Supplemental Notes:

The Christmas Story

(What Really Happened!)

What really happened in Bethlehem two thousand years ago? Who were the Magi? Why did a virgin birth occur? What does a Christmas tree have to do with it?

Discover the real story behind the traditional nativity account, including the loophole upon which the Messianic hope rests.

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The Christmas Story
What Really Happened?

Each year at Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. After the New Year, we struggle to remember to add a year as we date our checks, which should remind us that the entire Western World reckons its calendar from the birth of the One who changed the world more than any other before or since.

It is disturbing to discover that much of what we have been taught about the Christmas season seems to be more tradition than truth. It isn’t only Santa Claus that is the result of myths and legends of the season.

When Was Jesus Born?

Most serious Bible students realize that Jesus was probably not born on December 25th. The shepherds had their flocks in open field which implies a date prior to October. Furthermore, no competent Roman administrator would require registration involving travel during the season when Judea was generally impassable.6

If Jesus wasn’t born on December 25, just when was he born? Although the Bible doesn’t explicitly identify the birthday of our Lord, many scholars have developed diverse opinions as to the likely birthday of Jesus. (It reminds one of the rabbinical observation: with two Jews, you have three opinions!)

The Year of Jesus’ Birth

There are many scholastic debates offering contrasting views of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. The following exploration reviews but a few.

The year of Jesus’ birth is broadly accepted as 4 B.C., primarily from erroneous conclusions derived from Josephus’ recording of an eclipse, assumed to be on March 13, 4 B.C., “shortly before Herod died.”

There are a number of problems with this in addition to the fact that it was more likely the eclipse occurred on December 29, 1 B.C. Considerable time elapsed between Jesus’ birth and Herod’s death since the family fled to Egypt to escape Herod’s edict and they didn’t return until after Herod’s death.3 Furthermore, Herod died on January 14, 1 B.C.4

Tertullian (born about 160 A.D.) stated that Augustus began to rule 41 years before the birth of Jesus and died 15 years after that event.5 Augustus died on August 19, 14 A.D., placing Jesus’ birth at 2 B.C.6 Tertullian also notes that Jesus was born 28 years after the death of Cleopatra in 30 B.C., which is consistent with a date of 2 B.C. Irenaeus, born about a century after Jesus, also notes that the Lord was born in the 41st year of the reign of Augustus. Since Augustus began his reign in the autumn of 43 B.C., this also appears to substantiate the birth in 2 B.C.4

Eusebius (264-340 A.D.), the “Father of Church History,” ascribes it to the 42nd year of the reign of Augustus and the 28th from the subjection of Egypt on the death of Anthony and Cleopatra.7 The 42nd year of Augustus ran from the autumn of 2 B.C. to the autumn of 1 B.C. The subjugation of Egypt into the Roman Empire occurred in the autumn of 30 B.C. The 28th year extended from the autumn of 3 B.C. to the autumn of 2 B.C. The only date that would meet both of these constraints would be the autumn of 2 B.C.

John the Baptist

Another approach in determining the date of Jesus’ birth is from information about John the Baptist.
the day of the Feast of Trumpets. (See also our briefing package on The Feasts of Israel for more background.)

Then Why December 25th?

The early Christian church did not celebrate Jesus’ birth, and therefore the exact date had not been preserved in festivals.

The first recorded mention of December 25 is in the Calendar of Philocalus (354 A.D.) which assumed Jesus’ birth to be Friday, December 25, 1 A.D.

When the Emperor Constantine eventually declared Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire in the Edict of Toleration in 312 A.D., the persecuted Christians exchanged the rags of hiding for the silks of the court.

The predictable expediency to adopt the inevitable cultural changes caused many of the former pagan rituals to be adapted to their new “Christian” trappings. The date of December 25th, which was officially proclaimed by the church fathers in 440 A.D., which assumed Jesus’ birth to be Friday, December 25, 1 A.D.

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The Date of Jesus’ Birth

Elisabeth hid herself for five months and then the Angel Gabriel announced to Mary both Elisabeth’s condition and that Mary also would bear a son who would be called Jesus. Mary went “with haste” to visit Elisabeth, who was then in the first week of her sixth month, or the fourth week of December, 3 B.C. If Jesus was born 280 days later it would place the date of his birth on September 29, 2 B.C.

If Jesus was born on September 29, 2 B.C., it is interesting to note that it was also the First of Tishri, the day of the Feast of Trumpets. (See also our briefing package on The Feasts of Israel for more background.)

Babylonian Traditions

All forms of occult practices have their origins in the original city of Babylon. Isaiah Chapter 47 clearly brings this out. (See also Hislop in the bibliography.) Most of what we associate with pagan Rome had its origins in ancient Babylon. It has been the adherence to these idolatrous influences that has evoked the intense criticism of Roman Catholicism by Protestant commentators over the many centuries.
Babylon is mentioned in over 300 references in the Bible. It is even alluded to three times in Christ’s own genealogy. Babylon is presently being rebuilt 100 kilometers (62 miles) south of Baghdad.

The Origin of Babylon

The first world dictator was Nimrod, the “Rebel.” Nimrod built the famous Tower of Babel as the centerpiece of his rebellion against God. (“Bav” = gate; “El” = God. Thus, Babel = “gateway to the gods”). This was the beginning of the city of Babylon.

God disrupted the rebellious coalition through the “confusion of tongues” in Genesis 11. This rebellion against God is still with us. The residuals from Babylon, including most of the traditions of idol worship, astrology, and the occult, continue to the present day. The original Biblical significance of the zodiac (or “Mazzeroth”) was corrupted by the Babylonian religious system and continues in all cultures to this day. (See our briefing packages, Signs in the Heavens, and The Mystery of Babylon.)

The Tammuz Legend

Tammuz, the son of Nimrod and his queen, Semiramis, was identified with the Babylonian Sun God and worshipped following the winter solstice, on about December 22-23. As the days became shorter and shorter through the winter, they become the shortest at the winter solstice, about December 22-23. Tammuz was thought to have died during the winter solstice, and was memorialized by burning a log in the fireplace. (The Chaldean word for infant is yule. This is the origin of the “yule log.”)

His “rebirth” was celebrated by replacing the log with a trimmed tree the next morning. Sound familiar? (Jeremiah 10 contains an interesting verse which talks about trimming trees, etc.)

There are numerous other examples: the wassail bowl, the mistletoe (a fertility rite), and others that are documented in such works as Hislop, et al. (See bibliography.)

When Babylon was conquered by subsequent empires, this entire religious system was transplanted, first to Pergamos under the Persians, and then to Rome. As the pagan Rome (Babylonian) religious system was integrated with Christian ceremonial observances, many of our current traditions surrounding Christmas emerged.

Other Holidays

The Babylonian worship of Ishtar, the Golden Egg of Astarte, and the fertility rites of spring give us Easter (“Ishtar,” the mother goddess of Babylon). These get combined with other fertility symbols such as prolific rabbits, etc. (Have you ever wondered where we get rabbits that lay eggs?)

The calendar year-end on October 31, and its associated occultic rituals, gave us our Halloween. Many ancient cultures—Celts, Druids, et al—observed October 31, the Eve of Samhain, as their year-end. This was related to the worship of Baal (Mars) and may have been stimulated by the perturbation of the orbit of the earth associated with the planet Mars. (See our Briefing Package, The Signs in the Heavens.)

It appears that an “ecumenical” integration of all the world’s religions, including the ancient Babylonian occult forms that presently masquerade as the “New Age,” are destined to be the final religious climax. (See our briefing package, The Mystery of Babylon, for more background.)

The Messianic Promise

God’s declaration of war on Satan involved the promise of a kinsman-redeemer of Adam: the Messiah.
It is interesting to note Satan’s repeated attempts to eradicate the Messianic line from Eve onwards throughout history. From Cain and Abel and the Flood of Noah to the slaughter of the infants in Egypt, Satan has attempted to interrupt the royal line, even to the slaughter of the babes in Bethlehem.

The Blood Curse on Jeconiah

The kings of both Israel and Judah went from bad to worse. Ultimately, God pronounced a “blood curse” on Jeconiah and his descendants and, thus, on the royal line. How can the Messiah be of the royal line and yet not be subject to the blood curse?

The Two Genealogies

Mathew: As a Levi, Matthew focuses on the Messiahs of Jesus: he traces the legal line from Abraham (as any Jew would) through David, then Solomon and the royal line, to Joseph, the legal father of Jesus (Mt 1:1-17).

Luke: As a physician, Luke focuses on the humanity of Jesus: he traces the blood line from Adam (the first man) through David, then through Nathan (a different son of David) to Mary, the mother of Jesus (Lk 3:23-38).

Solution: A virgin shall bear a son (Isa 7:14) LXX: parthenos. Why? Deity, yet a kinsman-redeemer of Adam. (See genealogies on the next page.)

“Loophole”: Daughters of Zelophehad: One must note the amendment to the law which permitted inheritance through the daughter if no sons were available and she married within the tribe. Study the following verses: Num 26:33; 27:1-11; 36:2-12; Josh 17:3-6; 1 Chr 7:15.

(John also has a genealogy of the Pre-Existent One: John 1:1-3.)
**Why Bethlehem?**

Why did Samuel, knowing that the royal line was of the tribe of Judah, anoint Saul from the tribe of Benjamin? This, and the link of Bethlehem to David, is found in the Book of Ruth. (See the briefing package, *The Romance of Redemption.* You cannot understand Revelation Chapter 5 without it.18

**A Master Plan**

Genesis Chapter 5: The Genealogy of Noah

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adam</th>
<th>Man</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Kenan</td>
<td>Sorrow;</td>
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<td>Mahalalel</td>
<td>The Blessed God</td>
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<td>Jared</td>
<td>Shall come down</td>
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<td>Enoch</td>
<td>Teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Methuselah</td>
<td>His Death shall bring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lamech</td>
<td>The despairing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noah</td>
<td>Rest, Comfort</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**The Ultimate Issue**

Three things God “can’t do”:
- The Eternal One cannot lie;
- He cannot learn;
- He cannot make you love Him.

Four things He “doesn’t know”:
- A sin He doesn’t hate;
- A sinner He doesn’t love;
- An alternative path to His throne but through His Son;
- A better time to receive His Son than right now.

What is your Christmas gift to Him?

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**Tape 2: The Magi**

Eastern tradition: 12 Magi; (Christmas: Jan 6)  
Western tradition: 3 Magi; (Epiphany: Jan 6)

In the third Century: Magi became “Kings” bearing gifts: Psalms 72:10, 68:29. Sixth century chronicle, Excerpta Latina Garbari, gives the names of the Magi:

- Bithisarea
- Balthasar
- Melchior
- Melchior
- Gathaspa
- Gasper

Bede (673-735): Magi were representatives of the three sons of Noah and their progeny from Asia, Africa, & Europe: Shem, Ham, Japheth.

14th century Armenian tradition:

- Balthasar King of Arabia
- Melchior King of Persia
- Gasper King of India

Relics attributed to them were discovered in the fourth century; transferred from Constantinople to Milan, fifth Century; to Cologne by Frederick Barbarossa in 1162 where they remain enshrined.

The word Magi comes from a Latinized form of *Magoi* (Herodotus, 1:101), which came from an ancient Greek transliteration of the Persian original, meaning “magic” (*Singular, magus*).

However, “Magicians” (a profession, rather than citizenship or cultural link) are presented in Acts as vile men without standing or morals: Simon Magnus in Samaria, Acts 8:9-24; Elymas Magnus at Paphos on the Island of Cyprus, associated with Sergius Paulus the proconsul.19
the essential mediator between God and man by virtue of a blood sacrifice. Each depended upon the wisdom of the priesthood in divination (The Urim and Thummim of the Levite; the barsoms, small bundles of divining rods, of the Magi); each mutually held concepts of clean and unclean forms of life.

The Magi developed into a hereditary priesthood serving several religions; they became the priestly caste during Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanian periods.

**NT Magi (Matthew 2:1-12)**

Political Background: Since the days of Daniel, the fortunes of both the Persian and the Jewish nation had been closely intertwined. Both nations had fallen under Seleucid domination in the wake of Alexander's conquests. Subsequently both had regained their independence: the Jews under Maccabean leadership, and the Persians as the dominating ruling group within the Parthian empire.

It was at this time that the Magi, in their dual priestly and governmental office, composed the upper house of the council of the Megistanes ("magistrates") whose duties included the absolute choice and election of the king of the realm.

It was therefore a group of Persian-Parthian “king makers” who entered Jerusalem in the latter days of the reign of Herod. Herod’s reaction was understandably one of fear when one considers the background of Roman-Parthian rivalry that prevailed during his lifetime.

Pompey, the first Roman conqueror of Jerusalem, in 63 B.C. had attacked the Armenian outpost of Parthia. In 55 B.C. Crassus led Roman legions in sacking Jerusalem and in a subsequent attack on Parthia proper. The Romans were decisively defeated at the battle of Carrhae with the loss of 30,000 troops, in-
maneuvering requisite to choosing his successor. It was conceivable that the Magi might have taken advantage of the king’s lack of popularity to further their own interests with the establishment of a new dynasty which could have been implemented if a sufficiently strong contender could be found.

During this time it was entirely likely that the Messianic prophecies of the OT, culminating in the writings of Daniel, one of their own Magians, was of profound motivating significance. The promise of divinely imposed world dominion at the hands of a Jewish monarch was more than acceptable to them. (Their own Persian and Medo-Persian history was studded with Jewish nobles, ministers, and counselors; and in the great Archaemenid days, some of the kings themselves were apparently of Jewish blood.)

In Jerusalem the sudden appearance of the Magi, probably traveling in force with imaginable oriental pomp and accompanied by adequate calvary escort to insure their safe penetration of Roman territory, certainly alarmed Herod and the populace of Jerusalem.

It would seem as if these Magi were attempting to perpetrate a border incident which could bring swift reprisal from Parthian armies. Their request of Herod, regarding the one “who has been born king of the Jews,” was a calculated insult to him who had contrived and bribed his way into that office.

In the providence of God, the Messianic prophecy of the kingdom having been then fulfilled; the Magi, “being warned in a dream” (a form of communication most acceptable to them), departed to their own country with empty hands.

Within two years, Phraattes, the parricide son of Phraates IV, was duly installed by the Magi as the
new ruler of Parthia. Later, Philo of Alexandria, Cicero, and others record that Magi were attached to senior Roman courts with acknowledged gifts and standing.

**Star of Bethlehem?**

Was it a fulfillment of Balaam’s prophecy in Num 24:17? Neither Num 24:17 nor Isa 60:3 are quoted by Matthew. (Note: Simon Bar Cocheba, “Son of the Star.”) Conjunction theory: Kepler suggested that the star was a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces in 7 B.C. (Wrong date: 2 B.C. 4 B.C. suggested from an erroneous inference from Josephus.) See Signs in the Heavens for a discussion of the Hebrew Mazzeroth and the Zodiac.

**Notes:**

6. No year 0 between B.C. and A.D.
10. Both the Talmud and Josephus confirm this.
12. Numbers 4:3.
15. Genesis 3:15
16. Jeremiah 22:30
17. Numbers 27:1-11; 36:2-12
18. Micah 5:2
19. Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible 3:222

**Bibliography**


Also Encyclopedia Judaica, Encyclopedia Britannica, the Babylonian Talmud, and other various encyclopedias, dictionaries, and other reference materials as noted.
Commentaries on Tape

Chuck Missler’s Expositional Commentaries are now available from Koinonia House. Each volume consists of eight cassette tapes and includes notes, diagrams, and a comprehensive bibliography. Write for a complete list.

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