

Bible study: Jesus's birth

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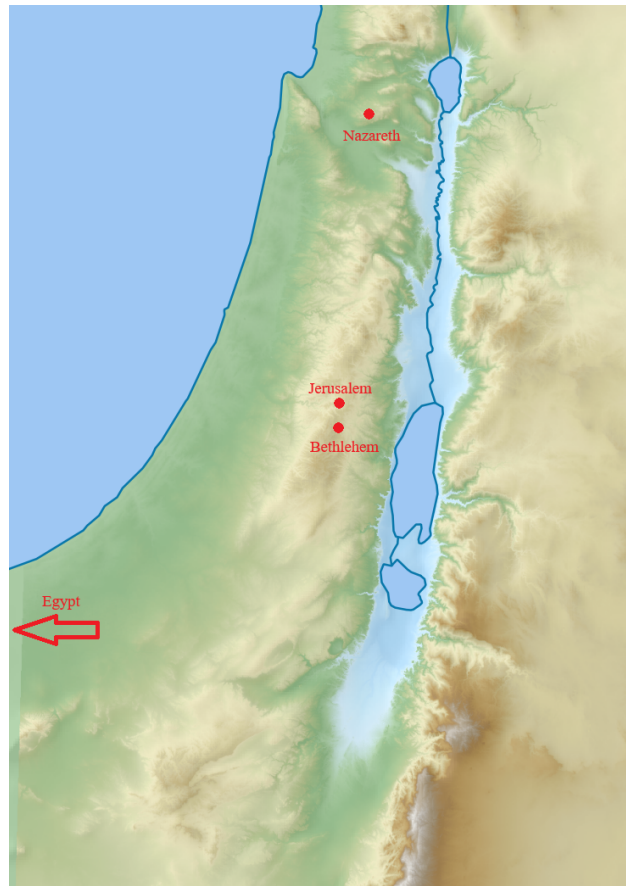
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Introduction

The story of Jesus's birth is known to all Christians: The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, announcing that she would conceive Jesus by the Holy Spirit, and an angel also appeared to Joseph in a dream, reassuring him to take Mary as his wife. Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem to be registered for a census because of a decree from Caesar Augustus. Upon arriving in Bethlehem, they find no room at the inn and are therefore compelled to stay in a stable or a similar humble setting, where Jesus is born and placed in a manger. Angels appear to shepherds in nearby fields, proclaiming the birth of Jesus with the message, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." A host of angels then praises God, prompting the shepherds to go and worship Jesus. Meanwhile, magi from the East, following a star that symbolizes hope and divine guidance, come to worship Jesus and present him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Before visiting Jesus, however, they met with King Herod, who inquires about the location of Jesus's birth, fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. When the magi do not return to Herod, he becomes enraged and orders the killing of all the infants in Bethlehem. Joseph is warned in a dream by an angel and takes Mary and Jesus to escape to Egypt. They return to Nazareth only after King Herod dies, fulfilling the prophecy, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

Here are two different versions of the story of the birth of Jesus, and one includes all the horrible events where the infant is hunted by King Herod, and they flee to Egypt, returning only to fear his heir, Herod Archelaus. The second includes only the pleasant events: the journey to Bethlehem, the birth, the shepherds, and the journey to the Temple in Jerusalem and home. After you read each of them, you are asked to answer some questions. Be sure to get out a piece of paper and write down your answers so that you can compare your answers. We then conclude with some follow-up questions about these two stories. Be sure to read Story 1 on one day, and take detailed notes and answer the questions. On the next day, read Story 2 (keeping notes) and then answer those questions. Finally, on the next day, answer the questions in the final set of questions.

Here is a map of Judah, Samaria and Galilee with Nazareth, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and the route toward Egypt.



1 The first story with only the sad events

For today, only read Story 1 and answer the questions that immediately follow. Wait until tomorrow to read Story 2. Make sure you keep detailed notes as to what happened.

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

“Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

“A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get

up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazarene."

Questions

Before you read Story 2, make sure you took notes as to what happened, and so that you can later compare how similar—or dissimilar—the two stories are.

1. What is the mood of the parents Mary and Joseph and what emotions may they have felt? Would they have felt fear, anxiety, confusion or uncertainty?
2. List the names or describe those people who died in this story.
3. Who are the other characters described other than Mary, Joseph and Jesus?
4. What emotions do you feel when you read this?
5. List all the places that they visited in order.
6. List all the miraculous events that are said to have occurred.
7. When the Jews were authorized to return from Babylon to Judah when the Babylonians were defeated by Cyrus the Great, some Jews remained in Babylon and continued their culture in that great city and many others. By the time of Jesus, many learned Jews were living in Seleucia and Ctesiphon, close to present-day Baghdad, as well as other cities in Mesopotamia. As the magi were clearly experts interpreting holy scriptures (as they seem to be the only people in the entire world who associated this new star with the birth of Jesus), is it reasonable that they were Jews coming from this Judahite community living in Mesopotamia? There were Jewish communities further north in Syria, such as Damascus, Palmyra and Nisibis, but these places would not be considered to be in the "East."
8. Assuming three magi, although the story does not say how many magi there were, a reasonable composition of a caravan taking the magi from the East to Jerusalem would likely include a small group of about twenty to thirty individuals. This group would consist of the magi themselves, who were likely nobles or scholars, and a small following of servants and attendants to assist with their needs. Essential members would include guides familiar with the route, guards or soldiers for protection against bandits, and animal handlers to manage the camels or donkeys used for transport. The caravan would also carry essential supplies such as food, water, and tents for the journey, along with the precious cargo of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. This composition would provide a balance of security, logistical support, and the necessary dignity befitting the magi's status while ensuring the valuable gifts reached their destination safely. The speed of such a caravan depends on the slowest elements: those servants and guards or soldiers who were walking and the more heavily laden pack animals carrying food, water, tents and the gifts. Could such a caravan move any faster than two or three miles per hour? Bethlehem is less than eight miles from King Herod's palace in Jerusalem, and the ridge on which it sits is visible from Jerusalem. A traveller could walk between the two in only a few hours. If Herod knew the magi were going there, why did he not simply send soldiers to accompany them or have them followed?
9. Could the magi immediately embark on such a journey? Gathering the necessary animals, supplies, food and water, as well as the hiring of guides, animal handlers, and guards or soldiers would take time. How many days do you think it would take to prepare for such a journey once the decision was made to travel to the west towards Judah?

10. If there were twelve magi, as is understood to be the case according to the Assyrian Christians of the Chaldean Catholic Church, how much larger would the caravan have to be?
11. Assuming that the caravan started in Seleucia, such a journey would depend on factors such as route choice, weather, and terrain. The direct distance is approximately 600 miles, but the actual travel distance would often be longer due to following established trade routes, one following the Euphrates north to Resafa and then back south to Damascus and then Jerusalem, and the other making a more direct passage across the Arabian desert starting approximately sixty miles south of Seleucia. Caravans could not cover more than between 15 to 25 miles per day, with regular rest days to allow animals and people to recuperate and resupply. How long would you estimate it took such a caravan to reach Jerusalem from the “East”?
12. Bethlehem is less than eight miles away from King Herod’s palace in Jerusalem, so it would take less than four hours to reach Bethlehem from Jerusalem. If King Herod knew the magi were going there, why did he not simply have the magi followed?
13. King Herod the Great died in 4 BC. When does this suggest that Jesus was born?
14. Does it seem that Joseph wanted to return to Bethlehem after King Herod had died?
15. Herod Archelaus was the son of King Herod the Great and after his father died, Archelaus became the ruler of Judea, Samaria and Edom; however, his brother Herod Anitpas ruled in Galilee. Why do you think that the family fled to Galilee even though another of King Herod’s sons ruled there?
16. The Temple is in Jerusalem and this is the city from which Herod Archelaus ruled Judea, Samaria and Edom. Does it suggest that the family visit Jerusalem or the Temple? If you were afraid of Herod Archelaus, would you visit Jerusalem?
17. When is the first time that Nazareth is mentioned? Does it seem that Nazareth was the home of Mary and Joseph?
18. On the map, draw a line showing where Joseph, Mary and Jesus went.

2 The second story with only the happy events

Before you read this story, wait one day. Make sure you keep your notes and your answers to questions about Story 1.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.

Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

When the eighth day came, it was time to circumcise the child, and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word,
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him.

Questions

Before you go to the next set of questions, answer the following, but be sure to answer these questions based only on what you read in Story 2.

1. What is the mood of the parents Mary and Joseph and what emotions may they have felt? Is there any suggestion or even hint that at any time they were feeling fear, anxiety, confusion or uncertainty?
2. List the names or describe those people who died in this story.
3. Who are the other characters described other than Mary, Joseph and Jesus?
4. What emotions do you feel when you read this?
5. List all the places that they visited in order.
6. List all the miracles events that are said to have occurred
7. In the "*Res Gestae Divi Augusti*" (The Deeds of the Divine Augustus), Augustus describes three censuses that he ordered during his reign as the first Roman emperor. These censuses were conducted in the years 28 BC, 8 BC, and AD 14. The first census in 28 BC counted 4,063,000 Roman citizens and this occurred shortly after Augustus consolidated his power, marking a key step in reorganizing the Roman state. The second census in 8 BC saw 4,233,000 citizens being registered and was part of Augustus's ongoing administrative reforms to update population records essential for taxation, military service, and political representation. The third census in AD 14 saw 4,957,000 citizens being registered and was completed in the final year of Augustus's life, helping to ensure continuity under his successor, Tiberius. Do any of these censuses align with the time Quirinius was governor of Syria in AD 6?
8. Quirinius became governor of Syria in approximately AD 6 and would have held his governorship for approximately three years. When does this suggest that Jesus was born?
9. Quirinius was made governor of Syria to oversee the administration of making Judea, Samaria and Edom into a Roman Province. The Romans had become frustrated with Herod Archelaus's barbaric practices that were destabilizing the region and so deposed him. Herod Archelaus had ruled Judea, Samaria and Edom for ten years before he was deposed. Was Jesus born before or after Herod Archelaus was ruler of Judea, Samaria and Edom?
10. The Temple is in Jerusalem and this is the city from which Herod Archelaus ruled Judea, Samaria and Edom before he was deposed. Did the family visit Jerusalem or the Temple?
11. When is the first time that Nazareth is mentioned? Does it seem that Nazareth was the home of Mary and Joseph?
12. On the map, draw a line showing where Joseph, Mary and Jesus went.

3 Follow-up questions

Here are some further questions to answer:

1. Looking at your answers to the questions, can you assume that these are telling the same story?
2. Is it possible that both of these stories can be true at the same time?
3. What are the shared events, and what are the events appearing in only one telling?
4. If events in both narratives occurred, would it be reasonable to leave them out in one telling or the other?
5. Compare and contrast the three references to Nazareth in these two stories:

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, ...

Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, ...

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

In the first story, it suggests that it was not Joseph’s intention to go to Galilee, but rather, it seems that it was his intention to return to Bethlehem, yet he feared returning there because of Herod Archelaus. It is only after receiving a warning in a dream that he made his way to Galilee, and there it says that he “made his home” in a town called Nazareth. Does this sound like an individual returning to his hometown? Why do you think the author did not simply say the following?

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and *returned to their home in Nazareth of Galilee*.

6. Here are two more common narratives:

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

Joseph also went... to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, ...

He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, ...

Why do you think that Story 1 makes no mention of what would be a very difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem while Mary is pregnant?

7. Jesus's circumcision and the journey to the Temple is an obligation found in Leviticus 12 where Yahweh said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites:

A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, . . .

On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised.

Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over. . .

When the days of her purification for a son or daughter are over, she is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the tent of meeting a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering. He shall offer them before the Yahweh to make atonement for her, and then she will be ceremonially clean from her flow of blood.

These are the regulations for the woman who gives birth to a boy or a girl.

But if she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for her, and she will be clean."

Mary's sacrifice was in line with the that offering available to only those who could not afford a lamb: "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." Recalling that Joseph and Mary returned to Nazareth immediately following that sacrifice, why do you not think they could afford a lamb when they had been presented in Bethlehem gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh?

8. In the following table, put a check mark in the column corresponding to which story the event appears in:

Events	Story 1	Story 2
Jesus is born in Bethlehem		
Joseph, Mary and Jesus return to Nazareth		
It is told that King Herod dies		
Shepherds see a multitude of angels above them		
An angel appears to Joseph and tells him about the pregnancy		
Simeon and Anna praise Jesus		
King Herod learns about Jesus from the magi		
Joseph, Mary and Jesus travel to Jerusalem to present Jesus at the Temple		
Joseph, Mary and Jesus flee to Egypt		
Joseph and Mary travel from Nazareth for a census		
Magi present gold, frankincense and myrrh		
Jesus is circumcised		
King Herod kills the male infants around Bethlehem		
Quirinius as governor of Syria oversees a census		
Joseph plans to divorce Mary because she is pregnant		
Jesus was laid in a manger		
Joseph fears returning to Judea because of Archelaus		
Shepherds come to Bethlehem to worship Jesus		
A star appears and guides the magi to Bethlehem		

Do you notice a pattern? Would it be fair to say that the only common events between the two stories are that Jesus was born to Mary in Bethlehem and the family at some point ended up in Nazareth after Jesus was born? Is it fair to split up the birth narrative in such a way to only include horrific events in one and only pleasant events in the other?

9. The first story is from the Book of Matthew, and the second story is from the Book of Luke. Are these telling the same story? That is, are both stories just different tellings of the same events?
10. You were asked to estimate the time it would take to travel from Seleucia to Jerusalem, and the time that it took to prepare for such a journey. In Story 2, Joseph and Mary were in Jerusalem presenting Jesus on the fortieth day, so given the short distance, they likely began their journey that morning, and reached the Temple by the afternoon, and after this, they returned to Nazareth. If the star appeared when Jesus was born, was there sufficient time for the magi to reach Jesus prior to the family's departure to Jerusalem?
11. Over two thirds (70%) of the stories in Matthew also appear in Luke. Can you think of a reason that the author of Matthew did not mention:
 - The census or the purpose of the journey to Bethlehem?
Indeed, if you read the story in Matthew without knowing about the story in Luke, would you not come to the conclusion that Joseph and Mary had always lived in Bethlehem, and only subsequently found themselves starting a new home in Nazareth?
 - The angels appearing to the shepherds who then visit Jesus?
 - Jesus being circumcised, the trip to Jerusalem, and the presentation of Jesus at the Temple?
 - Simeon and Anna?
12. Just under two thirds (64%) of the stories in Luke also appear in Matthew. Can you think of a reason that the author of Luke did not mention:
 - The star?
 - The magi or the gold, frankincense and myrrh?
 - King Herod the Great, in trying to kill Jesus, he has all the male infants in Bethlehem killed?
 - Joseph, Mary and Jesus fleeing to and then returning from Egypt.