

THE CENTER FOR GLOBAL MINISTRIES

The Christmas Story

Of course, the Christmas story starts in Genesis 3 and is prophesied hundreds of times before we get to the story we see as the narrative celebrated today.

Isaiah 7:14

Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel.

Isaiah 9:6

For to us, a child is born, to us, a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Micah 5:2

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

Did you notice the extra designation on the city of Bethlehem? Ephrathah? That is because, at the time of Micah and even today, there are two places called Bethlehem in Israel. One is in Galilee, and the other is... Bethlehem in the land of Judah. Micah wanted to be sure we had the right place.

Today, we celebrate the story and place it in Bethlehem in the land of Judah around 4 BC. There is the story of the trip from Nazareth because of a census. By the way, was there a census? Caesar Augustus was fond of censuses. It took a lot of taxes to keep the enormous Roman army going, to build roads, and to finance military campaigns to continue conquering the known world. Historically we know he commanded a census of the Roman world in 6 BC, 4 BC, and 2 BC. Of course, the Christmas story takes place in Bethlehem in Judea, but it starts there 1200 years earlier.

Let's go back in time:

- It is the 12th century BC
- The new kingdom in Egypt ends
- The ancient city of Troy is destroyed
- Ramses the 7th is installed to the throne in Egypt
- An alphabet was developed by the Phoenicians
- Nebuchadnezzar the 1st becomes the king of Babylon
- It is the time of the rule of the Judges in Israel
- And Israel is recovering from a deep famine

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My Christmas story, as I see it, starts in an Old Testament book called Ruth.

The family of a man named Elimelek from Bethlehem takes his wife, Naomi, and their two sons to Moab to escape the famine. The move does not go well. Elimelek and both of their sons die in Moab, and Naomi decides to return to her ancestral home and reconnect with her family to survive as the famine continues in Moab.

Naomi hears that there is food in Judah and leaves for a two-day walk to Bethlehem, the ancestral home of King David, along with one of her daughter's-in-law – Ruth.

The Jewish sages say that the trip from Moab that Naomi and Ruth made in about 1200 BC took two days to get there. They also say it began on the Pesah (Passover).

When Naomi and Ruth get there, Ruth is told to glean in a field of a wealthy man named Boaz.

Later in the story, we are told of a law called Goel.

Kinsman-Redeemer (All of Leviticus 25 deals with the redemption of all types. Leviticus 25:47-49 deals with the redemption of people who have fallen on hard times and have had to sell their wealth and property to survive).

The Kinsman-Redeemer had to be:

- Related by Blood
- He must be Free himself
- He must be able to pay the price
- He must be willing to pay the price

Boaz exercises his rights under the law of Goel, and he and Ruth are married. Ruth has a son – Obed. Obed has a son – Jesse. Jesse has a son – David. They become the great-grandparents of King David. Jesse is King David's father. Isaiah wrote prophetically about a branch from his roots from which the Messiah would come.

Isaiah 11:1

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

Remember, Nazareth is where Mary and Joseph live, and they go back to with Jesus after their return from Egypt. Nazareth is from the root word in Hebrew, "Netzar" – a branch.

One thing to note is that Naomi's trip started on the Passover and took two days. The story of Jesus going to the cross begins on Passover, and after two days, on the third day, He is risen.

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With that background, let's jump to the story we all know of the announcement of the birth of Jesus to the shepherds in a field who were tending their sheep.

Note, by the way, that this story is not in Bethlehem. Notice in verse 15 they announce they will go to Bethlehem to see what they have been told about.

In Luke 2:1-20, we can read this story of the announcement and birth of Jesus.

Luke 2:1-20

In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world (this was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria). And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

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Today, I can take you to the place where the tending of sheep is still done near Bethlehem. What we call Bethlehem is a series of small villages next to each other, with Bethlehem as the center point. We can stand on a hillside overlooking a field below where shepherds and sheep are moving about. Still, to this day, this place has been the area where sheep are raised and tended for thousands of years. On the hillside, there are many sheep cotes verifying the intent of the site.

If you ask anyone who lives there, “What is the name of this place? What is the name of this village in which this field is found?” You will get the answer that the village is called Beit Sahour.

What about the field below? The answer is that for thousands of years, it has been known as “The Field of Boaz.” This place where Ruth met her Kinsman-Redeemer is the same place where ours is announced.

Did Jesus meet the requirements of the Goel?

Jesus:

- He became our kinsman by taking on flesh – He was related by blood.
- He was free from sin – He was free
- He owned the cattle on a thousand hills – He could pay the price
- He went to the cross for us – He was willing to pay the price

But there is more here. Remember that we were told the village is named *Beit Sahour*?

The shepherds were waiting at night with their sheep in a place called Beit Sahour when the angels appeared. Tending sheep at night is a boring and dangerous task. They will be relieved when the morning light comes.

So, what does that have to do with our story? Sahour means the instant before the darkness leaves and the light of dawn appears. This place is the house (Beit) of waiting for the darkness to turn to light.

What were the shepherds waiting for here? At night, they are here watching over the flocks and waiting for the light of the morning to come.

But God used that place, with an appropriate name, to announce that the darkness had been pierced and the light had come. John records this from Jesus:

John 8:12

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

Why were shepherds chosen to receive this message?

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These were no ordinary shepherds and no ordinary sheep. Bethlehem was the place that raised the lambs for the sacrifice in the temple in Jerusalem. I know we all were told in Sunday School that the shepherds were chosen to show that Jesus's message was for even the lowest occupation at the time.

That is true, but that is not why I believe God sent angels to tell these special shepherds that a Messiah had been born. Remember, these shepherds raised the lambs for temple sacrifice.

I believe the real reason this group was chosen was to tell them, "Your job is finished. We no longer need these lambs. The perfect lamb has been born." And what better place for a lamb to be born than in a stable?

Why a baby? No one has seen God and lived, but they could see God in the man-God – Jesus. There is one more event in my Christmas story you need to know before we leave and celebrate the birth of the perfect lamb. Just like my other story, this one needs some Old Testament and some other history before it will become clear to us why it is in my Christmas story.

The ruler of Israel at the time of this story is a man named Herod. Herod is a killer of everyone he feels threatened by – his wives, sons, and anyone else who he thought threatened him.

In 47 BC, Herod was made Governor of Galilee following his father's death. He then assumed, on his own, the role of Governor of Judea.

But in 40 BC, amidst turbulent infighting between him and his brother, Persians swept into Jerusalem and booted him from the throne and sent him packing back to Rome, where he remained for three years until 37 BC.

"Antigonus the Persian" ruled Judah and Galilee until Herod convinced the Roman Senate to return him to power and make him king and send an army to help.

Herod never forgot the Persians and built six fortresses along the west bank of the Jordan and one on the east bank (Machaerus, "Mukwar Beta in Arabic"). Josephus writes that this is where John the Baptist is beheaded – In Arabic, a type of sword is called makhaira. So, it has an appropriate name for a place of beheading.

Long before Herod came to power, there was a priestly group that served kings and rulers across the Levant. They were Persian by heritage, and were called the Magus. Perhaps Zoroaster's? (A little trivia: Zoroaster's follow the teachings of Zarathustra, which means "the shining light.") This group was people who followed the "shining light." (Remember the star?)

In Persia and most of the Levant at this time, the Magus had essentially taken over the governments. They appointed kings and took them down. We first encounter this group in the Book of Daniel.

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Daniel 2:48

Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men.

The word “wise men” in the underlying Hebrew is Magoi – Magus – Magi.

Does that begin to give you a clue about where I am going?

Now, let’s read the story about this same group of people who came to visit Jesus after his birth.

Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: “‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’”

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me so that I too may go and worship him.”

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

On coming to the house, they saw the child was with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Sorry, the Magi are not at the birth. This is from several months to maybe two years later.

Why did they come? What brought them?

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Remember Daniel, who was over the Magi? I believe Daniel, the one who prophesied even the year the Messiah would be in Jerusalem (7, 7s reference – Daniel chapter 9), told them about this one to come, and they had been waiting just like the shepherds.

Those who followed the “shining light” saw the light in the sky that signaled to them that the prophecy of Daniel was at hand.

Now, can you imagine Herod’s fear when Persians are coming to town? This is the group that ran him off the throne years earlier. They would have been on horses, not camels. Persians did not ride camels dressed to the nines. There would have been many more than three – maybe hundreds.

This would have been the most exciting thing to happen in Jerusalem in most people’s lifetimes.

They arrive at the palace and then ask this question: they ask Herod, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?” Herod thought that was him. Now, he is threatened. Remember how Herod handles threats.

Herod planned to seek out and kill this child who had been born as soon as the Magi returned to tell them where they found him.

The Magi travel the five kilometers to Bethlehem and find Jesus in a house with his mother. Again, not at the birth. The story says they bring three gifts: Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh.

There are many interpretations of these gifts, but I want to share my Christmas story version of these gifts.

Do you know what the elements of a King’s installation were in Persia then? They are Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh. I submit to you the story of the Magi is given to us to see that God prepared that if his own people would not anoint him King, God would send another to do so.

The Magi anointed and named the King of the Universe when they came to Bethlehem.

That’s my Christmas story.

Now go tell yours to everyone you meet.