. More likely they were Gentiles of high position from a country, perhaps Parthia, northeast of Babylon, who were given a special revelation by God of the birth of the **King of the Jews**. This special revelation may simply have been in the sky, as might be indicated by their title "Magi" (specialists in astronomy) and by the fact they referred to a **star** which they **saw**. Or this revelation could have come through some contact with Jewish scholars who had migrated to the East with copies of Old Testament manuscripts. Many feel the Magi's comments reflected a knowledge of Balaam's prophecy concerning the "star" that would "come out of Jacob" (Num. 24:17). Whatever the source, they came to Jerusalem **to worship** the newborn King of the Jews. (According to tradition three Magi traveled to Bethlehem. But the Bible does not say how many there were.)³⁴
- **2:1.** Herod the Great died in 4 B.C.; Jesus was thus born before 4 B.C., rather than in A.D. 1; our calendars are off by several years. "Magi" (not "wise men"—KJV) were pagan astrologers whose divinatory skills were widely respected in the Greco-Roman world; astrology had become popular through the "science" of the East, and everyone agreed that the best astrologers lived in the East. The Old Testament explicitly forbade such prognostication from signs (Deut 18:11; cf. Is 2:6; 47:11–15), prescribing true prophecy instead (Deut 18:15).³⁵
- Their posture of worship was appropriate toward gods or toward kings in the East (but unlike most Mediterranean peoples, the Magi, though pagan, may not have been polytheists; they may have been Zoroastrian, but scholars debate the exact nature of Zoroastrianism in this period)³⁶
- It is no surprise that **King Herod . . . was disturbed** when the Magi came to **Jerusalem** looking for the One who had been "born King" (v. 2). Herod was not the rightful king from the line of David. In fact he was not even a descendant of Jacob, but was descended from Esau and thus was an Edomite. (He reigned over Palestine from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C. See the chart on the Herods at Luke 1:5.) This fact caused most of the Jews to hate him and never truly to accept him as king, even though he did much for the country. If someone had been rightfully born king, then Herod's job was in jeopardy. He therefore **called** the Jewish scholars **together** and inquired **where the Christ was to be born** (Matt. 2:4). Interestingly Herod connected the One "born king of the Jews" (v. 2) with "the Christ," the Messiah. Obviously Israel had a messianic hope and believed that the Messiah would be born.³⁷

The Star: Trusted by the Magi

- *"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his **star** in the east and have come to worship him...After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and **the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 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 and of incense and of myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. [Matthew]***
- The text might imply only that the star *appeared* to move due to the Magi's own movement. Even had the object been close enough to earth to calculate its relation to Bethlehem, Bethlehem was so close to Jerusalem that any distance would have been negligible unless the object was only a mile high. But the description of God's leading of the Magi by a moving, supernatural sign may recall how God had led his own people by the fire and cloud in the wilderness (Ex 13:21–22).³⁸
- The journey of the Magi from Jerusalem wrought a further miracle. **The star they had seen in the East** now reappeared and led them to a specific **house** in Bethlehem where they found **the Child** Jesus. Bethlehem is about five miles south of Jerusalem. "Stars" (i.e., planets) naturally travel from east to west across the heavens, not from north to south. Could it be that "the star" which the Magi saw and which led them to a specific house was the Shekinah glory of God? That same glory had led the children of Israel through the wilderness for 40 years as a pillar of fire and cloud. Perhaps this was what they saw in the East, and for want of a better term they called it a "star." All other efforts to explain this star are inadequate (such as a conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars; a supernova; a comet; etc.).³⁹
- The main road they would need to take northward from Bethlehem went directly through Jerusalem, then eastward through Syria. Given the probably large size of their entourage, the Magi could not approach Jerusalem without being noticed, as Herod knew very well. Indeed, no major route could take them homeward without passing through Jerusalem. They probably ventured far south to Hebron, then followed the rugged road to Gaza on the coast, where another road could lead them northward. This route would then have carried them through Nazareth, then Capernaum and on to Damascus.⁴⁰

The Star: Feared by Rulers!

- Astronomers have offered various proposals for the appearance of this star in the first decade B.C. The ancients thought comets and falling stars predicted the fall of rulers; some emperors even banished from Rome astrologers who issued such predictions. By this period many Jewish people accepted the idea that the stars could accurately predict the future. Even though these Magi were pagans, God had chosen to reveal himself to them... **2:3**. Many rulers feared astrological signs of their demise; the Emperor Nero later reportedly slaughtered many nobles in the hope that their deaths (rather than his own) would fulfill the

prediction of a comet. Jerusalem was an important trade center; the Magi must have come with quite an entourage for the whole city to notice them. Then again, many people resented Herod's rule and rumors could have circulated quickly. King Herod, who was aware of broad currents of thought in the Roman Empire and sponsored pagan temples among Gentile cities in his realm, might have been especially apt to consider the Magi's mission significant.⁴¹

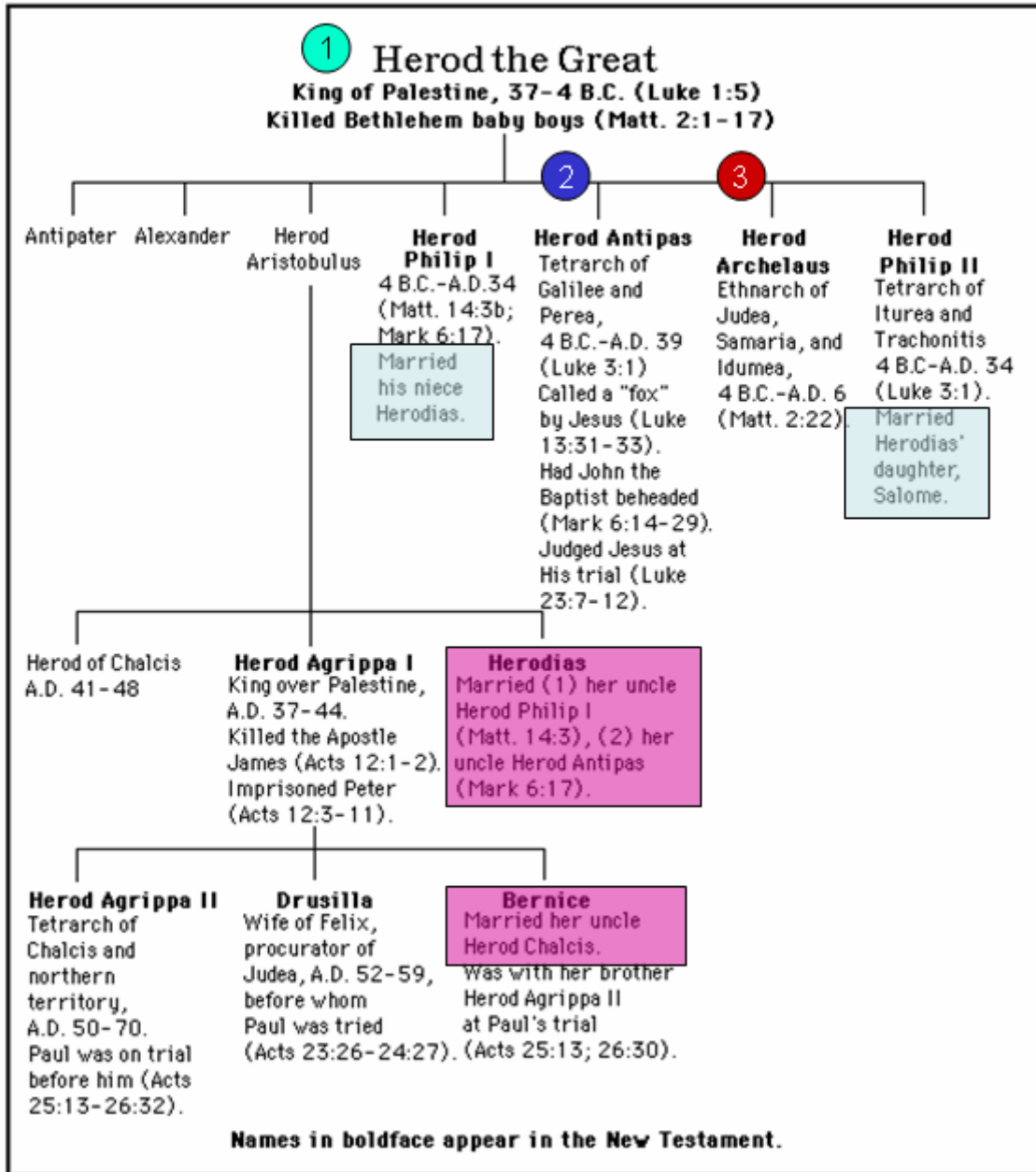
The Presentation in the Temple, Simeon/Anna's Hymns, and Return to Bethlehem

- On the **eighth day**, when it was **time to circumcise him**, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. When the **time of their purification** according to the Law of Moses **had been completed**, Joseph and **Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord** 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every **firstborn** male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), 24 and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." [Luke]
- Following the birth of a son, the mother had to wait 40 days before going to the temple to offer sacrifice for her purification. If she could not afford a lamb and a pigeon (or dove), then two pigeons (or doves) would be acceptable (Lev 12:2-8; cf. Lev 5:11). The distance from Bethlehem to Jerusalem was only about six miles. *present him to the Lord*. The firstborn of both man and animal were to be dedicated to the Lord (see v. 23; Ex 13:12-13). The animals were sacrificed, but the human beings were to serve God throughout their lives. The Levites actually served in the place of all the firstborn males in Israel (see Nu 3:11-13; 8:17-18). [NIV Study Bible Notes]
- In all three of the hymns of thanksgiving and praise recorded by Luke in his first two chapters (1:46-55, 68-79; 2:29-32) lie the deep significance of the births of John and Jesus for the salvation of Israel and the world. Simeon noted that the Messiah was to be for **the Gentiles** as well as for **Israel**. The idea of salvation for the Gentiles is set forth many times in the Gospel of Luke.⁴²
- **Simeon** revealed to **Mary** that her Son would be opposed (**a sign . . . spoken against**) and that she would be hurt greatly. Her grief would be like **a sword** piercing her **soul**. The Son would **cause the falling and rising of many in Israel**. Throughout His ministry Jesus proclaimed that the only way to the kingdom, something the nation had long sought, was to follow Him. The ones who did so would receive salvation; they would "rise." But the ones who did not believe Him would not receive salvation; they would "fall." These consequences would reveal what they thought about Mary's Son.⁴³
- Simeon's words probably allude to the stumbling stone of Isaiah 8:14-15 and the anticipated resurrection. The "sword" reflects either Mary suffering over Jesus' pain or her heart being bared, probably the former (a mother's grief can symbolize a son's suffering, e.g., Judg 5:28)... **2:36**. Although the Old Testament did include prophetesses, they were much less prominent than male prophets in the Jewish tradition of this period. The name "Anna" (Tobit 1:9) is the Hebrew name "Hannah" (1 Sam 1:2).⁴⁴

- The prophets and later writers (cf. DSS) spoke of God visiting his people for redemption and judgment. The use of “redeem” here compares this new event to when God saved his people from Egypt; the prophets had promised future deliverance in a new exodus.⁴⁵
- Future “salvation” in Isaiah includes deliverance from political oppressors; but, as here, it is predicated upon Israel’s restoration to divine favor through forgiveness.⁴⁶
- The Jewish hope was of a kingdom in this world, but by NT times this was taking on transcendental features, described in terms of everlastingness and the return of paradise upon earth.⁴⁷

The Escape to Egypt and Herod’s Brutal Response

- *And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he 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, 15 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." 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]*
- **2:16.** Because the only natural route by which the Magi could have returned was through Jerusalem (2:12), Herod knew that the Magi had purposely avoided returning to him. He was known for acts like the massacre described here. A young but popular competitor, a high priest, had a “drowning accident” in a pool that was only a few feet deep. Enraged at his favorite wife, Herod had her strangled; he was deceived into having two innocent sons executed; and on his own deathbed Herod had another son executed (admittedly a guilty one). Although probably fictitious, a purported comment of the emperor is appropriate: Better to be one of Herod’s pigs than his son. Josephus reports that Herod ordered nobles executed at his death to ensure mourning when he died; they were instead released at his death, producing celebration.⁴⁸
- Herod’s infamous crimes were many. He put to death several of his own children and some of his wives whom he thought were plotting against him. Emperor Augustus reportedly said it was better to be Herod’s sow than his son, for his sow had a better chance of surviving in a Jewish community. In the Greek language, as in English, there is only one letter difference between the words “sow” (*huos*) and “son” (*huios*).⁴⁹
- [Note: Herod the Great dies 4BC; Herod Antipas (son) rules Galilee 4BC – 34 AD; Herod Agrippa I (nephew of Antipas) rules Palestine AD 37-44, kills James; Herod Agrippa II (son of Agrippa I), rules northern territory, is present at Paul’s trial in Acts 25]



The Return to Nazareth

- *After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt 20 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. 22 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, 23 and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene."*

- **After Herod died . . . Joseph** was again instructed by **an angel of the Lord**. This was the third of four times an angel appeared to him **in a dream** (cf. 1:20; 2:13, 19, 22). He was made aware of Herod's death and told to return **to the land** (v. 20). Joseph obediently followed the Lord's instruction and was planning to return **to the land of Israel**, perhaps to Bethlehem. However, a son of Herod, **Archelaus**, was ruling over the territories of **Judea**, Samaria, and Idumea. Archelaus, noted for tyranny, murder, and instability, was **probably insane as a result of close family intermarriages**. (He ruled from 4 B.C. to A.D. 6. See the chart on the Herods at Luke 1:5). God's warning to Joseph (again **in a dream**, Matt. 2:22; cf. 1:20; 2:13, 19) was not to return to Bethlehem, but instead to move back to the northern **district of Galilee** to the **town of Nazareth**. The ruler of this region was Antipas, another son of Herod (cf. 14:1; Luke 23:7-12), but he was a capable ruler.⁵⁰

Reflections: The Variety of Responses

- Matthew informs his readers that even at Jesus' birth, the religious teachers who knew the most (2:5) failed to act on the truth, while pagans whom one would never expect to come to the Jewish Messiah did just that. . . In two important respects the story of the birth of Jesus is differentiated from that of John. First, it is given a setting in world history by the reference to the census which brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. It is the first hint of the cosmic significance of the birth and foreshadows the universalism disclosed in 2:32. Second, the birth of Jesus takes place in lowly circumstances, a fact indicated by the use of the manger and the presence of the shepherds who represent the humble, possibly even the despised people of the land. The twin motifs of the rejection of Jesus by the world and of God's acceptance of ordinary humble and needy folk, to whom he chooses to reveal his salvation, thus come to expression in the story at the outset, and remain of decisive significance throughout the Gospel.⁵¹
- Royal figure though he is, the entire drama that surrounds the birth of Jesus takes place with no part given to the secular or religious rulers of the land.⁵²

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth [John 1]

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" [John 14.8ff]

- ¹Keener, C. S. (1997, c1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary : New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Mt 1:2). Downers Grove: InterVarsity.
- ²Keener, C. S. (1997, c1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary : New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Mt 1:2). Downers Grove: InterVarsity.
- ³Keener, C. S. (1997, c1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary : New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Mt 1:17). Downers Grove: InterVarsity.
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