

REVEAL THE KINGDOM



A SEVEN PART
CHRISTMAS DEVOTIONAL

DOUGLAS OVERMYER

Published in the USA by
Reveal the Kingdom Press
1400 Champaign Avenue
Mattoon, Illinois 61938
United States of America

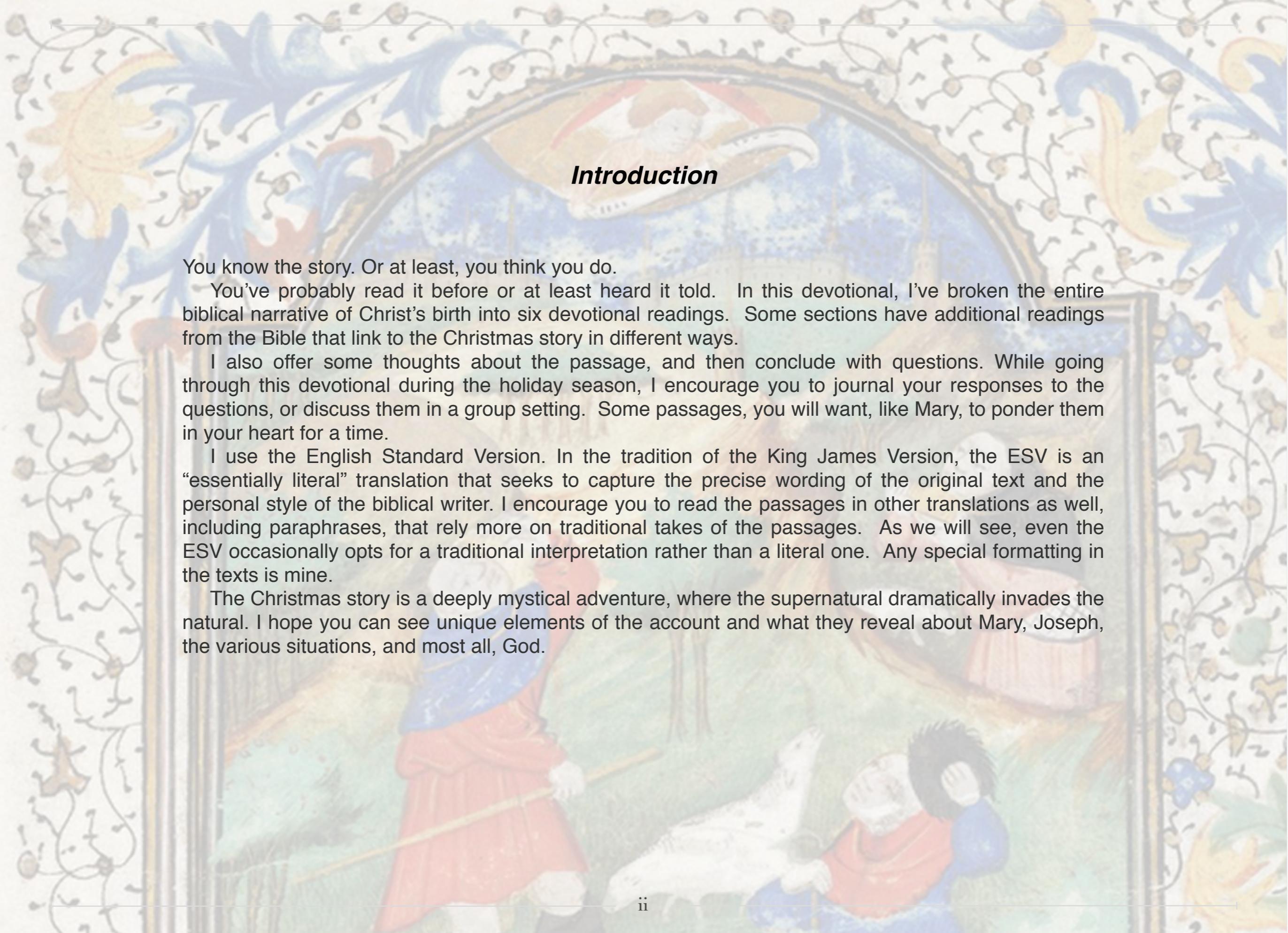
Copyright © 2016 Doug Overmyer

<http://dougovermyer.com>

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission of the author.

All artwork is from the *Book of Hours, Use of Rouen, in Latin and French, c 1500AD*

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.



Introduction

You know the story. Or at least, you think you do.

You've probably read it before or at least heard it told. In this devotional, I've broken the entire biblical narrative of Christ's birth into six devotional readings. Some sections have additional readings from the Bible that link to the Christmas story in different ways.

I also offer some thoughts about the passage, and then conclude with questions. While going through this devotional during the holiday season, I encourage you to journal your responses to the questions, or discuss them in a group setting. Some passages, you will want, like Mary, to ponder them in your heart for a time.

I use the English Standard Version. In the tradition of the King James Version, the ESV is an "essentially literal" translation that seeks to capture the precise wording of the original text and the personal style of the biblical writer. I encourage you to read the passages in other translations as well, including paraphrases, that rely more on traditional takes of the passages. As we will see, even the ESV occasionally opts for a traditional interpretation rather than a literal one. Any special formatting in the texts is mine.

The Christmas story is a deeply mystical adventure, where the supernatural dramatically invades the natural. I hope you can see unique elements of the account and what they reveal about Mary, Joseph, the various situations, and most all, God.

CHAPTER 1

IT'S CHRISTMAS TIME

Broad thoughts on the nature of Christmas celebrations in our modern culture, and an overview of the approach taken in this devotional.





CHAPTER ONE

It's Christmas Time

Devotional Reading

Luke 2:8-14

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them,

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in

the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and 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 among those with whom he is pleased!”

It's the Christmas season, and my favorite time of the year. When we think about this season, our minds conjure up a myriad of images: decorated trees, wrapped presents, lines of shoppers and dazzling sales. Our senses experience an onslaught of yummy smells and dazzling lights and yummy treats and, for those in colder climates, chill winds and snugly blankets.

And how about the Christmas movies? From *Elf* to *A Christmas Story* to *Christmas Vacation* to *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, this season is awash with dedicated motion pictures. In the Peanuts classic, Charlie Brown and his friends practice for a Christmas pageant, complete with the manger, shepherds, angels, and of course Snoopy. Charlie is sent to pick out a Christmas tree. He is astounded at the artificial trees and the subtext of his troubled emotions finally surfaces, culminating with a clash between the superficial meaning of Christmas with the true meaning of Christmas.

Each year, my family watches the Peanuts classic several times, and I remain amazed that this was produced in 1965. Seemingly, the superficial elements of Christmastime have intensified in the intervening years. In response to the naked materialism, certain religious elements have responded shrilly.

Oh well. Although this favorite time of the year is awash with intensifying cultural traditions and religious responses, we can enjoy both the cultural and religious aspects of the season in a way that promotes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.

What Goes Unsaid

The Bible includes two different accounts of Jesus' birth, written by different authors, who each had different audiences in mind. The accounts were powerful and the first audiences realized these passages were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Millennia later, we can still read them, but we often miss what goes unsaid.

We need to set aside our cultural or religious understanding when we read the Bible. Instead, we should try to step into the mindsets of the biblical authors and their original, first audience. After all, the Bible wasn't written with 21st Century readers in mind. When reading the Bible, this means trying to understand what goes without being said by the biblical authors, whose audience shared their cultural assumptions, context, and history.

Imagine a struggling football team gets blown off the field. A newspaper article points out this game was that coach's Waterloo. While you would generally understand what the newspaper meant, centuries from now, in a far different culture, readers might miss the subtext, or worse, completely misunderstand the meaning. They might wonder,

- Was the game in Waterloo, Iowa?
- Is this a game in which a romance occurred, as in Abba's song?
- Was this a card game played on a body of water?
- Did that game lead to the team having his coach exiled to an island by the victors, dramatic rule changes, and a completely new landscape in football?

Of course, none of those ideas are in view when someone describes a bad game as a coach's Waterloo. What goes unsaid is the hyperbolic link between an American football game in which administrators decided to finally fire its failing football coach to a dramatic history changing battle that ended Napoleon's reign as a European force and forever reshaped Europe. It was a bad day with an inevitable result for Napoleon, even as the football game was a bad day with an inevitable result for the coach. The amusement comes from linking a football game to a history-shattering battle.

But to explain what goes unsaid at best takes the flavors of meaning from the language, and at worst, is boring. It's like explaining a joke to someone, which automatically ruins the joke. Nonetheless, when it comes to reading a text written nearly 2000 years ago, new flavors of meaning are opened when we consider what went unsaid.

The Nativity Story

A few years ago, a movie called *The Nativity Story* came out, and initially, I was quite excited about it. The marketing professed it to be a culturally accurate telling of the birth of Jesus. While watching, however, I felt disappointment creep up because this movie did not break new ground. It told the same old story contrived by medieval European Christians that everyone already knows, and can be summarized with a simple nativity scene.

Don't get me wrong. I'm oddly touched by that movie and I love nativity scenes. My wife collects them, and we have dozens displayed across the house every year from Thanksgiving to New Years. But we should recognize that the nativity story told in movies, cartoons, and church pageants was basically developed many centuries ago by the Church to help a simple and uneducated people in the Medieval period to understand the basic biblical points:

- God incarnated himself and was born as lowly Baby Jesus.
- Only Mary, Joseph, and a few shepherds realized that Jesus would eventually be the King of the Jews and Savior of the entire world.
- A powerful, wicked king could not stop God's plan even through an atrocity.
- God appeals to all humans, including Jews and Gentiles, the richest and the poorest, the most educated and even a little drummer boy.

Okay, the drummer boy isn't in the Bible, but it's one of my favorite Christmas songs.

Anyway, these are great points, but the story the Bible tells contains even more drama and passion, with layers of meaning forgotten since the first audience read the accounts. In the last few decades, scholars have unearthed a plethora of new understanding regarding what goes unsaid in the biblical account.

As it turns out, we read a lot into the Christmas story which are not actually in the Bible and may even detract from what the authors wrote.

For instance,

- There are no "inns" in the biblical account.
- Joseph didn't go door to door, yelling desperately for help for his laboring wife.
- Jesus was not born in a stable or a cave.
- Baby Jesus was not visited by three wise men on the day he was born.

Don't let the facts upset you, and don't throw away your nativity scenes or movies. Those are just fine.

But let's unpack the actual telling of Jesus' birth. You may be startled to realize that Jesus' birth is awash in drama that shook families, cities, and even empires.

The two biblical authors who crafted the birth accounts are Matthew and Luke, and they did so expertly, revealing a deeply personal, emotional, and dramatic situation that unveiled an amazing amount of God's character.

Much goes unsaid, but is implied. Let's examine it afresh.

Questions

What is your favorite part of the Christmas season?

What is your least favorite part?

God sent Jesus to redeem the world. This means the Lord can take the bad parts of the world, and make them right with the Lord. Think about your least favorite parts of the Christmas season. How can God redeem them?

Think about the traditional nativity story. What is the most startling aspect about the story, in your opinion?

What does the nativity story teach you about God?

CHAPTER 2

MARY'S GIANT REVELATION PART 1

Considers the myriad of thoughts that must have gone through Mary's mind when the angel came to her. Some of these thoughts may be completely foreign to us, including giant concerns utterly foreign to our modern thinking.





CHAPTER TWO

Mary's Giant Revelation Part 1

Devotional Reading

Luke 1:26-38, Matthew 1:18-25

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a

man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary.

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"

But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God."

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

And the angel departed from her.

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb.¹

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.²

The Christmas story opens with an angel appearing to a young teenager named Mary with history’s most profound prophecy. Our familiarity with the story might cause us to miss just the amazing aspects of this scene.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary.

And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”

But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.³

The appearance of the angel did not trouble Mary. She was so comfortable with the idea of the supernatural invading the natural, that the angel’s sudden visit did not phase her. It’s likely that Mary didn’t think there was much of a difference between the supernatural realm and the natural world. To her, everything was natural *and* supernatural; and by golly, if angels are going to show up and tell you something, that’s as normal as the sunrise.

Certainly Mary had a different perspective on reality than we do.

While the appearance of the angel did not upset Mary, the angel’s message was very troubling. Why?

Because the angel announced *she was favored by God.*

Being Favored by God: “Uh-oh.”

Many Christians ask for God's favor. I certainly have. We assume it means God will send them good things that we like, and we like good things. Good things like financial provision, good health, and maybe some godly influence over others.

But what if God's idea of good things differs from your idea? I don't mean that God ever steals, kills or destroys, or even sends sickness. Those are all bad things sent from the enemy⁴, and not from God. But what if God's favor makes you a social pariah for the rest of your life, or at the very least radically changes the direction of your life from what you had in mind? This is what God had in store for Mary.

Think about it. Imagine you're a 14 or 15 year old Jewish girl in a primitive and ancient patriarchal culture, and you're minding your business, living your life, nervous about that man whom you're betrothed to. You plan on being a good wife, living there in your poor community near your family, bear some children, and teach them to follow in their father's trade, just as everyone in your family for untold generations have done.

Suddenly an angel shows up and says, "God is totally going to throw your life into a tailspin. All your plans? Yeah, forget them. You're favored by God."

And in case she didn't hear it the first time, the angel mentions it again. *You're favored!*

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."

*And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called **the Son of the Most High**. And the **Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David**, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of **his kingdom** there will be no end."*

This is a profound message regarding the invasion of God's Kingdom on earth. For centuries, it's what the Jews longed for: heaven was coming to earth! God's eternal peace was invading! *At last!*

But Mary may have missed the angel's Kingdom message. She couldn't get past the "you, an unwed Jewish girl, are gonna be pregnant" part. Mary immediately recognized that such a blessing would mean in her culture with its strict moral codes that are similar to modern Sharia law. If her community didn't stone her (which frankly didn't happen often anyway), she'd certainly become a social outcast, and maybe she would be considered a prostitute. At the very least, Mary knew being pregnant would bring shame to herself, her father, her family, her fiancé, and her community, and most of all, to her child and her other children, assuming anyone would ever wed her. So much for a her planned life of peace.

Mary affirms this concern by making it clear to the angel that she wasn't sleeping around.

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

The angel calmly explains the birds and the bees to her, *Virgin Birth style*, and then utters the most astounding truth ever uttered by man or angel. We've read or heard it so often, we have completely lost how incredible this is. And furthermore, in our modern thinking we miss the unbelievably bold spiritual warfare subtext.

*And the angel answered her, "**The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you;***

therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God.”

"God did it. God got me pregnant." That would be her feeble defense to society.

Christmas' Link to Genesis 6:1-4

Actually, it's not likely she would say such a thing because to do so would be utterly blasphemous and perhaps cause more danger to her and her child than the charge of adultery!

What would have come to mind of the Jews and Gentiles (Luke's primary audience) is another time when "the sons of God" (to Jewish audiences) or "the gods" (to Gentile audiences) impregnated women, who gave birth to demigods called the giants.

In the Bible, this is first recorded in Genesis 6 and directly mentioned by the New Testament writers Titus and Peter. Actually, Mary's culture (today known as the Second Temple Period) was awash in literature and stories that described those events. Some of the stories were clearly fanciful, others soberingly historical, but all were terrifyingly theological.

The stories describe powerful beings, sometimes called the sons of God, sometimes called Watchers, and sometimes simply called angels, who violated the divine order, came to earth, and impregnated human women. Their offspring were giants, which corrupted the land, leading to a Great Flood that destroyed them all. The Jews in the Second Temple Period believed that demons were the spirits of these dead giants, doomed to roam the earth causing terrible afflictions on the

living. Many of these demons eventually aligned themselves to other rebellious angels who became the gods of the pagan nations.

Centuries after the Great Flood, giants appeared again in Canaan during Israel's conquest and had to be dealt with ruthlessly by the invading Israelites in the most morally troubling parts of the Bible. At least, they are morally troubling to us, who read the ancient scriptures with modern eyes. To the ancient Israelites, the solution was obvious. These demonic giants warred against God's people, even as these demonic gods warred against the God of Israel. Demonic gods like Beelzebub. The founders of Israel's most powerful enemies throughout its long history, including Rome, were thought to be offspring of such forbidden sexual unions.

These pagan gods and their demonic offspring were the eternal enemies of all that was good, holy, and righteous, and the Jews looked for a warrior who someday would not only establish God's Kingdom on earth, but also defeat these demonic powers once and for all. That this warrior would be God incarnated as a human, the Son of God, entered no one's mind before the angel spoke it to Mary.

All of these giant thoughts would have flashed in an instant through Mary's mind. And just now, the angel told her the God of Israel was going to impregnate *her*, and *her* offspring would *defeat them all*. For us with the benefit of hindsight, we can see the long war that began in Genesis 6 culminating on the Cross, with the cradling manger as shocking way station. But for Mary, the angel's claim must have seemed shockingly blasphemous.

Anyone who heard her claim that her baby was conceived by the Holy Spirit would immediately assume the angel was a wicked demonic spirit and had actually done the deed. Perhaps, people would think, the angel was actually a demon like Beelzebub. And that meant her baby would be considered

demonic as well. The Old Testament was littered with accounts of what happened to such babies.

No. She must have shuddered at the thought. Mary would keep her mouth shut, at least at first. But to the angel, she had a reply:

And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Truly, this was a stunning declaration of faith and obedience. The consequences were grave for her and her family and stayed with them all of her life. We can and should look back in awe at this young woman's faith and obedience in the light of God's favor.

Questions

Do you want God's favor? What do you hope it looks like?

What are you willing to sacrifice to receive special favor from God?

In this devotion, we attempted to step into Mary's world and her mind. How shocking must it have been for God's angel for Mary to receive this message?

The angel offered a paradigm shifting prophetic word. It's so paradigm shifting, that today, Muslims refuse to accept that a Holy God could incarnate through a woman's womb. But God calls us to shift our paradigm to think like he does. How can we accept God's word when he asks us to shift our paradigm?

CHAPTER 3

FAMILY TIES

For many, the Christmas holidays involved gathering with family and friends, sometimes not seen much through the years.

Such gatherings are full of joy and sometimes tension. As we'll see, these "traditions" began with Mary and Joseph.





CHAPTER THREE

Family Ties

Devotional Reading

Luke 1:39-56

In those days Mary arose and went into the hill country, to a town in Judah and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry,

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

“And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.

“He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.⁵

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. And all went to be registered, each to his own town.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Christmas holidays are a time when family members often travel to spend time together. This tradition, in a sense, begins with Mary. After receiving her shocking news, Mary travelled to spend time with her older relative Elizabeth, a much older woman whose child-bearing years had passed. An angel of the Lord had come to Elizabeth's husband declaring they would have a child, who would become a great prophet. And sure enough, she became pregnant. It's likely that this news would not have reached Mary by the time Gabriel appeared to her. Gabriel revealed it to her as confirmation that his word was true. Naturally, this made Elizabeth possibly the only person Mary could safely share the truth of her news, that the Father of her baby was God Almighty. During the Christmas holidays today, we often travel to spend time with our families, often including those we haven't seen in a long time, and similarly, we enjoy sharing good news.

But there are accounts of other family travels in the Bible's Christmas reports that are not so joyous. In fact, they sound a lot like many of our modern family reunions. For many of us,

the Christmas holidays are a time of tension between family members who, beneath the veneer of joy, don't see each other often or even eye to eye. In fact, this "tradition" begins with Joseph taking Mary to Bethlehem.

The traditional story has Joseph traveling to Bethlehem alone with a very pregnant wife, who goes into labor as they enter town. They frantically try to find a place where she can give birth, but no one helps and the inn is full.

So they find a stable or a cave where the animals feed, and she gives birth there. It supposed to be a beautiful illustration of the humble nature of Jesus' birth.

Except it's pure fantasy! It was conceived in the Medieval Era by Europeans who applied their context (and assumptions about Jews) onto the biblical text. It ignores the original cultural context and in fact is deeply offensive to the community of Bethlehem. Think about it: *there isn't a community on the planet that wouldn't allow a woman in labor to come inside to give birth.* I mean, come on!

In fact, it's highly unlikely Joseph would have so mis-timed his journey so that they'd arrive in the nick of time.

What Goes Unsaid

Luke's account of Jesus' birth doesn't declare any of these things. Much is unsaid, but Luke assumes we understand what is going on, because many of his readers would have remembered, or at least heard about that time. In addition, his readers would have been familiar with the culture because they lived in it. There was no need for Luke to be specific. So let's look at what is unsaid.

Over the previous decades, the Roman Empire had expanded, been torn apart by civil wars, challenged by

invasions, and expanded again. A few years before Jesus was born, the Empire's officials, realizing they had lost track of the population, issued the order to gain a better idea of just who lived in its borders and where. The Empire delegated to the local provinces certain deadlines to complete the census. The Imperial governor over Syria, a region that included Judea (where Mary and Joseph lived), would have worked with the King Herod of Judea, who in turn collaborated with the local priests to figure out the most judicious procedures and timelines for the census.

Joseph was in the House of David. Born in Bethlehem perhaps 10 centuries before, David had been the second king of Israel and himself had ordered a census. Practically speaking, Rome's order meant all of David's living male descendants had to return to Bethlehem for registration. It wasn't just Joseph heading to Bethlehem, but any of his male relatives who no longer lived there, potential including his father, brothers, second-cousins, third uncles twice removed, and so on. That would have been quite a family reunion in the little town of Bethlehem! For the patriarchal and family-minded Jews, there could not be a better place a baby boy to be born. In other words, Joseph would have to buy many, many cigars on the big day.

Joseph and Mary lived in Galilee, a very poor, rural and sparsely populated area, far to the north of Bethlehem. The distance from Joseph's home to Bethlehem was about 80 miles as the bird flies, but they likely did not go in a straight line. To do so would have meant crossing Samaria, a forbidden zone populated by low-life half-breeds hated by the Jews. Being a good Jew, Joseph and his family would have gone around Samaria, causing about a week's journey through highly populated areas.

Joseph and Mary no doubt traveled in a large caravan well ahead of her expected time to give birth. Bethlehem was a

suburb of Jerusalem, one of the largest cities in the entire Roman Empire, with over a million local inhabitants. They likely experienced some culture shock moving next to this vast and ancient metropolis with all of its energy and excitement. Being a skilled laborer, Joseph would have set up shop right away, planning to stay in town until the work dried up, which conceivably would have been a very long time. In addition to the sheer economic opportunity of living in the suburbs, King Herod had invested in many large building projects. So there may have been plenty of work to be had there.

When they arrived, Joseph and Mary would immediately move in with some of Joseph's family who were already living there. All the local families would have boarded their distant relatives, friends and even visiting strangers in their homes.

Most English translations of Luke say there was no room in the "inn." But Luke, who wrote in a very precise Greek, doesn't suggest an "inn" at all. The word translated as "inn" means "guest room" or "upper room." English translators render this word correctly the other times this word appears. For instance, much later, when Jesus and his disciples take the Last Supper in the upper room, the same word is used as in Luke's birth account. The other New Testament accounts that speak of an inn use a different Greek word, the actually does mean "inn." The tradition to render that word "inn" is so strong that even the ESV translators still rely on religious tradition rather than historical accuracy.

What also goes unsaid but was understood by Luke's first audience was that practically everyone kept animals in their homes. The most important animals like goats, which produced nutritious milk on a daily basis and provided families with a wonderful source of protein, lived on the first floor. The manger, used to feed the animals, was necessarily also on the first floor in the family's house. Above this level

(away from the animal smells) were the upper rooms where the family slept, including any guest rooms.

It makes sense there wouldn't be room in the guest room: lots of family were in town to register with the government. And besides, it was the Jewish New Year, and there were lots of things to do in nearby Jerusalem, so no doubt many stayed around long after the census for the festivities.

Family Tension: No Room in the Guest Room.

Why wouldn't Joseph's family let Mary into the guest room? Who could possibly have been more needy of a comfortable room than a young mother and her infant son? The house was no doubt flooded with relatives, but certainly, everyone would have recognized the most welcome place for the baby was the upper room.

It seems Joseph's family rejected her and her baby. In their minds, their distant hillbilly relative Joseph had brought home his redneck girlfriend, who was pregnant with Lord knows whose child. So uncivilized. That sort of thing might go on in Galilee, you see, with its ignorant shepherds and uncouth fishermen. But in the suburbs of Jerusalem, well, that just wouldn't do. There in the city, they followed Moses' Law, you see, not like those hicks up in the boonies. Tsk tsk tsk. No, she and her bastard child can sleep with the animals, thank you very much. That's what they are, after all. Animals.

Put yourself in Mary and Joseph's place.

What goes unsaid isn't that Joseph couldn't find help in a destitute town while his wife went into labor. It's that his family shamed them.

The family rejected this unwed pregnant woman, relegating her to the level of the animals.

Jesus' birth was one of shame and rejection by his own family. And Luke is carefully foreshadowing this account as a prophetic picture of Jesus' ministry to God's family and ultimate rejection by that family.

Get it?

This Christmas, if you experience tension in your family gatherings, remember how Joseph must have felt; remember Mary's rejection, and a baby born in shame.

What a shock, what vindication, what a stunning declaration it must have been when the shepherds showed up to worship the newborn king! The shepherds then spread through the community to make sure everyone heard the good news. Joy to the World! The Lord is come! Let earth receive her King!

If your holiday gathers are filled with tension, or worse, you feel rejection by your family, gather together and get to a church, a community to welcome you, and celebrate together the birth of the King!

Questions

When you gather with your family or friends over the holidays, what do you most look forward to?

What fills you with grief over the holidays?

How does Mary and Joseph's experience relate to your experience over the holidays?

How does this reflect the heart of God towards you?

CHAPTER 4

ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD ON HIGH

The Christmas holidays are inundated with fictional stories that highlight the wonder of the season.

This chapter includes a fictional take about some shepherds on that first Christmas night, so long ago.





CHAPTER FOUR

Angels We Have Heard on High

Devotional Reading

Luke 2:8-20

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you

good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and 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 among those with whom he is pleased!"

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

“The wolves are out tonight.” For a shepherd, there was no greater danger, no greater risk to life and limb. In this case, the warning was taken both figuratively and literally.

Yes, the wolves were out. Their howls carried on the wind. But the greater danger lay in the valley, bristling with travelers and visitors. On top of the big festival ushering in the New Year, a whole throng plodded to the cities of their family origin for the big Roman registration.

The Shepherd’s family had lived in the region for centuries – since the Conquest, they liked to claim. No, not Roman conquest, or Parthian or Roman again or Greek or Persian or Babylonian conquests... but the Hebrew one, way back. The Big One.

The Shepherd sighed. There had been a lot of conquests and probably more to come.

But all the moving marauders, all the vivacious visitors, all the cornucopian caravans stirred up thieves; thieves who would roam the countryside to steal simple sheep, kill sleeping shepherds, and destroy dynamic destinies.

The Shepherd looked over his flock with approving alertness. With him as their shepherd, they would not want.

Other local shepherds were bringing their flocks to his sheepfold that evening, and they would take turns guarding the flock through the night. The flocks would mix amongst themselves, but the shepherds did not worry. They knew their sheep and their sheep knew them.

The Shepherd just had to call and start walking, and his sheep, knowing his voice, would follow, trusting that he would take them to lie down in green pastures and lead them besides still waters.

The sheepfold, a low fence that encircled a large space for the sheep to rest in, had a narrow opening, just large enough

for one or two to squeeze through. There was no gate. The Shepherd stood at the opening, barring the way between predator and prey.

Tonight, the fold would be crowded, but tomorrow they would head away from the busting suburbs of Jerusalem. The crowds didn't much care for shepherds. An unsavory, uneducated, unsophisticated lot, shepherds tended to smell like their flock, tended to care for them more deeply than for civilized folk, and tended to care little what others, who gladly purchased their wool or spotless lambs for Passover, thought of them.

The Shepherd grimaced, thinking of the little lambs to be sacrificed at Passover. Parting with precious lambs he helped ewes birth into the world was hard. No one understood the price of sin as the Shepherd.

As night approached, the other shepherds herded the sheep into his fold, the little critters interacting with each other like... well, let’s face it. They’re sheep. They didn’t much notice that a neighboring flock was joining them for a sleepover.

Few words passed between the men. They mainly just sat around the fire, and stared across the valley into Jerusalem, brightly lit beneath the starry, starry night.

“It’s shining on the Temple.” From their vantage on the hill that resembled a skullcap, the youngest of them with the sharpest eyes could peer directly into the Temple gates, and in daylight could even see the heavy curtains that separated man from God.

The Shepherd had often wondered how many spotless lambs would be required to remove that veil forever, and then shuddered at the thought. God set loose from the Temple of Stone? Never. Besides, God was best left to priests; God would care little of shepherds and understand them even less.

“No,” the Eldest said. “It’s shining on yon village.” About five miles away.

It was. The star hung low and bright. Wisps of fog veiled much of the countryside.

And then in a flash, the starry night faded before sea of bright white light. Before them, their own shadows appeared, dashed to the horizon and then disappeared. They leapt to their feet, spun around, staffs and rods held up and what to their wondering eyes appeared...?

An angel of the Lord, filling them with fear! And what can only be described as glory surrounded the angel and the men.

And then words he spoke; words would echo for all eternity: *“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 a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”*

Behind the angel, the skies rolled up like a scroll and a mighty army appeared, arrayed in rank upon rank, of angelic beings beyond description as far as their eyes could see.

A declaration rang out with fervency, as if every angel had been aching with anticipation since the Fall to announce the good news: *“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will towards men!”*

And more they said, a waterfall of thunderous praise to God, much more than he could remember. And then, the scroll rolled back and the heavens disappeared, and when their eyes adjusted to the star field and their hearts and breaths throbbed again, their eyes turned back to yon village.

“Bethlehem is the City of David,” whispered the Eldest. “Let us go and see this thing that has happened.” He started off.

“We cannot just leave the flock!” It’d take hours to cross the distance, leading the sheep, and to leave them unguarded in the wolf-infested ranges would be disastrous.

“The Lord has made this event on this night known to us,” the voice cracked from little use, or from awe, the Younger couldn’t tell.

They conferred further. The Younger said, “I will stay and guard the sheep. Make haste, and if you can, return this night, so I can go and see too.”

The others raced off to see that which they could not understand: the Savior born this night. They left the Younger alone with that very thought.

He sat in the opening, staring across the terrain to Bethlehem, listening to wolf cries on the wind, and the hours passed. A fear of another sort crept into his soul. What if the wolves attacked while he slept? Or some sneaking thief slipped a blade between his ribs?

“He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

With these words in his heart, he lay across the opening, becoming the sheep’s gate to safety, and he drifted off.

Panting footsteps woke him in the darkest of night. One of the shepherds had raced back. The Younger leapt to his feet and without a word, dashed off. It’s not too late. It’s not too late.

His legs pumped. His stomach growled. His breath rasped. He thirsted.

He was running through dangerous lands, known hideouts of bandits and thieves, and he felt fear, and he remembered, *“Thou preparedst a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou annointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.”*

As long as he ran towards the Savior, he knew he would be ok.

As he entered the village, the other shepherds beckoned him. The townsfolk kept their most important animals in their homes on the first floor for protection and the added heat in the autumn nights, while the families slept in the upper rooms. With so many guests, even the spare rooms were full, but the Younger could not understand why a newborn baby would not be in a guest room, but in a feeding trough, a place worthy of maybe a shepherd, where the sheep knew they could eat.

The exhausted mother was sleeping in a bed of straw and blankets. The husband guarded the manger, eyes revealing conflicting emotions. The space was filled women and other members of the household, some glowering with guarded if confused eyes. The Shepherd did not understand why the community rejected the mother and her baby, a rejection knew all too well, but he did not need to know every answer: he just needed to know the way to the Savior.

With his eyes, he asked permission.

The husband nodded. The mother opened her eyes to watch the Shepherd slowly walk forward, until the Baby was in view.

Wonder flooded his heart. God does understand rejection and God was pleased to reveal to lowly shepherds, those rejected by the community, God's heart for humanity and the Person through with God would redeem humanity.

The Shepherd fell to his knees and bowed his head and cried, "*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!*"

~~~

In the morning, the shepherds decided against retreating from the world, but instead split up to invade the world with the good news that the Savior had come, and nothing – not shame or disdain of men, not fear of rejection or persecution-

would keep them silent, -for who could understand better the mission of God than lowly shepherds, keeping watch over their flock by night?

## Questions

Read Psalm 23. How does God relate to you as a shepherd?

Why did the angels reveal to the shepherds the good news of Jesus' birth? Why not to the priests in nearby Jerusalem?

How do shepherds protect their sheep at night? Read John 10:1-5. How can you make Jesus your shepherd?

What does this story reveal to you about God's heart?

## CHAPTER 5

# GIFT OF MAGI: CLASH OF EMPIRES

Because we our ideas of Christ's birth are clouded from the biblical accounts by tradition and lack of cultural or historical understanding, we miss the unmistakable truth that the birth of Jesus, to those in and around Jerusalem, threatened the clash of two superpowers, which resulted in an atrocity.

This chapter explains why.





## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Gift of Magi: Clash of Empires*

#### Devotional Reading

Matthew 2:1-23

*Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."*

*When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.*

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

*"And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."*

*Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.*

*And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."*

*After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.*

*And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.*

*And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.*

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."

And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

"A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of

Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: "He shall be called a Nazarene."

My wife collects Nativity scenes. Each one contains images of the 3 wise men next to Baby Jesus in the stable, and the popular conception of the Christmas story is that the wise men appeared the night of Jesus birth, in a stable.

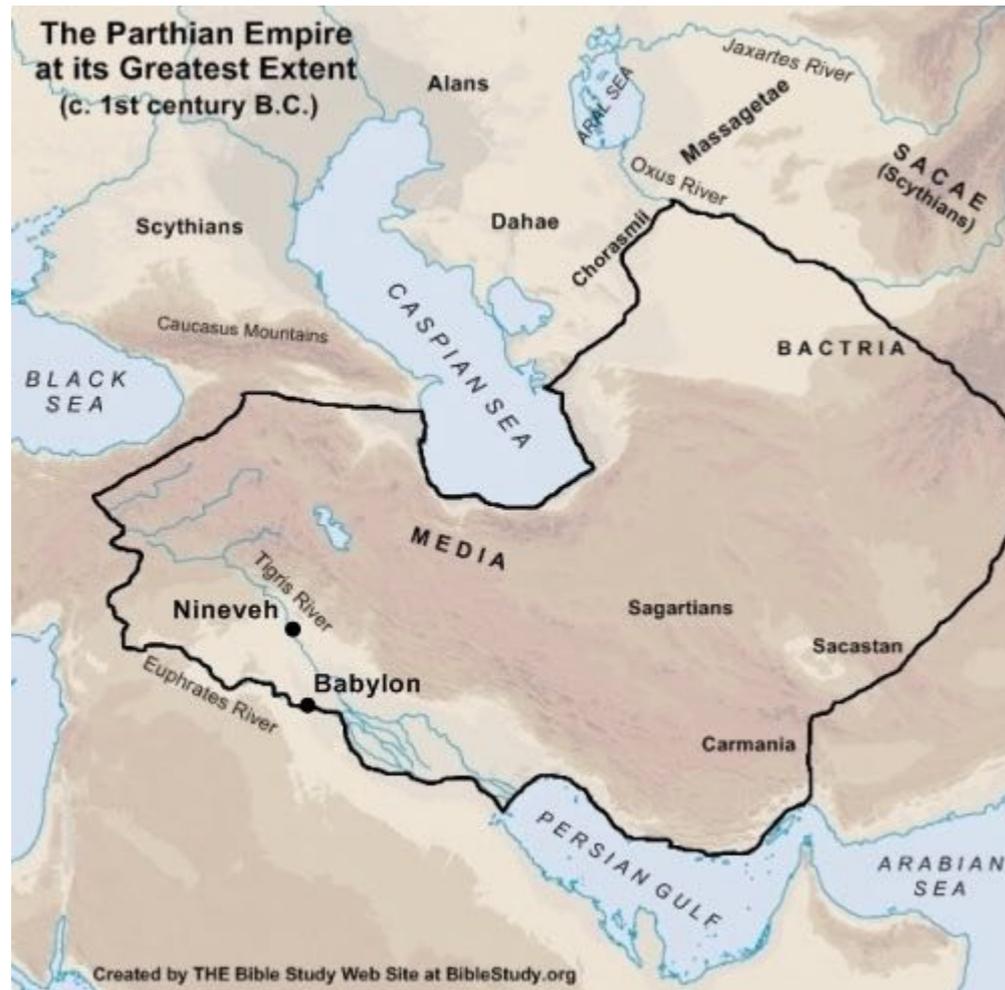
The truth is *much more dramatic*.

Two thousands years later, we have lost what goes unsaid in Matthew's narrative. We don't understand the unstated geopolitical subtext in which the readers were immersed. Let's take a moment and look at the big picture surrounding Jesus' birth, which actually threatened a clash of empires.

## **The Parthian Empire**

In the century before Jesus' birth, the Roman Empire was still a Republic, although it governed regions from Spain to Syria. South of Syria lay the independent Jewish nation called Judea. To the east lay another superpower, the Parthian Empire, which stretched all the way to India.

Judea contained strategic and important land routes, somewhat beyond the reach of Parthia, but which the Romans believed vital for its own protection and wealth.



A few years later, in 53 B.C., the famous Roman Senator Crassus decided to continue Rome's expansion and invaded the Parthian Empire with an army 40,000 Roman centurions.

The Parthians met the Romans in the desert with its own army and obliterated Crassus' forces. The Senator was killed in the fighting. This shocked Rome into a bloody and costly civil war. Subsequently, the Roman Republic reorganized, and Rome installed a new King of the Jews as its puppet in Judea, King Herod. But the weakened state of the Roman Empire courted an invasion by the Parthians.



Sixty years before Jesus' birth, the Roman Empire invaded and conquered the land of Judea, including Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Nazareth, killing tens of thousands of Jews, including many of the priestly class.

Joseph and Mary's grandparents likely remembered these events, assuming they survived the raging combat, and the victorious raping and pillaging legions.

### A Bridge Too Far

The invasion came just seven years later and the Parthians took Syria, Galilee and Judea, conquering Jerusalem and all the region, pushing the Romans into headlong and unprecedented retreat.

King Herod fled to Egypt and the Parthians installed a new King of the Jews.

---

Joseph and Mary's parents lived through these events.

## **The Empire Strikes Back**

Rome recovered from its civil wars and sent new and brilliant commanders back to the frontier to push back the overextended Parthians. The Romans captured the Parthian king's son, and the defeated Parthian forces withdrew from Syria. Rome quickly retook Judea, and Herod returned from exile as the King of the Jews in 37 B.C.

Parthia eventually negotiated the release of their king's son, and the Romans threw in a slave girl to sweeten the deal. She must have been really something, because the Parthian king married her, making her queen. She bore him several sons, and sent all but one back to Rome. The Parthian nobility were aghast at the king's choice for a queen and that his heir could have Roman blood.

Across the frontier, the Roman Senate eyed the rich Parthian Empire suspiciously. Tensions along the border seethed and the threat of another general war between the empires loomed across the border provinces from Judea to Armenia. Rome militarized the borders in anticipation of a costly war everyone saw coming, but which Rome, still recovering from its own ghastly civil wars, wanted to avoid.

In this environment, Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant, although they had not had sexual relations. And he received a message from an angel in a dream that was so convincing, he flouted social conventions and chose to marry her, all the while knowing his community would assume he had gotten her pregnant out of wedlock, thus dooming them both to becoming pariahs.

It must have been some dream!

The angel revealed a lot about their unborn son, including his name, which meant "Yahweh is Our Salvation" and "God with Us."

## **Time for a New Parthian King**

In the Parthian governmental system, if the line of the king's succession become confused, two bodies of nobles would determine who should be the next king. One of the bodies were the Magi, an ancient order which six centuries earlier saw the Jewish seer Daniel at its head. It's likely Daniel embedded certain prophecies in the traditions and scripture of the Magi. When looking for the next king, the Magi conferred the stars, and based on their interpretation of the messages in the stars, sent traveling parties throughout the lands to search for the sign pointing them to the new king. These parties of Magi were accompanied by troops.

In this time, the Parthian succession seemed secure, until about 3 BC, when the Parthian queen, that former slave girl sent from Rome, murdered her husband and elevated her son to the throne, and *then married him*.

Such a state unnerved both Parthian nobles *and* the traditional sensibilities of the Romans, whose machinations seemed to go terribly awry.

"What hath we wrought?" the Roman Senate asked itself (not for the first or last time) and sent even more troops to the border. Herod and the other border kings were under strict orders to *not provoke a war*. What went unsaid was, "don't provoke a war, even if it meant enacting atrocities on your own people."

---

A nearby border conflict erupted, but not with Parthia, caused Herod to send his legions north, away from Jerusalem, leaving the city largely unguarded.

Meanwhile, Magi conferred the stars. There *had* to be a better solution for Parthia. They sent parties out to find the new King of Parthia.

Coincidentally, as it's called, a certain star had appeared in the sky over Judea. Some of the Magi read the signs and began assembling their caravan.

### **We Come Bearing Gifts**

It was not unusual for Jews in the Parthian Empire to visit their relatives in Judea bearing gifts, which sometimes took the form of vast wealth. Such treasure-laden parties were tempting targets to local leaders and their armies or bands of pirates. Thus, the caravans were typically guarded by contingents of mercenaries or even official Parthian troops, sometimes as many as 10,000 strong.

Such an army showed up one day in Jerusalem, guarding Magi bearing gifts and looking for the new King... *of the Jews*.

That was unexpected. Herod knew the turmoil going on in Parthia, so Magi appearing to find the new King of Parthia was to be expected, but a new *King of the Jews*? Just who did these Parthian Magi think they were? And here Herod was, with his own legions away and Jerusalem largely undefended.

Herod must have wondered: were the Magi and their troops a vanguard to a general invasion to replace him *again*, as had happened just a few decades before? A prelude to a war that would lay the whole region waste, a war everyone wanted to avoid?

As so often happens to the Great Powers, events sometimes have a mind of their own, and wars they want to avoid occur anyway. Herod knew this and was determined to not trigger an event to lay waste to the whole border, an event that would likely see his head separated from his body by either the Romans or the Parthians.

Thus he greeted the visiting dignitaries with kind and warm words.

### **Family Drama**

A suburb of Jerusalem had family issues of its own. In response to the Empire's summons, the betrothed couple, which traced its line to King David himself, had returned home and given birth to a son.

Mysterious circumstances surrounded the birth and rumors started by local shepherds had faded, but everyone knew the son that she had birthed was not the husband's... or if it was, he had been with his wife before they married, which was forbidden by good Jews. The community knew better and rejected them.

The young family had decided to stay in town for a time and moved into a house. With war tensions so high, new construction, aside from government spending, must have stopped (no sense in investing in new buildings that will get destroyed in a war), making money to support a family hard to come by when the husband was in the construction business. Added to financial stress came the distress of the town gossip about the bastard son and his loose mother... who would help *them* financially?

Word must have spread like wildfire: a small army guarding some Magi with gifts had appeared in Jerusalem. Roman

---

troops went on alert, but King Herod had warned everyone to not provoke the Parthians, since such visitations weren't uncommon. Herod's scouts indicated no host of invading Parthians threatened the region. But the tidings of the Magi were confusing. The tidings out of Parthia in general were alarming. Herod may have sent word to Rome, requesting more forces.

And then the Star reappeared. Joseph, Mary, and everyone in town saw it. Including the Magi and their small army in Jerusalem, just a few miles away.

So then the unthinkable happened. One day, a parade of the Magi and their troops through town led to a knock at the door of Joseph's house. The foreign dignitaries saw the young boy, not yet 2 years old, and they bowed, whilst his flummoxed parents and neighbors... and Herod's spies shadowing the Magi and their troops... watched on.

The Magi presented gifts: vast wealth and expensive medicinal oils. And the gift of worship. They stayed a while to learn more about this new King of the Jews, until one night these nobles, these foreign diplomats who specialized in the things of the spirit realm, had an angelic visitation in their dreams. The angel offered prophetic revelation and instruction, which they acted upon. Their own guards were on high alert as they slipped out of the country, avoiding the trap the Romans were preparing for them in Jerusalem.

### **Joseph's Thoughts**

Imagine going from poverty to exceeding wealth in an instant. Imagine going from pariah to celebrity. And imagine what those who rejected Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus must have felt: anger, bitterness, and jealousy.

Imagine also the items Joseph thought to shower on his wife and son. Maybe some new clothes. Maybe an apartment in Jerusalem! He certainly would not have to work for a long time.

And then, imagine the trepidation of Joseph, who must have suddenly realized *the eye of both Rome and Parthia must now be on him and his family*.

Think about that. Think of how the weight of the world, the fulcrum between two empires, lay in his arms that night.

He would look at his adopted son in love, and wonder... and consider what must he do with his newfound wealth to protect his family.

And so he prayed. "God. What should I do?"

God answered sooner than he expected, releasing an angel from heaven, which appeared to Joseph a second time in his dreams with prophetic revelation: "Run to Egypt. You can afford it now. You're correct: God's Son is in danger. Don't wait another minute. Go now!"

For sudden wrath and war was coming to Bethlehem.

### **The Meaning of Christmas**

We live in a world of clashing empires, political strife, and bewildering events outside our control. Against this backdrop, the drama of our lives unfolds.

And in the midst of that, look to the Son. Marvel at who he is, what he means, what he is worth. And then pray, and ask God, "What must we do?" And be prepared for the answer.

God may release an angel to speak to you in your dreams as well.

For to look and to ask and to obey... this is the meaning of Christmas.

---

## Questions

How does the larger geopolitical context of Jesus' birth add meaning to the story?

The Bible never indicates just how many wise men or troops showed up looking for the new king. We can only speculate, given the larger political events occurring in Parthia and the great wealth being carried by the Magi. How might have Joseph felt when this force arrived at his doorstep?

How is it fitting that the focus of two superpowers for a moment was on baby Jesus? How does this foreshadow Christ's ministry?

The financial means to escape to Egypt came the moment Joseph needed it: God is our provider. How does this encourage you?

## CHAPTER 6

# THE CHRISTMAS STAR

There are many ideas about the Christmas star. This chapter looks at the biblical and astronomical evidence that the stars proclaimed the birth of Jesus, the King of Israel.





## CHAPTER SIX

### *The Christmas Star*

#### Devotional Reading

Psalm 19:1-6, Revelation 12:1-5

*The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*

*Day to day pours out speech,  
and night to night reveals knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words,  
whose voice is not heard.  
Their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.  
In them he has set a tent for the sun,  
which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber,  
and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy.  
Its rising is from the end of the heavens,  
and its circuit to the end of them,  
and there is nothing hidden from its heat. Psalm 19:1-6*

*And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days. Revelation 12:1-5*

The most influential Christian theologian of all time was a Jewish scholar, the Apostle Paul. His brilliant mind was sharpened by the best education of his day and his theology was radically shaped by personal encounters with Jesus.

## The Creation Declared the King!

One of Paul's frustrations was the refusal of so many of his own people to recognize Jesus as their God in the flesh, despite many rational and supernatural proofs.

In his message to Roman believers, Paul said:

*"How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? ... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*

*But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for **"Their voice** has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world."*<sup>6</sup>

(I'll explain why "their voice" is in bold below). Paul quotes the Greek translation of Psalm 19:4. Let's look at the first 4 verses, here translated from Hebrew:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims the work of his hands.*

*Every day, they pour forth speech, and every night they tell knowledge.*

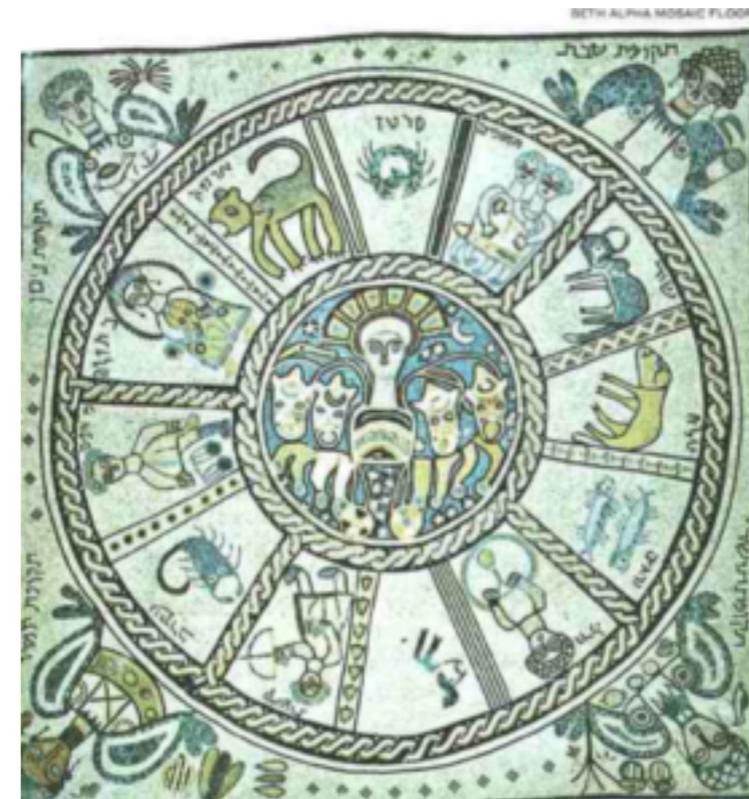
*There is no speech and there are no words; their sound is inaudible.*

*Yet in all the world **their line** goes out, and their words to the end of the world...*

(I'll explain why "their line" is in bold below). While many want to use this and similar passages to defend astrology and others want to look at it symbolically, this poetry does not reflect symbolism or a defense of astrology.

## A Note on Astrology

The biblical Hebrews shared the zodiac with other ancient peoples. It was a clear tool to tell the months and seasons, but they also believed God could communicate what he was doing through the heavens. Here is an image of the Hebrew zodiac taken from the ancient world.



Astrology, however, is different. Astrology is the notion that the destinies of individuals, families, and nations are determined by cosmic powers in the heavens. Astrologists try gaining credibility through linking their occultism to science, but it ultimately this leads to a colossal denial of free will by adherents and is rather dangerous.<sup>7</sup>

Psalm 19 and other similar biblical passages do not defend or support astrology. Instead, they suppose that, since God made the heavens, he can use the heavens to communicate things to us.

### The Heavens Proved Jesus was King

Paul indicates that the stars preach the truth that Jesus was the divine king who came to Israel, and yet most Jews rejected him. Paul went on to quote Isaiah:

*"I have been found by those who did not seek me;  
I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me."*

What is Paul thinking about in this passage? To whom did the stars preach the truth that God emptied himself to become human and came to earth to inaugurate the Kingdom of God?

Since most Jews missed it, who saw it? Think back to the previous devotion: the Magi read the signs.

### The Heavenly Signs of Christmas

John wrote in Revelation 12 a description of the birth of Jesus.

*And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth.*

*And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth.*

*And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it.*

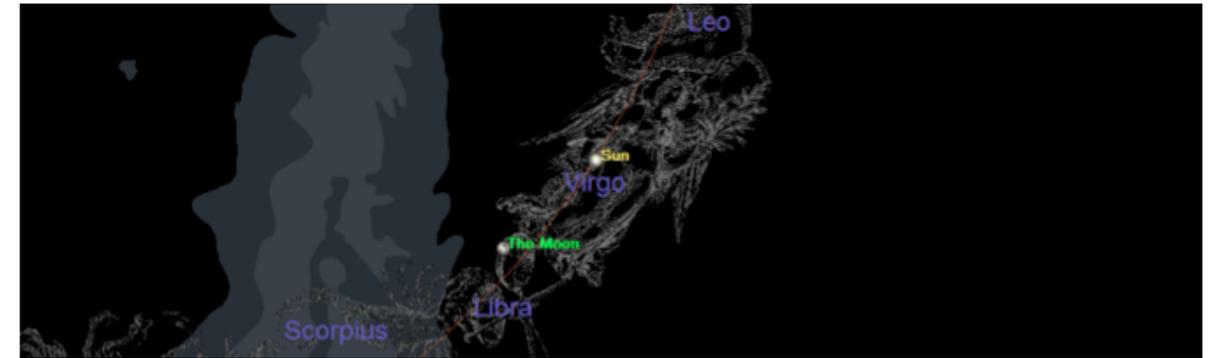
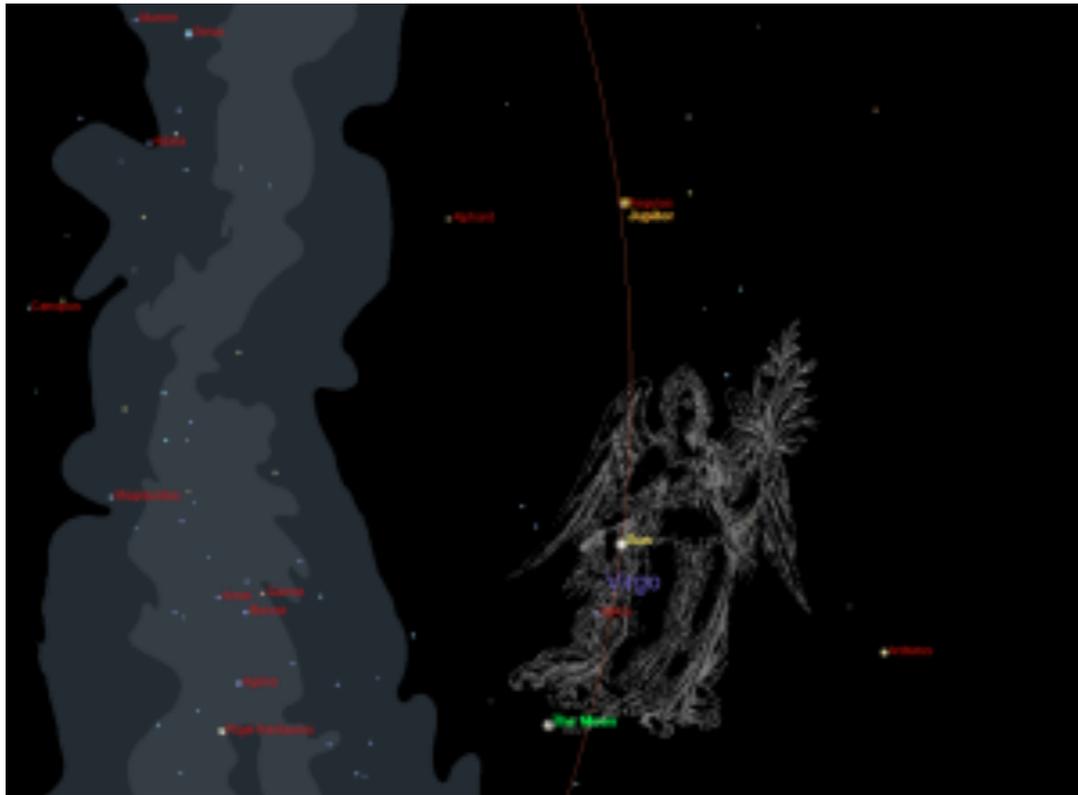
*She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.*

Above, I bolded from Paul's quotation of Psalm 19, "the voice" and the same word in Hebrew, "the line."

In the ancient world (and also ours), this refers to the ecliptic, the imaginary line astronomers use to track the constellations of the zodiac used by God to speak mysteries to those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

*a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.*

The constellation Virgo (the Virgin) is crowned with twelve stars. Being clothed with the sun (being in the constellation) and the moon at her feet looked like this:

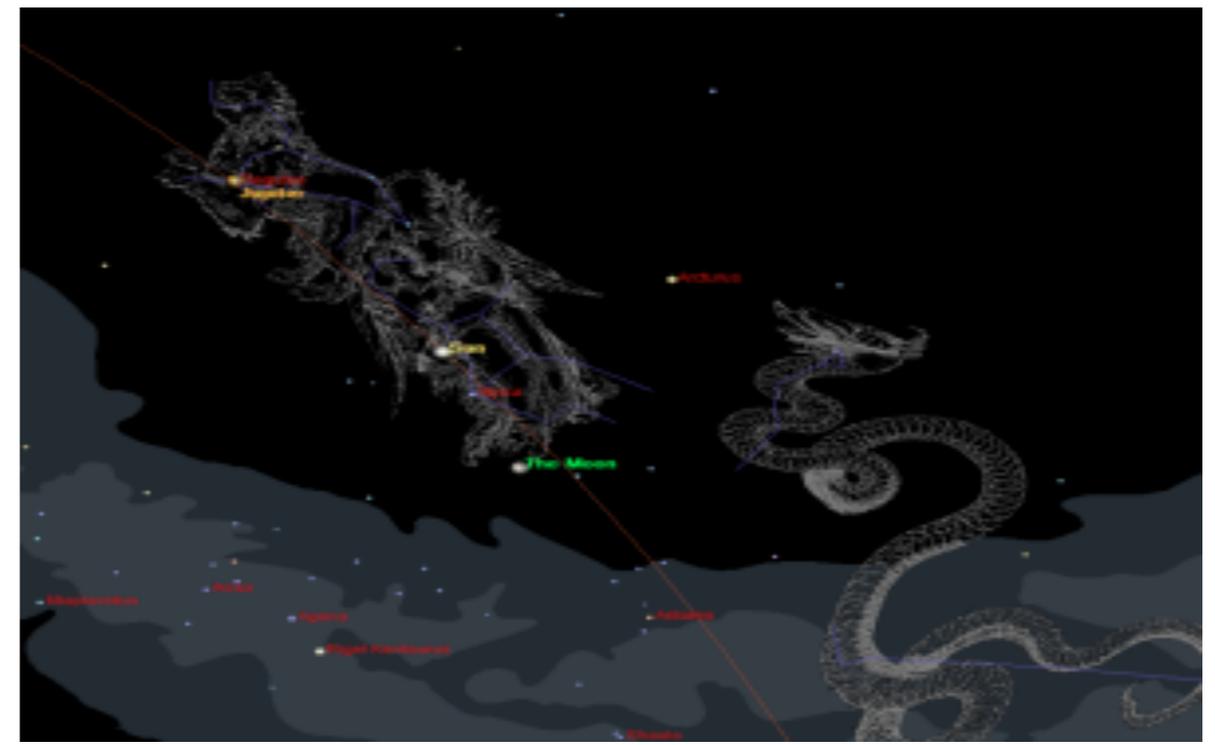


In the ancient world, the two constellations at Virgo's feet, were considered a single constellation: a scorpion creature with claws called The Dragon. During that 80 minute period, another dragon is off the line a bit, also at her feet.

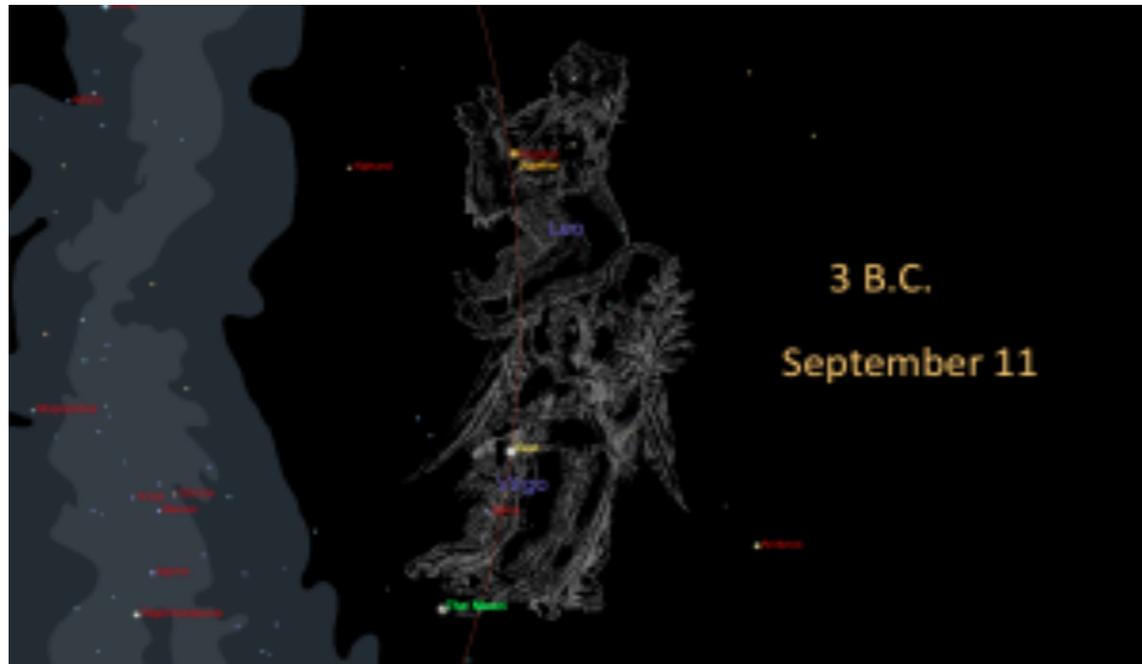
This occurred only one time **in all of history** for about a 20 day window.

Notice, during this 20 day window, the co-joining of Jupiter and Regulus above Virgo. In the First Century, Jupiter was known as the "King Planet", because it was the brightest planet, and Regulus was known as the "King Star", because it was the brightest star. To the human viewer, this co-joining would look like a *very large and bright star*.

When Virgo was clothed with the sun and the moon at her feet, this *very bright star* appeared for about 80 minutes in the constellation Leo, which to the Hebrews meant the **Lion of the tribe of Judah**.



The time that these conditions occurred was 3 B.C. on September 11.



Coincidentally, as its called, September 11 is, in the Hebrews' civil calendar Tishri 1: the Jewish New Year. The civil calendar is when the year number changes. It's also the Day of Trumpets, when the Hebrews would inaugurate a new king.

Perhaps the Magi and other astronomers noted this. The Magi packed their bags and came looking for the King of the Jews, the Lion of Tribe of Judah.

### **The Point of the Christmas Star**

Of course, there's even more to this, but for now, the point is simple. For those who had the eyes to see, the heavens

declared that the Divine King had come to earth to destroy the powers of darkness forever by establishing God's ever-expanding Kingdom.

The Christmas Star proclaimed it. So go, tell it on the mountains, over the hills and everywhere, that Jesus Christ is born!

### **Questions**

What does the Christmas star represent to you?

Paul declares that the zodiac and stars proclaimed that Jesus was King. How do you respond to that?

The biblical and astronomical evidence suggests that Jesus was actually born on the Jewish New Year, Tishri 1, or September 11 in our calendar. What are your thoughts and feelings about this?

For historical and cultural reasons, Christians have chosen to remember Christ's birth on December 25. In some cases an entire month is spent remembering the birth of Jesus. Some will point to pagan origins of December 25, but how does celebrating Christ's birth on December 25 demonstrate the power of the Gospel to redeem and renew the lost?

What does the Christmas star as discussed in this devotion reveal about God?

## CHAPTER 7

# MARY'S GIANT REVELATION PART 2

Mary received a profound prophecy about Jesus from the angel, but she did not understand it fully.

At least, not initially.

After 30 years of pondering, however, she began to realize the implications, revealed startlingly one day, at a wedding.





## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Mary's Giant Revelation Part 2*

#### Devotional Reading

Luke 2:19-20, Psalms 69:1-12, John 2:1-11

*But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

*Save me, O God!  
For the waters have come up to my neck.  
I sink in deep mire,  
where there is no foothold;  
I have come into deep waters,  
and the flood sweeps over me.  
I am weary with my crying out;  
my throat is parched.  
My eyes grow dim  
with waiting for my God.  
More in number than the hairs of my head  
are those who hate me without cause;  
mighty are those who would destroy me,  
those who attack me with lies.  
What I did not steal  
must I now restore?  
O God, you know my folly;  
the wrongs I have done are not hidden from you.  
Let not those who hope in you be put to shame through  
me,  
O Lord GOD of hosts;  
let not those who seek you be brought to dishonor through  
me,  
O God of Israel.  
For it is for your sake that I have borne reproach,  
that dishonor has covered my face.  
I have become a stranger to my brothers,  
an alien to my mother's sons.  
For zeal for your house has consumed me,  
and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen  
on me.  
When I wept and humbled my soul with fasting,  
it became my reproach.  
When I made sackcloth my clothing,*

*I became a byword to them.  
I am the talk of those who sit in the gate,  
and the drunkards make songs about me.* Psalms 69:1-12

*On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."*

*Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. And he said to them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast." So they took it. When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now." This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.*

I enjoy hearing mothers describe the birth experiences of their children. No two birth experiences are quite alike. I daresay, Mary experienced quite a traumatic pregnancy. Being impregnated by the Holy Spirit, public doubt about her character and integrity sullied the community. At times, she

must have wondered if the angel Gabriel was really from God or perhaps was one of those evil Watchers sent to masquerade as an angel of light, and impregnated her with an evil seed.

Except Gabriel had spoken the truth about Elizabeth, and her conflicted emotions and experiences of rejection and shame could not deny what she knew to be true. To a select few, she would whisper the truth, that God was her son's Father. To Elizabeth and to Joseph. But to most, she would answer the questions about the father with silence.

Then came the shepherds with their independent verification that what she knew to be true was true indeed. Mary pondered them in her heart, even while the rest of community vilified her son. Psalms 69 prophetically examined the emotions of being the son of a woman with a sullied reputation:

*I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's sons.<sup>8</sup>*

In the Jewish patriarchal society, tracing the lineage of males through the father's line was very important, but this passage refers to someone who could trace his lineage through his mother's line, not his father's. The verse also indicates his brothers knew their father, but he could not reveal who his father was. Therefore, his brothers assumed he did not know, and thus he had become a stranger to his own family, an alien to his mother's other sons. The passage is speaking of Jesus' lonely childhood and adolescence.

It goes on:

*I am the talk of those who sit in the gate, and the drunkards make songs about me.<sup>9</sup>*

During Jesus' life, Mary's community- and even Jesus' brothers - were never certain of who Jesus' father was. Jesus was the gossip of the town, and even the drunks sung about him. Some in Nazareth apparently thought he was Joseph's biological son, but others did not. During Jesus' public ministry, religious leaders accused him of being the son of a mother who got pregnant through sexual immorality: they called Jesus a bastard.

*They said to him, "We were not born of sexual immorality..."<sup>10</sup>*

Jesus was never in doubt of who his Father was... and neither were Mary or her husband Joseph, who apparently passed away before Jesus' public ministry began.

Jesus often showed incredible and culturally uncharacteristic love and affection to women who had bad reputations or had made poor choices or through unfortunate circumstances were forced into destitute situations. Jesus was a personal witness to just how cruel people can be to undesirables. His own name became a joke to the local drunks, if the Psalmist's prophecy was literal. But God desires society's undesirables, and Jesus proved it.

### **Mary's Public Vindication**

When Jesus was about 30, yet still before his public ministry had begun, he went to a wedding with his disciples. His mother and possibly other family members were there as well. These weddings were wonderful celebrations where the

hosts showered food and wine on the guests. Typically the groom served the best wine first, because no one cared if the wine wasn't as tasty later on!

Something went wrong at this wedding. Perhaps the groom was ill-prepared or could not afford to serve all the guests the wine they wanted. At any rate, they ran out. For some reason, Mary decided to intervene.

She came to Jesus and said they had no wine. Jesus protested. He had done no miraculous works of power yet, and there frankly was no reason for anyone to yet believe he would become the most influential miracle worker of all time. To that point, he was just a modest rabbi with a few disciples. Jesus told her his time had not yet come. Jesus spoke only what he heard the Father saying,<sup>11</sup> and so the Father must have been saying Jesus' time had not yet come.

But Mary had pondered in her heart certain prophecies for 30 years. In shame and derision, she had quietly raised her family, suffering the financial and social consequences of God's favor, all the while pondering in her heart the message spoken by angels and shepherds of the Kingdom of God being released on earth.

She knew from that the Kingdom had power to work miracles, to heal the sick, to cast out demons, and overturn poverty. She knew it was a Kingdom in which God gave wine to gladden the hearts.<sup>12</sup> At the wedding, the lack of wine was certainly not gladdening hearts.

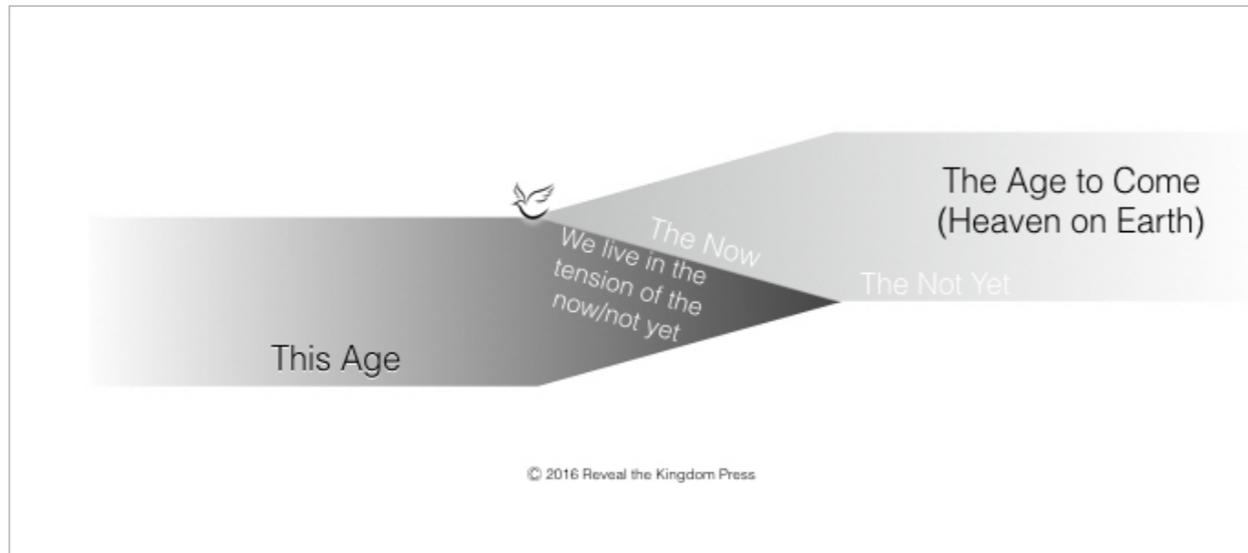
Jesus said it was not yet time for him to release the Kingdom through works of power.

But for thirty years, Mary pondered and she saw the future, and decided to pull it into the present through Jesus' spoken words. Mary knew the Kingdom was Future, but she needed it to be Present; she knew the Kingdom was in heaven, but she needed it to be on earth; she knew the Kingdom was Not Yet, but she needed to be Now.

After thirty years of pondering, Mary decided it was time for to release the Not Yet into the Now; it was time to grab the Future and pull it into the Present, to grab heaven and pull it to earth.

She turned to her servants and said, “Do whatever he tells you.”

Mary turned the Father’s *Not Yet* into the Son’s *Now*, and since the Son is one with the Father,<sup>13</sup> her profound



understanding of the Kingdom changed history and advanced God’s timeline. Mary was a steward of tomorrow even before tomorrow came. She saw the future and released it into the present through the power and will of Jesus Christ.

And so Jesus turned the water into wine.

Thirty years of dramatic and public shame was suddenly overturned by a display of dramatic and public power of the Kingdom of God releasing heaven on earth, ahead of schedule.<sup>14</sup>

I can imagine Mary’s smile now. Not a gloating smile. But a knowing one: she knew the Not Yet was breaking into the Now, and she would have a front row seat for the rest of her life. What a legacy Mary's faith and obedience preserved for

her... and for us, forever immortalized in nativity scenes the world over!

God's favor may not look like we expect it to look, but faith and obedience will leave an eternal legacy of the Not Yet breaking into the Now.

## Questions

How does the Psalm capture Jesus’ struggles in growing up?

Have you considered what the life of Mary and Jesus must have been like on a day to day basis, given the nature of Christ’s birth? What does that reveal about God’s heart towards the least in society?

How might have Mary felt when Jesus turned the water into wine?

Jesus came to inaugurate the Kingdom of God on earth. The Kingdom of God means the dynamic rule and reign of God, which brings God’s dynamic peace while overturning the works of the enemy. Apparently, it also means changing water into wine at wedding celebrations. How does the Kingdom turning the water into wine reflect God’s heart towards his people?

Given Jesus’ attendance and participation at the wedding, and since Jesus is God, how do you suppose Jesus would celebrate the Christmas holidays?

## CHAPTER 8

# CONCLUSION

With these thoughts in mind, I encourage you to ponder the nature of the Kingdom of God, identify where the Not Yet needs to break into the Now, and then go for it.

And most of all, I wish you a safe holiday season, full of love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. Merry Christmas!



## Notes

- [1.](#) Luke 1:26-38
- [2.](#) Matthew 1:18-25
- [3.](#) Luke 1:26-29
- [4.](#) John 10:10
- [5.](#) Luke 1:39-56
- [6.](#) Romans 10:14-18
- [7.](#) See my podcast on the topic, located here: <http://seerssee.podbean.com/e/ssm-ep3-horoscopes-and-prophecy/>.
- [8.](#) Psalm 69:8
- [9.](#) Psalm 69:12
- [10.](#) John 8:41
- [11.](#) John 8:28
- [12.](#) Psalm 105:15
- [13.](#) John 10:30
- [14.](#) God had written Mary's actions into his sovereignty.