

# A Christmas Devotional



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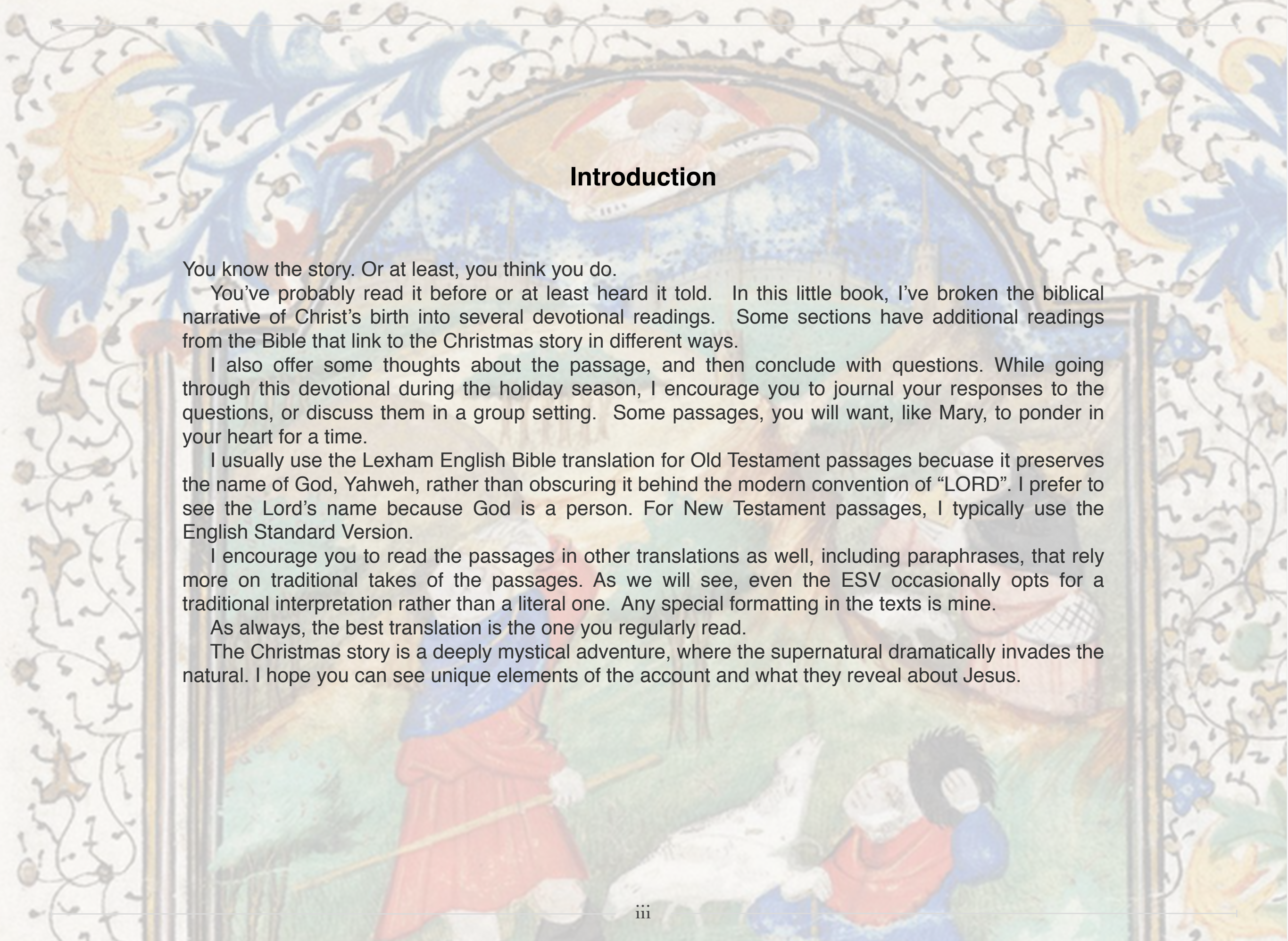
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*For Reverend Mark Borror,*

*Church planter, pastor, and my great grandfather,*



## 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 little book, I've broken the biblical narrative of Christ's birth into several 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 in your heart for a time.

I usually use the Lexham English Bible translation for Old Testament passages because it preserves the name of God, Yahweh, rather than obscuring it behind the modern convention of "LORD". I prefer to see the Lord's name because God is a person. For New Testament passages, I typically use the English Standard Version.

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.

As always, the best translation is the one you regularly read.

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 Jesus.

## CHAPTER 1

# A TIME OF EXPECTATION!

Ancient Israel looked forward with great expectation to Yahweh's king coming to free God's children from bondage, while setting up peace among all nations. No one knew exactly what that would look, although everyone speculated.

Today, children also look forward to Christmas with great expectation, also not knowing what Christmas morning will bring.





## ***A Time of Expectation!***

### **Devotional Reading**

Isaiah 11:1-9 LEB

*And a shoot will come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch from its roots will bear fruit.  
And the spirit of Yahweh shall rest on him—  
a spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
a spirit of counsel and might,  
a spirit of knowledge and the fear of Yahweh.  
And his breath is in the fear of Yahweh.  
And he shall judge not by his eyesight,  
and he shall rebuke not by what he hears with his ears.*

*But he shall judge the poor with righteousness,  
and he shall decide for the needy of the earth with  
rectitude.*

*And he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and he shall kill the wicked person with the breath of his  
lips.*

*And righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*

*And a wolf shall stay with a lamb,  
and a leopard shall lie down with a kid,  
and a calf and a lion and a fatling together  
as a small boy leads them.*

*And a cow and a bear shall graze;  
their young shall lie down together.*

*And a lion shall eat straw like the cattle.*

*And an infant shall play over a serpent's hole,  
and a toddler shall put his hand on a viper's hole.*

*They will not injure and they will not destroy on all of my  
holy mountain,*

*for the earth will be full of the knowledge of Yahweh,  
as the waters cover the sea.*

*And this shall happen on that day:*

*the nations shall inquire of the root of Jesse,  
which shall be standing as a signal to the peoples,  
and his resting place shall be glorious.*

The weeks leading up to Christmas are full of expectation. As early as October, shoppers expect good deals from retailers. Many expect to spend too much money. Many families expect to decorate, attend church services, and see families rarely visited.

The advent is also full of tension. What should I get for my loved ones? What if I lose my job? Should we cut back this year? Should we say “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Holidays?” Which family members should we visit on which day? Is *Die Hard* a Christmas movie or not?

In my own household, the weeks leading up to Christmas see wrapped presents beginning to appear beneath the tree. This week, watching my children gaze at them in expectation of Christmas morning reminded me of ancient Israel’s expectations of what the one anointed by the God of Israel would bring to them.

The God of Israel, Yahweh, made many promises to ancient Israel, which the Jews looked for with hope and expectation. Central to the promises was that God would restore Eden through Yahweh’s anointed servant who would judge with righteousness and justice through sovereignly ruling Israel and all the other nations, who would unite in the everlasting worship of God. How Yahweh would manifest these promises was a matter of great speculation.

Just what is in that pretty package wrapped under the tree?

## **What Goes Unsaid**

Speaking of expectations, what can you expect in the rest of this little tome? In particular, we’ll try to step back into the minds of the biblical authors and their first audience to see how they understood the story. We’ll look at cultural cues drawn on by the biblical authors that we miss today.

The biblical authors wanted to show how the birth of Jesus was the birth of God’s new age that would radically exceed

the expectations of their readers. Do we miss those cues and message in our modern reading? After all, the Bible wasn’t written with a 21st Century audience in mind.

The Bible includes two accounts of Jesus’ birth, written by different authors, who each had different audiences in mind. Millennia later, when we read them, we often miss what goes unsaid because we do not share their cultural assumptions, context, and history. By stepping into the mindset of the writers and their first, original audience, we can share anew the wonders of Christmas.

Imagine reading an article about the government considering new regulations of Facebook and Google. You do not need the article to explain what Facebook or Google are, nor why a government may be interested in regulating them. Now, imagine a time 2000 years from now, when someone reads that same newspaper article. What goes unsaid in the article that needs explained to the reader of the future?

Quite a lot.

Similarly, much goes unsaid in our modern translations of the Bible stories written nearly 2000 years ago. The authors assumed their readers shared their history and cultural cues. We will attempt to uncover some of their shared assumptions as we look at the Christmas story.

## **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 realized the movie did not meet my expectations. It told the same old story contrived by

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medieval Europeans 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 for about a tenth of the year, every year. We should, however, recognize that the nativity story told in movies, cartoons, and church pageants was basically developed many centuries ago by the Western Church to help a simple and uneducated people in the Medieval period understand the basics of God's radical invasion of the earth.

But the story the Bible tells contains much more drama and passion than the traditional telling of the Christmas story, 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 Bible.

As it turns out, we read a lot of images into the Christmas story that 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.

Let's add some color to the nativities by unpacking the actual telling of Jesus' birth. You may be startled to realize that Jesus' birth is awash in drama that shook the families, cities, the spirit realm, 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 declared Jesus came to fulfill Israel's fervent expectation of God's promises, and this was very good news.

## 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?

In Isaiah 9:1-9, what is expectations is God setting with Israel?

What does the nativity story teach you about God?



## CHAPTER 2

# WHY DECEMBER 25?

While most Christians in the Western tradition celebrate December 25 as the birth of Jesus, some Christians vehemently argue to do so is a pagan act. Why was December 25th selected and was it really originally a pagan holiday subverted by Christians?





## CHAPTER ONE

### *It's Christmas Time*

#### Devotional Reading

Isaiah 59:15-60:3 LEB

*And Yahweh saw,  
and it was displeasing in his eyes that there was no justice  
And he saw that there was no man,  
and he was appalled that there was no one who intercedes,  
so his arm came to assist him,  
and his righteousness was what sustained him.  
And he put on righteousness like a breastplate,  
and a helmet of salvation on his head,*

*and he put on garments of vengeance for clothing,  
and he wrapped himself in zeal as in a robe.  
According to deeds, so he will repay;  
wrath to his enemies, requital to those who are his enemies.  
He will repay requital to the coastlands.  
So they shall fear the name of Yahweh from the west,  
and his glory from the sunrise,  
for he will come like a narrow stream;  
the wind of Yahweh drives it on.  
“And a redeemer will come to Zion,  
to those in Jacob who turn away from transgression,”  
declares Yahweh.  
“And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says Yahweh:  
my spirit that is upon you,  
and my words that I have placed in your mouth  
shall not depart from your mouth,  
or from the mouths of your children,  
or from the mouths of your children’s children,”  
says Yahweh, “from now on and forever.”*

*“Arise, shine! For your light has come,  
and the glory of Yahweh has risen on you.  
For look! darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples,  
but Yahweh will rise on you,  
and his glory will appear over you.  
And nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the bright light of your sunrise.”*

Every year during Christmas, debates rage mainly in the fringes of Christianity, on social media, and in online forums if Christians should celebrate Jesus’ birth on December 25.

Wasn't this a holdover from paganism adopted by the Roman Catholic Church? Wasn't December 25 originally the day of worship celebrating founder of Babylon and his mother/wife? And if so, shouldn't Christians abhor celebration on this day?

I confess to being shocked at the vehemence of the anti-Christmas arguments, until I remember I was captivated by them when I was a teenager. Is ancient Babylon where this December 25 festival originated?

After the English Civil War, Oliver Cromwell banned Christmas, deeming it too Catholic for his Puritanical tastes, but the modern anti-December 25th acolytes can trace their vehemence uniformly to the 19th Century's *The Two Babylons* an anti-Catholic diatribe by Alexander Hislop.

Hislop used his seeming command of ancient religions and myths to argue all religions (outside of his version of Christianity) were in fact the worship of Semiramis, the mother and later wife of the biblical Nimrod, the builder of the Tower of Babel and the founder of ancient Babylon. Every myth and every religion outside the Bible, Hislop argued, could be traced from these origins.

In an era that birthed numerous strange cults and beliefs, Hislop's original readers have some excuse for believing this tripe. However, we do not. It doesn't take much effort to see that, like the ancient aliens evangelist Zachariah Sitchen, Hislop made it up. For instance, there's no evidence at all that anyone named Semiramis existed in Babylon, let alone as Nimrod's mother or wife. Actually, Hislop's voluminous tracing of mythologies fail in nearly every turn.

This cannot be overstated. All claims of Semiramis as a mother and wife to the biblical Nimrod, who became precursors to the worship of Mary and Jesus, were made up by Hislop. No justification whatsoever exists for considering it outside of bafflement of the gullibility of Hislop's followers and modern Internet Hislopien acolytes. .

Hislop argued that December 25 was a festival "celebrated among the heathen, at that precise time of the year, in honor of the birth of the son of the Babylonian queen of heaven..." The invention of the calendar in which the word "December" is used came a thousand years after the start of the Babylon Empire, a simple point that escaped Hislop's steel-trap mind. Nonetheless, Hislop argues that December 25 was also celebrated by the ancient Egyptians as the birth of the son of Isis, which was also many centuries before the Romans invented the calendar we still use today.

Hislop concludes that the Romans practiced Saturnalia on December 25, and asserts, "That Christmas was originally a Pagan festival is beyond all doubt."

*Really, Alexander Hislop? All doubt?*

In the Roman Empire, the festival celebrating the Birth of the Unconquered Sun occurred on December 25, which at the time was timed to coincide with the winter solstice fell. The Roman Emperor instituted this celebration in the year 274 CE.

The emperor did this in response to an existing feast day set apart by Christians to celebrate the birth of Jesus. At the time, Christianity was spreading unchecked across the Empire, much to the chagrin of its pagan rulers. Early Christians believed that Jesus was born on December 25 and as Christianity spread across the Empire, the pagan emperor was looking for ways to slow it down. He reasoned subverting this holy day into a pagan celebration of lengthening days would do just fine, so he appropriated the Christian holy day by inventing a new pagan holiday. He also hoped it would inspire the faltering Empire into a revival of growth. The pagan emperor was reacting to an existing Christian feast day!

An idea widespread among Jews in the time of Christ and in early Christians was that great prophets of Israel died on the same dates as their conception. A prophet was someone who spoke God's words, and Jesus certainly did that, so early

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Christians believed he was conceived on the date of his death.

Different churches used different ways of calculating the date of Jesus' death, and the Western church landed on March 25, while the Eastern Church discerned April 6. If Jesus was conceived on this day, the early Christians believed, then fast forward 9 months, and you come to December 25 in the West and January 6 in the East for the date of Christ's birth.

While not yet a day where Christians gave presents or put up a tree, December 25 in the West and January 6 in the East became feast days to celebrate Jesus' birthday. The Roman Emperor appropriated this day to subvert Christianity in the West.

Eventually, rather like God's mission to take back the nations, the Church decided to take back what in the beginning belonged to them: December 25.

### **Questions**

In Isaiah 59, what displeases God? What does Yahweh decide to do?

How does Yahweh arm himself in his mission on earth?

Yahweh plans to bring a new covenant or testament when he comes to earth as a man. What does this new testament include?

The prophet's sees the advent as a new sunrise, a new age, for all nations to come to God. It made sense for early Christians to accept the winter solstice as Christ's birthday, since the days begin lengthening, ending the advance of

darkness. Why are some critics of celebrating Christ's birth on December 25 so passionate in their attacks?

Even if Christmas had started as a pagan holiday subverted by Christians, how does this reflect the good news of God redeeming all things into his glory?

Darkness tried to end the celebration of Christ's birth in the year 274 by turning the celebration into pagan worship of the sun. Why did this effort fail?

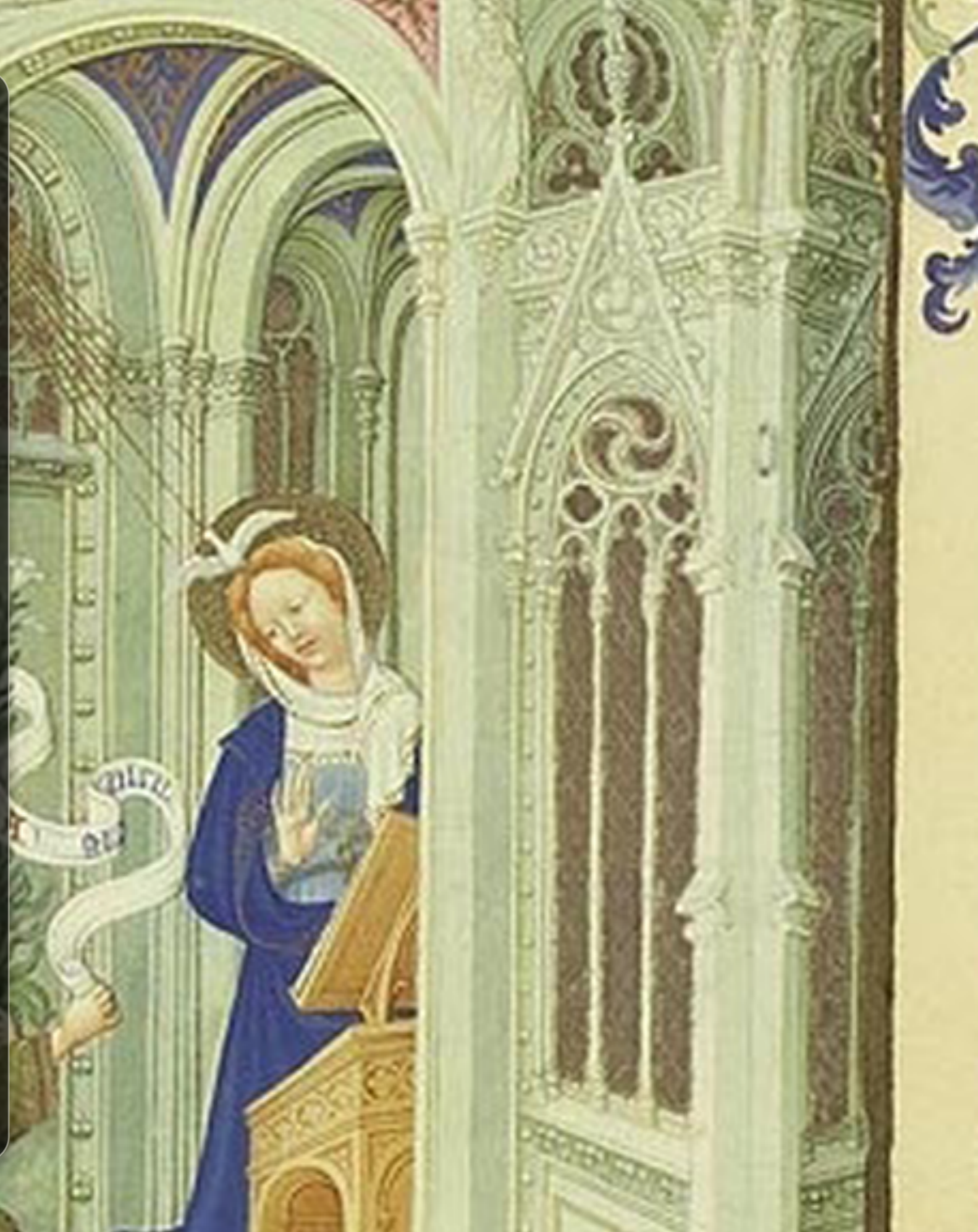
### **Sources and Additional Reading**

William Tighe, "Calculating Christmas: The Story Behind Dec 25" Touchstone Magazine (December, 2003)

## CHAPTER 3

# THE WOMEN OF CHRISTMAS

Discover the dramatic reasons why five women are mentioned in Jesus' genealogy, and the fate of demonic forces their mention portends.





## CHAPTER TWO

### *The Women of Christmas*

#### Devotional Reading

Matthew 1:1-18

*The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*

*Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king.*

*And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.*

*And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Joseph, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.*

*So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to*

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*Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.*

I don't recall ever seeing a Christmas devotional including Matthew's genealogical record of Jesus. Frankly, when I follow a daily Bible reading plan and come across one of the passages of endless genealogies, I skip that day's reading. I mean, who cares?

Besides the biblical writers, that is. And the Holy Spirit who inspired them. And, for that matter, their intended audience.

Okay, so maybe in skipping the genealogies, I'm demonstrating my own laziness and lack of interest in what the writers were trying to say by their inclusion.

With this in mind, when you read Matthew's genealogy, what is noteworthy?

Certainly, Matthew is defending his opening thesis that Jesus is descended from Abraham and David. While important to some of Jesus' later claims, a lot of other Jews could make similar genealogical boasts.

It's interesting that Jesus' adopted father was Joseph, son of Jacob, reminding us of another Joseph son of Jacob who would lead Israel into Egypt, and forecasting a prophecy later in Matthew that God would call his son out of Egypt.

What else is noteworthy? Not just noteworthy, what is *startling*?

Throughout human history, men have consistently treated women as, to put it mildly, less than partners. In the period of the Bible, women particularly were considered far lesser than men. Although God consistently elevated the status of women, starting with the clear statement that women as well as men were made in God's image, and using women in key points of Israel's history to enact historic and dramatic reformations, men's attitude toward women consistently fell short of God's intentions.

So why did Matthew include five women, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah, and Mary, in his genealogy? And specifically why these women?

Scholars have come up with several reasons for Matthew's inclusion of women:

### **Gentile inclusion in Jesus' mission**

Although the Old Testament only clearly identifies Rahab and Ruth as Gentiles, Matthew's readers may have assumed Tamar and "the wife of Uriah" also as Gentiles. Sarah was not a Gentile, in that there was no distinction between the Hebrews and Gentiles in her time, and certainly Mary was not.

Perhaps Matthew included the Gentile women to make it clear the sins of Gentiles were covered by Jesus' mission, although Jews in Matthew's time normally didn't think of Rahab and Ruth in the context of sin, but of deliverance and restoration.

### **Demonstration of Faith**

At least three of the women demonstrated great faith in God, but one (the wife of Uriah) certainly did not, and again, in Matthew's time, these women weren't thought of in connection with great faith. If that was Matthew's aim, couldn't he have come up with better examples?

### **Unusual Sexual Relationships**

Some scholars believe Matthew included these five women because the first four all engaged in questionable sexual relationships with men, which contrasts the unusual birth story of Jesus. The sexual history of the first four certainly does

contrast with Mary's, but that actually points to an even more dramatic reason to include them.

None of these traditional explanations satisfactorily explains why these 5 women are included in Matthew's birth narrative.

Recently, the Bible scholar Dr. Amy Elizabeth Richter suggested a different and comprehensive reason for these women's inclusion, which I think describes what Matthew had in mind, and what Matthew's first readers were thinking about when they read the women's names. And if so, these ideas dramatically highlights one of Jesus' chief missions that is often overlooked by Christians today, particularly Christians who have suffered from sexual sin, violence, or occultism.

In short, one of the reasons Jesus came was to overturn the "sins of the Watchers."

### **The Problem of Evil**

One challenge many critics charge against Christians is the problem of evil. If God is good, they quip, then how can there be evil?

Modern Christians typically point to Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden as the cause of evil. They point to Paul's assertion in Romans,

*"...Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned... for if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many..."*

When Adam sinned, he was forced away from sacred, holy space of God's home on earth, Eden, and away from the Tree

of Life that would sustain him and all who ate from it forever. Being banished from the Tree and God's presence, Adam and Eve began to die.

This mortality was conferred to all of their descendants and because of mortality, everyone sins. Paul goes on to explain that believers in Christ, who has defeated death, hell, and the grave, must consider themselves already dead, and born again, this time from above, living as if eternal life has already begun now because through God's indwelling Spirit, *it has*. Certainly, the sin of Adam was a big deal to the problem of evil, which Jesus came to redress.

The Jews of Matthew's day and early Christians, however, did not blame the existence of all evil on Adam's sin and human mortality. Paul asserts in Galatians 3 that the Old Testament Law was given to protect against "transgressions." What does he mean?

Paul is not referring to Adam's sin. When Paul refers to Adam's sin, he uses "transgression" in the singular form. An example is Romans 5:13, "...transgression of Adam." In Galatians 3, however, Paul's uses the plural form, "transgressions", and he connects them to angels. Paul says The Law "was added because of the transgressions...having been commanded through angels by hand of a mediator."

What is Paul talking about? What does restraining transgressions have to do with angels? What transgressions?

For Jews in Jesus' day and early Christians, the key passage in the Bible describing the origin and effects of evil is Genesis 6:1-4. Included in the flood story, this passage describes the "sons of God" taking beautiful human women as their sexual partners and producing giant offspring. Ultimately, these actions led to widespread wickedness which consumed humankind, leading to the Great Flood. These events were also mentioned in the New Testament books Jude and 2 Peter.



Many books widely read in this time period expounded on these events, and none were more influential to shaping the thinking of Jews than the Book of Enoch (also referred to as 1 Enoch). While generally not thought of as a work that should be held as scripture, it nonetheless was a very important historical book considered accurate and it reflected how many Jews and early Christians thought regarding the events describes in Genesis 6. If it was important to the biblical writers and their first audience, it should be important to us.

The “sons of God” in 1 Enoch and many other ancient books are also called “the Watchers,” spirits who were supposed to serve a protective role in God’s cosmos. But they “transgressed” God’s order, engaging in illicit sex with women, producing horrific and unholy aberrations to God’s creation, forever altering the cosmos on a fundamental level. The judgement of the Flood destroys the giants, but their disembodied spirits roam the earth as demons, afflicting humans and even tricking some into worshiping them as gods until the final judgment.

Paul has angels on his mind in Galatians, especially chapters 3 and 4, where he links Jesus to the angelic mediator (who is also Yahweh) who gave the Law to protect ancient Israel from the transgressions of these Watchers, and whose divine mission began through being born of a woman, contrasting to the Watchers whose rebellion violated women and God’s cosmic order.

The New Testament writers and their first audience didn’t have to be told that the transgressions of the Watchers went even further, for they read and discussed the books that explored these events. Other aspects of these events include:

1. Many angels in heaven looking down to earth and seeing beautiful women and desiring them.

2. They bind each other with oaths to do this.
3. They descend to earth to fulfill their desires.
4. To gain access to the women, they teach men hidden knowledge in three areas:
  - a. To use nature to harness occult powers to control others and their own destiny (occultism and idolatry)
  - b. To beautify women making them more sexually seductive and generally dehumanizing them into sex objects, for the purpose of illicit sex.
  - c. Technology to make powerful weapons of war.
6. The spirits and women produce a “bastard” race of giants, which ravage the earth in violence and lawlessness against humanity and each other, spilling and drinking blood, destroying and consuming flesh
7. Earth and humans complain to heaven.
8. Loyal angels take the complaint to God.
9. God dispatches archangels to punish the Watchers by binding them in hell.
10. A great flood purges the earth of the giants' corruption.
11. The immortal spirits of dead giants become the origin of demons, which continue to plague humans, afflicting with sickness, sinful addictions and idolatry.

12. The Watchers implore Enoch to intercede to God for them, but God tells Enoch to descend to hell and preach to the spirits that their plans against God would fail.

These ideas were ingrained in the minds of Jews' in Jesus' time and early Christians. No one needed an explanation. Everyone knew and believed, just like everyone today knows about Google and Facebook.

With this in mind, let's examine each of the five women and consider what Matthew and his first readers would be thinking about when they read their names.

### **Tamar**

An ancient Hebrew custom (the "law of levirate marriage") required that if a married man died without a son, his brother must wed the widow. Any children she bore would be considered the offspring and heirs of the first husband. This served to protect the widow, since the son would care for her as she aged, and keep the man's name from being forgotten.

Jacob's son Judah had an evil son Er, who married Tamar. He died childless. His brother Onan did not want to perpetuate the wicked line of Er, so to prevent her from getting pregnant, when he had sex with her, he refused to ejaculate in her. This selfish, anti-woman act angered God, who struck Onan dead.

Judah commanded Tamar to remain a widow until his young son was old enough to marry her. So she waited but Judah started to worry this son would end up dead too, and he made no effort to arrange for their marriage.

When Judah's own wife died, Tamar removed her widow's garments, dressed like a prostitute, especially veiling her face (in that culture, a true and seductive sign of a harlot), and arranged for Judah to see her on the way to a market.

He paid for her services, slept with her, and she became pregnant. Tamar had made further arrangements that it would be clear the child was his. So Judah accepted Tamar as his wife. Her own future security became firm when she gave birth to twins, the oldest of which was Perez, who became Jesus' ancestor.

Tamar's inclusion in Jesus' genealogy reminds Matthew's readers of the sins of the Watchers.

1. Her first husband is Er, a word that means "watcher" when connected to the word that means "to be awake." In other words, Er's name derives from the same root as the Watchers.

2. Judah "took" a wife for his evil son Er, as the evil Watchers took wives. For Er's evil nature, God kills him, even as God sent the Watchers to hell.

3. The Watchers taught humans the hidden art of metallurgy (to forge weapons of war). Judah's interaction with Tamar involves giving her a signet ring: something made through metallurgy.

4. The Watchers taught the art of using makeup to change the appearance of women to become more sexually seductive. In the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, Tamar puts on a veil, covering her face, a sure sign of a prostitute. But Matthew and his first audience would be more familiar with the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Bible, which says, "she put a covering around herself and she beautified her face", just as the Watchers had taught.

5. The biblical writer used two terms to describe Tamar's false identity. In Genesis 38:15 and 24, the word usually

means a prostitute in the sense of a woman who exchanges money for sexual activity. However, the second word, used in verses 21 and 22, is a word associated with temple prostitution or sacred prostitution. Temple or sacred prostitution was considered to be sex between a woman and a stand-in for a spiritual being, like a god or a Watcher.

6. When Judah had sex with Tamar, he was in town for sheep-shearing, which was a feast time accompanied by rituals to encourage the increase of fertility in the herds. Judah illicitly engages in sex reminiscent of a pagan fertility ritual: sexual occultism. .

All of these points will cause the careful reader of the Bible to link Tamar's story to the story of the Watchers.

### **Rahab**

As a prostitute in Jericho, Rahab would have been tolerated but scorned by her community. In many cultures, prostitution was seen as an undesirable but necessary institution to keep the men satisfied, but nonetheless prostitutes were still outcasts.

God rejected this conception of women and included careful protections against sexually exploiting women in the Law given to Israel; and thus, the Jews rejected the surrounding cultural practice of using women as objects for men's illicit sexual pleasure. Because of God's Law, women had a higher standing in Jewish culture than in surrounding nations. They were not to be used to "satisfy men."

When Joshua planned to attack Jericho, he sent two spies into the city to scout it out. Rahab had heard the stories of the Hebrews and she feared the God of Israel. Somehow, she encountered the spies and sheltered them. While it's unclear if

they were visiting her to use her services, the reader is invited to think so. Word slipped out that she was sheltering the spies, and the king's men came to hunt them down. She hid them on the roof, and helped them escape, begging them to save her and her family when they sacked the city. They did and she became a direct ancestor of Jesus.

The story of Rahab also has connections to the sins of the Watchers.

1. Rahab engages in the seduction of men for the purpose of illicit sex, using arts taught by the Watchers

2. When referring to Rahab entertaining the Hebrew spies, James called them "messengers," using the same word sometimes translated as "angels." James was not alone in possibly interpreting the spies as angels in disguise as humans, and that Rahab had "entertained angels unawares."

3. The biblical writer mentions the Israelite army spared Rahab because she hosted the "messengers" ("angels," in the Septuagint). Readers of the Septuagint would naturally think the story is about a woman who engaged in illicit sex entertaining angels.

4. The entertaining of men/angels is reminiscent of Abraham and Sarah hosting the men/angels whom God sent to scout out Sodom and Gomorrah: cities known to be interested in sex between humans and angels.

5. Rahab lowers the men/angels out a window, and tells them to "head for the hills", using the same words that Lot received from the angels in Sodom.

6. Rahab “hides” the Hebrew spies by covering them up until she can give them instructions to escape. The word for “hide” is extremely rare in ancient literature, but was used to describe how Moses’ mother hid Moses, and in 1 Enoch, is the same word used when an angel tells Noah to hide himself until he receives instructions to escape the coming judgement.

7. Matthew’s genealogy lists Rahab as the mother of Boaz. The Old Testament describes Boaz using the same terms as the giants are described in Genesis 6. This is not to say that Boaz was a giant, but only that careful readers of the Bible will make the literary connection.

All of these linguistic and cultural touch points unequivocally remind Matthew and his first audience of the sins of the Watchers.

### **Ruth.**

The ancient people of the Moabites were descendants of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughters after they fled from Sodom. Over the centuries, Hebrews and Moabites came to strongly disliked each other, especially since Moabite women were known to seduce Hebrew men. The Law actually forbade allowing the offspring of Hebrews men and Moabite women from entering the family of God for ten generations. These two people groups really did not like each other.

One day, a famine in Israel drove the Hebrew family of Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and two sons into the land of Moab. This was the only place he could find to save his family from starvation. Naturally, the two sons fell in love with Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. In time, all the men died,

leaving the three widows alone. This was a desperate situation for the women, who suddenly had no one to provide for them.

Naomi, a Hebrew among Moabites, decided to go back to Bethlehem, hoping her family would care for her. Orpah and Ruth had families in Moab to care for them, but they probably would have refused to help the despised Hebrew.

Similarly, Naomi's family likely would reject the descendant-from-incest Ruth. Naomi recommended the girls stay with their family in Moab, but Ruth famously chose to follow Naomi, which involved the not insignificant changing of religions: leaving behind the gods of her family, and following the God of Israel.

They survived in Bethlehem thanks to the wisdom of the Law that required harvesters to leave some grain in the fields for the poor and sojourners. One of the Hebrew landowners, Boaz noted Ruth, especially for her beauty. Boaz, who was related to Naomi’s husband, instructed his servants to leave extra grain for her.

Naomi heard about this and urged Ruth to stay with Boaz's female attendants. Ruth did so, and found Boaz sleeping on the threshing floor, where she made a convincing (if typically Moabite) case to fall under his protection. Boaz accepted her convincing, provided for Naomi, and redeemed Elimelech's property.

Eventually Boaz married her, and she bore a son Obed, who was nursed by Naomi. Obed became recognized as Naomi's son and Elimelech's descendent, perpetuating his line. He became grandfather to David, and ancestor to Jesus.

Matthew mentioning Ruth in Jesus’ genealogy also reminds careful readers of the sins of the Watchers.

1. The biblical author emphasizes that Ruth was a Moabite by mentioning it at least 7 times. The Moabites are

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connected with all 3 aspects of the Watcher's sins: illicit sex, bloodshed and idolatry.

2. Moabite women were associated with sexual appetite and the seduction of Israelite men. The Law forbidding allowing Moabite women and Hebrew men into the family God until the 10th generation caused advocates of David's kingship some uncomfortable challenges.

3. The male offspring of an Israelite man and Moabite woman was called a *bastard*, the same word used to describe the offspring of human women and the Watchers.

4. The land inhabited by the Moabites had been occupied by the Rephaim : wicked giants, who were descended from the offspring of forbidden unions between angels and women.

5. The Hebrew Naomi teaches the Moabite Ruth how to beautify herself for a sexual encounter with Boaz. (Until that point in the Ruth story, readers might have assumed she already knew these arts because of having won an Israelite husband in the first place). The skills normally used by the Moabites, but here taught by the Hebrew were specifically taught by the Watchers in the first place.

6. Aspects of the Ruth story include fruitful humanity, plentiful earth, righteousness, the blessing of God, and a Gentile with her offspring joining Israel in the worship of God. These elements all point to Israel's eschatological ("end times") hope throughout the Old Testament and spelled out clearly in the book of Enoch of God restoring all things in the age to come.

## **Bathsheba**

King David watched the beautiful Bathsheba bathing on the roof of her house. He sent for her, and his men brought her to him. David slept with her, and she later found herself pregnant. Her husband Uriah, one of David's military officers was off fighting in a war. Uriah was born a Hittite, but had left his Gentile paganism and had converted to Judaism.

David sent for him, hoping Uriah would sleep with his wife, so everyone would think the baby belonged to Uriah. But under the Law, Uriah was forbidden to have sex with his wife while engaged in warfare. Uriah was proudly obedient to the Law, whereas David wasn't.

David arranged for Uriah's death in the war and he married Bathsheba. His sin was noticed by God, of course. Adultery was a capital offense for women, but God spared Bathsheba. Their child, however, died. Bathsheba later bore Solomon.

One of David's other wives had the son Absalom, who hated David, possibly because of the preferential treatment Bathsheba received over his own mother (not to mention other sexual sins that David overlooked regarding Absalom's sister) and later triggered a coup against David.

Matthew's oblique inclusion of Bathsheba as "the wife of Uriah" would also remind his first readers of the sins of the Watchers: the art of war, the illicit arts of beautification, and illicit sex.

1. David was up on a rooftop (emphasized by the biblical writer twice) and looks down from his roof and sees a beautiful woman that he wants to take. Just like the Watchers looking down from heaven did.

2. In the book of Enoch, the Watcher Asael taught skills for making women beautiful, and the Watchers could not resist them. Bathsheba was on the roof bathing in clear view of the king. While readers aren't told if she did so knowing David was watching or if he could not resist her, the ancient Jewish historian Josephus (and contemporary of Matthew's) states that this was certainly the case.

3. David sends messengers ("angels") to take her. In Enoch, the Watcher Shemihazah knows that if he takes a human wife, he'll be guilty of a great sin, and wants other Watchers to join him in the crime. David knows this too, and also wants others to help him in his sexual crime.

4. Using the arts of war, David kills Uriah.

5. Bathsheba becomes Queen Mother, instrumental in the downfall of Adonijah and Solomon's enthronement. While not an official position in Israel, the neighboring Hittite political structure had the position of Queen Mother, and Matthew's readers are reminded of the Hittite's because Uriah was a Hittite.

The Queen Mother was involved in a cultic function related to the goddess Asherah. Specifically, the Hittite's Queen Mother played the role of the king's consort in a sacred marriage rite, which means sex between a human woman and a human stand-in for a divine being like a Watcher, and involved a sacred marriage ritual on a rooftop.

In other words, the wife of the Uriah the Hittite was reenacting the Hittite's Queen Mother ritual of sacred sex and marriage between a woman and a Watcher.

## **Mary**

While the four women previously mentioned remind us of the sins of the Watchers, Mary's inclusion declares the sins of the Watchers is being dramatically overturned and redressed by Jesus.

1. Mary is the fifth woman mentioned. Five reminds us of the five books of the Law, which (says Paul) was given to limit the destruction of the transgressions of the Watchers, among other reasons.

2. In the 1 Enoch, Lamech (Noah's father) horrifyingly assumes his wife became pregnant by a spirit of heavenly origins. An angel comes to Lamech in a dream to reassure him the child is actually of earthly origins.

Joseph, on the other hand, horrifyingly assumes the child is of earthly origins until an angel comes in a dream to reassure him the child is actually of heavenly origin.

3. In the Watcher story, celestial beings have sex with women to produce humans that are semi-divine. Matthew, however, describes the Holy Spirit's creative power in a non-sexual way to produce a human who is fully divine: God with us.

4. While the offspring of the Watchers, the giants, began to fill the earth with illegal rule, the angel declares that Jesus will rightfully retake dominion over the earth as both God and Man.

5. In the Watcher story, the divine beings cross the boundary from heaven to earth to fill the earth with sexual

sin, warfare, and occultism. But in Jesus, God crosses the boundary from heaven to earth, to fill the earth with God's purity, peace and unified worship of God by Jews and Gentiles.

6. The Watcher story leads to the destruction of the created order. Jesus' rule, however, leads to a redeemed new creation.

7. In the book of Enoch, Watchers taught humans astrology, leading to worship of divine beings thought to be the stars who determined human destinies. In the East, men who worshiped the Watchers and tried to divine destinies through the stars were the Magi. Using this forbidden art, the Magi, who started by worshiping the Watchers ended up worshiping Jesus.

8. The legacy of the Watchers are *demons with us*. The legacy of Jesus is the *Holy Spirit with us*.

The genealogy of Jesus is Matthew's first, dramatic declaration by that in Jesus, God was fulfilling all of God's promises to Israel to restore the creation, including overturning the sins of the Watchers and restoring God's creative rule.

Who among us has not suffered from sexual sin, from human wars, from violence, from occult forces, from demonic oppression manifesting in mental, physical, or spiritual illness?

Women especially have been oppressed, humiliated, used and abused through the ages. Wicked spiritual forces and their human pawns continue exploiting women for their illicit sexual desires. How many women do having fallen into this

dehumanizing trap find shame and disgust. How many men find themselves ensnared in addictive sexual sin? Who can redeem such bitter shame? Who can love us if we cannot love ourselves.

**Jesus!** That's who!

For God, no human transgression is unredeemable! For God so loved the world with all of its fallen, horrific, evil-filled and utterly depraved humans, and gave his unique Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life!

### Questions

1. Think of someone who has been the victim of sexual sin. How do the five women of Christmas bring hope to this person?
2. In a world afflicted with unstoppable sickness, what does the genealogy of Christ teach us about God's unstoppable Kingdom?
3. The Book of Enoch describes God sending Enoch to preach to the imprisoned Watchers in hell that their plan to subvert God's cosmos would fail. In 1 Peter 3:18-22, Peter says baptism does the same thing. In other words, each baptism declares to the spirits in prison that Jesus has come and they have lost. How does Christmas declare that the spirits in prison have lost because Jesus has come?

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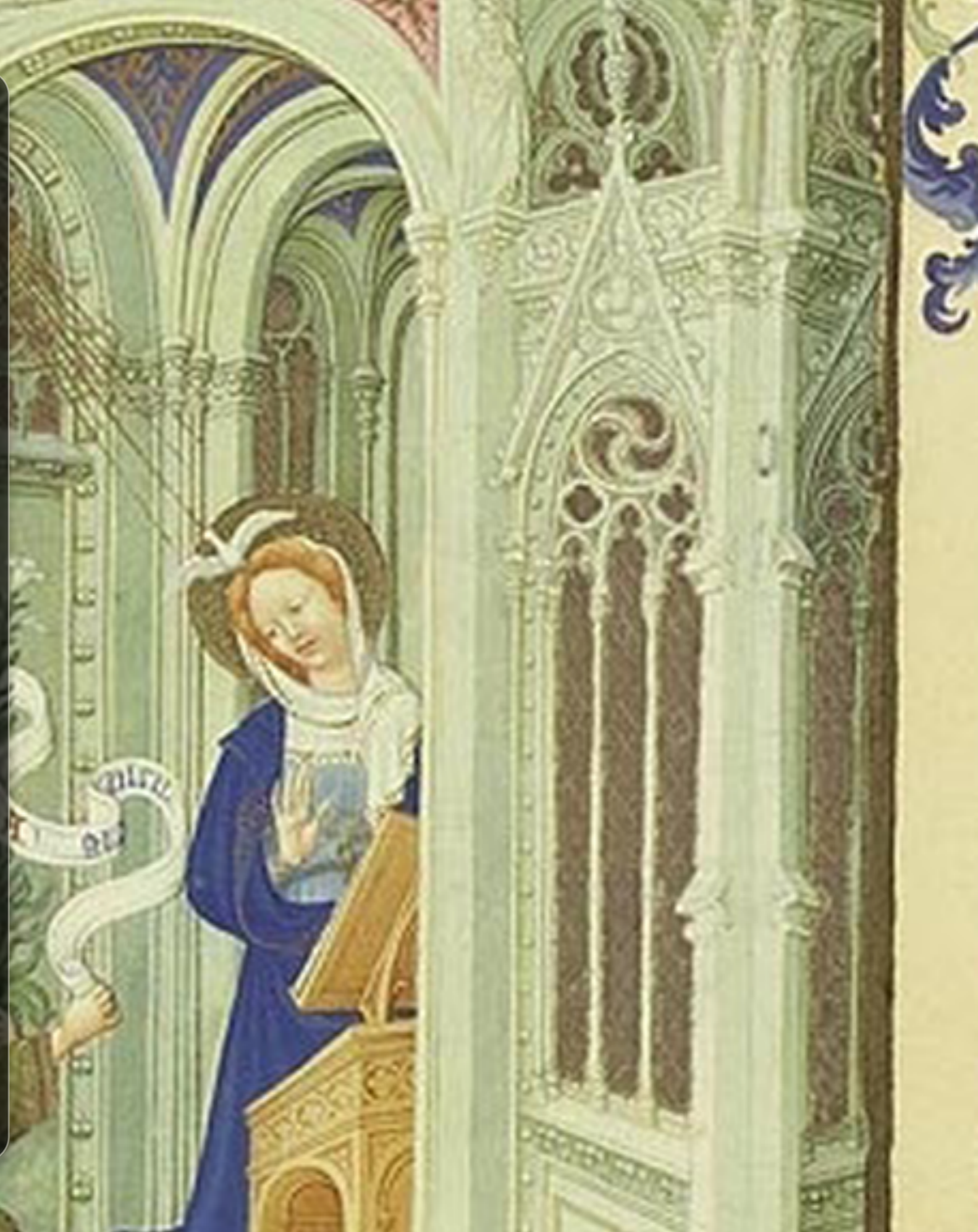
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## CHAPTER 4

# 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.<sup>1</sup>*

*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.*

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.<sup>3</sup>*

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 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 favor differs from your idea? 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.

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 the 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: Yahweh's king was coming! God's dynamic 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), 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.***

"An angel told me God got me pregnant." That would be her feeble defense to society.

### **Another' 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 both Jews and Gentiles 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.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, this is first recorded in Genesis 6 and directly mentioned by the New Testament writers Titus and Peter. Actually, Mary's culture (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 their 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 Watcher that 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

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

She must have shuddered at the thought. Mary would keep her mouth shut, and bear her pregnancy with no defense to the community. 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 5

# 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.<sup>5</sup>*

*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.*



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*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 Yahweh.

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!

This story was conceived in the Medieval Era by Europeans who applied their culture (and prejudiced assumptions about Jews) onto the biblical text. It ignores the original cultural context and in fact is deeply offensive to the community of Bethlehem.

If you think about it, you can conclude *there isn't a community on the planet that wouldn't allow a woman in labor to come inside to give birth.*

Moreover, 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.

Nazareth and Bethlehem were on the frontier of a vast empire. It's difficult for us to understand just how powerful and impressive the Roman Empire was. We live in an era where we can traverse oceans in several hours, and video conference with friends and co-workers across the planet. The Roman Empire, by contrast, was so vast, it took months to traverse by horse. Today, you can drive to Bethlehem from Nazareth in 2 and half hours. In the time of the Empire, it took a week to get there.

In the span of a few decades before Christ's birth, the Empire had violently expanded, been torn apart by civil wars, challenged by invasions, consolidated power and expanded again. A few years before Jesus was born, the Empire's officials in distant Rome, 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 the men who descended directly from David through an unbroken line 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 a people the Jews hated. Being a good Jew, Joseph and his family would have gone around Samaria: 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, the most important city on the frontier. 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**

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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 6

# 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!*"

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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 7

# 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.

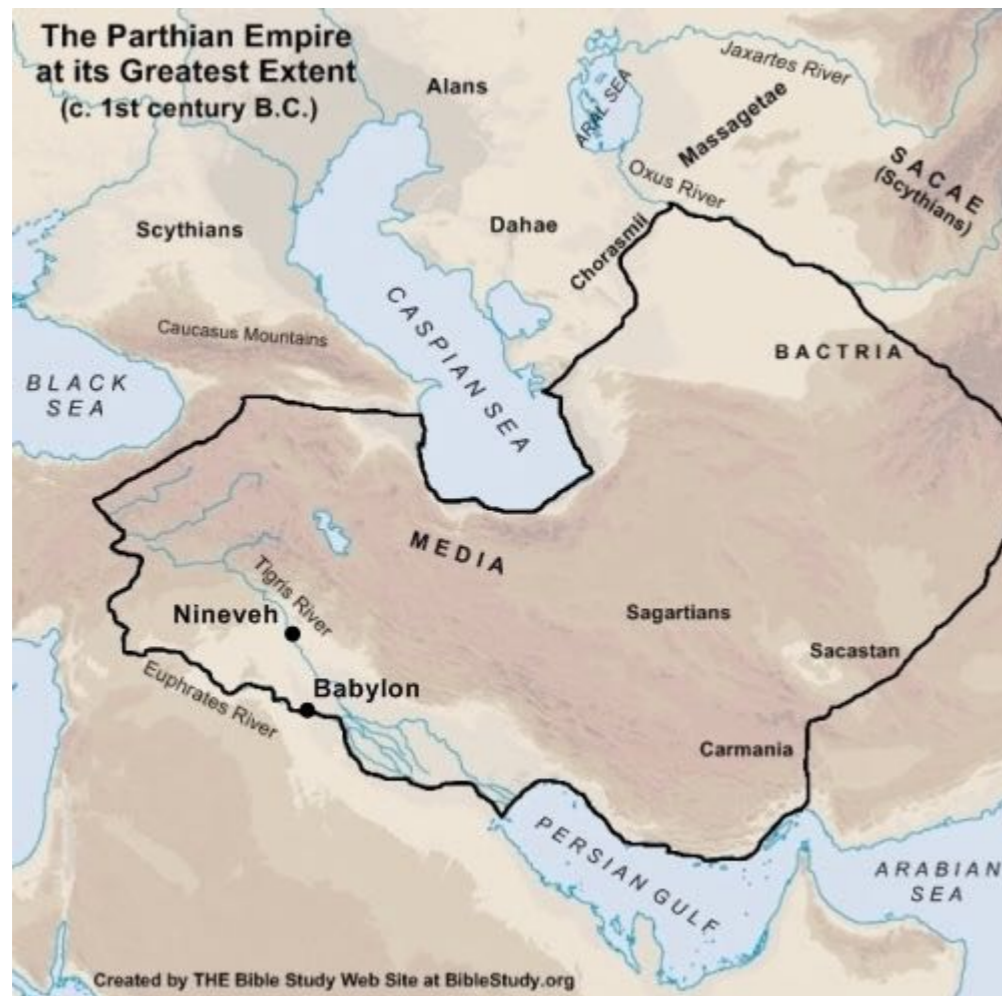
The truth is *much more dramatic*.

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 Bridge Too Far

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 soldiers.

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.

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 became 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

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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 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 riches. Such treasure-laden parties were tempting targets to local leaders 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.



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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 8

# 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 and intimate knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures.

## 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 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 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.*

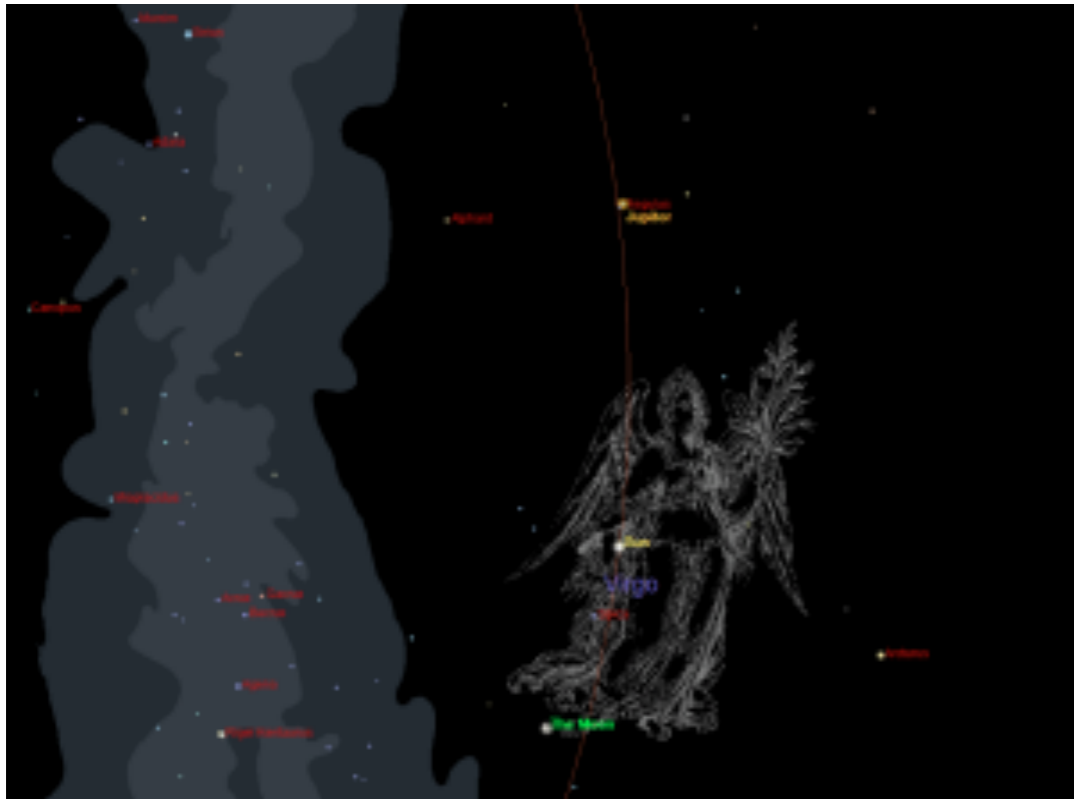
***She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron,** but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.*

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:

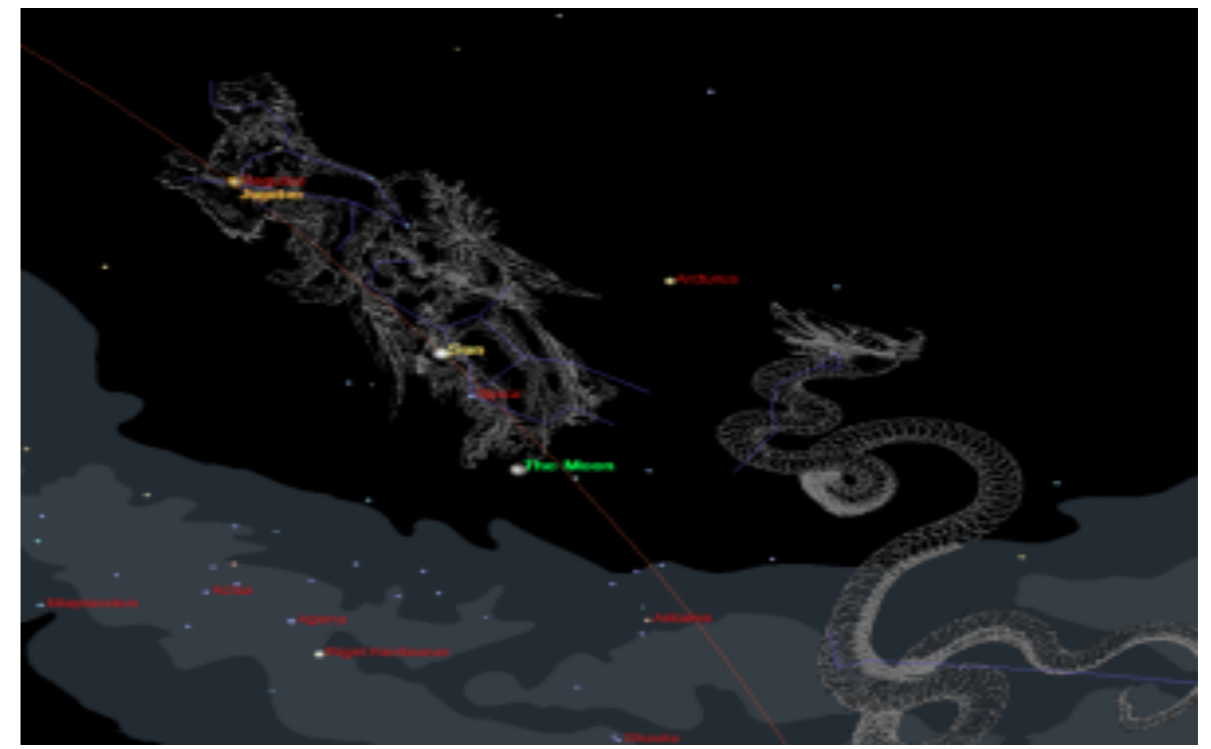


In the ancient world, the two constellations at Virgo's feet, were considered a single constellation: a scorpion creature with claws called The Dragon. During that 80 minute period, another dragon is off the line a bit, also at her feet.

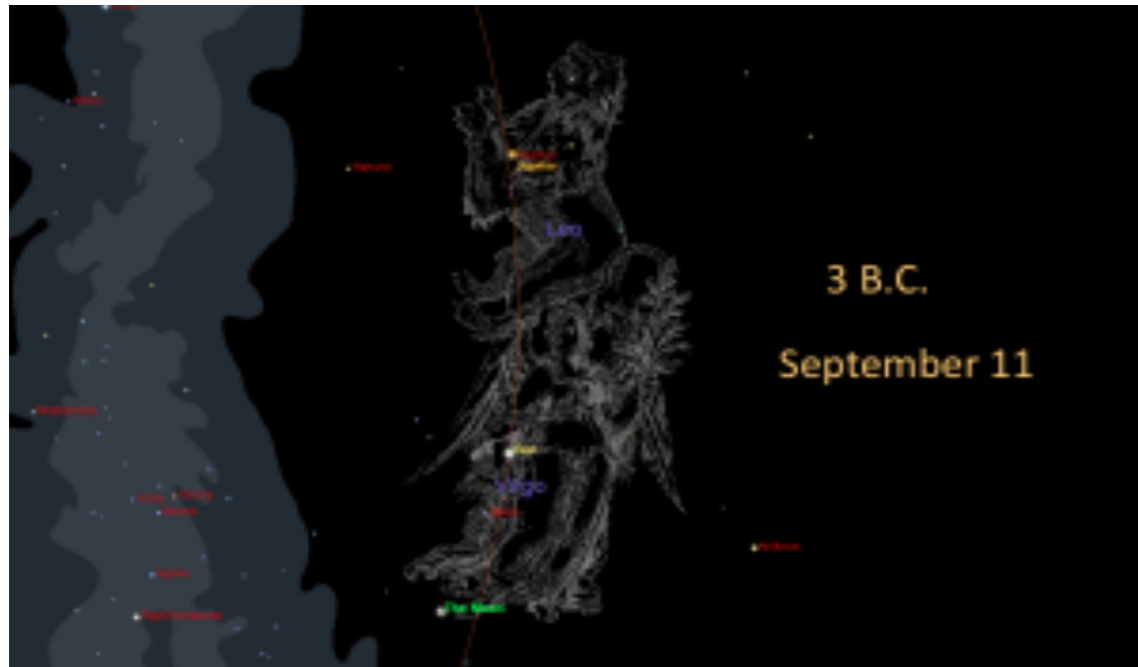
This occurred only one time **in all of history** for about a 20 day window.

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?

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

### **Source and Additional Reading:**

Heiser, Michael S. *Reversing Hermon: Enoch, The Watchers & The Forgotten Mission of Jesus Christ*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017.

## CHAPTER 9

# 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.*

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.*

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 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, 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. At the wedding, the lack of wine was certainly not gladdening hearts.

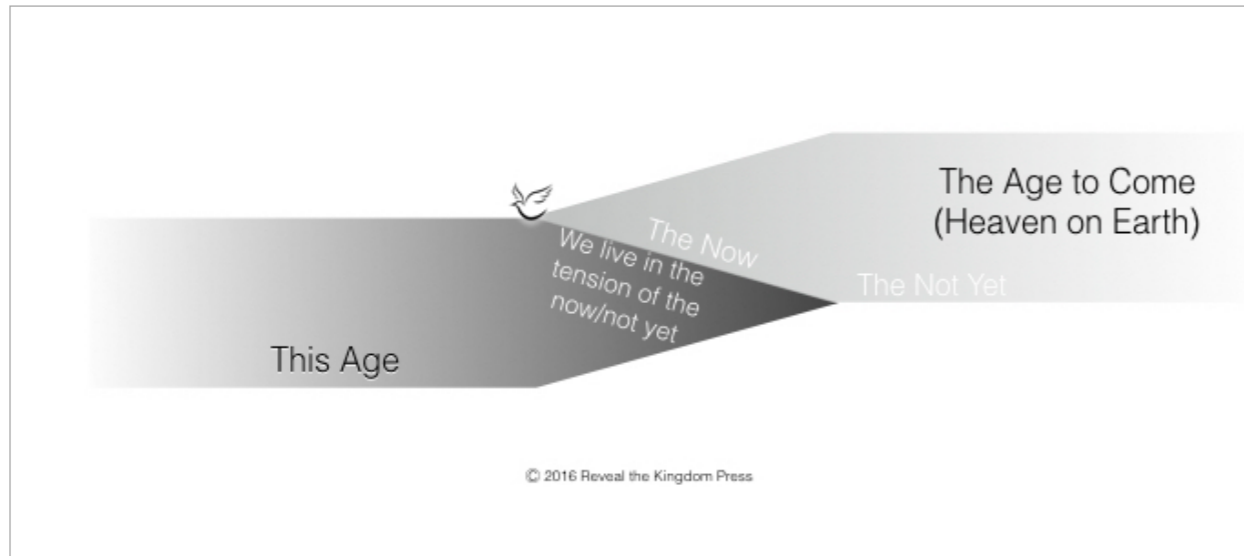
Jesus said it was not yet time for him to release the Kingdom through works of power.

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 the 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, 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.

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 10

# 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.