

# *Events Surrounding the Birth of Jesus*

*by Roger Day*

## **INTRODUCTION**

*Picture in your mind this manger scene that was spotted one December outside of a McDonald's restaurant. Present were the baby Jesus, His parents Joseph and Mary, some shepherds, three men wearing crowns and carrying gifts, Ronald McDonald, the Hamburgler, and other McDonald's characters. Above the roof of the small open-sided wooden barn was a five-pointed star.*

We all know that Ronald McDonald was not present at the birth of Jesus. But adding McDonald's characters is not the only thing amiss with the scene just described. There were no kings or wise men bearing gifts at Jesus' birth. When the wise men did travel to find Him over a year later, they did not follow a star in the sky, at least according to the Bible. And they found Christ as a young child in a house. As to the barn, some historians suggest that stone construction was most typical, and hillside caverns were often utilized.

Common ideas about the events surrounding the birth of Christ are not well informed by either the Bible or historical records. Serious warping of the story has taken place over time. While the wise men gave gifts to Christ, it is now customary for folks to give gifts to one another as part of their celebration of His birthday. Yet, there are still ways that we may give directly to Christ. There are also several indications in the Bible that Christ was born in the autumn, and not near the time of the winter solstice in December.

In the New Testament, there are but two accounts of events surrounding the advent of Jesus Christ. In Luke, we find the manger story. In Matthew, we read about the visit of the wise men. While one can understand the desire to condense these events into a single manger scene or pageant, the effort to do so ignores logical impossibilities. We will look in Luke to see just what did and didn't happen when Jesus was born. Then we will shed light on Matthew's account of the later visit of the wise men.

## **GIFT GIVING**

It is most unfortunate that in 1863, Rev. John Henry Hopkins Jr. published his hymn *We Three Kings of Orient Are*. Like the manger scene described in the Introduction, this song title alone has propagated a seriously incorrect image, not to mention the song lyrics. They were wise men, important officials, or nobles, but not kings. They were from a land east of Jerusalem, but not the Orient. They did bear three types of gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But there were probably well more than three wise men that came to worship the Christ, accompanied by a massive entourage, and arriving well after Christ's birth.

The story of the wise men is fascinating, as we will see. But notice something very important about what they did. They gave their gifts to Jesus, not to each other. And they did not bring gifts because it was His birthday! They arrived in between Jesus' first and second birthdays. Instead, the gifts given by the wise men were their recognition that Jesus was the One that was born to be a King (John 18:37). It has been customary throughout history, and to the present day, to bring a gift when one visits a king, ruler, or head of state. But the wise men were inspired to bring more than token gifts to the Messiah.

Things would be quite different if everyone gave their gifts to Christ instead of to one other. But how could that be done? Christ is not visibly present on the earth at this time, although we can count on His promise that He will one day return from Heaven to rule the earth as King of Kings and Lord of Lords (1 Tim 6:13-16, Rev 19:16). But we are in luck! Christ taught that if we help those truly in need, He would consider it as though we had helped Him (Matt 25:31-46)! Of course, we should be helping those in need all year long. While many of the churches in this world suggest that they should be the sole recipients of giving, Jesus' message is clear that we should help anyone in need - the physically and spiritually poor, blind, sick, naked, hungry, thirsty, and imprisoned.

## **BORN IN THE AUTUMN**

We read that Jesus began His ministry when he turned 30 years old, after having been baptized by John the Baptist (Luke 3:21-23). Age thirty was considered the required age to perform important official service (Gen 41:46, Num chapter 4, 2 Sam 5:4). If Jesus had begun his ministry before age 30, He may not have been recognized as a fully qualified master or teacher. There can be little doubt that Jesus was anxious to fulfill His mission, assigned to Him by His Father (John 5:30; 6:38; 14:24; 20:21). So we should expect that He began His ministry without delay as soon as he turned thirty.

Jesus - the Lamb of God - was crucified on the Passover day, which occurs in the spring. It was prophesied that Messiah (Jesus) was to be cut off in the middle of the week, that being a prophetic week of seven years (Dan 9:26-27). If one counts backward three and one half years from His death on the Passover, they arrive at autumn for the beginning of His ministry. As He was 30 years old at the beginning of that ministry, He was necessarily born 30 years prior in that same autumn season.

The autumn festival season of the Bible is six months opposite from the Passover, and meanings associated with those holy days include the importance of Jesus' birth. Jesus was clearly born in the autumn, but further support is found when we look at the timing of the birth of Christ in relation to the birth of John the Baptist.

Luke describes the conception and birth of John the Baptist. John's father Zacharias served in the temple on a rotation called the division, or course, of Abijah (Luke 1:5). It was the 8th of 24 week-long divisions, which then repeated. But all priests served during three additional divisions that corresponded to the festival seasons. These included the 3rd and 10th weeks of the Hebrew calendar year, which begins in the spring. So Zacharias' 8th division fell during the 9th week of the Hebrew calendar year. And Zacharias then had to stay to serve with all the priests during the next, or 10th week, returning home about early June of our present day calendar.

Zacharias was told by an angel that he would have a son, and should name his son John (Luke 1:8-13). Zacharias' wife Elizabeth had been barren, but conceived upon the return of her husband from his temple service (Luke 1:23-24). Given nine months for John to be born, John the Baptist was born in the spring. When Mary had conceived Jesus, an angel told Mary that her cousin Elizabeth had conceived and was six months pregnant (Luke 1:35-37, John 15:26). So being born six months after John the Baptist, Jesus was born in the autumn. (John was conceived in the summer; Jesus was conceived in the winter.)

We should also take note that shepherds were in the fields watching their flocks by night (Luke 2:8). In the winter, it is too cold to do this. In Bethlehem, the average daily high temperature in December is 44.6 degrees Fahrenheit. Colder temperatures occur near the end of the month, with overnight temperatures often below freezing. Historically, flocks were put in the fields in the spring, and brought in before the first rain in late October. The rainy season lasts from late October until March, and sometimes includes snow. So it is not plausible that Jesus was born in late December.

In answering His disciples questions about the end of the age, Christ stated that folks should pray that they would not have to flee in the winter or on the sabbath day during the greatest tribulation in history (Matt

24:3; 20-21). Surely the Father would not have allowed His Son to be born on one of the coldest winter nights of the year, and laid in a feeding trough (manger) in a barn that would no doubt be chilly. Nor would the Father have allowed Joseph and a very expectant Mary to travel the 70 mile route from Nazareth (elevation 1830 feet) to Bethlehem (elevation 2564 feet) through cold wet winter weather, risking sickness and exhaustion.

Given the efficiency of the Romans, it makes little sense that they would require extensive travel by many individuals during the winter. Many would not be able to endure the journey, and probably many would refuse to go. In fact, autumn time after the harvest, and before the rainy season, would be good weather for traveling. It would also be the very best time of the year in terms of people having money from their crop harvests with which to travel. In fact, many folks traveled in the autumn to keep the Biblical festivals in Jerusalem. Having them swing by the town of their lineage in their travels for the census registration would have been logical.

The Roman administration of Judea was quite familiar with the timing of the Biblical festivals. The Roman ruler Herod was himself raised in a family that had converted to Judaism. He was a "client king" installed by Rome, and is referred to as both Herod II and Herod the Great. While ethnically an Idumean, Herod's family line had converted to Judaism when their homeland was conquered by the Maccabees, led by John Hyrcanus, during the period of 140-130 BC. It was Herod that had razed and rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem in which Jesus would later teach.

## LUKE CHAPTER 2

Luke Chapter 2, King James Version, begins, "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city." Other Bible translations read registered instead of taxed, and render Cyrenius as Quirinius. So Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem, the city of Joseph's lineage, to be registered. The order was given by Caesar Augustus in 8 BC, although its effect probably did not reach Palestine immediately.

Some sources indicate that the census ordered by Caesar Augustus in 8 BC was administered in Palestine in 7 BC, and was followed by a taxing of the area in 6 BC, based on that census information. Caesar Augustus ordered censuses in 28 BC, 8 BC, and 14 AD, as determined from his own written record of his accomplishments, coupled with the known dates for particular events and consulships that he listed. This is his description.

*"As consul for the fifth time, by order of the people and the senate I increased the number of the patricians. Three times I revised the roll of the senate. In my sixth consulship, with Marcus Agrippa as my colleague, I made a census of the people. I performed the lustrum after an interval of forty-one years. In this lustration 4,063,000 Roman citizens were entered on the census roll. A second time, in the consulship of Gaius Censorinus and Gaius Asinius, I again performed the lustrum alone, with the consular imperium. In this lustrum 4,233,000 Roman citizens were entered on the census roll. A third time, with the consular imperium, and with my son Tiberius Caesar as my colleague, I performed the lustrum in the consulship of Sextus Pompeius and Sextus Apuleius. In this lustrum 4,937,000 Roman citizens were entered on the census roll. By the passage of new laws I restored many traditions of our ancestors which were then falling into disuse, and I myself set precedents in many things for posterity to imitate."*

Some argue that Cyrenius, referred to as governor of Syria in Luke 2:2, did not obtain that post until 6 AD. However, the Greek word translated 'governor' represents any level of authority and not a particular title. Cyrenius was in fact in authority in Syria in the time period of 9 BC to 7 BC during a change in the governorship of the area. And in fact, he did later acquire the official title of governor. Cyrenius' presence in the area at the time of the census that Joseph and Mary responded to is supported by the historian Josephus, who wrote as follows.

*"So Archelaus' country was laid to the province of Syria; and Cyrenius, one that had been consul, was sent by Caesar to take account of people's effects in Syria. Cyrenius came himself into Judea, which was now added to the province of Syria, to take an account of their substance." (Antiquities of the Jews Book 18)*

So Cyrenius was in authority in Judea and Syria for the census. And it appears that the census information also included an accounting of property for purposes of taxation. As mentioned earlier, the taxation itself, based on the census registration, may have been conducted the next year.

While the order for folks to register was undoubtedly for males, both Joseph and Mary were of the lineage of David (Matt 1:1-17, Luke 3:23-38). Joseph had to go, but no doubt wanted to care for Mary. She was near the full term of her pregnancy, and he knew she was expecting a very important baby. Clearly, they decided to travel together (Luke 2:1-5).

Jesus was born in Bethlehem and laid in a manger (an animal feeding trough) "because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:6-7). The words translated "the inn" could also refer to guest quarters of homes, typically offered for use to those who had arrived to keep the autumn festivals. Apparently the census registration was timed to occur just before those festivals. As many as two million worshipers would swell the 120,000 population of Jerusalem to celebrate those holy days. This would explain why there was no room at the inn, Bethlehem being less than 5 miles from Jerusalem.

There were shepherds minding their flocks of sheep by night when a light shown and an angel appeared who announced to them that Christ had just been born in Bethlehem. To find Him, they were told to search for a baby lying in a manger (Luke 2:8-12). The shepherds were not told to look for a caravan of wise men, or a star hovering over a barn. A special star just above a barn would have been easy to spot, and no doubt would have attracted a crowd. But the shepherds were simply instructed to find a baby in a manger. Notice that God chose to make this important announcement to lowly shepherds, not to important political or religious officials.

A true star is a sun, a nuclear fission furnace, that is light years away. Planets are closer, but still very far away. Go outside at night and attempt to determine which star is exactly over your dwelling, as opposed to some other dwelling a mile or more away. From this exercise you will quickly understand why a typical star or planet in the sky cannot serve as a visual marker for a specific location on the ground. And never mind that stars are not stationary, due to the rotation of the earth. If anything called a star were to denote a particular barn, it would have to be a supernatural glowing mass, hovering not far above the roof. Had such an unusual phenomenon occurred in Bethlehem, the report of it would have likely reached the Roman authorities.

Before the shepherds journeyed into Bethlehem, the sky opened up and they were treated to a choir of numerous angels singing (Luke 2:13-14). No doubt, this was the best choir performance heard by the ears of men. Correctly translating Luke 2:14, they sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth among men of good will." The shepherds then went into the small town of Bethlehem, inquired, discovered the baby Jesus lying in a manger, and became witnesses proclaiming what they had seen (Luke 2:15-20). As we will see, that initial witnessing never reached the ears of Herod or the Jewish hierarchy, who simply didn't know that the King had been born.

On the eighth day after His birth, Jesus was circumcised (Luke 2:21). After the required additional 33 days of purification for Mary, for a total of 41 days, the family appeared at the temple in Jerusalem to offer the required sacrifice (Luke 2:22-24, Lev 12:1-8). Because they were not rich, they offered the optional sacrifice of two pigeons or two turtle doves in lieu of a lamb and one bird. Had the wise men visited them before this point, Jesus' family would have been rich and would have offered the better sacrifice. For that matter, had the wise men found Jesus in the manger of a barn in Bethlehem, they would have arranged better accommodations!

While Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were in the temple, a man named Simeon, moved by the holy spirit to go to the temple, took Jesus in his arms. He blessed God that he was able to see the Christ before he died, after which he blessed Joseph and Mary (Luke 2:25-35). After that, the 84 year old prophetess Anna gave thanks to

the Lord and spoke of Jesus to all around her (Luke 2:36-38). After these events, Joseph and Mary took Jesus and returned to their home city of Nazareth (Luke 2:4, 39). Luke does not mention the visit of the wise men (which occurred over one year later). The next event Luke describes is when Jesus' parents found Him speaking with the teachers in the temple when He was 12 years old (Luke 2:40-46).

## **MATTHEW CHAPTERS 1 & 2**

An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream. Joseph was told not to fear to take Mary as his wife, as she was with child by the holy spirit, and that the child should be named Jesus (Matt 1:20-21). This fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 (Matt 1:22-23). Joseph then had no relations with Mary until after Jesus was born (Matt 1:24-25). Later they had four sons named James, Joses, Simon, and Judas, plus daughters (Matt 13:55-56, Mark 6:3). (The phrase "And his sisters, are they not all with us?" implies more than two. Had there been just two, the word "both" would have been more appropriate.)

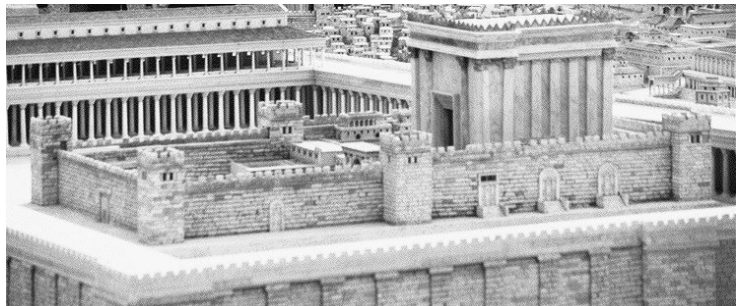
We next read that at some time after Jesus was born, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem. They inquired, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" They said they had seen His star in the east, and that they had come to worship Him (Matt 2:1-2). They did not say that they had followed a star from the east to Jerusalem. And they would not have needed any supernatural star, or to be all that wise to reach Jerusalem. Travel routes to principal cities were well known. Arriving in Jerusalem and inquiring, they apparently thought that the location of the King whom they sought was known. But an immediate answer to their inquiry was not forthcoming.

When word reached Herod of the wise men showing up and inquiring, scripture tells us that both he and all Jerusalem were troubled (Matt 2:3). Why would everyone be troubled about a few foreigners asking a question? The explanation is that the wise men were officials of the Parthian Empire, composed of Israelites of the so-called "lost ten tribes". A single Parthian official was known to travel with a personal army of 10,000 soldiers. It is likely that at least one official representative of each of the ten tribes had made the journey. So if several officials arrived with their personal armies, or with even just a couple such armies, everyone would know about it. And everyone might be wondering if a war was about to break out, with thousands of soldiers camped in the environs of Jerusalem. Some historical background might help at this point.

The Roman and Parthian empires had fought a number of battles. In 40 BC, the Parthians had expelled the Romans from Palestine. Herod, then Roman ruler of Judea, fled for his life, and returned to Rome. While there, the Roman Senate voted him the title "King of the Jews." The victorious Parthians installed the Jewish vassal king Antigonus as ruler, and withdrew to their homeland. The Jews enjoyed freedom from Herod. But after three years, Roman forces sent by Mark Antony, and commanded by his general Ventidius, defeated Antigonus. Herod was then reinstated as Rome's client king. Antony ordered Antigonus beheaded, and then personally mounted a massive invasion of Parthia. Despite having 100,000 troops at his command, Antony was defeated at every turn. Rome was no match for Parthia, an ignored fact of history.

A truce was made between Rome and Parthia, with agreement that the boundary between the two empires would be the Euphrates River. That truce lasted from 36 BC to 58 AD, and was strictly enforced by Roman emperors Caesar Augustus and Tiberius.

In 19 BC, Herod demolished the Second Temple in order to replace it with a much larger and magnificent one. It is sometimes also referred to as Herod's Temple.



Herod's Temple (scale model)

Herod also built temples for the worship of pagan gods, largely financed by the taxation of Jewish inhabitants. So despite the new temple project, Herod was not well liked by the populace. His actions did not seem to indicate that he was fully faithful or committed to Judaism.

In addition to a decadent lifestyle, Herod had put to death several rabbis, family members, and other enemies. Relations executed by Herod included a brother-in-law, two of his ten wives, one mother-in-law, and three sons. Three other sons survived. One of the surviving sons, also named Herod (Herod Antipas), would later be ruler of Galilee when Jesus was crucified.

Given the history described above, one can understand why Herod was troubled by the unexpected visit of the Parthian wise men, accompanied by an army large enough to easily overcome his Jerusalem garrison of perhaps 3,000 soldiers. The Parthians had sent him fleeing for his life the last time they invaded. Herod probably suspected that many folks would want to see him and the Roman rulership forced out of Judea yet again. The previous war with Parthia was still in the memory of many inhabitants, and they would naturally be wondering if another war was about to begin.

Herod was no doubt upset that the Parthians had ventured far beyond the agreed truce boundary between the Roman and Parthian empires. He likely bristled that the Parthian wise men were asking for someone who was born to be King of the Jews. After all, wasn't Herod the King of the Jews, the title conferred upon him by the Roman Senate? But Herod also knew that he was under a strict order from Caesar Augustus not to start another war with Parthia.

Directions mentioned in the Bible are relative to Jerusalem. Parthia was located east of Jerusalem, including present day Iran, and parts of Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Turkmenistan. Jesus instructed His disciples to go "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:6). Those lost sheep were the so-called lost ten tribes. Jesus did not have to tell His disciples where the lost sheep were located. Everyone knew about Parthia. The first century Jewish historian Josephus wrote, "the ten tribes are beyond the Euphrates till now, and are an immense multitude" (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 11:5:2). Other historic sources state that Thomas, Andrew, Bartholomew, and Philip visited the Parthian region where the lost sheep resided (later to migrate into western Europe).

Returning to the story line, Herod sought to answer the annoying question posed to him by the Parthian wise men. Herod convened a gathering of the chief priests and scribes of the Jewish people, and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They told Herod that "the prophet" (Micah) wrote that a Ruler would be born in Bethlehem (Matt 2:4-5, Mic 5:2).

Herod then held a secret meeting with the wise men, and determined from them the timing of when the star had appeared to them in the east. The implication here is that the star appeared to them at the time of Christ's birth. Probably Herod did not want the Jewish leaders to have any idea that he was inclined to eliminate any rival King of the Jews. Herod then told the wise men that they should go to Bethlehem and search for the child. He added that they should let him know when they find him, so that he could worship him as well (Matt 2:8). Of course we know from subsequent events that Herod had no intention of worshipping Jesus.

The wise men departed, presumably heading toward Bethlehem. But at that juncture, the very same star that they had seen in the east reappeared. They rejoiced with "exceedingly great joy" when the star reappeared (Matt 2:9-10). It led them to a house where they found Jesus, the One born to be King. It is clearly no accident that the star reappeared to them just when they really needed more specific direction.

How the star directed the wise men to Jesus is correctly translated in Young's Literal Version of Matt 2:9, "And they, having heard the king, departed, and lo, the star, that they did see in the east, did go before them, till, having come, it stood over where the child was." So the star went before them. We do not read that a star flew or hovered or glowed in the daytime. If it had, it might have attracted many other folks, including those loyal to Herod. We read that the star stood over where the child was. The wise men went into a house and saw Jesus as a child and also His mother Mary. They bowed down and worshipped Jesus, and presented to Him gifts

of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matt 2:11). Was this really a star like one sees in the sky, or some other glowing point of light? The answer to this question is readily answered by the Bible.

The Bible refers to angels as stars (Job 38:7, Isa 14:13, Dan 8:10, Jude 13, Rev 1:20; 9:1; 12:4). Even Christ is referred to as the Bright and Morning Star (Rev 22:16), and also as the Star of Jacob (Num 24:17). It is nothing but poor Biblical scholarship to read the word star and imagine this to be a literal star in the sky. The Bible is full of symbolism, metaphor, hyperbole, allegory, simile, and other literary devices. The star was an angel, not any natural or supernatural glowing mass or object. But few think to question the established traditional story of a literal star of some kind in the sky.

It is sad that much effort has been expended by many individuals in researching convergences of planets and other astronomical events proposed to be the star that the wise men saw. And why would a divine sign from God to the wise men have to be a scientifically calculated event involving known heavenly bodies? Wouldn't it likely be something one couldn't determine from working backward to positions of stars and planets? God has the power to create a special star or glowing light any time He wants. But in this case, the wise men did not see a special light, but rather an angel. If those researching celestial phenomena were familiar with Bible symbolism, they could have saved themselves a lot of effort. And there are significant logistical and logical problems with a party "following" a star, as we will see.

In the Bible, announcements and instructions to men are typically in the form of a personal angelic appearance, or as an angelic or other divine image in a dream. Many angels showed up for the shepherds watching their flocks, and performed as a great choir. In fact, the word angel means messenger. And there are countless numbers of these messengers available to serve both God and man. There is no need to follow some star in the sky, as hard as that might be (especially during the daytime).

Throughout the Bible passages mentioned up to this point, it is angels (messengers) who have spoken in person or in dreams to Zacharias, Joseph, Mary, and the shepherds. The angels will next speak in dreams to the wise men, and three more times to Joseph. It's their job. If an angel makes an announcement, using recognizable language, one can act accordingly. If one sees a bright star in the sky, one must guess as to what it might portend. One would have to wonder how the appearance of a star in the sky could have led the wise men to conclude that they should get a caravan together and head to Jerusalem in search of the King of the Jews. Imagine all the other things one might guess. But if an angel made an announcement in words, then that would not only be clear, but of great import.

For any miraculous star in the sky to lead a caravan, it would first have to delay moving until the caravan was assembled. Then the star would have to move at the same speed as the caravan, and stop each day when the caravan stopped to get some sleep. This pattern would have to continue during the 9 to 10 weeks it would take the caravan to travel from Parthia to Jerusalem. The star would also need to lead the caravan, not in a straight line, but from oasis to oasis. The distance between Parthia and Jerusalem was 540 miles as the crow flies. However, the caravan route was about 700 miles in length, so as to connect water sources and skirt rough terrain.

Of course the wise men had not followed a star to Jerusalem. But when the star appeared to the wise men for the second time, the wise men recognized it as the same one they had previously seen in the east. How were they sure? It would be easy to be sure if it was an angel with distinctive voice, facial features, and clothing. And yes, it is possible for angels to appear as everyday men (Heb 13:2, Gen 18:1-3; 19:1-5).

Had the wise men been following a miraculous star in the sky, surely it would have led them straight to Jesus in Bethlehem, or wherever He was at that time. In that case, the wise men would not have had to inquire of Herod at all! But even though they were wise, they had traveled directly to Jerusalem and made inquiry of the Roman ruler. In hindsight, this was a foolish move, not becoming of wise men. So much for following a star in the sky. They had hoped that Herod would know about the birth of Jesus. But Herod would not have known about that birth unless everyone had been expecting and watching for that event. They hadn't, and Herod had not been informed.

The wise men knew that Jesus was important. But it is clear that they were about the only ones who knew that the Messiah had been born, thanks to the star/angel. The Biblical account of Jesus' birth being announced to shepherds in Judea indicates to us that God did not want the news of Jesus' birth to reach the authorities right away. And for good reason, as we will see that Herod would seek to have Jesus killed.

So did the wise men make it to Bethlehem? Had they followed Herod's instructions, they would have gone to that small town. If Jesus was there, it would seem there would have been less need for the star/angel to intervene. Were the wise men led all the way to the family home in Nazareth? That seems unlikely, as the route from Jerusalem to Nazareth is 70 miles in length. The Biblical account does not say specifically where the wise men found Jesus. Maybe He was in a house in Jerusalem, or in fact in Bethlehem, which is 4.5 miles to the south.

Yet another possibility of where the wise men found Jesus is the town of Arimathea (modern day Ramallah), which is 9 miles due north of Jerusalem where Jesus' Uncle Joseph lived. This is where Jesus' family might have stayed on a visit to the area for any reason. Since Luke 2:39 told us that Jesus' family returned to Nazareth after visiting the temple in Jerusalem, they were either in Nazareth when the wise men arrived, they had relocated to the Jerusalem area, or they were visiting the Jerusalem area for some reason. One reason for visiting would have been to keep a festival, such as the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread in the spring, or Pentecost in the summer. (The seven Bible festivals are grouped such that they occur in three seasons during the year - spring, summer, and autumn.)

During the night after their visit to Jesus, the Parthian wise men were warned in a dream to depart back to their land, and we read that they returned by a different route (Matt 2:12). Had they found Jesus in Arimathea, this would have been convenient. Several trade routes converged there, providing the wise men and their large personal armies that different route out of the area. While they did not need to have all their military escorts follow them everywhere in Jerusalem, such forces were needed to protect them from significant bandit armies that raided traveling caravans during this time in history.

After the wise men had departed, Joseph was warned by an angel in a dream to take his family and flee to Egypt. He arose and they left in the night (Matt 2:13-15). The gifts of the wise men would have made the cost of such a journey possible. But no doubt there was a significant surplus of gifts to be left with a trusted party. If they had been staying with Jesus' uncle on his mother Mary's side, Joseph of Arimathea, he could have acted as steward of the surplus gifts.

Joseph of Arimathea would play an important role in Jesus' life. Some historical sources claim that he dealt in the tin trade, possibly had responsibility for some Roman tin mining operations in Britain, and took Jesus with him on seagoing trips there and elsewhere. If so, Joseph of Arimathea was, like some Jews, a Roman citizen. The Bible tells us that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jews, but he did not consent to their decree to have Jesus crucified. His high standing, and the fact that he was a family relation to Jesus, gave him direct access to Pilate after Jesus' crucifixion to claim Jesus' body for burial (Luke 23:50-53).

Noting the sudden departure of the wise men right after their visit, and then the hasty departure of Jesus' family a day later, it should be abundantly clear that the wise men were not present at the birth of Jesus. It would have been traumatic for Jesus' family to flee to Egypt with Jesus as a newborn. But of course Jesus was between one and two years old when the wise men visited, and not a newborn.

What happened after Jesus' birth is as Luke described. Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day. Prior to traveling, Mary completing the 41 days of her purification after Jesus' birth. Next, the family presented Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem with the prescribed sacrifice. They offered the sacrifice permitted for poor individuals, not having yet received riches from the wise men. And only then did they return to their home in Nazareth.

Herod was angry that the wise men departed without informing him of the location of Jesus. In an attempt to eliminate this person of great interest to the wise men from the Parthian Empire, adversary of the



Roman Empire, Herod gave an order. All male children in the area of Bethlehem that were two years old and younger were to be put to death. This event had been prophesied (Matt 2:16-18, Jer 31:15). The age of two years was based on what Herod had learned in his secret meeting with the wise men, regarding the timing of when they had seen the star. Logic tells us that Herod believed Jesus to be younger than two years, but older than one year.

We should expect that the star/angel appeared to the wise men at the time of Jesus' birth in the autumn. But for all we know, the Parthians may not have been in a big hurry to travel. Usually dependable Roman records tell us that Herod died near the end of March, 4 BC, after a long and excruciating illness. So perhaps the wise men visited in the spring or summer of 5 BC, with Christ having been born in the autumn of 7 BC, making Him less than two years old at the time of their visit.

Christ was born a few years BC due to an error made in the calculation of calendar events by the 6th century monk Dionysius Exiguus, whose work established the calendar year. Many conflicting claims can be found about the year Christ was born, but since they conflict, most of them must be in error. While we simply cannot know the year of Christ's birth with absolute certainty, plausible timing has been presented.

In Egypt, Joseph learned from an angel that Herod had died, and that they should return home. During the return journey, Joseph learned that Herod's son Archelaus was the Roman ruler (ethnarch) of Judea, and they were afraid to go there. This seems to imply that Joseph and Mary had relocated or planned to relocate their family to somewhere in Judea. Joseph had no doubt been informed of Archelaus' slaughter of 3,000 persons in Jerusalem during an uprising at the season of the Passover in 4 BC, just weeks after Herod's death. Joseph was again warned in a dream to take his family to Galilee, where they settled in their original home town of Nazareth (Matt 2:19-23, Luke 1:26; 2:4; 2:39). (Herod's son Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. Another son, Philip, was tetrarch of other territories east of the Jordan River.)

## CONCLUSION

I hope the above presentation and analysis of events was of interest. In my opinion, the truth is almost always more interesting, and certainly more valuable, than the "conventional wisdom" about any topic. I realize that resistance is the most typical reaction to the presentation of new or additional information. But may we all grow in grace and knowledge, with a love for the truth. Myths will vanish, but truth will last forever.

## SOURCES

The following sources were used, in addition to those sources quoted in the text.

*Did Our Lord Visit Britain as they say in Cornwall and Somerset?* by Rev. C. C. Dobson, 1936 (Revised 1999)

*The New Testament - Its Background, Growth, and Content*, by Bruce Metzger, 1965 (2nd Edition 1983)

*Parthia: The Forgotten Ancient Superpower and Its Role in Biblical History* by Steven Collins, 2004

<http://www.factmonster.com> (various topics)

<http://www.wikipedia.com> (various topics)

<http://www.formerthings.com/augustus.htm>

<http://www.orldutheran.com/html/census.html>

[http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Augustus/Res\\_Gestae/home.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Augustus/Res_Gestae/home.html)

Copyright © 2012 by Roger Day. All rights reserved. Unless otherwise noted, scriptures quoted are taken from the New King James Version®, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.