

The Christmas Story

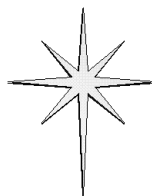
Introduction

This is my version of the Christmas story. I have aimed this at young people (from about 12 years and upward) but it is hoped that this will be informative and enjoyable for those of any age. This is not meant as an exhaustive and exact historical document but to put a different angle on the usual story. That said I have endeavoured to make this story as accurate as possible. Having researched this I realised that much of the significance of the story is found in Jewish custom, law and tradition which is usually lost on us Gentiles and yet I wanted to make this understandable to those not familiar to the Jewish way of life. So as not to spoil the readability of the text I have, as much as possible, tried to keep explanations to footnotes. I hope that most questions will be answered by these footnotes.

If you have not done so recently, read the biblical accounts in Matthew and Luke before, or alongside this account.

If being read to young people, I recommend that you set the scene by explaining that Israel at that time was under Roman occupation and that many Jews were hoping for a redeemer (called Messiah) sent from God to deliver them from this Roman occupation who they would make king for doing so.

This is not intended as a replacement for reading the biblical accounts but I hope that having read this one that you will gain insights into the biblical story.



Version 1.2

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The Christmas story

The birth of John



Long ago, when Herod was king of Judea, the lot fell upon a priest called Zachariah¹ to perform his duty of burning incense in the temple of the Lord. While doing this, the angel of the Lord appeared to him. Zachariah was afraid² but the angel said “Do not be afraid, because your prayers have been heard, and your wife Elizabeth³ will bear a son, and you must call his name John⁴. You shall joy and delight and many shall rejoice over his birth”.

Zachariah said “By what shall I know this, as I and my wife are old”.

The angel replied “I am Gabriel; I stand in the presence of God, I was sent to talk to you and bring you this good news. You shall now be unable to speak until the day when these things take place.”

Outside the temple there were people waiting for Zachariah. As he was taking longer than usual they began to wonder what had happened to him. When Zachariah did eventually come out, they saw that he was unable to speak. Even though he could not speak, he finished off his priestly functions and then returned to his home.

His wife Elizabeth then became pregnant but she stayed in her home for five months⁵.

Six months after Elizabeth became pregnant an angel called Gabriel⁶ visited Mary⁷ who was engaged to Joseph⁸. They both lived in a town called Nazareth in the district called Galilee. The angel said “Be glad highly favoured one, the Lord is with you”. Mary was afraid and wondered why an angel should say these things to her.

The angel continued, “Do not be afraid Mary, because you have found God’s favour. Just listen, you are about to become pregnant, give birth to a son and will name Him Jesus⁹. He will be great and will be called the Son of the most high God and the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His forefather David¹⁰. He will reign throughout eternity over the descendants of Jacob.”

¹ Zachariah means - God remembers.

² Some believed at that time that a visit from an angel meant you were about to die.

³ Elizabeth means - oath of God.

⁴ John means - God is gracious.

⁵ In those days in Israel it was a shameful thing for a married women not to have children.

⁶ Gabriel means - Man of God.

⁷ Mary (Greek) or Miriam (Hebrew) means - their rebellion

⁸ Joseph means God has added.

⁹ Jesus(Greek) means God saves. It is equivalent to the Hebrew name Joshua or Yeshua.

¹⁰ David means - beloved (or loved one).

But Mary, a little confused said “How can this be, since I am unmarried.” “The Holy Spirit shall come on you” the angel replied, “and so the child you bear shall be known as the Son of God. Listen, your relative Elizabeth is now six months pregnant, even though she has been unable to have children until now. This is because with God, nothing is ever impossible.”



Mary said “I am the Lord’s servant, let it come to pass; just as you have said”. The angel left her and Mary got up and hurried to see Elizabeth. As soon as Mary went into Zachariah’s house and greeted Elizabeth, the baby leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

“You are happy and fortunate above all women and so is the fruit of your womb”, Elizabeth said in a loud voice, “How is it that I am so favoured to have the mother of my Lord come to visit me?”

Then Mary praised God for his mercy, strength and judgement in that He lifts up those who are humble but scatters those who are proud.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about 3 months and after that Mary went back to her own home. Elizabeth gave birth to a son. Eight days later¹¹ her relatives wanted to call the baby Zachariah after his father but Elizabeth said “he shall be called John”. The relatives were bewildered saying “none of your relatives have the name John¹² .” So they asked Zachariah what name he would like the baby to have. He asked for something to write on and wrote to their amazement “His name is John.” And then, even more amazingly, Zachariah began to speak - praising God!

News of these events quickly spread to all their neighbours who, in awe at first, began to gossip about what the boy might become. God filled Zachariah with the Holy Spirit he began to prophesy. In that prophecy he said that the boy would be a prophet of the Most High¹³.

The birth of Jesus



Now Joseph had heard that his soon to be wife was pregnant and so he thought about getting a private divorce¹⁴ so as not to publicly shame Mary. He knew Mary’s good character and so was puzzled by this news. While still thinking this over an angel appeared to him in a dream. The angel said “Do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife, because the baby she is about to have is conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you shall call His name Jesus¹⁵ because He will save His people from their sins.” When Joseph woke up, he did just as the angel said, knowing that God had spoken to him.

¹¹ When he was circumcised.

¹² Their custom was to name babies after someone in the family.

¹³ The prophecy in full is given in Luke 1:67-79.

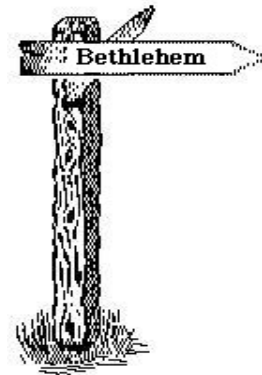
¹⁴ In those days in Israel an engaged couple, although living apart, were given the same legal status of a married couple so, to break off an engagement meant going through divorce proceedings. Remember that adultery was punishable by death so it was important that God spoke to Joseph.

¹⁵ see footnote 9.

A decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole Roman Empire should be registered.

Because both Joseph and Mary were descendants of King David, they had to go to register in Bethlehem¹⁶, even though Mary was about to become a mother and Bethlehem is over 60 miles journey from Nazareth on foot¹⁷.

It was a tiring journey but they took their time and took plenty of rests.



When they arrived, Bethlehem was jam packed because of the Roman decree and so all the places to stay were full. The inn keeper took pity on them, however, and let them stay in his stable¹⁸. It was here that Mary gave birth to her firstborn son; she wrapped Him in clothes¹⁹ and used the manger as a cot.

In that area there were shepherds²⁰ living out in the open, taking turns to watch over their sheep. The angel of the Lord appeared and the brilliant light of God's glory shone around. The shepherds were terrified but the angel said "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for everybody. Because today in Bethlehem is born to you a Saviour - Christ²¹ the Lord. A sign to show you who the baby is will be that you will find a baby, wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."



Suddenly the whole sky was filled with a multitude of angels who praised God saying "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, towards men."

When the angels left them the shepherds said to one another "we must now go to Bethlehem and see this thing which has come to pass and that the Lord has told us."

So they made straight for Bethlehem and after searching, found Joseph, Mary and the baby just as the Angel had said. After seeing these things, the shepherds could not help but tell everybody about these amazing events, but Mary kept quiet and mulled these events over in her heart.

Eight days after His birth Jesus was named²² Jesus by Joseph and Mary just as they

¹⁶ Bethlehem is also known as "the city of David".

¹⁷ They were very poor (see Luke 2:24, Lev 12:8) and so would not have a donkey.

¹⁸ Probably a stable cave near to cave graves from which the swaddling clothes were taken.

¹⁹ These clothes were swaddling clothes used to wrap the dead in preparation for burial.

²⁰ Near Bethlehem was where the Passover lambs were kept. These lambs had to be one year old at Passover and so were "born to die". Perhaps these shepherds kept watch over Passover lambs!

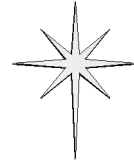
²¹ Christ (Greek) means "anointed one" and is equivalent to the Hebrew word Messiah.

²² at his circumcision

had been instructed by the angel.

Thirty three days later²³ Joseph and Mary make the journey up to Jerusalem to present Jesus to the Lord as he was their firstborn son. While they were in the temple Simeon, who had been told by God that he would not die before he had seen the Christ, took the child in his arms and praised the Lord, declared a divinely inspired prophesy²⁴. An old woman called Anna prophesied²⁵ too.

Wise men²⁶, astrologers from the East²⁷ visited Herod in Jerusalem asking “Where can we find the newborn King of the Jews? We have seen a star²⁸ which signifies His birth and have come to worship Him.” This news bothered Herod. He called together all those who studied the Biblical prophetic writings and asked them where the Christ should be born.



“In Bethlehem” they replied and quoted the prophet’s writings to him. Herod was a cunning man and had an evil plan. He met the Wise men secretly firstly, asking them the exact day they had seen the star and then told them go and find the baby in Bethlehem, but to be sure and report back to him where the baby was so that he could “worship” him too. But worshipping this baby was the last thing on his mind.

The Wise men went to Bethlehem and, guided by the star they had seen originally, they found the boy²⁹, now almost 2 years old, in a house. They were ecstatic to see the star again. The Wise men opened their treasure bags and presented to Jesus their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh³⁰. When they left the house, the Wise men were warned by God not to go back to Herod, so they went home by another road.

²³ After her purification (see Leviticus 12:1-4)

²⁴ See Luke 2:28

²⁵ See Luke 2:36

²⁶ We have no idea exactly how many wise men there were that came to see Jesus.

²⁷ The Wise men are called Magi (astrologers from Babylon) in the Greek.

²⁸ Balaam was a Babylonian astrologer. See his prophecy in Numbers 24:17 which tells of a star

²⁹ Although the text does not explicitly say they stayed in Bethlehem - it is logical that they did.

³⁰ Gold was a gift given to a king, frankincense to a priest and myrrh to a prophet. Myrrh was also used to perfume a body before burying in tomb or cave.

Joseph then had a dream in which an angel told him to take Mary and the baby into Egypt because Herod wanted to destroy the baby. They left immediately and settled in Egypt³¹.

After many days had elapsed, Herod realised that the Wise men had tricked him and he was furious. In a blinding rage he ordered that, as it was two years ago that the star was first seen, all the boys³² in Bethlehem under two years old should be killed. Years later when Herod had died, God told Joseph by means of an angel in a dream to take Mary and Jesus and settle in Nazareth, which is in Galilee. It was here that Jesus grew up and gained wisdom, and favour with God and with men.

The End

³¹ Remember that the gifts they had just been given would have given them the means to live in foreign country. It is unlikely that Egyptians would have given Joseph a job or income.

³² Although the Greek word in Matthew 2:16 can be either boy or girl most commentators think it was only the boys that were killed. In that case it would bring to mind what happened in Egypt at the time Moses was born.