

# Events Surrounding the Birth of Christ

By Elder C. C. Morris

**T**he Lord God, through the gospel writers Matthew and Luke, gives us the inspired account of the birth of Jesus Christ. Matthew and Luke are the only two writers who tell us of these things. There is no detail which is told in both gospels; yet, between the two, we have the one complete account. Man's traditions about the Savior's birth leave many false impressions compared to God's record of what happened. May He enable us to look first, very briefly at the events preceding Jesus' birth, and then to look more in detail at the things which transpired at that sacred time and immediately after.

John the Baptist was conceived: Luke 1.24. Six months after John was conceived by Mary's cousin Elizabeth, an angel told Mary "Thou shalt [yet future] conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS...The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God (Luke 1.31, 35)."

Note that John was conceived at least six months before Jesus was and was therefore chronologically older than Jesus. This is important because John said, "After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me (John 1.30)." Because John was the older of the two, he could not have been referring to chronological age. This testimony of the Baptist was his avowal of the preexistence of Jesus as God the Son, the eternal Son of God, as was said by the angel Gabriel.

In Matthew 1.18, the evangelist tells us that Mary was found with child of the Holy Ghost while yet espoused to Joseph and before they had come together. It was "in those days" that Mary visited Elizabeth, mother of John,

Luke 1.39, and the unborn John leaped in Elizabeth's womb for joy at the voice of Mary.

It was also during this time that Joseph was warned in a dream, Matthew 1.20: "Fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost." Joseph was also told, "She shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call His name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins (Matthew 1.21)." Independently of one another, then, both Joseph and Mary were told of the male child to be born and that His name would be JESUS. On this firm, God-given basis, Joseph took Mary as his wife (Matthew 1.24f) and knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son.

During this time (after Joseph took unto him his espoused wife but before Jesus was born), "it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world would be taxed (Luke 2.1)." Joseph, being of the lineage of David, was thus required by law to return to the town of his ancestry, Bethlehem, to register for tax purposes. This was a trip that Joseph in nature would not have chosen to make with the young maiden, his espoused Wife, being "great with child," but Roman law now required it. "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: He turneth it whithersoever He will (Proverbs 21.1)." Little did imperial Caesar realize that he was a mere pawn in the providence of God, a cog in the machinery of God's predestination, providence, and prophecy, the prophecy that Jesus the Savior would be born in Bethlehem.

So, Joseph and Mary his espoused wife went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, their home town, to Bethlehem for tax purposes, because he was of the house and lineage of David, Luke 2.4.

While they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered, Luke 2.6. The word, "days," an indefinite term, probably indicates that she was in Bethlehem for at least two days, if not longer, before Jesus

was born. Contrary to popular opinion, she did not ride into Bethlehem on a donkey's back the very day she was to deliver her child Jesus.

"She brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn (Luke 2.7)."

"There were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night (Luke 2.8)." Those who know the customs of the people in the land of Judaea of that day say the winters there are too severe for shepherds and their flocks to abide in the fields in mid-December. In autumn each year, the shepherds would bring their flocks in to winter in the shelter of barns, stables, or other shelters during the bitterly cold winter season. David's twenty-third Psalm says, ". . .and I Will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." The sheep dwelled in the house of the shepherd in Bible days when, after the summer's grazing was over, the shepherd brought his flock home with him. The flock literally stayed in the lower level of the house which served as a barn, while the shepherd and his family lived upstairs in "the upper room."

In Leviticus 23 there are seven feast days given for Israel to observe throughout all their generations. The seventh of these was the feast of tabernacles which was about mid-October by our calendar. Each of the seven feasts is a type or picture of some event in the life of Christ. Most notable, perhaps, is the Passover, on which Jesus was crucified; and fifty days later, the feast of Pentecost, when He sent His Holy Spirit in a manifest way in Acts 2. We can only comment here on the feast of tabernacles. These "tabernacles" were temporary lean-to shelters or "booths" made from the boughs of trees (Leviticus 23.40—43), in which the men of Israel dwelled for a week during this feast. Since each feast has its antitypical fulfillment in Christ, this feast must also. In John 1.14 we are told, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us. . ." The word here translated "dwelt" means literally, "tabernacled." Such is the marginal rendering in many reference Bibles. The Word was made flesh, then. And, to fulfill the type, He

tabernacled--He took up a temporary abode, tabernacling in the flesh-- among us. Because of these types from Leviticus and the plain language of John, it is evident that Jesus was born in Bethlehem on or about the time of the feast of tabernacles, not in late December, but in mid-October, while the shepherds were indeed yet in the field with their sheep.

The angel of the Lord came upon the shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night; the glory of the Lord shone round about them. He then announced the birth of Christ and told them where they would find Him, Luke 2.8-12. Then, a multitude of the heavenly host was suddenly with the angel, praising God, and saying (note: not "singing," but "saying"), "Glory to God in the highest..." Luke 2.13-14. The shepherds made haste and came, evidently that same night (Luke 2.15-16). When they left, the shepherds made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child (Luke 2.17).

Such are the events leading up to and including the birth of Jesus Christ as told by Matthew and Luke. There is no mention of the wise men having been in Bethlehem with the shepherds the night Christ was born, simply because they were not there that night.

The week following Jesus' birth, Mary rested, recuperating and nursing her firstborn son. Eight days after his birth, according to Hebrew law (Leviticus 12.3), Jesus was circumcised (Luke 2.21), probably at the local synagogue in Bethlehem. Levitical law prohibited Mary's traveling as yet, so they could not yet go home to Nazareth.

Luke continues in 2.22, that "when the days of Mary's purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished," a total of forty days after His birth (Leviticus 12.4), "they brought him to Jerusalem, to present Him to the Lord. . .and to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord [Leviticus 12.8], a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." Incidentally, this offering shows the poverty of Joseph and Mary, who, had they been more well-off financially, would have been required by the same

law to have offered a lamb of the first year for a burnt offering AND a young pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering (Leviticus 12.6-7) at this time.

“And WHEN they [Joseph and Mary] had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth (Luke 2.39).” Notice: This was on or immediately after the fortieth day after Christ’s birth that the little family of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus returned to Nazareth. Forty days and no Wise men. Where were the wise men? Matthew tells us.

### **THE WISE MEN**

“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east and are come to worship him (Matthew 2.1-2).”

How far east were they when they saw the star? They were at least as far away as the Tigris-Euphrates valley, if not further. Possibly they were further east, in the region of the Medes or the Persians, the old Medo-Persian empire. They were five hundred to a thousand miles away or further, as the F-16 flies. They were probably in what is now called Iran. They were not in any position like the shepherds to show up within a few minutes, a few hours, or even a few days.

The wise men’s sighting of the star was at the time of Christ’s birth, some two years prior to their actual arrival in Jerusalem. Christ, Joseph, and Mary had been in Nazareth for almost two years by the time they arrived in Jerusalem.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the days of Herod. Also, in the days of Herod, Matthew tells us, wise men came from the east to Jerusalem. Did they come on the night Jesus was born? Hardly. They saw His star that night, while they were a thousand miles to the east. These wise men

recognized the star for what it was and began making preparations for their journey. And, what preparations they were! There must be valuable gifts prepared; nothing trivial, for the magi, king-priests themselves, are to present these precious treasures to their own king, the king-priest of His people. Therefore, they must be gifts worthy of a king: gold, frankincense, myrrh. And, if they are going to be bearing valuable treasures across a thousand miles of dangerous, barren wilderness and desert, then an armed and supplied caravan must be prepared, with food and water for the way, and soldiers sufficient to protect them and their treasures from the bandits, thieves, and killers who inhabit the wastelands between them and their destination, the city of the Great King. Knowledgeable and reliable guides who well know the route must be enlisted. All of this takes time. These men are no amateurs; they are not ignorant. They are royalty. They are wise men from the east.

This awesome assemblage of treasures, men, and supplies finally completed, together with the arduous trip itself, finds a majestic, regal caravan from the ancient Persian empire entering Jerusalem, not Bethlehem; and not on the night of Jesus' birth, but some two years later. It is not three weary pilgrims asking for directions. It is not three street people asking for a handout. It is not, "We three kings of orient are." It is a holy pilgrimage of kings and their caravan coming to worship their king, the King of Kings. Their august arrival in Jerusalem was such a spectacle, and their authoritative demand, "Where is He that is born King of the Jews?" was so penetrating, and their announcement, "For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship HIM," was so devastating to Jerusalem's religious and political status quo of that day, that when Herod had heard these things "he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him"!

### **HEROD AND THE WISE MEN**

Herod was so troubled that he gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together. He gathered the Sanhedrin. Herod then did some demanding of his own, for he was not used to having royal dignitaries

come to Jerusalem looking for a king other than himself. He demanded of the Sanhedrin where Christ--for by now it had. come out that this King of the Jews must be the Christ--should be born.

Noooo-oo problem! Scriptorians all, they answered, "In Bethlehem of Judaea," and quoted from the prophet Micah. Herod made a mental note of the location: just six miles down the main highway, south out of Jerusalem.

Herod was still troubled. Snake that he was, he viewed any newborn king as a direct threat to himself. Cagily now ("privily," Matthew says), Herod inquired of the wise men: Along about when did you say you saw the star? Are you sure? Are you certain? Probing carefully, diligently, he asked them "what time the star appeared (Matthew 2.7)." Unsuspecting, the wise men answered that it had been two years ago. Two years. Herod made another mental note. He now has both the place and the time.

He is already formulating a plan, looking for a two-year-old boy-child, just six miles down the road.

Deviously, Herod sent them on, apparently with his blessing. "Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also." This is seemingly a reasonable request from a king to his fellow kings. Search diligently. Be sure you find him. Be sure you tell me exactly where he is. His request is plausible, justifiable: "That I may come and worship Him also."

The caravan moved on, south on the dusty Judaeian road, headed for Bethlehem. Neither Matthew nor Luke reveals whether it was before or after the magi arrived in Bethlehem that the star they had seen in the east appeared again to them, but it did reappear. And the star "went before them till it came and stood over where the young child was" --not in Bethlehem, six miles south, but in Nazareth, seventy miles north, where Joseph and his family had lived for the last two years, minus a little over forty days.

The star led them in a roundabout way, not backtracking through Jerusalem, for by all accounts the unsuspecting Herod never saw a trace of the eastern caravan again.

The wise men from the east came "into the house," says Matthew (2.11). Not a Bethlehem barn with its manger, and not an inn. Joseph's and Mary's house. "And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child," a toddler now, no babe in the manger, not exactly a babe in arms; the young child. The Ancient of Days clad in the body of a preschooler. And they worshiped Him. Not that they worshiped her, Mary; oh, no. She worshiped Him too. They worshiped Him. "When they had opened their treasures, they presented unto Him gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. And, being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way (Matthew 2.]. 10." Already in Nazareth, there was no need to go south to Jerusalem; indeed, they were warned not to do so. Instead, they went directly northeast through Galilee toward Damascus where they connected with the major caravan trails toward their homeland.

Joseph likewise was warned in a dream. While Herod was looking for Jesus in Bethlehem to the south, Joseph took his family from the north, Nazareth, to Egypt. Had they remained in Nazareth, Herod well might have been able to trace Joseph's family to Nazareth through the tax records or through someone in Bethlehem who remembered, having talked with Joseph and Mary during their forty-day stay in Bethlehem (or perhaps the shepherds--see Luke 2.17), that Joseph was from Nazareth. In any case, however, by the time Herod's troops would have arrived in Nazareth, Jesus' family would have long since been safe in Egypt. Thus, Herod's every move was defeated by God's wisdom and power.

What is the point of all this, you ask? How much difference does it make? What difference does it make whether Jesus was born in October or on the day the Romans celebrated the sun-god's return? What difference does it make whether the wise men arrived the night He was born or a



couple years later? It makes this difference: It is the difference between right and wrong, truth and error. It is God-inspired history versus Roman mythology.

This is more than a "Christmas story." It is more than a myth about a young expectant mother in labor pains bouncing along on a burro's back, entering Bethlehem scant hours before the delivery of her child. It is more than a pageant about shepherds and wise men and little drummer boys and oxen and chickens and sheep and a red-nosed reindeer all huddled around a glow-in-the-dark manger. It is the true account of God's sovereign providence protecting a baby boy predestined to save His people from their sins and of the Lord's misdirecting those who would destroy Him. It is the account of God's protecting power and guiding providence taking care of and controlling everyone from a poor, small-town carpenter's family to emperors, kings, and armies on the international level.

Here, God tells us of His own power overruling a depraved and crazy king and a crowd of evil priests, all for the good of His people. See Herod destroy the infant population of Bethlehem! "Surely the wrath of man shall praise Thee; the remainder of wrath shalt Thou restrain." In his insane depravity Herod tried to destroy the Christ-child, and we see his hateful intent demonstrated to its fullest. It was surely no fault of Herod's that he did not succeed, for he followed the best information he had available. He failed only because of the infinite power and wisdom of God which hindered, restrained, blinded, and misled him.

What is the point, then? The point is, God's truth is so much better than the pagan fiction known as "the Christmas story." The point is, we see God manifest in the flesh of the infant Jesus, "made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons (Galatians 4.40." The babe was helpless from the human standpoint, yea, bound up like a mummy in swaddling clothes, but He was protected by God's infinite power, wisdom, and providence.

Joseph was unaware of all that Herod would do if he could, and powerless to protect his little family against Herod's soldiers. But although the details were unknown to Joseph, he, his wife, and their little charge were being protected at all times by the true and the living God. At the proper time, God warned Joseph again in another dream. By God's grace Joseph took his wife and her child and fled at the appointed time to Egypt, thus fulfilling yet another prophecy of which Joseph well might have been unaware at the time: "Out of Egypt have I called my son."

Nothing devolved upon Joseph's being well-versed in either Bible prophecy or the details of God's predestination and will. Everything, everything hinged solely upon God's sovereign will and power over all creation. His purpose was not that the infant Jesus would die at the point of Herod's sword, but that He would survive and live until He had fulfilled all righteousness and all things which were written in the law and the prophets, and that He would then and only then make His own soul an offering for sin. Only then would He give His life as a ransom for many by His death on the Roman cross.

The point is, God Almighty had a predestinated purpose for this child, His holy child Jesus, as He has a purpose for all people, things, and events. The point is, nothing can alter, change, or thwart God's purpose, whether it is His purpose for Jesus Christ, or kings and rulers, principalities and powers, or you and me.

The point is, in God's inspired account we have evidence and reason to believe and to hope that this same God who watched over Jesus, Mary, and Joseph has also watched over our families, and will watch over and protect us--not only when we were infants and toddlers, which He has done; but also that He will watch over us throughout all of our varied, unprofitable lives, protecting us from dangers both seen and unseen, from before our births until after our deaths. Such is my God. I hope He is my Savior.

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