

# **THE 'REAL' CHRISTMAS**

## **STUDY 2**

### **CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND**

#### **Introduction**

To understand the purpose and meaning of the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke it is, as it is for all biblical texts, important to understand the context in which the stories are written. While it is true that human nature probably hasn't changed much over the two millennia since the birth of Jesus, the difference between his *world* and our world is massive. If we don't know what the people of Jesus day were concerned about, the nature of their lifestyle, the political situation in which they lived, it is practically impossible to understand the reasons why the Gospel writers wrote what they did.

So in this study we will spend the time considering the physical, political and religious background in which the birth narratives were written to see how they influence the authors of Matthew and Luke.

**YOU WILL NEED AN OPEN MIND—YOU WILL NEED TO BE WILLING TO THINK FOR YOURSELF—AND YOU WILL NEED TO BE WILLING TO OFFER YOUR THOUGHTS AND BELIEFS TO THE WIDER GROUP..... *So let's begin!!***

#### **Think time 1**

What are some of the obvious differences between the world in which we live and the world that Jesus was born into?

How does the environment in which we live affect the lives that we lead?

Would it be true to say that we are all the product of outside influences rather than an inbuilt 'genetic program'?

### **The physical context.**

It would take much too long to examine the complete social and physical environment into which Jesus was born. So we will use an example of the physical context directly mentioned in the texts. The way people lived in Jesus time in Palestine as we have discovered from archaeology and ancient texts leaves doubt on the generally accepted place where Jesus was born.

#### **The birthplace.**

In Matthew's narrative, the only description of the environment in which Jesus birth took place is in the 11th. Verse of the second chapter. -

*(11)when the wise men saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. (11)on entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.*

Matthew is not concerned in any way about the place in which Jesus is born, he is rather intent on describing the fallout from the wise men's confrontation with Herod, and the richness of their gifts to the Christ child.

Luke on the other hand wants the context in which Jesus is being born to be understood .

*(2:7) and she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger. Because there was no place for him in the inn*

In verses 12 and 16 Luke repeats the information that the baby is in a manger—

A manger is a trough in which food for animals was placed during the winter when they were kept inside out of the inclement weather - Luke clearly wants to make this point strongly!

Matthew simply notes that the holy family are in a *house*, not an inn, and makes no mention of the state in which the birth takes place. Luke appears to want to communicate the simplicity of the birth, Matthew that it took place at home, among family.



## Talk time 1

Looking at Luke's narrative what are the parts of the well known story about the place of Jesus' birth to be found there, and what parts are not?

Remembering what I said last time about the fact that smaller towns and villages had very few if any places where travellers could pay for lodgings how does that fit with the well known story?

Does it disturb you that what we all 'know' about place where Jesus was born does not fit with the reality of Luke's story.

### The Inn

Christmas nativity scenes we are familiar with depict the holy family huddling around a wooden 'manger' surrounded by various farm animals in a wooden stable—or occasionally a cave.

We have this image as the result of the tradition that Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem (Joseph's family home) and cannot find lodgings at any of the inns, until a kind innkeeper offers them the use of his stable, where the baby Jesus is born and placed in an empty animal food trough.

The word used in Luke, translated into English generally as INN, is the Greek word καταλυμα (cataluma) which is also *upper room*.

Bethlehem was likely to have been small town of around 1000 people, built on a hill and perhaps surrounded by a defensive wall. There is unlikely to have been an inn as we understand it—most people, particularly those whose background was from the town, would have stayed with relatives—and this according to modern scholars is the most likely scenario for the birth.

Families lived in houses built on three levels—a basement or 'cave' level, where the animals were looked after—the living level where the families lived—and the rooftop where they often lived and slept in the hot summer months.



If Joseph arrived at a relative's house on the eve of an important holiday, and there were others staying, there well might not have been any space in the 'upper room' (*cataluma*) and so Mary and Joseph would have had to make do with the 'cave' where the animals were sheltering from the harshness of the outside weather.

This reading of the narrative actually fits better with the information we have in Luke's gospel and with the reality of the physical context in which the events would have taken place.

The two pictures below show how this house arrangement works. The picture on the left is a ruined ancient house, in which we can see the two 'cave' like structures in which the animals would have huddled (the manger in the room is shown on the previous page) and a flight of stairs leads up to the *cataluma*. The picture on the right shows the same arrangement looking from the upper room in a contemporary house in a small Palestinian village where little has changed over 2000 years. You can see the family cooking and other implements on the left of the wall, and some goats eating from their manger in the lower room.

Because the translators of the Greek text were unaware of the nature of Judean life at the time of Jesus it is more than possible that they assumed travellers would seek an inn to stay, and so they used *cataluma* as inn rather than upper room!



Ruins of traditional house similar to that in Which Jesus is likely to have been born



Contemporary house in Palestine with the family in the upper room and the animals below.

## Talk time 2

How do we react to this more modern understanding of the physical situation in which the birth of Jesus took place?

How would an acceptance of this image of the birth change or influence how we view the impact of the story today?

**Let's look now at the political world in which the birth took place and how that affects the narrative and the gospel writers reason for writing.**

## A world of unrest

### Think time 2

Is the use and abuse of power an important factor in human society?

How much does the politics of our time affect our daily lives?

What differences do you think there are in how people were governed in Jesus day from our society?

The area we know as the Holy Land is today primarily enclosed in the nations of Israel, Southern Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and the Palestinian Territories. The events relating to the birth narratives are within Israel, but Bethlehem is part of the Palestinian Territories under constant military control by the Israeli army which conducts strict border searches before allowing entry of pilgrims into the modern town. Bethlehem is less than 30kilometres from Jerusalem and is seen as an important strategic site in the defence of Israel from Arab invasion.

The map on this page shows the political structure of the area in the early first century CE. We can see quite clearly that just as the region is fractured today, so too in that period. Nazareth is part of Galilee which, on the death of Herod the Great became the kingdom of Herod Antipas, while the areas of Samaria, Idumea and Judea (where Bethlehem was situated) were ruled by Archelaus.

These rulers were 'client kings' to the Roman Emperor. Rome was the real power in the middle east as they were over the whole of the Mediterranean. When the Romans conquered an area they would often allow the ruling family, or another local family, to retain their position as leader of the people. They would be responsible for the day to day running of a place like Judea and be the first port of call for matters of justice or other issues.

However, the real power would lie with the senior Roman official. This might be a Governor or a Roman General. Their power was usually backed up by one or more of the mighty legions of the Roman army.

At the time of Jesus birth Herod the Great was the main ruler of the area (shown by the broken lines on the map) and he was given considerable freedom by the Romans because of his long support and friendship with the imperial family. Herod's family however were not from the line of David—in fact they were of Greek extraction and their connection with Judaism was short and remarkably tenuous

## Talk time 3

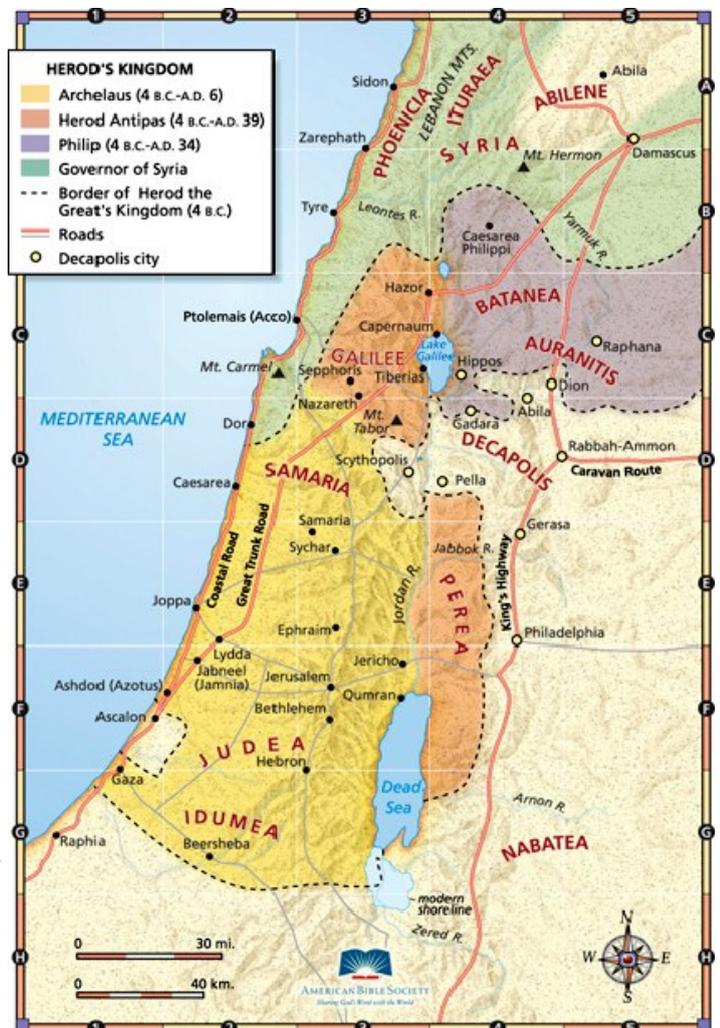
Rome and her Emperor Augustus were the real power in ancient Palestine, Herod acting on their behalf and with their support. How might local Jews have felt about the political situation in which they lived—and how might it be different by the time that matthew and Luke write their stories?

When Matthew and Luke author their gospels towards the end of the century, the situation in Palestine was significantly different. The Jews had revolted against Rome in 69CE and been overwhelmingly defeated. The Jerusalem Temple had been destroyed, the Herodians had been removed from power, a strong Roman Governor put in place and a permanent legion stationed in the area to keep the area pacified. The people were even more 'enslaved' than they had been at the time when Jesus was born.

Under political and military control of Rome as Matthew and Luke write, what hope and desire might the birth narratives seek to connect with in the minds of those who read or heard their stories.

Why might Herod the Great be portrayed in such a negative fashion, but the Romans hardly mentioned?

**We close the study by examining the final important context for the birth narratives, and it is, for the Jews of the period the most important—the hope of the imminent ESCHATON.**



## **The Eschaton**

The eschaton is the earth's final kingdom, the kingdom of God. Jews of the 1st. Century CE were living in the hope that this would take place in their lifetimes and they believed that the 'signs of the times' indicated that this would be the case.

### **Think time 3**

*What is your understanding of the end times?  
What is that understanding based on?  
Is it something you expect to happen soon?  
Does it have any real impact on the way you live your life?*

To the Jews of Palestine in the time of Jesus and when Matthew and Luke were writing the expectation of the eschaton was a real and imminent thing. Today we look at this subject through two thousand years of Christianity and in the light of Christian writings like the Book of Revelation which have a uniquely Christian perspective. The eschaton the Jews were waiting for was not about the destruction of the earth and the end of the world to be replaced by a heavenly kingdom, but rather the end of evil, justice, violence and imperialism (particularly Roman!). The Kingdom would be a place of truth and justice, peace and plenty where all were equal in the sight of God.



### **Daniel's prophecies**

The major influence on Jewish eschatological expectations was the book of Daniel written approximately 150 years before Jesus when the Jews were part of the empire established by Alexander the Great. At this time the Ruler was Antiochus IV. Some Jews had revolted against his rule (*see Macabees*), but more religious Jews believed that the need was to seek a better relationship with God

Daniel ch.7 begins with his dream vision in which there is a sequence of 4 great empires—Babylonia, Medea, Persia and Macedonia. These empires are seen as mythical animals—Babylon—a lion with eagle wings, Medea—like a giant bear, Persia—like a leopard, and Macedonia the most fearsome of all and almost beyond description.

Daniel then describes the fifth and final empire, the eschatological kingdom of God. This is the Kingdom of the “Son of

Man”, who will establish the just and peaceful conditions upon which the rest of time will be based.

### **Talk time 4**

*Roman imperial power seeks to rule from afar with sword and shield—enslaving and subjugating all those who resist and oppose her. Does this fit with the Daniel image of the four previous kingdoms of the earth?*

*How might religious (and political) Jews at the time of Jesus birth and the period when Matthew and Luke write cling to the image that Daniel offered of a “Kingdom of God” under the rule of the “Son of Man” as a hoped for future?*

*Do the birth narratives respond to this hope in any way that you can observe?*

Far back beyond the visions of Daniel are the announcements of OT prophets like Isaiah. These trumpet the expectation of a Messiah who will come to bring peace and justice to the earth.

So with the not too distant visions of Daniels “son of man” and the OT prophecies bringing the expectation of a Messiah—allied with the ongoing subjugation of Jewish Palestine and the practice of the Jewish faith—clearly the people of Matthew and Luke’s time were desperate for the message of a Messianic figure along the lines of Daniel’s Son of Man, a special God blessed (conceived?) figure who would bring the long awaited eschaton, the fifth kingdom to fruition.

## **conclusion**

Matthew and Luke are undoubtedly writing their birth narratives aware of the physical, political and religious background in which their writings will be received. Those who heard their stories also knew what they were referring to. The problem that we have had is that we have been separated from this context by a gap of 2000 years and it has only been the work of scholars and scientists that has allowed us to begin to bridge the gap.

By making this leap forward we can again start to understand what the birth narratives were intended to communicate to those who heard them, and therefore begin to re-evaluate them for our time and our context.