

What Child is this?

This week in our homework we will be looking at a handful of episodes in Jesus' early life. We will begin with the beloved and awesome story of Jesus' birth attended by the most exalted as well as the most lowly. We will read the account of his presentation at the Temple and the astonishing prophecies made over the infant Jesus to his bewildered parents. Then we will follow along with Magi from the east seeking to worship a foreign infant identified in the night sky as the King of the Jews. Lastly, we will go with Mary and Joseph as they flee Herod's soldiers escaping to Egypt, the dark night echoing the cries of Bethlehem's sons.

Lord Jesus, I pray over this child of yours that you will lead her in studying your word today, and every day this week as she seek to know you better. Bless her with understanding and insight, and most of all, a hunger in her heart to spend more time with you. – Amen.

Angels Sing and Shepherds Seek

One of the most loved passages of scripture has to be the Nativity Story. Every year in every church throughout the world this story is re-enacted by the most adorable children dressed in homemade costumes to the delight of every parent, grand-parent and every soul bearing witness to this Christmas tradition. The innocence of the little girl Mary and little boy Joseph so serious in their roles as the Holy Family showing forth baby Jesus to bed sheet covered angels and bath-robed shepherds reflects the innocence of the moment Jesus first came into the world. As we begin our study today let us revel in the rejoicing of angels and awestruck wonder of the shepherds. What a wonderful story with which to begin our Bible study! Lord, fill our hearts with joy and wonder as once again we see the story of your birth unfold before us. Open our hearts and minds to receive your truth and to recognize just how awesome a moment it was when you, the Lord and Creator of the Universe, stepped into time a little tiny infant.



Let's read the oh, so familiar but beloved story of Jesus' nativity as recorded by Luke in Chapter 2: 1-20.

Why did Mary and Joseph have to travel to Bethlehem?

Where did they travel from?

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➤ Look at the two prophecies below regarding the birth of Messiah. Highlight (or underline) the significant elements of these prophecies.

Micah 5:2

*"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
 though you are small among the
 clans of Judah,
 out of you will come for me
 one who will be ruler over Israel,
 whose origins are from of old,
 from ancient times."*

Jeremiah 33:15

*In those days and at that time
 I will make a righteous Branch
 sprout from David's line;
 he will do what is just and right
 in the land.*

According to verse 8, what were the shepherds doing?

Scripture tells us that there was no room for Mary and Joseph at the inn. Remember that all descendants of David would have traveled to Bethlehem to register for the census. Every home and possible lodging would have been filled to the brim. The only place Joseph could find for Mary was a lodging for animals. The surrounding hillsides would have been home to flocks and herds. Bethlehem was 5 miles distant from Jerusalem and flocks of sheep were raised to be used by the Temple in Jerusalem. Verse 8 tells us the shepherds were watching over their flocks in the fields, leaving the shelter available to Mary, heavy with child. Most likely this shelter would have been more of a cave rather than a stable built of wood. In the region of Bethlehem, there would have been caves set aside for the protection of ewes with young lambs. Very appropriately the Lamb of God was born in what likely would have been a lambing cave for the lambs destined to the Temple for sacrifice.

What does the angel announce to the shepherds?

The most miraculous event in human history was celebrated with heaven opening and announcing this event not to kings and priests, and people of great standing (by human reckoning), but to shepherds considered at the time to be of not only lowly, but unclean standing according to Jewish Law. They were men of low birth, no education, often associated with thieves, outcasts and sinners.¹

What is the shepherds' response to this angelic message?

¹New American Commentary (NAC)

According to verse 15, who do the shepherds know that this message came from?

After visiting the child, the shepherds go forth telling what they had seen and heard. What was the response by “all who heard” what the shepherds said? (v18)

The word is starting to spread from a little cave near the town of David, into Bethlehem filled to the brim with the descendants of David, who could not help but know that from their own line a King would come, a King to restore Israel. The day had come when Jeremiah’s prophesy came to pass:

“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, ‘when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah.

*“In those days and at that time
I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line;
he will do what is just and right in the land. Jer 33:14-15*

These prophecies about the Messiah would have been very familiar to all in Israel, but most especially to the descendants of David gathered in Bethlehem for the census. It never ceases to amaze me how God’s timing takes advantage of human activity. The Emperor’s census brought all of the House of David to one place to be the first to hear the announcement of the birth of the long awaited Messiah – all in the fullness of God’s timing!

What Words are These Said Over this Child?

Take a few minutes of quiet and ask Jesus for his leading you in these scriptures. They are his words (through a faithful servant), chosen to teach you about who he is. Who better to lead you than Jesus himself?



Turn to Luke 2:21-40

What name was Mary’s son given?

What is the significance of that name? (See Matt 1:21, 23; Luke 1:31-33)

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Jesus' name comes from the Hebrew name *Yeshua* and the word "yasha". Look at the following definitions. What does this tell you about Jesus' very name in addition to your answers to the question above?

- *Yeshua*: Joshua which means "*Yehovah: Jehovah-saved; Jehoshuā (i.e. Joshua), the Jewish leader :- Jehoshua, Jehoshuah, Joshua*".²
- *Yasha*: which means to save, to deliver, to help, to defend, to avenge, to rescue; bring (having) salvation, save (-iour), get victory.³

What was Simeon's response to the infant Jesus?

What does he say about this child?

Verse 36 tells us that Anna, who "never left the Temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying", spoke about the child. To whom did she speak? "to _____ who were _____ to the redemption of Jerusalem." What do you think this means?

As Mary and Joseph came to the Temple to fulfill their religious requirements of sacrifices and dedication of their one and only son to God, they were greeted by the righteous and devout Simeon who had received a promise from God that he would not die before laying eyes on the Lord's Christ. Scripture describes that the Holy Spirit was upon him. When he saw the infant Jesus in the arms of his mother he took the child in his own arms and burst forth praising God and prophesying over the baby. Notice that Simeon prophesied that this child would be light for the Gentiles as well as for Israel! He was proclaiming salvation was coming to all not just to Israel.

Simeon's prophesy takes a darker turn in verses 34, 35. He says that "*This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.*" Throughout his ministry Jesus proclaimed that the only way to salvation is through him. Those who chose to believe him would "rise" to eternal life, and those who chose not to believe him would "fall".⁴ All who encountered Jesus during his ministry would make a decision one way or the other revealing their true hearts. Were their hearts aligned to God or to self?

² Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary (Strong's)

³ Ibid

⁴ Bible Knowledge Commentary (BKC)

The Prophetess Anna was next to speak over the infant Jesus. As she approached the young family, she too spontaneously burst into praise and spoke about this child “*to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Israel*”(v38). Notice the little word “all”. Anna wasn’t just speaking to Mary and Joseph, she was speaking to all in the Temple courts. The Temple likely would have been filled with all manner of people – rabbis, students, priests, men and women come for daily sacrifice and worship. Anna likely was well known at the Temple. She had lived there since her husband of 7 years had died. She was now 84, living, praying and fasting at the Temple. She lived a life devoted to God. This would not have gone unnoticed in Jerusalem. The Bible gives her the name “prophetess”. A prophet is one who speaks the word of God. It was known that God spoke through her; and when she spoke, people listened. When she began to speak over the infant Jesus, the people in the Temple courts would have stopped and listened to what she had to say, and whatever she said would have been carried out into the streets of Jerusalem. Think about what might have been spread throughout Jerusalem that day as people would have spread Anna and Simeon’s prophecies overheard in the temple courts. Nothing flies faster than juicy gossip! Write in the margin what you think might have been spread person to person, customer to shop-keeper, servant to mistress that day!

The last gem of today’s scripture we will look at is verses 21-24 and 39-40. We are told that after they completed everything the Law required of them, they went home to Nazareth. The beginning of our lesson today tells us the Holy Family circumcised Jesus on the eighth day, came to the Temple to present him to the Lord, and to make sacrifices in keeping with the Law of the Lord. They did all these things in accordance with the Law. Despite Jesus being the savior of the world, the long awaited Messiah, his parents still obeyed the Law. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law. He did not come to abolish it. These acts showed his family’s obedience to God.

The last verse we read today is that the family returned to Nazareth and that “*the child grew and became strong, he was filled with wisdom and the grace of God was upon him.*”



Compare Simeon’s prophecy of verses 34-35 with Isaiah 8:14, 15 and Matt 21:42-44

Visitors Come from a Foreign Land

Today we have a study filled with mysterious visitors, intrigue and danger. It is a story told only in Matthew's Gospel. Take a few moments to prepare your heart and mind for our study of these passages, asking the Lord to increase your understanding of who he is.



Begin by reading Matthew 2: 1-9 and answer the following questions.

Who were the Magi looking for and why did the Magi come?

What had the Magi followed to Judea?

Verse two tell us the Magi *"saw his star in the east"*, a better translation would have been *"saw his star at its rising in the east"*. The Magi had seen the star as it rose in the East, each night making a westward progression across the sky, leading them west to Judea.

❖ Turn to Psalm 19. What do verses 1-4 tell us about the stars in heaven?

The heavens _____;

the skies _____.

Day after day _____;

night after night they _____.

3 _____

4 _____

What word describes Herod's response to the Magi's presence and quest?

In verse 10-11, what is the emotional response of the Magi?

Why do you think Herod is disturbed by the presence of these Magi from a *foreign land* and the information they provide?

In the time of Jesus, and long before, the land called Parthia, (what we know as Iraq) was famous for its astronomers, called Magi. These Magi were wise men educated in history and astronomy (not astrology which is fortune telling) and held respected positions in politics and in their religion. These Magi watched the night sky and mapped the celestial movements of stars, believing specific stars to be tied to specific events. God even tells us his story is written in the movement of the sky (Ps. 19). Why were these Magi interested in events in distant Judea? Centuries earlier Judea was conquered and its people taken captive to Babylon. The Book of Daniel begins with a description of this event and specifies that members of the royal family and nobility – those who have an aptitude for learning and are well informed -be brought to serve the King. Babylon was known as a center of learning. Not only were the captives going to be taught to serve the King, the King's scholars were going to be learning from the captives. Throughout their time in captivity, the Jews retained their own heritage and religion. The book of Daniel is evidence of Jewish captives retaining their faith while also reaching heights in the royal court of Babylon. The Torah was brought with them. They were encouraged to settle in Babylon and many did so long after they were allowed to return to Israel and rebuild Jerusalem (not only with the King's blessing but his money.) The Magi would have had access to the Old Testament, it is possible some of them may even have been Jews themselves.

Herod the Great was half Jew, and half Idumean, a descendant of Esau, therefore an Edomite, not a full-blood Israelite. He had no true claim to the throne as he was not a descendant of King David. Herod came to the throne of Israel in 37 B.C. by making accommodations to Rome. He was subject to Caesar and Roman authority. If Caesar was displeased with Herod, Herod could lose his throne. He was known for his extensive public building projects, including the building of the Temple, paid with the money from oppressive taxation of the Jews and built by conscripted Jewish labor. Israel itself had been a difficult region to rule. There had been previous insurrections attempting to throw off the yoke of Rome. Roman soldiers ruthlessly put an end to the insurrections. It was also widely known the Jews were waiting for a messiah, one like King David or Moses who would come and overthrow the Romans. Herod did not need even the whisper of such a king being born for the Jews to rally behind. As he aged throughout the course of his long reign, he became increasingly paranoid over threats to his throne, putting even his wives, sons, and many others to death fearing their plots against him. Herod's tyranny over Israel knew no bounds:

In his youth he had browbeaten the venerable Sanhedrin, and threatened the city with slaughter and destruction; again and again had he murdered her venerable sages; he had shed like water the blood of her [H]asmonean princes, and of every one who dared to be free; had stifled every national aspiration in the groans of the torture, and quenched it in the gore of its victims. Not once, nor twice, but six times did he change

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the High-Priesthood, to bestow it at last on one who bears no good name in Jewish theology, a foreigner in Judaea, an Alexandrian^a.⁵

Take a close look at verse 2 and fill in the missing word: *"Where is the one who has been _____ king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."*

It is likely this word and the fact Magi from a foreign land wanted to worship this child that disturbed Herod the most. Herod knew he was not the legitimate king of Israel, and these learned and well respected men were pointing out that the one who is legitimate had been born. This one, though a young child, was a threat to his power, position and throne.

Scripture shows us that the Magi came not only to honor and recognize this young King of the Jews but to worship him. Somehow their astronomy revealed to them that this was no ordinary King. He was a King for which they needed to travel a great distance to find and bow down in worship. Something about this King extended beyond the kingdom of the Jews and out into the far reaches of distant lands drawing these men to him. What was Herod's reaction to the King of the Jews? We'll see more as we continue with our next lesson.

A Night of Terror

Our next passage of scripture takes us through a heart-rending scene in the young life of Jesus. It is hard for us to understand how God can allow such evil schemes to be perpetrated, but I'm certain that the cries he heard that night ripped through his heart just as much and more as he felt the combined pain in the death of innocent babies and the anguished cries of their mothers and fathers. Sadly such a scene had been recorded in our Bibles before. Lord, as we read and study this passage today, help us to see your love and truth revealed in your word.



Read Matthew 2:13-23 and answer the following questions.

Where does the angel tell Joseph to take the young Jesus and his mother, and why?

According to verse 15 what was the prophecy fulfilled?

^a Simon, son of Boethus from Alexandria - or, according to other sources, Boethus himself - , was made a high priest about 25 or 24 B.C. by Herod the Great, in order that his marriage with Boethus's daughter Mariamne might not be regarded as a mésalliance. - *Wikipedia: Boethusians*; Josephus, "Antiquitates", xv. 9, § 3; xix. 6, § 2

⁵ *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Alfred Edersheim

Turn to Hosea 11:1 and read what the Lord spoke through his prophet Hosea. In light of the Holy Family's sojourn in Egypt and verses 19-20 of Matthew 2, what is the significance of this prophecy?

Hosea's prophecy was remembering back to when the Lord lead his infant nation Israel, the Lord's adopted sons, out of Egypt under the guidance of Moses. Moses shepherded this young nation until they reached the very edges of the Promise Land. When the Israelites had been settled in Judea for some time, they would go through periods of time being faithful to the Lord, and other times of embracing the pagan practices of the Canaanites in the land worshiping the Baals of their religion. Hosea is looking ahead and warning Israel of another future (to Hosea) captivity in Babylon. The significance of this passage is verse one, the Lord calling his son (Israel) out of Egypt led by Moses, the deliverer of a nation.

Exodus 4:22 what does the Lord instruct Moses to say to Pharaoh?

Going back to Matthew 2:16-18 we read the devastating account of the Slaughter of the Innocents. As I mentioned before, this scene had been recorded before. Turn to Exodus 1:22. What order did Pharaoh give?

Pharaoh's evil scheme was to further and ruthlessly oppress the Israelites in Egypt whose numbers continued to grow despite their enslavement and maltreatment by the Egyptians. Read Exodus 2:1-10 and 3:7-10. Briefly describe these two accounts.



Now read Exodus 11:1-8; 12:29-30. Fill in verse 12:30: *Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up during the night, and there was _____ in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead.*

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The final plague of the Death of the Firstborn sons of Israel forced Pharaoh to relinquish the children of God. Let us remember that we serve a holy God, and the sins of Pharaoh and his nation were great. We do not know the mind of God nor the extent of evil for which the Lord brought this judgment against Egypt, but we must trust in the holiness and sovereignty of the Lord. The Lord gave them 9 warnings to turn and repent. They did not. The children of Israel were saved by the Blood of the Lamb painted on their doorpost as sign for the angel of death to passover them.⁶ Through the pain and anguish of Egypt, Moses delivered the Lord's chosen people.

➤ Returning to Bethlehem's night of terror, let's return to Matthew 2: 16-18. Compare Herod's actions to what we read in Exodus. What do his reactions reveal about who he believes the infant Jesus to be? Contrast this with the shepherd's response in Luke 2:17, 20; as well as the Magi's response in Matthew 2:11.

Herod's judgment against Bethlehem's children was not just. His depraved and maniacal actions were to secure his own position. He knew of the prophecies concerning God's Anointed. He knew that the Jewish scribes and priest were watching for such a messiah to come. He knew who the Magi claimed the infant to be. His response to the infant Jesus was one of fear, loathing, and murder; far from the response of the Magi who were overjoyed, bowed down, worshiped and gave gifts fit for a king. The coming of the Messiah into the world inspires two very different reactions: worship or fear. The reaction is dependent upon the focus of the heart. The shepherds and the Magi had hearts for what is holy and of the spirit. Herod's heart was focused on self and the temporal. He perceived the Messiah as a threat to what he held dear, himself. Herod's choice, the Magi's choice, Pharaoh's choice all revolved around choosing the Kingdom of Heaven or choosing the temporal kingdom of self. Everyone has been or will be confronted with this choice when confronted by the presence of Jesus. Where does your allegiance lie?