

The Birth of the Lord

The Setting of the Birth

When I was a kid, the story of the Nativity was one of the few biblical narratives I was familiar with. However, this was mostly communicated through the culture around me than through the culture of New Testament times. Around Christmas time Nativity scenes adorn homes and churches which very often serenely, but unrealistically portray the birth of Christ. While we are only given limited details from the Gospels, one of the goals of this lesson will be to expose you to a more realistic setting of the birth of Christ. As we have considered the humanity of Christ, we must remember that Jesus had completely human experiences. There have been times in the past when people have taught that Mary did not experience any pain in giving birth to Christ. There are several supernatural events that took place in the Nativity accounts. These events include the following: the appearance of angels, the vision of the star, and fulfilled prophecy. However, there is no reason to assume that the birth of Christ did not include all of the pains and toils that take place in a normal birth. In that day, after the umbilical cord was cut, the baby was rubbed with salt and wrapped in swaddling clothes. Jesus was placed in a manger, which was a feeding trough made out of stone. Remember that the birth took place where animals were kept, and all of the smells and sounds that animals make would have been present. This is the kind of birth that the Lord saw fit to have. When God became a man, he did so with a huge stoop of humility.



There are some additional facts that you should be aware of. The place where Jesus was born is often called an inn. However, there was no such thing as Motel 6, or any other kind of hotel. Since Joseph went to Bethlehem to be registered (Luke 2:1-5), the place where they stayed could have belonged to a relative. Whether or not this was the case, there was no room for them in a normal room, which is a *kataluma* (kataluma), which simply means guest room or a place to lodge. Another widely kept tradition is that there were three “wise men” who visited Jesus. First of all, they were never really called “wise men.” The Greek word for those persons is *magoi* (magoi), which is best transliterated as “magi.” The text does not tell us that there were three magi in number, or that they were kings. The magi typically traveled on Persian steeds, not camels, and in large numbers. The common portrayal of “wise men” has been created on a number of assumptions. That there were three is assumed from the three gifts. That they were kings is assumed from their interaction with Herod. Names have even been given to them: Balthasar, Melchior, and Caspar. However, magi were typically never kings, but

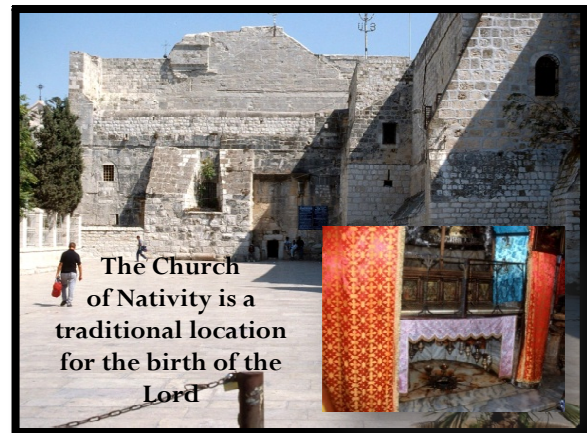


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those who practiced magic, similar to Nebuchadnezzar's magicians. Ancient magic often involved astrology. Regardless of their name or number, they were probably not practicing magic. However, the reason they travelled to Judea was because of the star. This has been suggested to be a real star, a comet, the angels who appeared to the shepherds, or the manifested glory of God. Because they came from the east, they might have had access to the Scripture from the time when Israel was in exile, and particularly when Daniel was associated with magi in Babylon. One text they might have been familiar with is Numbers 24:17.

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth.

Regardless of who they exactly were, and how they knew about the star, they are commended for their worship of the king. The gifts they brought are another testimony to the royalty of Jesus. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were rare and very expensive. When they told Herod that they were looking for the King of the Jews, Herod became scared out of his skin. As you have read, Herod was an Idumean, and knew that he had no ethnic right to the title "King of the Jews" which Rome had bestowed upon him. While he was foolish enough to accept this, he was wise enough to know that he could be ousted by someone with a right to the throne in Israel. This is why he attempted to have Jesus killed.



The Date of the Birth

Some have argued that although Christmas is celebrated in December, Jesus could not have been born then because there were shepherds in the field and it would have been too cold for them to be out. Based on this, many believe that the Jesus was born sometime around October. However, we do know from helpful sources that there were shepherds out all year around. A tradition which goes back to the early church has taught that Jesus was born on January 6. However, the more concrete tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church has taught that Christ was born on December 25, and that the magi visited on January 6. Although determining an exact date is probably not realistic, a traditional wintertime date of Jesus' birth is most likely accurate. As to the year of Christ's birth, there are more firm facts that we may work with. As observed in the biblical account, Jesus was born before the death of Herod the Great and after Quirinius' census (Luke 2:1-5). Herod's death is best determined to have been in the spring of 4 BC. Quirinius' census is more difficult to pinpoint, but it would have taken place between 6 and 4 BC. This means that Jesus was most likely born sometime between 5 and 4 BC.¹ At this point, you are probably wondering why we have AD 1 where it is-- after all, is not the AD era, "In the Year of Our Lord?" You must be aware that in the time of Christ's birth, and of his life on earth, there was no such thing as the BC/AD distinction. Our modern dating system had not been developed until much later, which was the replacement for the Roman calendar. The Anno Domini era was introduced by Dionysius Exiguus, who was a monk in the mid-500s AD. When asked to produce a church calendar by Pope John I, Dionysius set the

¹ For more details see: *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, Harold Hoener (Zondervan, 1977) 11-27.

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date for Christ's birth at 754 years from the beginning of the city of Rome. However, due to some facts inaccessible to him, he was a few years off. To reset our calendar to have Christ's birth in AD 1 would amass to insurmountable trouble. I am writing this in AD 2011. You can imagine the confusion that would arise if we moved the calendar up to AD 2015....chaos! Absolute chaos!

The Virgin Birth

You have noticed from your reading in Matthew (1:18) that Joseph was "betrothed" to Mary. Today, when two people decide to get married, they become engaged. There was no such thing as engagement in biblical times. Betrothal was a more formal agreement which could have only been broken by an official divorce. When a couple was betrothed, the woman remained in her father's house, but a dowry was paid by the groom to the bride, a token of his commitment. When Joseph



Bethlehem

discovered that Mary was pregnant, he did not want to dishonor the Lord by marrying someone who had committed adultery, which is why he decided to divorce her. He did have the option of filing a lawsuit against her for infidelity, but he chose to quietly divorce to avoid embarrassing her. Other men may have been outraged and could have chosen to shame her. Though Joseph was not willing to compromise his integrity, he did not become hostile toward Mary. In fact, one commentator translates 1:20 as, "But as he was mulling this over, what happened?" highlights Joseph's disappointed confusion.² However, the reader can rejoice with Joseph in discovering that Mary had not sinned, but had become blessed among women (Luke 1:42). When you think about how Mary was blessed, consider the circumstances she underwent: nearly being divorced, giving birth in a barn, fleeing to Egypt, and all with very little money. This is what life was like for Joseph and Mary, and they were the most blessed parents to ever live. Joseph "had not known" Mary (1:18). This bolsters the testimony of the virgin birth. The virgin birth is nothing less than miraculous, but it has fallen under serious criticism in the last two centuries. It does not require the modern scientific mind to be puzzled at the idea of a virgin giving birth. Mary herself asked that question (Luke 1:34). Scripture nor any other source can explain how a virgin can give birth to a child from a biological standpoint. Because this event cannot be scientifically proven or disproven, the virgin birth has fallen under much historical criticism, especially related to Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 7:14). Just as a virgin birth is miraculous, the prediction of it is equally miraculous.

Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

It has been argued by several that the word **עלמה** (almah) in the Hebrew does not refer to an actual virgin, but only a young woman. However, there are problems that this raises. Isaiah said this would happen as a sign from God to King Ahaz. In Isaiah 8:3, "the prophetess" gave birth to a son. If this were a young married woman, then the significance of the sign would be meaningless. It is normal for young married women to have children. Additionally, when the LXX was produced, the word **παρθένο** (parthenos) was used for virgin. The word **παρθένο** is used in Matthew as well. This word means the same exact thing that virgin does in English. There is no reason to believe that the meaning of the text of Isaiah was given a more recent nuance. Isaiah's readers understood that a virgin would give birth to a son in Isaiah's day, and in a later day. Matthew knew that this had been fulfilled in no one less than the Messiah, the Lord Jesus (1:22).

² *Exposition of the Gospel of Matthew*, William Hendricksen (Baker: 1973), 131.

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As there have been many who have denied the virgin birth, there are others who distort it. For some time, the Roman Catholic Church has taught that Mary remained a virgin for the remainder of her life. This is called the doctrine of perpetual virginity. There are many other doctrines about Mary which the Roman Church holds that will not be addressed here. If the perpetual virginity of Mary is true, then that means that Joseph and Mary would have not had any other children. Before explaining the doctrine, you need to understand that the Roman Catholic Church believes that doctrines ordered by their popes have equal authority to Scripture. They do not claim to deny Scripture, but to have multiple sources of authority. However, I would charge the Roman Catholic Church for a denial of the teaching of Scripture in a number of areas. Also before explaining the perpetual virginity, you need to understand another Roman Catholic doctrine. It is called the Immaculate Conception. This teaches that Mary herself was born without sin, and did not sin at any point in her life. It did not become formal Roman Catholic doctrine until AD 1854, under Pope Pius IX. As it is stated: “By the grace of God Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 493). They believe this was necessary to be the mother of the Savior, lest he be polluted with sin through her. The problem is that there is nothing from the Bible to suggest this, and no reason why it is necessary. If Mary was protected by God from the original sin in her parents, then there is no reason to think that God could not do this in the conception of Jesus. In other words, an immaculate conception of Mary is not necessary for an immaculate conception of Jesus. So, it is said that Mary was without sin since her conception. The doctrine of perpetual virginity is important to the Roman Catholic Church because for Mary to have *not* remained a virgin after the birth of Christ would have compromised her consecration. In other words, because Mary had the role of being completely devoted to God, she must have remained celibate. It is for this same reason that Roman Catholic priests, bishops, cardinals, and popes remain celibate (*Catechism*, 915). Rome’s teachings on the role of Mary extend far beyond what is observable in the Bible. Therefore, she must have remained pure her whole life, lest she be unfit for her role. You might be wondering about references to the brothers and sister of Jesus in the New Testament. How could Mary have remained a virgin if Jesus had brothers and sisters? We will address this in the next lesson, in which we will discuss Jesus’ family.



Jesus crowns Mary
Artwork on the ceiling of the Maggiore Basilica in Rome shows the high place of Mary in Roman Catholic theology.

Reading Assignment:

Matthew 8-16

Luke 8-20

Review John

Greek	Pronunciation	English	Part of Speech
par geno~	par-then-oss	virgin	noun
pl hrow	play-raw-o	fulfill, fill up	verb
Mariā	maria	Mary	noun
magoi	ma-goy	magi	noun
katal uma	kata-loo-ma	guest room, lodge	noun