

uncommon

THE HOLY ONE OF GOD IS COMING

LESSONS:

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Lesson 3 | His Birth would Announce His Kingdom (12/21)

Taking the lead from a book called *“Compassionate Creator: Becoming Human For Me”* by Bruce Morton, we are taking a look at the entrance of Jesus the King into the world in which He was born. As we have already said, Paul reminds us that **“at the right time**, Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 6:6) and to the Galatians he wrote, **“when the fulness of time came**, God sent His Son.” (4:4). So, there is value in understanding, along with the written text, the events and the environment that led to God sending His Son into the world. This study will consider the amazing story of the incarnation (God made flesh) in a world, within the social, political and religious struggles of His own day.

To the shepherds the Angels heralded: “Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” (Luke 2:11). To Mary, Gabriel said, “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end” (1:32-33). And to Joseph, the Lord’s angel said, “Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21-22).

He was born to be King; and when Jesus arrived, that was what was clearly announced. But what Kingdom would it be? How would that Rule manifest itself – and in whom? The manner in which Jesus arrived clearly forecasted **the nature of that Kingdom** in contrast to the world kingdoms of the day in which He was born.

He was “of Nazareth.” Nathaniel’s astonishment that anything good could come from Nazareth (John 1:45) demonstrated the significance of His entrance, of mostly his parents’ place, in the world. Nazareth was among several poor villages that stood in stark contrast to the larger, more affluent cities of Galilee called Sepphoris and Tiberias. His parents were poor, as deduced from their sacrifice in the Temple. According to Leviticus 12:6-8, Mary was to bring a burnt and sin offering; However, she fulfilled the law and brought two turtledoves which was offered to the woman “without sufficient means” and equally demonstrating that she – and they were – of “humble state” (Luke 1:48, 52-53, 2:8). Also, if Mary offered a dove as a sin offering (Leviticus 12:6) for her purification indicates that she sought forgiveness and redemption. (The description of Mary’s offering also suggests that Joseph and Mary were not yet in possession of the rich gifts of the wise men mentioned in Matthew 2:11, i.e., the wise men had not yet come. Cf. also Matthew 2:7, 16.)

Nazareth was a town of little means and even less substance. A small village of about “50 impoverished Jewish families where Jesus will spend His childhood” (Hadid, PhysOrg, 12/21/2009). “The absence of any [excavated] remains of glass vessels or imported products suggested the people who lived in that dwelling were simple” (ibid). The same house had a hidden grotto to conceal property from Roman searches and seizures. With one road running in and out but unconnected to the larger towns in Galilee, it was a town of little consequence (c.f. Morton).

Also, Jesus’ parents responded to the tax enrollment of Caesar (see Luke 2:1-3). In a similar enrollment in 104 AD, Gaius Vibius Maximus said, “the enrollment by household being at hand, it is necessary to notify all who are for any cause whatsoever outside their homes to return to their domestic hearths, that they may also accomplish the customary dispensation of enrollment and continue steadfastly in the husbandry that belongeth to them” (Diessman, *Light from the Ancient East*, 271). The fact that they *had to* return to Bethlehem for this indicates, most likely, that Joseph’s family had lost their family homestead. Add to this that they had no means (or relatives) for housing when Jesus is born perpetuates that suggestion that the family was little to none of any

means. And, finally, the humiliation of Mary in giving birth to Jesus outside (c.f. Luke 2:7) would have shown again the extraordinary, uncommon, humiliations that they would have suffered. The Bible says that they remained in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1-2); and at some point in time within two years (2:16), they had moved into a “house” (2:11) where the Wise Men were led by His star (2:2) to worship Him.

Much like Nazareth, though larger and with a stronger economy, Bethlehem's economic base was agricultural. We not only have the witness of the Gospels themselves, which show shepherds watching in their fields by night (which would not have typically been in the winter months), but we also have the witness of other ancient sources of rabbis in the Mishnah. According to Alfred Edersheim:

“...Jewish tradition may here prove both illustrative and helpful. That the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, was a settled conviction. Equally so was the belief, that He was to be revealed from Migdal Eder, “the tower of the flock.” This Migdal Eder was not the watchtower for the ordinary flocks which pastured on the barren sheep ground beyond Bethlehem, but lay close to the town, on the road to Jerusalem. A passage in the Mishnah leads to the conclusion that the flocks, which pastured there, were destined for Temple-sacrifices, and, accordingly, that the shepherds, who watched over them, were not ordinary shepherds. The latter were under the ban of Rabbinism, on account of their necessary isolation from religious ordinances, and their manner of life, which rendered strict legal observance unlikely, if not absolutely impossible.”

So, Bethlehem's economy was not just based on the breeding of sheep; it was based on the breeding of sheep to be exported to the nearby city of Jerusalem where they would be used as part of the Temple's sacrificial system. The Lamb who would be slain to bear away the sins of the world was born in the city where lambs were born and bred to be used in the sacrificial system which symbolized the coming Lamb of God.

The Wise Men. Why are we told about them? McGarvey wrote, “The star of the magi stood over the house where the child was... preventing them from entering the wrong house and finding the wrong child” (*Matthew and Mark*, 26). Matthew calls the “Magi” (2:1) in the Greek which “had roots going back (according to the Behistun Inscription) at least 500 years” (Morton, 38). “Greeks applied the word to a caste of priests, magicians, and astrologers in Persia – then Parthia” (the same word is used in the LXX in Daniel 2:2). These people came from the modern region of Khorasan (Brittanica) in Iran and Iraq. This region was clearly a charged political wild card for Caesar who placed 4 of his legions there to keep peace (Grant, Augustus to Constatine, 5). So their arrival to Herod (Matthew 2:2-3) was a bold, political affront that caused all of Jerusalem angst. Since they were counselors and ambassadors, they would likely have travelled with a caravan with an armed escort and servants.

Yet, this poor family will receive three mentioned gifts of great value because of their uncommon child who is King of an uncommon Kingdom. He came as a humble child, born to humble people and honored by unwelcomed visitors. The projection of this event cannot be underestimated in what it means that Christ came “at the right time” to manifest to us the love of God (Romans 6:5-8). Incidentally, this proves again that they arrived after Jesus’ birth because Mary offered the sacrifice of a poor woman.

Not only does His parents’ sacrifice in the Temple portray them as poverty stricken, there is nothing shared in Jesus life to show their family was any less burdened by the Roman occupation of Israel.

Herod had placed a Roman eagle above the door of the Temple and the image was minted on the coins that Jews carried for their needs.

Further, the religious insult they brought Israel has been discovered in recent archaeological finds.

1. There were roman depictions of deities and even sexual symbols found (Religions and Society in Roman Palestine, ed., Douglass Edwards, 2004).
2. Also, and most significantly, they unearthed a mikveh (a ritual cleansing pool) in Qeren Naftali, a fortress in Galilee, dating to the Herod of Jesus' birth timeline. Inside, the had been filled with pig bones which scholars say had been still filled with water. To do that must have been intentional to incite the Jewish more of uncleanness and would have had "a terrifying effect on Jewish faith" (Morton, 32).

Rome taxed Palestine heavily. According to one source, "revenue from Judea and Galilee represented an estimated 10 percent of the total Mediterranean world" (Millar, The Roman Near East, 31 bc-AD 337). Rome would have taken 12% of Joseph and Mary's annual income and you would add to that Herod's taxes and the Temple Tax (Exodus 30:13-16; Matthew 17:24-27; 1%).

It was a sharp and bitter reminder of the world they lived in (and the world in which their King will be born) where heavy-handed and violent assaults on their well being were common place under Herod's rule. Even near the time Jesus was born, Sepphoris, just four miles from Nazareth, was razed by Rome and made its citizens their slaves. This was the peace Rome brought as they leveled "the ornament of all Galilee" in contrast to what the Holy One of God would bring.

The German scholar Martin Hengel, now deceased, wrote that Jesus's birth and if he through quote expresses the contrast between the world ruler Augustus and the hidden and lowly birth of the world Redeemer" (Luke 2:1-14). The story is not one that Jews would have invented to announce the coming of the Messiah. The gospels, however, give no indication that Bethlehem was aware of the wondrous birth that was taking place. The only visitors to the stable were shepherds, for they had seen the supernatural realm light up the night sky and had heard a wondrous announcement by angels. They knew God works in ways differently than the kings of their day.

And when the Holy One came – He came to set free the humble from the despair, the domination and the death world leaders of their day (and ours) bring to all.

He was uncommon – in every way imaginable in the King that He was born to be.

**Next Lesson: 4. His Childhood Among the Religious (12/28).
Read ahead: Luke 2:39-52.**

"Compassionate Creator: Becoming Human For Me" by Bruce Morton; Chapter 4
Sold on Amazon and 21st Century Christian or other Christian Bookstores.