

And if the bugler doesn't sound a clear sound, how will the soldiers know they are being called to battle?

1st Corinthians 14:8 NLV

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First Love Ministries, Inc.

Prayer Study #162

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS

A review of Paul L. Maier's *In the Fullness of Time*

About that time Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for. So Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David's town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the hostel.

There were shepherds camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger."

At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises: "Glory to God in the heavenly heights. Peace to all men and women on earth who please him."

As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherds talked it over. "Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us." They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherds were impressed. Mary kept these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The shepherds returned and let loose, glorying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told.

Gospel according to Luke, Chapter 2, Verses 1-20 The Message

I. THE PLAYERS

- a. **Caesar Augustus**, 1500 miles away from Israel, made a decree that all people in the Roman Empire must return to their ancestral homelands to be registered. Both Mary and Joseph were distantly related to David and thus had to return to Bethlehem. Augustus, the nephew of Julius Caesar, reigned as Roman's first emperor for 44 years in a period known as the Pax Augusta. Palestine, having been captured by Pompey, a Roman general, sixty years before, was a "client state" controlled by Rome but ruled by a local king, Herod the Great. These census returns were number 8 on Augustus' list of 35 things he wished to be remembered for. One reason Augustus perhaps wanted the census is that the Roman males were not wanting to marry but to sleep around, and thus the birthrates had fallen at a very alarming rate. Augustus wanted to fill his empire with good

Romans, and thus, he made promiscuity a crime, conferred certain political advantages only on the fathers of at least three children, set the minimal age for engagement at ten for girls, penalized bachelors in their right to inheritance and denied bachelors the better seats at the games. At the time of Augustus' death in 14 BC, Jesus was only around 19. Thus, Augustus would never have even heard of his most famous subject.

- b. **Mary**, whom Herbert Lockyer refers to as *The Woman Honored above All Women*, was a peasant girl from the tribe of Judah and the line of David. She became the wife of Joseph, the son of Jacob. Some denominations, primarily Roman Catholics, believed that she birthed only Jesus and never had sexual relations. They say that "the brethren of the Lord" are either children of Joseph by a previous marriage or Christ's cousins since brethren was a term that just implied kinship. Protestants believe that the Bible implies that there were other children, following the Immaculate Conception and born naturally to Mary and Joseph, and they attribute 4 sons to her (James, Joses, Judas, and Simon) and several daughters. From her song of praise for what the Lord's messenger told her, i.e. that she would bear a son who would save His people, we know that Mary was very knowledgeable of Old Testament scripture, and New Testament scripture paints her as a faithful, humble, and godly woman.
- c. **Joseph** was a godly man, the husband of Mary, and the foster-father of Jesus. Not much information is given about Joseph in the Bible. We know he was a carpenter in Nazareth. Almost nothing is told of Jesus' first 30 years at home, and we know nothing of Joseph's death, but we believe there must have been a very strong and deep bond between Jesus and Joseph. In the hard working Jewish class that Joseph was in, a man would not think of marrying until he was at least 25 years old. In contrast Jewish women usually married shortly after puberty, around 15 or 16 years of age. (Some believe Mary was as young as 12.) A clue that Joseph did not live to see Jesus' public ministry is found in Luke 2:35: Simeon turned only to Mary when he prophesied saying, "And a sword will pierce your own soul too" indicating that Mary would suffer the pain of Calvary but Joseph would not be living.
- d. **Shepherds** perhaps represent men that the masses can most identify with in the Christmas story. They were literally men on the night shift. They were probably poor and looked down on by the religious leaders since they were often absent from the synagogue and could not always fulfill the law. These men were the first witnesses of the Christian Messiah.
- e. **Magi** are the wise men. Our Christmas song, "We Three Kings of Orient Are" probably contains at least 3 errors. First, there were probably more than 3 wise men, they were no "kings", and they most probably were not from the Orient or Far East. Tradition says that there were as many as 12. It also gives the names of three-Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar: their ages-20, 40, and 60; and their skin color-black, yellow and white. Also, tradition says that Thomas, the apostle to India, found and baptized them into the Christian faith and ordained them as priests. Later they died as

martyrs, and their bones now rest in Cologne, Germany. These traditions did not come until the 6th Century, so we cannot put any authenticity to them. Most scholars now believe they were Persians (Iranians) who were extremely well-educated and who were from a pagan, priestly caste. The three gifts are symbolic: Gold refers to Jesus' kingship; Frankincense, which is burned as incense, represents His priesthood; and Myrrh represents His anointing and His giving of His life.

- f. **Herod**, when the Magi did not return to report to him, went into a rage. He ordered all the male babies, two years old and younger, in nearby Bethlehem slaughtered. Since Bethlehem was a village of about 2000, possibly about 20 babies would have been ruthlessly killed. This was in character for Herod whose last years were filled with illness and court intrigue, causing him to possibly be deranged and an egotistical murderer. He had 10 wives. He had his favorite wife killed so that no one else could ever have her, as well as her grandfather and mother, his brother-in-law, three of his sons, and numerous subjects. During a swimming party in Jericho, he drowned the high priest, who also was a brother-in-law. Much of Herod's suspicions were fueled by his sister Salome who was acting out of jealousy of Herod's wives. In his early years as ruler, however, Herod was exceptional and he upgraded and beautified Israel in many ways, including building the new seaport Caesarea, looked after his people during crises, even selling his silverware to buy food for the people, and served as a protector of Jewish overseas in the Dispersion. At home, he will still hated because he was only a half Jew, taxed the people heavily, and was too cozy with the Romans. Herod feared that no one would mourn his death, and he was sick with arteriosclerosis. He ordered from his deathbed that leaders from all parts of Judea were to be locked inside the hippodrome of Jericho. When he died, archers were to massacre these men, so that there would be universal mourning in Israel.
- g. **Anna** of the tribe of Asher was a widow from a very young age. She was married for only 7 years, had no children, and remained a widow for 84 years. This means that she must have been over 100 years old when she finally saw the Christ that she had waited for all her life. Anna was a prophetess and is the only person of note from the tribe of Asher mentioned in the Bible. She prayed and fasted and waited in the temple day and night for the coming of the Messiah. When she finally saw him and heard Simeon's praise for prophecy fulfilled, she went out to proclaim the good news that Messiah had come to others.
- h. **Simeon**, like Anna, was waiting for the coming of the Messiah. Simeon means *one who hears and obeys*, and indeed he knew the voice speaking through the ancient prophets and obeyed the light he saw. When he saw Jesus, he took the babe in his arms and blessed God.

II. THE PLACE

- a. **Palestine** is the shape and size of an upside down Vermont, and is in the same north latitude as the state of Georgia. The summers there are typically dry with the spring rains for the planting and the latter rains for

the harvest. Palestine is the most bitterly contested spot on the planet and has seen the most bloodshed. It is a land that joins Asia and Africa and is the land that birthed the Jewish and the Christian religion and is called the Holy Land by Muslims too. It is a geographer's paradise since it has almost all geographic conditions on earth with the Dead Sea being the lowest place in the world- (There are sea depths, however, lower.)

- b. **Bethlehem** is the City of David. It is a small town near Jerusalem. The journey from Nazareth would have been 80 or 90 miles. It was the setting for the story of Ruth, the birthplace of David, the place where David was anointed by Samuel as king, and the birthplace for the Messiah. Today Bethlehem has around 57,000 inhabitants. It is the home of the Church of the Nativity, which has a partially walled-up doorway, compelling visitors to bend down upon entering the sanctuary. This church is the oldest church in continual use in all of Christendom and dates back to the time of Constantine (326 AD). Services are usually taking place and are led by Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Greek Orthodox, or Roman Catholic priests. On Christmas Eve the city is transformed with visitors all over the world. Maier describes it this way: *Each Christmas, Bethlehem decks itself in colored lights, glass lanterns, glittering stars, and illuminated crosses, while it swells in size because of the influx of Christian pilgrims. On Christmas Eve, a Protestant carol service is conducted at twilight on a hillside at the Shepherds' Fields and again at 9 PM in the outer court of the Church of the Nativity. Meanwhile, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem leads a colorful Mass in the Church of the Nativity, a celebration transmitted by closed-circuit television to a large screen in Manger Square for the benefit of the thousands who cannot crowd inside the basilica. At the same time, the Grotto has been filled with humanity for most of Christmas Eve, as groups from all over the world read the Christmas story in a babble of foreign tongues. Exactly at midnight, a silver bell tinkles in the Grotto, heralding Christ's birthday, and many of the pilgrims are overcome as they spirit themselves back two thousand years and try to find a place between the shepherds at the manger side. A few move forward to try to press their lips to the metallic star marker. The church bells peal forth throughout the city, since the people of Bethlehem are predominately Christian.*
- c. **Jerusalem** was six miles from Bethlehem and would have probably taken the Holy Family about 2 hours. When Jesus, (who had already been circumcised on the eighth day and formally given His name, which was Yeshua or Joshua, which means *God saves*,) was 40 days old, his mother had to go to the temple for purification rites. At the same time Jesus, (His Greek name which we in western culture prefer) was formally consecrated and dedicated and given back to God. It was at this time that Anna and Simeon recognized Jesus in the temple as the Christ.
- d. **Egypt**-Warned in a dream from the Lord, Joseph packed his family up in the night and started on the trip to Egypt. This journey, assuming that the couple averaged 20 miles a day, would take ten days. The stay in Egypt

was not long because Herod died soon after they left. The Holy Family returned to Israel but, finding out that Archelaus, Herod's son, ruled Judea and that he had just massacred 3000 Jews that had rebelled against him, they went to Galilee where a milder son of Herod, Antipas, was ruling.

- e. **Nazareth** was a very poor ancient town, which is still in existence today. There is no mention of Nazareth in the Old Testament or the Talmud. In the New Testament, Nathaniel when Philip tells him that they have found the Messiah who was from Nazareth, replies, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" To which Philip gives his famous reply, "Come and see!" (John 1:46) Today this village has 57,000 people living in it.

III. THE WEDDING

- a. **The Engagement:** There was no dating or courtship in ancient times. Parents of the bride and groom arranged marriages, but the parents did this based on the comments made by the couple about each other so love was a factor in most of these alliances. Joseph would ask his parents if he could marry Mary. The parents would then go to Mary's parents and work out a contract. Marriages were not a contract between the couple but marriage was considered a covenant between two families. After the parents worked everything out, they would bring Mary and Joseph together and utter a formal benediction over the couple, as they tasted a cup of wine together. This engagement could not be broken except by divorce, and if either party was unfaithful to the other, it would be considered adultery and punishable by death. Had Joseph died, Mary would have been his legal widow. There is evidence that engaged couples could be intimate with each other, but more conservative families, such as Joseph's, would have considered this inappropriate, and indeed we know from scripture that Joseph did not have relations with Mary until after Jesus was born. (Matthew 1:24)
- b. **The Annunciation:** This is the date the church celebrates, (based on nine months before birth, i.e. March 25th-exactly nine months before December 25th), the announcement of the angel Gabriel to Mary that she was to bear a son.
- c. **The Pregnancy:** Joseph, knowing that he was not the father, was shocked that pure and innocent Mary was pregnant. He had three choices: 1. Marry her quickly and hope the gossips in Nazareth would not talk about a six month baby; 2. Publically divorce Mary as an adulteress, which would lead to Mary being publically shamed and killed; 3. Have the marriage contract set aside quietly while Mary left Nazareth to move far away. Joseph was too godly to do #1 and too compassionate to do #2 so he opted for #3. Thank-goodness the angel intervened. (Matthew 1:20)
- d. **The Marriage:** The wedding ceremony was similar to modern ceremonies although there was a wedding feast that followed, and these sometimes lasted for days. In Joseph and Mary's case, we assume the wedding was very modest & quick since they were poor.

IV. THE TIME

- a. **The Year** –The wrong date for the birth of Jesus was due to a mathematical error by a sixth century Roman monk-mathematician. He wanted to reform the calendar by making it pivot about the birth of Christ. He dated the birth of Jesus 753 from the founding of Rome, when, in fact, Herod died in 749 from the founding of Rome, and Herod was very much alive during the birth of Jesus. Thus the calendar we use, based on the birth of Christ, is four or five years off. So now it is later than you think. We are really living in 2013 to 2014.
- b. **The Day**-The early church started observing Christmas in the 300s AD. The church in the East celebrated on January 6th. The church in the West celebrated on December 25th. The church in the West most likely put the celebration on December 25th as a substitute for the Roman Saturnalia festival. The Romans celebrated the *Sol Invictus*, the Unconquerable Sun, because they incorrectly thought that the winter solstice was December 25th, not December 21st as it correctly is. The Christians replaced these pagan festivals with a celebration honoring the “Sun of Righteousness.”

V. **THE MANGER**-In painting the innkeeper as a Judas Iscariot, we might have misjudged him. Bethlehem was most probably very crowded, and Mary and Joseph must have arrived late. Perhaps the innkeeper sympathetically allowed the couple to stay in the only available refuge, a cave or grotto, behind the inn. It seems that no one, even Joseph, for husbands were not to play the role of midwives, assisted Mary in the delivery, but the women of Palestine prided themselves on self-delivery. This manger scene is the most familiar scene in all of art history. And the news of a baby being born in Bethlehem was probably known all over the small town for the shepherds and Magi had no trouble locating the family. By the time the Magi arrived several days later, the family seems to have been living in a house.

VI. **THE STAR**-Some say the Star that the Magi followed was a myth or a literary device to highlight the importance of the Nativity story. Others believe that the Star was miraculously placed there by God to guide the Magi, and thus is beyond natural explanation. Still others try to connect the record to a historical event. Was this a possible planetary conjunction, a comet, a nova or something else? A planetary conjunction takes place every 850 years when Jupiter and Saturn, and later Mars line up and stay in alignment for several months, making a spectacular light. One of these did take place in 7 BC. Comets were thought by the ancient world to signify important changes in state. Comet #52 did appear for 70 days in March and April 5 BC near the constellation Capricorn and would have been highly visible in both the Far and Near East. A nova is a star that suddenly has a tremendous brilliance due to internal explosions. In the sky it appears as a comet without a tail. There was one of these, incorrectly named Comet 53, that appeared and was visible all over the East in March and April of 4 BC.