

## **THE BIRTH OF CHRIST**

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For centuries, both the people of Israel and the people of Judah had been promised a Saviour, a Deliverer. Every Jewish woman had the wish that she would be the mother of the promised Messiah, the Christ and, therefore, every woman who was barren was a reproach, since she would not bear the Messiah. What a privilege it would be for any Jewish woman to be the mother of the long-awaited Christ.

Consider Mary. She was a virgin, a humble ordinary girl, engaged to be married to Joseph who was a descendant of King David who had lived in Bethlehem, or his ancestors had, but was now living in Nazareth in the province of Galilee. It was not a city with a good reputation. It was a crossroads and often its roads were filled with Roman soldiers who occupied both the lands of Israel and Judea and the traders who used these roads with their caravans.

(See the article on [Virgin Birth](#))

Joseph was a carpenter, a manual labourer, one who worked with his hands. Was he soon to become the object of gossip since his fiancée, Mary, was pregnant. One wonders what evil tongues said and what suspicious eyes glared. Joseph wanted to send her away to a private location to avoid scandal.

But an angel of the Lord visited Mary and this initially frightened her. He comforted her and said that she was to be the most blessed of all women since she was to have a son and had to call His Name Jesus which means the One who saves His people from sin. He would be great, the Son of the Highest, the Son of God and would be a King reigning over the kingdom of Judah with an everlasting kingdom. He was the Messiah.

Mary asked how this was possible as she had not been with a man. The angel replied that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and she would be with child who would be called the Son of God.

For those who reject the Virgin Birth they should remember that God created the universe and life itself and has maintained such creation. These are miracles. God is the God of miracles. As He created the worlds and life, He can arrange a miraculous Virgin Birth

The angel also told Mary that her cousin Elisabeth, who was known to be barren and was old, was six months pregnant. This was also miraculous and Mary was amazed. Elisabeth was a descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses, and her husband, Zacharias, was a priest. Gabriel, the angel of the Lord, had appeared to Zacharias while he was performing his priestly duties in the Temple at Jerusalem and was told of the son that his wife was to have was to be called John. He would be a powerful preacher and evangelist turning people back to God. Elisabeth was so overwhelmed with this that she did not appear in public for five months but said that the Lord had taken away her reproach since a barren woman was regarded as a reproach and, therefore, could not be the mother of the Messiah.

When the son of Zacharias and Elisabeth was born and presented in the Temple, people said he should be named after his father. Elisabeth said no but the people said that no one in the family had the name of John. Zacharias had been speechless but wrote down that his name was to be John. As soon as this was done Zacharias was able to speak and thanked God for His goodness and the people were amazed and this great event was circulated throughout Judea.

Zacharias prophesied of the Saviour to come promised since the time of Abraham who would be holy and righteous and how his won son would be the prophet of the Most High.

The people in the Temple were astounded and impressed by this prophecy.

There are at least two miracles here. The first was that Elisabeth, well past child-bearing age, was to have a

son and that Mary was to have a son, the Messiah, although she was a virgin.

We should repeat that miracles are performed by God, the God who created Heaven and Earth and life itself the God of the Bible who had worked miracles since the beginning of time and therefore nothing was impossible to Him, except sin.

Mary visited her cousin, Elisabeth, in the hill country. Elisabeth knew who Mary's son was to be and asked Mary, "Why has the mother of my Lord come to me?" thus acknowledging the Deity of Mary's unborn child. Mary stayed with Elisabeth for about three months. Mary spoke her magnificat extolling the might and mercy of God and how He had regarded her lowly estate.

The time came for a census. Everyone had to be registered for tax purposes and this registration had to be in the city of their birth or ancestry. Joseph had to go from Nazareth to Bethlehem and take Mary with him who was in the final stages of her pregnancy.

Did some of Mary's family take the journey with her to help care for her? Did some of Joseph's family do likewise?

Bethlehem was overcrowded and there was no room in the inn for the young couple. They were shown to a stable which may have been an outbuilding, a cave or the storey of house which was used to house the animals. Whatever the location was Mary gave birth and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger. Were some of Mary's family present at the birth to help her? Did someone act as a midwife?

It was Caesar Augustus who had declared that all the Roman world must be taxed and, at this time, Herod was the king of Judea. He was known as Herod the Great because he built the Temple at Jerusalem which had been destroyed over 550 years earlier. However, he was bloodthirsty and cruel.

The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was about 90 miles if the route was a straight line. The journey was accompanied by others travelling to their ancestral homes and the roads would have been busy. There were robbers and highwaymen on this road.

On the night of the birth of Jesus there was, as usual, shepherds in the field around Bethlehem looking after their flocks from wolves and other predators. Suddenly a glorious light shone around them and they were frightened. The angel of the Lord spoke to them telling them not to be afraid for there was good news. In Bethlehem the city of David is born the Saviour, Christ the Lord. The angel continued, "This shall be the evidence. You will find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger". That, in itself, was unusual, to say the least.

The angel was suddenly accompanied by a company of angels praising God in speech by saying, "Glory to God in the Highest and, on earth, peace to all men".

The angels left and the shepherds agreed to go to Bethlehem and see this for themselves because the Lord has made it known to them, lowly shepherds as they were.

They moved with speed and found Joseph and Mary and the Baby in the manger just as the angel had said and they told everyone of this amazing experience. But Mary kept all these things to herself.

The Gospel writer John records that in the beginning there was the Word of God who was God and the Word became flesh, became a person, became a man and lived among His disciples and the people of the day and was to be known as the Light of the World. This is the Christ, the Messiah, the Saviour who had been born in Bethlehem. There would be a forerunner of the Eternal Word, the Light of the World, and that forerunner would be John who was a man sent from God to baptise converts upon their personal confession of sin and repentance. He would be known as John the Baptist who would refer to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes

away the sins of the world. John first preached in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar and when Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea and Herod Antipas was the tetrarch of Galilee.

Eight days after His birth Jesus was presented in the Temple and circumcised as was John the Baptist and all Jewish boys. Circumcision was a health and hygiene issue. At this presentation the child was named and Jesus was the name given. A sacrifice of two turtle doves and two pigeons was offered and a devout man called Simeon, who had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Lord Jesus, praised God.

Simeon took the baby up in his arms saying, "Lord, now let thy servant depart in peace for my eyes have seen Thy salvation which shall be a light to the Gentiles and the glory of Thy people Israel".

Simeon spoke to Mary telling her that her Child was blessed and would revolutionise the Jewish nation but a sword would pierce Him and Mary's heart also.

There was an 84 year old widow, Anna by name, who served in the Temple and spoke to as many people as she could saying that in this Child was the redemption of Israel.

After the presentation the parents returned to Nazareth.

It is not clear who were the wise men from the east were. The word wise may be misleading. They may have been kings, or men of science or astrologers. Some say that they were from Persia and, as the journey was long and dangerous, they would have travelled in a caravan with others.

They arrived in Jerusalem and went for an audience with King Herod asking, "Where is He that is born King of the Jews, for we have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him."

How did these three rich men know a Baby was born and that He was to be the Kings of the Jewish nation?

Herod was angry at this news which spread throughout the city and he sought the private counsel of the chief priest and writers who told him of the prophecy of a Saviour and the Child would be born in Bethlehem and would rule Israel. Then Herod went back to the wise men and asked what time the star appeared and sent them to Bethlehem telling them to report back to him after they had seen the Child so that he may worship Him also. Of course, Herod had no intention of worshipping Jesus. He would be a rival to his throne and had to be destroyed.

The wise men followed the star to where Jesus was born and came into the house. Was this the same location to where the shepherds came? We do not know. They worshipped the Child but not His mother, notice. Their gifts were gold, frankincense and myrrh, expensive gifts.

Note that Jesus is no longer called a baby but a young child.

In a dream the wise men are told not to go back to Herod and so they took a different and unexpected route back to their own country. After they had left, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream telling him to take Mary and the Child and escape into Egypt since Herod sought to destroy Him. And so, by night the Holy Family began their journey into Egypt.

Herod was furious with the wise men and ordered all the children in Bethlehem and the surrounding district to be killed from two years old and under which may indicate that Jesus was not longer a baby but a toddler. Some people say that only boys were killed but the edict was to kill all children.

All these events were the fulfilment of Jewish prophecies some 700 years old and of promises that went back to Eden.

There is another unanswered question. After the first eight days or so of His life, Jesus and His family went back to the city of Nazareth? After the visit of the wise men the family fled into Egypt. Is it possible that they returned from Nazareth to Jerusalem at a later date when the wise men visited them which was followed immediately by the flight into Egypt and when Jesus was no longer a baby but a young child?

People argue about the date of Christ's birth and what the star was but this does not matter. What matters is that He was born.

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