



## ***I LOVE CHRISTMAS...***

...I love everything about it.

From the sense of excitement at the Christmas Eve midnight service, to the turkey on Christmas day: from giving and receiving presents, to Donald Duck having yet another run-in with Chip n' Dale: from chestnuts "roasting on an open fire" to "deck the halls with boughs of holly, 'tis the suzy to be trolley", as my youngest son used to sing.

I like the Christmas nativity plays and adorning the tree with familiar and much loved decorations.

And I love the Christmas story.

### **But which Christmas story?**

Because there are *two* tales being told at Christmas time – one that belongs to fantasy and one that belongs to reality. Yet all too often we celebrate through our songs and through our stories the fantasy - rehearsing, remembering and so *reinforcing* something that didn't actually happen. And the more we tell it as it *isn't*, the more the true story fades from view and loses its impact and its life-changing power.

So put down the fairy on the Christmas tree. Put down the "three kings from orien-tar." Put down the "star of wonder, star of night," and "no room in the inn." Because I am going to tell you a different story. The real story of Christmas...

### **...AND YET**

As with all the best nativity plays or the "look behind you!" pantomimes, we too will need a script and scriptwriters; a cast and some nifty special effects; a stage and the star of the show.

Are you sitting comfortably?

Then I'll begin....

## **THE SCRIPT AND THE SCRIPTWRITERS**



Although four men each wrote a life of Jesus (the Gospels), only three of them mention Jesus' birth and only two of them (Matthew and Luke) do so in any detail.

Indeed basically all the information that we have about the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth come from these two people.

So how trustworthy are they?

First of all a general comment about the birth stories. If we are not to take them at face value but prefer to see them as a colourful and imaginative way of talking about who Jesus is and why He came, then we have to accept that we require them to be substantially different in character from the rest of the Gospel material, which is presented as historical facts.

For example the miracles that Jesus performed in His lifetime (and which some might want to treat as invention), are treated by the Gospel writers as facts. Indeed at the end of his Gospel John writes that he has recorded particular miracles so that the reader may "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing may have life in his name." (Jn.20v30-31). In other words John expects us to take miracles so seriously that they become a convincing testimony as to who Jesus is. A person's very salvation apparently rests on the historicity of these signs that he has recorded.

If those later miracles are accurately recorded, why not the miraculous events surrounding Jesus' birth?

**Matthew's** prime consideration is with Jewish Christians and his intention is to show that Jesus is the Messiah or Christ, the One who fulfils both Jewish Law and prophecy,

He focuses on Joseph, recording Joseph's genealogy and thus Jesus' adoptive family tree, whereas Luke concentrates more on Mary (and many commentators think that his genealogy in chapter 3 is that of Mary's).

However it is upon **Luke** that most attention falls, as it is his Gospel that contains so much of what we know as the familiar Christmas story – the archangel Gabriel coming to Mary; the census under Caesar Augustus; no room at the inn; the shepherds and the angels and so on.

## So how reliable is he?

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

In the time of Herod king of Judea..  
(Luke 1v1-5)

Later on Luke will continue to root his record in verifiably historical figures and events:-  
“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken.. This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria” (Lk.2v1-2).

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea...during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...” (Lk.3v1-2).

History as we understand it, context and factual accuracy are obviously important to him.

So no surprises in the reasons which Luke gives for having written his Gospel and the steps that he took to ensure that what he passed on was reliable and true.

“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us” - but apparently not all of them accurate or helpful, or why attempt another version of events? Thus Luke wants his reader – Theophilus means

“a lover of God,” so he may either be an actual person or represent any Christian – to know “the *certainty* of the things you have been taught.” How does Luke guarantee this certainty that he feels is so essential?

By making *careful investigation* and by talking to *eye-witnesses*, including those who were there *from the first* i.e. from Jesus’ birth. So that what we are finally left with is an *orderly* and *certain* record of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. That’s quite a claim!

In fact Luke was very well placed to compile such an authoritative record, for as a travelling companion of Paul he had spent around two years in Palestine with ample opportunity to talk to those whom he describes as being “eyewitnesses,” including Jesus’ family and indeed to Mary herself (Acts 21v17; 24v27).

Furthermore unlike the classical Greek of his prologue (1v1-4) and of the rest of his Gospel, Luke’s first two chapters abound in Jewish terms and phrases, suggesting that he may even be quoting from these eye-witnesses to whom he spoke.

*“Luke’s history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness... Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statement of fact trustworthy; he is possessed of the true historic sense; he seizes the important and critical events and shows their true nature at greater length, while he touches lightly or omits entirely much that was valueless for his purposes. In short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.”*

(W.M. Ramsey :archaeologist -  
“The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament”).

*“Wherever modern scholarship has been able to check up on the accuracy of Luke’s work the judgement has been unanimous; he is one of the finest and ablest historians in the ancient world.”*

(Prof. Otto Piper: “The Purpose of Luke”)

One final point in relation to Matthew and Luke’s accounts is that although their birth narratives often contain very different material, they both agree on the fact that Joseph and Mary were betrothed and not married; that there was a virginal conception; and that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. For them, these things were incontrovertible.

**John** is more interested in the theological significance of Jesus' coming into the world rather than the actual events surrounding His birth. That the "Word became flesh" is what excites him, that and the fact that those who respond to this "Word" become in their turn children of God, "children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." (Jn.1v12-13).

Yet even there perhaps it is possible to make a connection between these sons and daughters of God and *the* Son of God. Both becoming so because both born "not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

Later on John also records an insult levelled against Jesus – "We are not illegitimate children" (Jn.8v41). Is this a reference to the dubious (and widely known) circumstances surrounding His conception? Mark too records the comments of the crowds in Nazareth when faced with Jesus' wisdom and power in Mk.6v3: "Isn't this Mary's son..?" Are they simply referring to the fact that Joseph is apparently now dead or are they alluding to the fact that whilst everyone knew who Jesus' mother was, the identity of His father was none too clear?

John also uses the curious word "enfleshed" to describe Jesus becoming a human being (Jn.1v14), a strange way to talk about an everyday sort of conception.

In summary we can say that the Gospel writers are writing history which they then interpret theologically. They do this not to change the facts but to bring out the full significance of those facts.

## THE CAST

### Joseph

(Mt.1v18-25; 2v13-23; Lk.1v27; 2v4-5)

Matthew tells us that Mary's fiancé Joseph was a godly and upright man (Mt.1v18; Lk.1v26-27). He was a distant descendant of the famous King David and thus because of the requirements of the census had to travel to his ancestral home of Bethlehem, choosing to take Mary with him (Mt.1v6,16; Lk.1v27; 2v4-5).

He was a carpenter / general builder in Nazareth (Mt.13v55; Mk.6v3), and became the father of several sons and daughters after the birth of Jesus (Mt.13v55-56; Mk.6v3).



However, the Bible makes it very clear that he was not married to Mary when she became pregnant with Jesus (Mt.1v18f; Lk.1v26f; 2v5).

### Betrothals

At the time of Jesus a length of time would elapse between an engagement and the actual marriage. Yet during that intervening time, although the couple did not live together, they would already be called "husband" and "wife" (Mt.1v19), and were one of them to die, their partner would be called a "widow" or "widower." So binding was this formal betrothal that it could only be broken by a divorce (Mt.1v19), and there would have to be compelling reasons – such as unfaithfulness – to take such an action.

Believing that Mary had been unfaithful, Joseph decided to divorce her and had a choice of one or two courses of action. Either he could start a lawsuit against her, and so expose her to public shame and ridicule, or he could hand her a note of divorce and dismiss her quietly. It was this latter course of action that he intended to take (Mt.1v19), until God spoke to him in a dream and told him the truth of the matter (Mt.1v20-21).

After the dream Joseph then married Mary and they began to live together as husband and wife, although it is explicitly stated that they had no sexual union until after Jesus was born (Mt.1v24-25) and that he was not really the father of Jesus, although most assumed that he was (Lk.3v23).

After the visit of the Magi, Joseph took his new family into Egypt to escape the murderous attentions of King Herod, only returning after the King's death. Thinking that it was still too dangerous to stay in Judea, he moved to the northern territory of Galilee (Mt.2v19-23).

### Mary (Mt.1v18-25; Lk.1v26-56; 2v1-7,19)

Was a young woman of marriageable age (around 14 years old), and engaged to Joseph, the local carpenter– builder (Mt.1v18; Lk.1v27).

To her complete and utter amazement, a mighty angel from heaven appeared to her with the news that she had been chosen to become the mother of the long awaited Messiah. But the message went even beyond that. For this longed for Servant of God, prophesied for generations, would be none other than God Himself (Lk.1v26-38)!

Taking her courage in both hands, Mary later shared with Joseph the news that she was pregnant, recognising all the risks that she was

running by so doing. To her joy, Joseph took her into his home as his wife.

Mary will be with Jesus all through His life, literally from the cradle to the grave and will be one of the first disciples to receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, forty days after Jesus was raised from the dead (Acts 1v14; 2v1ff).

### **The Shepherds** (Lk.2v8-20)

Due to their nomadic rootless lifestyle, shepherds were not considered to be very trustworthy and being a group of self-contained, self-sufficient men, they stood apart from normal community life. In effect they suffered from the same stereotypical reputation that gypsies might have in some areas today.

Indeed shepherds were one of a number of sections of society who were not allowed to be witnesses in court, because their testimony was considered to be so unreliable.

Yet it was to *them* that the angels were sent with the news of Christ's birth! And it was *they* who became the very first witnesses of the coming of God into the world (Lk.2v8-20)!

Sheep tended to be kept outside from March to November (and sometimes later), which potentially gives the birth of Jesus its traditional mid-winter time.

And far from abandoning their sheep on the hillside to run off to Bethlehem, the flock would already have been safe inside a sheepfold made of thorn bushes or of stones topped with thorns and guarded by the sheep dogs.

### **The Wise Men / Magi** (Mt.2v1-12)

If shepherds were considered beyond the pale, what price the Magi?

These men were star gazers, greatly interested in the study and significance of the night sky and embracing astronomy and astrology, science and superstition, in equal measure. It is also known from ancient documents that Magi would sometimes travel long distances on journeys covering many hundreds of miles in pursuit of knowledge. For example Magi are recorded as visiting Rome in AD 66 .

And because they were involved in the occult in direct contravention of the Scriptures (e.g. Deut.18v9-13), no devout Jew would have anything to do with them. As a Jewish saying

went: "Whoever learns something from a magus is worthy of death."

It is possible to read symbolism and significance into the gifts that they brought – gold for kingship, frankincense for worship (and thus for divinity) and myrrh for death and burial. Indeed later Christians turned to such passages as Ps.72 v.10-11,15 and Isa.60v6 to do just that. Or they tried to find other meanings in the visit of the Magi, proclaiming that they represented the pagan, occult world acknowledging that Jesus was Lord of all and coming to worship at His feet.

But these are connections that others made, not ones that Matthew made himself. Very significantly Matthew never tells his readers why the Magi came. This is extremely relevant in deciding whether this is an account of an actual event or simply a work of devout fiction.

Elsewhere in his Nativity, Matthew is at pains to point out that such and such an action fulfilled such and such a prophecy (e.g.1v22; 2v15, 17, 23). *But on the visit of the Magi in chapter 2, he is silent.* If he had invented their visit in order to demonstrate the fulfilment of a particular prophecy or to prove a certain theological point he would have done so. But Matthew makes no connections at all. His silence points to the fact that he simply recorded what had happened.

And not only that but as a devout Jew himself, he would know that it did nothing for Jesus' "street cred" for pagan occult visitors to pay Him homage and vouch for His credentials. (Just as in the same way today the Archbishop of Canterbury would not thank a Satanist for telling everyone that he was God's man for the Church)!

And that brings us to another question. From where did these Magi or Wise Men come? The Bible says that they came from "the east" (Mt.2v1) but gives no more information than that.

Not surprisingly there have been a number of solutions put forward.

Perhaps Persia (modern day Iran). This is most likely their country of origin and has the backing of tradition. Matthew says that they came from the east (Mt.2v1). We know too that Jews were deported to Persia in earlier times (2 Kngs 17v6) and they would have brought with them their faith and their expectations of the coming of Messiah.

Another suggestion is that the Magi came from Babylonia, where again Jews – most notably Daniel – had dwelt for a time (Dan.1v1-6 etc).

What we do know is that their visit caused quite a stir. By Jesus' day the prophecy in Num.24v17 about a "star," was taken to refer to the Messiah, Israel's promised king 1. And now these men arrive in Jerusalem, asking for the "King of the Jews" and saying that they have seen his "star"!

1. *"The king rises out of Jacob and the Anointed One [Messiah] of Israel becomes great and ...rules over all the children of men."* Targum Onkelos).

Finally, the Bible never says that there were three magi, only that they gave three gifts (Mt.2v11), nor that they were kings.

### **King Herod (Mt.2v1-8,12-19)**

With the help and support of Rome, Herod was installed as "King of the Jews" in the year 40 BC, after a period of political and civil unrest. He proved to be unstable, insecure and unpopular. He murdered members of his own family besides those of the old previous royal family and created a network of spies and informers to help him keep control.

Very aware that part of his unpopularity stemmed from the fact that he was an Idumaeon and not a full Jew (cf Deut.17v15), Herod tried to win the people's favour by a series of ambitious building projects, so earning himself the title of Herod "the Great." One particularly significant venture was the enlarging of the Temple in Jerusalem on a massive scale.

Herod is notorious in the Biblical records for being the king who ordered the murder of all the boy babies after the birth of Jesus, as recorded in Matthew's Gospel. To disguise this crime there is evidence that he ordered the destruction of the genealogical records held in the Temple.

In February 2000 an archaeological dig near Bethlehem also discovered a mass grave containing the remains of up to 100 infants, which dated back at least to the time of Herod's reign, although these bones may hark back even further to the period when this area was a site for the burial of child sacrifice victims.

Herod died somewhere between 12<sup>th</sup> March and 11<sup>th</sup> April in 4 BC, and so disliked was he that the Jews later made the anniversary of his death one of the 35 days in the year when it was expressly forbidden to fast! On his death his kingdom was divided between three of his sons.

**Herod the Great**  
King of Judaea (37- 4 BC)

**Herod Antipas**  
tetrarch of Galilee (4 BC – AD 39)

**Archelaus**  
ethnarch of Judea (4 BC – AD 6)

**Herod Philip**  
tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis  
(4 BC – AD 33/34)

Archelaus proved to be as unstable, cruel and unpopular as his father. He was unable to maintain order in his realm and was replaced by a Roman procurator serving under the Roman legate in Syria.

The procurator controlled the area formerly under Archelaus' jurisdiction, namely Judea, Samaria and Idumea (or Edom). He had no authority in Herod Antipas' domain of Galilee and Perea (Lk.23v5-6). The first of these procurators was a man named Coponius. Later it was to be a man named Pontius Pilate.

## **THE SPECIAL EFFECTS**

### **The Virginal Conception**

As a starter let's remind ourselves that this most extraordinary claim comes in the Gospel of Luke, who makes the most stringent claims to be giving us a sober and accurate record, based on interviews with eye-witnesses who were there "from the first" i.e. including Mary.



Matthew also says that Jesus was conceived before Mary and Joseph had sexual intercourse (Mt.1v24-25) and he identifies Joseph as being the "husband of Mary" but not the father of Jesus (Mt.1v16). And John uses the unusual word of "enfleshed" to describe Jesus' becoming a human being. (And see above Jn.8v41; Mk.6v3).

The notion of a virginal conception of course did not come out of nowhere. It was found in the Old Testament in a prophecy of Isaiah (Isa.7v14), given around 700 years before the birth of Jesus.

In those days the nation was under severe threat from external enemies and so God gave them this most unusual sign to assure them of His presence and of their certain deliverance from danger.

In many versions of the Bible, the prophecy runs as follows:- "The *virgin* will be with child and will give birth to a son.." Strictly speaking that is not quite what Isaiah says. The word he uses which is translated as "virgin," is *almah*, which means a young woman of marriageable age, rather than specifically a *virgin*. It most closely approximates to our word *maiden*.

However that virginity is taken as read is clear for three reasons. Firstly, because in the culture of the times if a girl was unmarried then she would have been a virgin.

Secondly, because whenever *almah* is used elsewhere in the O.T. it describes a sexually mature but unmarried woman.

Thirdly because when Jewish scholars translated Isaiah. 7v14 into Greek, they did not choose a general word to describe a young woman but rather they translated *almah* by the Greek word *parthenos*, which means *virgin, and only means virgin*. (The only other time *parthenos* is used for *almah* is in the account of the choosing of Rebekah as a wife for Isaac in Gen.24v13f and where the Hebrew *almah* is translated as *parthenos* in v.16).

Isaiah makes no more mention of this "virginal" conception, for his focus is more on God's deliverance of His people.

A deliverance so *certain* that a young as yet unmarried woman, can consider marrying and having children, when common sense says that the nation is staring into an abyss.

A deliverance so *swift* that whilst the child is still innocent of right and wrong, "the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste." (Isa.7v16).

A deliverance so *secure* that this baby will symbolise God's actual presence with His people, "Immanuel, God with us."

Yet it is not just any young woman that Isaiah is talking about, for he speaks of *the* virgin / young woman. In Isaiah's day, this prophecy was understood to have been fulfilled when the wife of King Ahaz gave birth to the godly Hezekiah.

But Biblical prophecy is like the incoming tide of the sea, each wave coming further up the beach than the last. So in many cases there will be an immediate and "minor" fulfilment of the promise (e.g. the birth of Hezekiah), followed sometimes many years later, by the final and complete fulfilment.

It is this final act that Luke and Matthew record in their different ways.

And of course the reason that Mary conceives a child whilst still a virgin takes us to the very heart of the nature and identity of Jesus.

The first part of Gabriel's message to Mary might speak only of the birth a great man, a true descendant of King David and God's chosen Messiah (Lk.1v30-33). Even the term "*Son of God*" could refer simply to a king (e.g. Ps.2), or to the Messiah, whilst the promise of a kingdom that will never end to a reiteration of the promise made to David (2 Sam.7v11-16; 1 Chron.17v11-14).

But the *second* part of Gabriel's message reveals that this child will not simply be a great human being but will be God Himself (Lk.1v35). It is the Holy Spirit who will release life within Mary, "so the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

However godly and upright a man Joseph might be, and however godly and upright a woman Mary might be, the result of their sexual union could only be a human being, no more and no less.

Only in this unique fusion of the Holy Spirit of God and of a woman (Mary), can God enter the world as both fully man and also fully God. Suddenly "Son of God" takes on a whole new and deeper meaning and suddenly "Immanuel" (Mt.1v23) means *exactly* what it says! Isaiah 9v6-7 is literally fulfilled!

That this fact was shared early on with Jesus can be seen in Lk.2v48-49, where Jesus carefully distances Himself from Mary's anxious comments about she and his "father" Joseph looking for Him. In fact He is already in (God's) His true Father's house (the Temple) and engaged in His true Father's business.

It may be to draw attention to the unique way that Jesus was conceived but also to remind his audience of other women who had played a key role in the nation's history, that Matthew, unusually in a genealogy, mentions three other women in the family tree (Mt.1v2-5).

One final point: although passages such as Isa.9v2ff were interpreted by Jewish scholars as referring to the Messiah, no such understanding appears to have been attached to Isa.7v14 and nor was there any expectation that the Messiah would be conceived by means of a virgin.

This means that neither Matthew nor Luke were basing their account on Jewish expectations of the Messiah but rather were forging a totally new narrative. And in doing so they would have been aware of the extra difficulties that they posed for themselves by not only claiming that Jesus was the Messiah but by claiming that He had been conceived in this unique way.

The only reason for recording such a conception was because that was the way that it had happened.

### Angels

(Mt.1v20-24; 2v13,19; Lk.1v5-38; 2v8-20)  
Gabriel is one of two great angels mentioned in both Old and New Testaments (Dan.8v16; 9v21; Lk.1v11f; 1v26f). The word "angel" comes from the Greek word *angelos*, which means a messenger (or angel).

Far from being the fairy on the Christmas tree, angels are mighty servants of God, spiritual beings whose majesty and power can be awesome to behold. Just see the response of the shepherds to the angel in Lk.2v9 or the description of an angel in Rev.10v1-3. Yet these mighty beings are given to care for and to help Christians (Heb.1v14 e.g. Acts 12v1ff).

### The Star (Mt.2v1-2,16)

First of all it is clear that it was a real star (or planet) that was observed and not simply some figurative way of describing a star of destiny, or a guiding star or even an angel.

Various suggestions have been offered as to the identity of this star:-

- The planet Jupiter, often associated with the birth of kings and called the "king-planet."
- The conjunction of Jupiter with Saturn.
- The conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars in the constellation of Aries (the "ruler").
- A comet acting in an odd manner.
- A star of unusual brilliance.
- A supernova (as for example recorded by Chinese astronomers in 5/4 BC).

In the ancient world there was a widespread belief that the appearance of stars heralded the birth of human beings destined for greatness. And both Roman and Jewish writers report that there was also a widely held belief that a world ruler was to appear from Judea whose kingdom would

usher in a reign of peace and prosperity. No wonder the wise men or Magi studied the night sky so intently!

**Suetonius:** "*An ancient and settled persuasion prevailed throughout the East, that the Fates had decreed some one to proceed from Judea, who should attain universal empire.*" (Vespasian IV)

**Tacitus:** "*Many were persuaded that it was contained in the ancient books of their priests, that at that very time the East should prevail, and that some one should proceed from Judea and possess the dominion.*" (Histories V.13)

**Josephus:** "*...an ambiguous oracle that was ...found in their sacred writings, how 'about that time, one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth.'*" (War.6.312)

### "We three kings of orient are...following yonder star."

But did they?

If the Magi were from Persia as tradition suggests, then they could not have seen Jesus' star "in the east" –Gk: *en tais anatolais* (Mt.2v2), because they would have seen it rising in the west, (unless they were simply saying that they were in the east when they saw the star). However an alternative and perhaps a preferred translation reads "at its rising." – *en te anatole*, the common Greek expression for the first appearance of a star on the horizon.

Matthew actually never says that the Magi followed the star to Jerusalem, only that they had seen Jesus' star at its rising (or in the east) and had divined its significance as heralding the long awaited "king of the Jews." In consequence they had travelled to Israel.

Indeed if they *had* followed the star all the way from their home country then it undoubtedly would have led them directly to Bethlehem and to the holy family and not to Jerusalem and into the arms of Herod. And of course they didn't need a star to guide them to Jerusalem either because everyone knew what the capital of Israel was and where it was to be found.

The only time the star is in fact recorded as leading the wise men is on their very short (four mile) journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, where it is clear that the star they had seen once at its rising in their own country, now appeared for a second time to lead them to Bethlehem (Mt.2v9)

As Bethlehem is so close to Jerusalem, it is hard to imagine how a celestial object could hang so low in the sky that it could lead the magi over such a short geographical distance, especially as they did not need the star to guide them to Bethlehem because the teachers of the law had already told them where they should go (Mt.2v5-6).

So why did the star shine once again? Probably to confirm that Bethlehem was indeed the right place to which to go. But more importantly it shone to identify the actual house in which Jesus had been born (Mt.2v9). Although the Magi knew to which village to go they did not know the specific location. Perhaps the star then shone with particular brilliance, casting a “spotlight” on Jesus’ birthplace.

And there was also going to be another reason why the magi would need a star to guide them on a night journey to a specific home, rather than them simply waiting for the day.

A few men arriving at night and leaving the very next day at early dawn (“having been warned in a dream”), would ensure that the location of Jesus’ home would remain a secret. Foreign travellers arriving in broad daylight and asking around for directions to “King” Jesus’ home would have ensured that Herod would swiftly have discovered where Jesus was.

Although tradition and popular belief have the Magi coming to Jesus at the same time as the shepherds, a closer look at the text suggests otherwise.

They come to the “house” (and not to an inn or to a stable), and worship the “child” (and not the baby (Mt.2v11). Indeed it is explicitly stated that they arrived in Judea “after Jesus was born in Bethlehem” (Mt.2v1).

Moreover Herod would have had no reason to kill the male children of two years and under, “in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi,” (Mt.2v16), unless the guiding star, signalling the actual or the imminent birth of the “King of the Jews,” had not appeared in the skies two years before the Magi’s arrival in Jerusalem. Which would make Jesus two years old or less when the Magi found Him.

Further indications that the wise men did not arrive in Bethlehem at the same time as the shepherds i.e. at Jesus’ birth, is given in Luke’s Gospel. There, in chapter 2v21f, Luke records that Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the Temple

when He was about 6 weeks old “to present Him to the Lord”

It is surely inconceivable that Herod, on tenterhooks to discover the identity of this new born “King of the Jews,” would have waited that long to hear back from the magi, when Bethlehem was no more than a few miles from Jerusalem. If they had not returned to his palace within the first day, he would have come looking for them and for the baby. Similarly it is surely very unlikely that if Joseph and Mary had been alerted by God to the fact that Herod was looking to kill their child and had been told to flee to Egypt, they would instead have first brought that same baby to the very city in which Herod was living.

Also Joseph and Mary’s offering, in accordance with Lev.12, was one made by poor people. Yet with gold, frankincense and myrrh, they would hardly have been thought of as being poor.

Why Luke decides not to record the flight to Egypt after the purification in the Temple and simply records the holy family returning to Galilee is consistent with his decision not to mention the wise men at all and instead to concentrate on key aspects of Jesus’ infancy and childhood prior to the beginning His adult ministry.

Whereas Matthew chooses to use the flight into Egypt as the theological climax of his Nativity, quoting Hosea 11v1, “out of Egypt I called my Son” (Mt.2v5), and thus identifying Jesus as the true Israel and also as God’s unique Son, Luke makes the same theological point but chooses instead to do so by concentrating on the meeting with Simeon and with Anna and on Jesus’ visit to the Temple aged twelve years old (Lk.2v21-52).

**Dreams** (Mt.1v20-21; 2v12-13,19)

Dreams figure strongly in the Nativity story.

Matthew has a dream when he is considering divorcing Mary (Mt.1v20-21). He has another dream warning him to flee Herod’s wrath and yet another telling him that the tyrant was now dead (Mt.2v13,19-20). And the wise men are warned by God not to return to Herod and to go home by another way (Mt.2v12).

Even today God promises to speak to His people through dreams (e.g. Acts 2v17). It can be a way of bypassing all our conscious defences and of Him speaking directly to us.

## THE STAGE

**Nazareth**  
(Mt.2v22-23;  
Lk.1v26; 2v4)



Was a settlement of some 200 persons in the north of the country. It lay near to Sepporis, the old capital of Galilee and near to one of the most important trade routes in the Roman Empire which ran from Egypt up to Damascus.

Later on, in reaction to Christian claims of Jesus' virginal conception, a slander would be spread that far from being a miraculous birth, Jesus was the result of a liaison between Mary and of one of the many traders or soldiers who had used that road.

#### **Jerusalem (Mt.2v1-4)**

Was the capital city of Israel and the focus of all political and religious life. It not only contained Herod's sumptuous palace and the Antonine fort where the Roman garrison resided, but also the great Temple.

During His ministry Jesus was often to be found in and around Jerusalem, (He had close friends living in nearby Bethany), and on two famous occasions He cleared the Temple of the money changers and animal traders.

It was into Jerusalem that Jesus rode on Palm Sunday; it was in Jerusalem that He shared the Last Supper with His disciples and where He was tried and sentenced to death. It was here that He was crucified and then raised to life on Easter Day.

#### **Bethlehem (Mt.2v1-11; Lk.2v1-20)**

Was the birthplace of the greatest king that Israel had ever known, the godly King David. According to Micah (quoted by Matthew) it was in Bethlehem that the Messiah, David's "son," was to be born (Micah 5v2; Mt.2v6).

As a descendant of the Davidic line as Matthew and Luke make clear, Joseph had to return to his ancestral home in obedience to the census and it was there that Jesus was born.

Bethlehem means "*House of Bread*," how fitting for One who years later would call Himself the "Bread of Life."

#### **The Census (Lk.2v1-5)**

This is one of Luke's typical approaches to his Gospel, placing the events of Jesus' life into an historical context.

It therefore becomes one of the biggest challenges to the reliability of his birth account because no evidence exists that any single, all-embracing Empire-wide census was ever taken during the time of Augustus.

Another apparent difficulty is that although Quirinius *was* governor of Syria (and thus of Judea) and *did* conduct a census, he was not appointed until AD 6. Jesus on the other hand, was born some time before the death of Herod the Great, who died in Jericho in March-April of 4 BC.

The third obstacle is that Roman censuses did not require people to travel back to their ancestral homes in order to register, yet this is precisely what we are told Joseph had to do. 2.

2. Although for example in AD 104 a census issued by the Roman prefect of Egypt *did* instruct people to return to their homes to register.

Yet we need once again to put these difficulties against Luke's stated aim in compiling his Gospel: "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning.. so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught....In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world." (Lk.1v1-4; 2v1).

Although there is no clear evidence of any such "first census" outside of Luke, the Gospel itself is an ancient source document, and where it can be tested by other external sources it proves to be accurate. Can this be the case here too?

In fact there are coherent ways forward to address these issues without being required to perform unconvincing mental gymnastics in order to make Luke's account "work," or alternatively having to reject his Gospel out of hand.

First of all the wording of Lk.2v1 is actually very general and doesn't claim that the Emperor Augustus ordered one huge census of his realm all at the same time. If we realise this then it is easy to see that what Luke is saying is that various parts of the Empire were subject to various censuses during the reign of Augustus and that at this point ("in those days") the Emperor decided to extend this census to every part of the Empire, including such client states as Judea. And this is something that we know that he did.

*A census or taxation-assessment of the whole provincial empire...was certainly accomplished for the first time in history under Augustus.*

A.N. Sherwin-White (Historian on ancient Rome)

In other words Augustus did indeed order an Empire-wide census, but not one simultaneous and all-embracing census.

Secondly, although it is true that Quirinius was most probably only once governor of Syria and conducted a census in AD 6, Luke knows this, as he demonstrates in Acts 5v37: "Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt." So it is highly unlikely that he would have confused this later head count with the one held at the time of Jesus' birth and yet he still makes reference to Quirinius' census in connection with the birth of Jesus.

Once again it is instructive to go back to the text and to see what Luke actually wrote. His precise wording in 2v2 is unusual: "this was the *first* [Greek: *prote*] census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria."

*Prote* can indeed mean *first*, which gives us our familiar translation and has Luke saying that this was the *first* census taken whilst Quirinius governed Syria. But grammatically it is possible (although problematic) to take *prote* to mean *prior to*, or *before*.

In which case Luke is not linking this census with Quirinius but rather saying that this was a census undertaken by someone else *before* the famous one of 6 AD and for example a census was taken of Judea between 9 – 6 BC by Sentius Saturninus. In fact there appears to have been a general 14 year cycle of censuses throughout much of the Roman empire.

There is in fact actually some evidence that Quirinius *may* have governed Syria twice, the first occasion being between either 10-7 BC or between 3-2 BC, and if so then Luke would be quite correct in saying that the census under which Jesus was born was Quirinius' first. An inscription [Lapis Tiburtinus] speaks of Quirinius as being governor "for the second time" in Syria. However, does this mean a governor twice in Syria or simply twice a governor, but only one of those times being in Syria?

Or it may be that the census began before he became governor of Syria but that it lasted into his governorship and so was completed by him and was thus credited to him.

Or can we go back to the apparent face value reading of 2v2, i.e. that a census was begun by Quirinius, but was it a census which he had actually set in motion *before* he was governor?

For example another inscription [Lapis Venetus] indicates that whilst a consul Quirinius initiated a census in around 11-12 BC, which at least included parts of Syria.

Around the time of Jesus' birth, Herod was a sick man and his power was on the wane. Quirinius had been made consul (a high ranking and very powerful imperial administrative post) in 12 BC and was serving in the East. It is not at all impossible that Herod could have been compelled to organise a census by Quirinius acting as the Emperor's agent, prior to the anticipated change over of power.

As a client king, Herod (and any subsequent ruler), had to be confirmed in their position by Rome and they could be dismissed at any time. So Rome would certainly want to know the exact state of the country before she decided who might rule it on her behalf. As it was, Herod's kingdom was divided amongst three of his sons – none of whom were called "king," and eventually Judea was ruled directly by Roman procurators, the most (in)famous of whom was of course Pontius Pilate.

In conclusion, Luke's words in 2v2 – "This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria" can legitimately be taken in one of five ways:-

1. That the census under which Joseph and Mary travelled to Bethlehem was ordered by Quirinius in 6 AD when he was governor of Syria. (Unlikely, in that the date of his appointment and the date of Jesus' birth do not tie up).
2. That the census under which Joseph and Mary travelled to Bethlehem was a census held *prior* to the famous one ordered by Quirinius as governor of Syria.
3. That Quirinius did in fact serve two terms as governor of Syria, the first dating from either 10-7 BC or 3-2 BC, (as some scholars believe) and that it was during his first governorship that he ordered the census described by Luke.
4. That a census was ordered by the Emperor Augustus, which began before Quirinius was appointed governor of Syria but which lasted up to and into his governorship and for which he was credited.

5. That Quirinius himself ordered a census via Herod but in his capacity as consul and prior to his later appointment as governor of Syria.

Lastly, although it is true that Romans did not require their subjects to travel to their family homes for a census, this was how Jews did things. It is quite possible that the Romans were willing to let Herod conduct their census along Jewish traditional lines. In this way they both mollified a client king – although Herod had no choice as to the census being held, he could at least decide how it should be conducted - and it helped ensure the cooperation of his prickly subjects.

After all the Romans were simply interested in the results of the census, not in how the information was gained. All that mattered for them was that it would be accurate.

This may also explain why the census in Luke's Gospel apparently passed off peacefully, whilst the thoroughly Roman census referred to by Gamaliel in Acts 5, led to violence.

### **The “Stable” (Lk.2v1-7)**

Perhaps the most famous part of the whole Christmas story is that of Joseph and Mary desperately seeking shelter, with Mary on the verge of giving birth and finally being allowed to bed down in a stable “because there was no room for them in the inn.”

But did it really happen like that, or have we simply accepted wholesale an inaccurate retelling of those extraordinary days that changed the world?

Actually, contrary to the popular story, there is nothing at all in Luke's account to suggest that Mary gave birth to her son immediately or even very soon after her arrival in Bethlehem. In fact, the words of Lk. 2v6, “While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born”, suggest the very opposite.

And did she give birth in a stable, because there was no room in the inn? The Greek word that Luke uses at this point is *kataluma*. It can variously be translated “*guest room*”, “*house*”, or “*inn*.”

However it is very unlikely that Bethlehem possessed an inn because inns were to be found on trade routes and on major roads and Bethlehem was situated on neither.

Moreover Luke uses a different word, *pandocheion*, when he wants to speak of a commercial inn, as in the well-known story of the Good Samaritan (Lk.10v34).

*Kataluma*, in contrast, is the word Luke uses to describe the “guest room” of the Last Supper (Lk.22v11), as does Mark (Mk.14v14).

So it is far more likely that Luke is talking of a house or a guest room, rather than an inn, and most likely of all to be referring to a guest room. *The guest room of the family home to which Joseph had returned, in obedience to the requirements of the census.*

Archaeological and literary evidence has shown that peasant houses at the time of Jesus housed their livestock inside the home, not in a separate building. The animals and the people slept in one large enclosed space, with the animals occupying a lower level and the family on a raised dais.

### **So how can we re-picture the story?**

Returning to his family home, Joseph is anticipating staying with relations who are still living in Bethlehem. However he is not the only family member coming back and when Joseph and Mary arrive they discover that there is no room in the guest room of the family home because it is already occupied by other relatives.

Consequently Mary gives birth to her first-born in the animal part of the home, discreetly away from the noise and bustle of the overcrowded living quarters, but surrounded by enough experienced women to ensure that the birth is safe. Wrapped tight around in cloths according to Jewish birth customs of the time, Jesus is placed in a feeding trough as a makeshift cradle, because that is where the birth has taken place.

### **THE STAR OF THE SHOW**

(Mt.1v20-23; 2v1-2,6,11-15;  
Mt.2v19-23; Lk.1v31-35;  
2v6-7,10-12)



So we have the script and the script writers, the cast, stage and special effects. But what is it all for? *Who* is it all for?

The stage would look pretty empty and the supporting cast more than a little useless, without the star of the show.

And He of course, is **JESUS**.

Many years ago a Bishop of Durham got into trouble for saying that the Bible didn't portray three kings following a star to Bethlehem. One tabloid newspaper took him to task for daring to "spoil the children's story," (On a par with the vicar who tells a primary school assembly that Father Christmas doesn't exist)!

In other words, the explicit assumption on the part of that particular newspaper was that the Christmas story clearly wasn't true. It was a delightful, if somewhat childish tale for little children – on a par with Puss in Boots or Cinderella – but obviously not something that any thinking, intelligent adult would believe.

Indeed as we look out on a world torn and broken and look inwards to our own lives and to the lives of those whom we know, angels trilling, "peace on earth, goodwill to all men," is as banal as it sounds. (Although of course they didn't actually sing that but something far more disturbing Lk.2v14)!

What actual connection can a childhood (and childish) Christmas story have with my life or with anybody's life for that matter?

Which is why it is so important to revisit the Bible and to see what it really says and not what we always assumed it said.

And suddenly we discover that we are talking about real and convincing events, set firmly in history, surrounding the real birth of a real person. And not just any person.

And we are listening to a story that doesn't stop with a baby being born but which is actually about a man, "anointed with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him." (Acts 10v38).

And not just any man, but literally and actually **IMMANUEL – GOD WITH US!**

Luke and the other Gospel writers were right all along – "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, **so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.**"

## SO WHAT IS THE REAL STORY OF CHRISTMAS?



A young woman named Mary is engaged to be married to Joseph the local carpenter. Visited by the angel Gabriel, she is told that whilst still a virgin she will conceive a child by the power of the Holy Spirit. In that way the child to be born will be both fully human and fully divine. He will be God "enfleshed."

At first believing that Mary has been unfaithful, Joseph resolves to give her a bill of divorce and to send her away. However in a dream the true facts are revealed to him and he takes Mary to be his wife but they have no sexual relations until after Jesus is born.

Meanwhile in Rome the Emperor Caesar Augustus decides to extend the census that he has been taking of his empire to include those of client states. Under the direct or indirect supervision of Quirinius, King Herod arranges for a census to be taken according to the old traditional Jewish method of everyone returning to their family homes.

As a descendant of the house of David Joseph takes Mary with him and returns to Bethlehem to stay with relatives. However there are so many people staying in the house that there is no room for them in the guest chamber and so they have to muck in with everyone else on the raised family dais in a home that is shared with the animals.

During her stay Mary goes into labour and gives birth in a quiet place away from all the noise in the area of the house reserved for the livestock. Jesus is then subsequently placed in a make-shift crib – a manger.

Out in the fields shepherds are keeping watch over their flock when suddenly angels proclaim to them the news and the significance of Jesus' birth. Leaving their sheep safe in the fold and guarded by their dogs, they hurry to Bethlehem to see this amazing sight.

Some weeks or months later Magi, probably from Persia, arrive at the court of King Herod asking to see the new-born King of the Jews. Maybe up to two years earlier they had seen a celestial event which had convinced them that this King had been born or was about to be born.

On arriving in Jerusalem the religious teachers tell them that they must go to Bethlehem. The “star” that they had seen at the start of their journey now identifies the house where the child is living, and on entering they worship Him and give their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Warned by God that Herod will seek the child’s life they leave secretly for home. Similarly warned, Joseph also flees, taking his new family to stay as exiles in Egypt until Herod is dead. Only then do they return and only then do they go back to their home town of Nazareth, from where, some 30 years later, Jesus will begin the work that will change the world upside down.

## WHERE NOW?

My purpose in writing this little booklet was three-fold.



Firstly to help us better understand what really happened and what the Bible really teaches us about that first Christmas, as opposed to the mass of misinformation and inaccuracies that have accumulated around the Nativity story over the centuries.

Secondly to give us confidence in the accounts of the Nativity as we have them in the Bible.

Thirdly to present a challenge. Far from this being a delightful but unconvincing story for children, what we actually have in the Gospels is an account of an actual birth, rooted in historical people and events.

But more than that it is a sober and accurate record of how God came into our world in the person of His Son, Jesus.

The Christian writer and broadcaster C.S. Lewis once wrote: “Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.”

We can reject the Christmas story if we so choose but at least let’s be clear what story we are rejecting and equally clear as to why we are rejecting it, beyond mere prejudice and misinformation.

Because if the Gospels are as true as they claim to be, we are now faced with an immense question. Having found out **HOW** Jesus came into this world, we now have to come up with a convincing answer to the biggest question of all –

## WHY DID HE COME...?

### ...WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What better way to start than to read the accounts of Jesus’ birth and life written in the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? But don’t stop with the birth of Jesus: go on to discover the Man. And in finding the Man, you will have found God.

### INVITATION

How to explain their presence there?

Awkward, embarrassed,  
caps in weatherworn hands  
they stand in the lamp-lit dark.  
How to say why they were there  
and who they had come to see?

Easy enough on the hillside  
bathed in the glory of God!  
In the company of angels  
singing that Messiah had come!  
Shouting out the Good News of God, that this  
was it and heaven had come to earth!

But here in this poor room,  
Under the gaze of a watchful young man,  
in the presence of an exhausted young girl,  
how to explain the reason for their journey,  
the cause of their unlooked for coming?

Something stirred and one small sound  
escaped the enfolding crib.  
No trumpets or singing;  
no royal proclamation  
cart-wheeling across the sky.  
This was quite another sound,  
as soft as a whisper,  
yet loud enough to silence all the  
clamour of the world.

The sound of a baby’s breath.  
The inspiration of life.

No explanation is required.  
No need to speak at all.  
This is the invitation to come  
and to witness:  
to watch and to know  
that God indeed had come  
just as He had promised.

Immanuel. God with us!