

## TOPIC XXIII

### QUESTIONS, MYTHS AND TRADITIONS REGARDING OUR CELEBRATION OF CHRISTMAS.

#### **I. The Christmas tree. Are we violating a Biblical commandment by erecting a Christmas tree?**

Some say “Yes” based on Jeremiah 10:2-5 and Isaiah 40:19-20. Here they are:

Jeremiah 10:2-5, 2: “Thus says the LORD, "Do not learn the way of the nations, And do not be terrified by the signs of the heavens Although the nations are terrified by them; 3: For the customs of the peoples are delusion; Because it is wood cut from the forest, The work of the hands of a craftsman with a cutting tool. 4: They decorate *it* with silver and with gold; They fasten it with nails and with hammers So that it will not totter. 5: Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field are they, And they cannot speak; They must be carried, Because they cannot walk! Do not fear them, For they can do no harm, Nor can they do any good."

Isaiah 40: 19-20, 19: “*As for* the idol, a craftsman casts it, A goldsmith plates it with gold, And a silversmith *fashions* chains of silver. 20: He who is too impoverished for *such* an offering Selects a tree that does not rot; He seeks out for himself a skillful craftsman To prepare an idol that will not totter.”

This one is actually easy. First, Jeremiah lived 600 years before Christ was born. Second, it wasn't the tree that was decorated and worshipped; it was idols carved from a tree and decorated that were worshipped. And it wasn't at any particular time of year. Third, we don't worship the decorated tree. Maybe the packages under it, but not the tree. Fourth, Christmas tree involvement in the Christian church did not begin until about 500 years ago in Germany.

There are many traditions that surround this practice and history some having pagan origins some Christian. Among some pagan origins is because the fir tree flourished in winter, it became a symbol of life among ancient Romans and other cultures affected by Rome in ancient times. So some small trees were actually planted into boxes and brought into the house to give the residents a sense of hope for the future year. Other took some of its branches were brought into the home and decorated them for the same reason. This was done appropriately at the winter

solstice when we have the shortest day and longest night of the year. This does occur around our Christmas time in December.

As early as 200 A.D. there was opposition to Christians doing this because it was a pagan practice.

"By the early Middle Ages, the legend had grown that when Christ was born in the dead of winter, every tree throughout the world miraculously shook off its ice and snow and produced new shoots of green. At the same time, Christian missionaries preaching to Germanic and Slavic peoples were taking a more lenient approach to cultural practices—such as evergreen trees. These missionaries believed that the Incarnation proclaimed Christ's lordship over those natural symbols that had previously been used for the worship of pagan gods. Not only individual human beings, but cultures, symbols, and traditions could be converted.

Of course, this did not mean that the worship of pagan gods themselves was tolerated. According to one legend, the eighth-century missionary Boniface, after cutting down an oak tree sacred to the pagan god Thor (and used for human sacrifice), pointed to a nearby fir tree instead as a symbol of the love and mercy of God."<sup>1</sup>

Martin Luther is one name that comes up when the origin of the modern Christmas tree tradition is researched. The tradition (or legend) revolves around Luther, who, walking toward his home one winter evening, composing a sermon, he was awed by the brilliance of stars twinkling amidst evergreens. To recapture the scene for his family, he erected a tree in the main room and wired its branches with lighted candles. There is really no historical record of this however, though medieval Germany seems to be where the Christmas tree tradition began.

"The most likely theory is that Christmas trees started with medieval plays. Dramas depicting biblical themes began as part of the church's worship, but by the late Middle Ages, they had become rowdy, imaginative performances dominated by laypeople and taking place in the open air. The plays celebrating the Nativity were linked to the story of creation—in part because Christmas Eve was also considered the feast day of Adam and Eve. Thus, as part of the play for that day, the Garden of Eden was symbolized by a "paradise tree" hung with fruit. These plays were banned in many places in the 16th century, and people perhaps began to

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<sup>1</sup> "Christianity Today" - online, "Why Do We Have Christmas Trees?"

set up "paradise trees" in their homes to compensate for the public celebration they could no longer enjoy. The earliest Christmas trees (or evergreen branches) used in homes were referred to as "paradises." They were often hung with round pastry wafers symbolizing the Eucharist, which developed into the cookie ornaments decorating German Christmas trees today."

Most of our Christmas traditions are not Biblical at all including the celebration of the birth of Christ itself. There is much worldliness in all of it, but there is no real prohibition to celebrating Christmas in the way we do, just as there is in our celebrating of birthdays, anniversaries, Valentine's Day, Thanksgiving, or any other day.

## **II. What time of year was Jesus actually born?**

Can this even be actually known? Well, we have an option or two based on biblical information, not just tradition. It is often taught that the birth of Christ was to replace the Saturnalia in ancient pagan Roman culture. The Saturnalia was the celebration of the god Saturn. There is quite likely some validity to this.

From Wikipedia: "In [Roman mythology](#), Saturn was an agricultural deity who was said to have reigned over the world in the [Golden Age](#), when humans enjoyed the spontaneous bounty of the earth without labor in a state of [innocence](#). The revelries of Saturnalia were supposed to reflect the conditions of the lost mythical age, not all of them desirable. Although probably the best-known Roman holiday, Saturnalia as a whole is not described from beginning to end in any single ancient source. Modern understanding of the festival is pieced together from several accounts dealing with various aspects. The Saturnalia was the dramatic setting of the multivolume work of that name by [Macrobius](#), a Latin writer from the early 4th century who is the major source for information about the holiday. In one of the interpretations in Macrobius's work, Saturnalia is a festival of light leading to the [winter solstice](#), with the abundant presence of candles symbolizing the quest for knowledge and truth. The renewal of light and the coming of the [new year](#) was celebrated in the later [Roman Empire](#) at the *[Dies Natalis Solis Invicti](#)*, the "Birthday of the Unconquerable Sun", on 23 December."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia online.

Similarly, the Jewish festival of Hanukkah could also be pointed to as resulting from a substitute for the Saturnalia. Highly unlikely, and does cast some question into this assumption about the date of Christmas.

The popularity of Saturnalia continued into the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, and as the Roman Empire came under Christian rule, many of its customs were recast into or at least influenced the seasonal celebrations surrounding Christmas and the New Year."

However, the Saturnalia involved many practices that never came into the Christmas tradition.

To determine the actual time of Jesus' birth is not a simple task. We begin with Luke 1:5-9,

5: "In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6: They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. 7: But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years. 8: Now it happened *that* while he was performing his priestly service before God in the *appointed* order of his division, 9: according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense."

Now, we know from Luke 1:26 that John had been conceived six months before Jesus. "Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth..."

From this then, we know that Jesus was born about fifteen months after Zacharias' service during his priestly assignment in the course of Abijah. So, all we have to do is determine when the daily service of Abijah took place, add fifteen months and, voila, we have an estimate of the time of Jesus' birth. Let's see if this works.

Well, there's the rub. From I Chronicles 24 we have the prescribed courses for the priestly service.

7: Now the first lot came out for Jehoiarib, the second for Jedaiah, 8: the third for Harim, the fourth for Seorim, 9: the fifth for Malchijah, the sixth for Mijamin,

10: the seventh for Hakkoz, the eighth for Abijah, 11: the ninth for Jeshua, the tenth for Shecaniah, 12: the eleventh for Eliashib, the twelfth for Jakim, 13: the thirteenth for Huppah, the fourteenth for Jeshebeab, 14: the fifteenth for Bilgah, the sixteenth for Immer, 15: the seventeenth for Hezir, the eighteenth for Happizez, 16: the nineteenth for Pethahiah, the twentieth for Jehezkel, 17: the twenty-first for Jachin, the twenty-second for Gamul, 18: the twenty-third for Delaiah, the twenty-fourth for Maaziah. 19: "These were their offices for their ministry when *they* came in to the house of the LORD according to the ordinance *given* to them through Aaron their father, just as the LORD God of Israel had commanded him."

So, twenty- four divisions of daily service, each for one week were established. This meant that each priest would serve twice in the year, making 48 weeks, and then there was a selection of those to serve in the remaining three-four weeks. Zacharias was serving one of two of his regular weeks.

The first course of Jehoiarib was served during the first week of the Jewish month of Nisan, the ecclesiastical new year. This corresponds to April-May in our calendar. However, there are two new-year recognitions for the Jews, the one mentioned and the official or civil new year we know as Rosh Hashanah, literally translated "head of the year." This falls roughly between mid-September and mid October in our calendar depending on the year. In 2015 for example, it fell on September 13th, and in 2016, October 2nd.

Most agree that the priestly service would be based on the ecclesiastical year. However, the first of Nisan fell on March 21st in 2015 and April 9th 2016. In 2017 it will fall on March 28th...and so on. So we could be nearly a month off even before we start.

The first course of Abijah then would begin the eighth week after the first of Nisan. This year (2016) would be May 28th. Add fifteen months and we have the end of August to the first of September for this year. But in 2015, we would have come to mid-June to early July.

If we use the civil year, in 2015 Rosh Hashanah fell on September 14th. Add eight weeks and then fifteen months and we have mid-February. In 2016, it fell on October 3rd. Add eight weeks and fifteen months, giving us around February once again.

BUT! What if Zacharias was in his second course for the year? This would fall about six months after his first course or about mid-November to early December. Add fifteen months and we have mid-to late February once again, or even early March.

The Greek and Russian Orthodox celebrate Christmas on January 7th. Here's why;

“The majority of the Orthodox churches worldwide use the Julian calendar, created under the reign of Julius Caesar in 45 BC, and have not adopted the Gregorian calendar, proposed by Latin Pope Gregory of Rome in 1582.”

There are 13 days in difference between the two calendars, the Gregorian calendar being the one long adopted by Western nations.

“December 25 on the Julian calendar actually falls on January 7 on the Gregorian calendar. So strictly speaking, Christmas is still kept on December 25, which just happens to fall 13 days later on the Julian calendar.”

For Orthodox Christians who have adopted the Gregorian calendar, Christmas falls on Dec. 25 as it does for others, and Jan. 6 marks the Epiphany, a Christian holiday that celebrates the revelation of God the son as a human being in Jesus. For those remaining on the Julian calendar, the Epiphany is celebrated on Jan. 19.”<sup>3</sup>

So, does that have any significance for us? Not really because we are looking at Biblical Jewish system while the Orthodox churches simply go from a western calendar adjustment already established by the Roman Catholic Church.

[In that regard, we can confidently say that our year 2016 supposedly based on the year of Christ's birth is off by at least three years and some think seven. Again the problem is the changes in the calendars by the Roman church officials. Christ was born years earlier than we now assume by our date.]

There are a few scholars who have worked on this problem and its complexity. Many come to the conclusion the the birth of Christ actually took place sometime in September. Here are the links I suggest if you wish to do more research:

- <http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Christmas/christmas.html>
- <http://www.askelm.com/star/star006.htm> (Less recommended but having some interesting thoughts.)

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<sup>3</sup> "The Christian Post" online.

### **III. Was there an inn at Bethlehem? And, the wise men and their visit. Were there just three and were their names Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar?**

The English word "inn" is found in two places in the New Testament; Luke 2:7 that says, "And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." And in the parable of the good Samaritan also found in Luke, 10:33-34, "But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on *them*; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him."

The words Luke used in the Greek are different. In 2:7, the Greek word is "kataluma" meaning "according to", "down", or "against" - "loose" or "release". It is used in the sense here and in Mark 14: 13-14<sup>4</sup> and Luke 22:11<sup>5</sup> as being released or loosed from something in order to rest. In this case, a journey.

The word is translated "guest room" in both Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11. The reason it is translated "inn" in our English Bibles is due to tradition. The ancient "inns" were actually large facilities called "caravansaries." Much like a modern motel, they were accommodations for travelers that were built surrounding a courtyard (See picture below). These "inns" were distributed along major trade routes to accommodate caravans and served as a place for travelers to rest, and take shelter. Animals were also cared for in stables beneath the buildings.

"Caravanserais supported the flow of commerce, information, and people across the network of [trade routes](#) covering Asia, North Africa, and [southeastern Europe](#), especially along the [Silk Road](#)."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mark 14:13-14, 13: 'And He \*sent two of His disciples and \*said to them, "Go into the city, and a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him; 14: and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher says, "Where is My guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?'"

<sup>5</sup> Luke 22:11 "And you shall say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher says to you, "Where is the guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?'"

<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia on line.



Caravanserai of [Qalaat al-Madiq](#), in northern Syria<sup>7</sup>

But Luke did not use this word in 2:7, but "guest room" would be more adequate. We will get back to this in a moment.

On the other hand, in Luke 10:33-34, the Greek word for "inn" (pan-dox-ion) is used and it makes sense in the context and is the Greek for "caravansary."

Bethlehem was not on a major trade route, nor is it likely Joseph and Mary could have afforded to stay in one if it was, though we can't be sure. No, they sought out a guest room somewhere in Bethlehem most likely in the home of a relative. If this were the case, it could have been in the home of Zacharias and Elizabeth, as Elizabeth was Mary's "relative"<sup>8</sup> and this means that through Mary, Jesus was also related to John the Baptist. Zacharias and Elizabeth lived nearby in "the hill country of Judah."<sup>9</sup>

If Joseph and Mary did this (which I propose) then we can better understand the difference in Matthew's account where he says of the Magi's visit some time later, "After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh."

This house, near Bethlehem could well be the home of Zacharias and Elizabeth. Mary and Joseph apparently remained in or near Bethlehem after the birth of their child and moved into the house from the stable when others had departed after the census was completed.

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<sup>7</sup> By: [Bernard Gagnon](#)

<sup>8</sup> Luke 1:36, and the word "sug-genis" (relative) means of the same blood or birth family.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 1:39-40.



### III. The "Wise men."

Matthew 2:1-12, 1: "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, 2: "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." 3: When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4: Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5: They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: 6: 'AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.'<sup>10</sup> 7: Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. 8: And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found *Him*, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him." 9: After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over *the place* where the Child was. 10: When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11: After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12: And having been warned *by God* in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way."

This is the only account where the Magi are mentioned. However, there are many other Biblical references to men who followed this religious philosophy.<sup>11</sup> As to the limited reference to this event, we could speculate that this might be due to the atmosphere of secrecy Herod sought to establish concerning this visit. His own motives would desire this "hush-hush" atmosphere. However, Matthew (Levi), a Roman hireling and tax collector may have been in a position to have an inside knowledge of this event.

We could discuss Herod's partial knowledge about these things as he knew that any king born to the Jews at this time must be considered a Messianic figure. So he had been informed at one time of the hope of the Jews. Yet he knew little else about the matter.

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<sup>10</sup> Micah 5:2 - LXX

<sup>11</sup> See: Exodus 7:11; Esther 1:13, 6:13; Jeremiah 50:35; Daniel 2:10; Acts 8:9-11, 13:6-8 and many more.

The "Magi" were from Persia and were followers of the teachings of Zoroaster (also-Zarathustra or "Avestan" in Persian). Zoroaster was descended from a family of nomadic sheep and camel herders and lived many hundred years before Christ, perhaps as long as 1200 years earlier. His interest in spiritual things prompted him to aspire to become a priest in the ancient Persian religion that worshipped nature as well as the stars. During his priesthood, at the age of thirty, he received a vision of a shining being, who revealed himself as [Vohu Manah](#) (Good Purpose) and taught him about [Ahura Mazda](#) (Wise Spirit) and five other radiant figures. His revelations prompted him to develop a new religion, one of the world's oldest, called Zoroastrianism in which Ahura Mazda was worshipped. His image is that of a winged man seen in typical Babylonian/Persian art styles. Included in the religion was an enchantment with the stars. Astrology had been studied for a thousand years before Zoroaster's birth in the ancient Babylonian and Persian cultures. Some of Zoroastrianism is still seen in Islam and the Baha'i Faith today.

The Magi were men that held an official position in the courts of ancient Persia as counselors and advisors to the kings as well as to wealthy merchants and military leaders. They themselves were wealthy. They studied not only the stars but nature, science, medicine, history, politics, and all the religions of the world at that time. Judaism would have come to the attention of the east during the reign of Solomon whose rule and power extended north as far as the Fertile Crescent. The Magi, like all astrologers, believed that the universe and nature were divinely created and in themselves held messages that could guide one's life with a divinely inspired purpose. So they studied the heavens.

About a year after the birth of Jesus, they were involved in their work when an unusual star appeared in the sky. This star was not prophesied in the Old Testament unless one chooses to apply Balaam's prophetic word here. In Numbers 24:17 regarding a future king for Israel we have him predicting, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; A star shall come forth from Jacob, A scepter shall rise from Israel, And shall crush through the forehead of Moab, And tear down all the sons of Sheth."

The Magi were quite familiar with the prophecies of a coming king of the Jews. How, we are not sure as they did not know the prophecy about Bethlehem being his birthplace. They may have had a copy of the Pentateuch, but nothing else. Even Herod had no idea and had to call together chief priests and scribes to tell him. The prophecy is found in Micah 5:2. Bethlehem was an ancient village going back to before the time of Abraham. It is mentioned forty-nine times in the Bible. However there were two Bethlehems one in the north in the territory of Zebulun

(Joshua 19:15) and one in Judah. That is why we see the name "Bethlehem in Judea" in Micah and Matthew 2:1 and 2:5.

In terms of the star, many scholars and astronomers have attempted to find a conjunction of planets, a comet's appearance or some astronomical phenomenon by which to ascertain the years of Jesus' birth, but most of these attempts are not convincing. In my opinion, it is possible that this was not a star at all, but an angel or specially guided divinely created object assigned to bring the Magi to Bethlehem so provisions could be given to finance the escape of the Holy Family from the wrath of Herod. The reason I suggest this is for two reasons: 1. Verse 9 tells us that the "star" stood over the place where the child was. The word for "stood" is "his-tay-mie" meaning simply "to stand fixed in a place." This would be unusual for stars in a night sky, not to mention the question of how would the nearest "star" be able to either stay in one place while all the rest were moving and then also illuminate a specific small place on this planet. 2: We have a similar angelic descriptions in Revelation 10:1 and 18:1. 10:1, "I saw another strong angel coming down out of heaven, clothed with a cloud; and the rainbow was upon his head, and his face was like the sun, and his feet like pillars of fire; 18:1 After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illumined with his glory."

Appearing as a "star," it literally guided the Magi to Jerusalem where they likely stopped at the caravansary<sup>12</sup> about a mile or so southwest of the Temple Mount. Nevertheless, after spending time in Jerusalem attempting to ascertain where the King of the Jews was to be born, when they departed, they saw the star standing over Bethlehem and rejoiced. They hadn't lost it in the delay but it had stayed with them. A very intelligent star.

The trip from north-central Persia<sup>13</sup> to Bethlehem by the closest trade route was over a thousand miles. This would entail a trip of two thousand total miles and at least seven or eight months of travel. These Magi (astrologers and sorcerers) may have traveled in a commercial caravan or a private one, we don't know. Caravans in those days varied in size and if engaged in trade, could be comprised of anywhere from a thousand to ten thousand camels and would include handlers,

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<sup>12</sup> Archaeology has speculated that one did indeed exist in this area. In any case, there would have been one near the city on this major trade route coming into Jerusalem.

<sup>13</sup> Further southeast from Chaldea and north of the Persian Gulf in modern Iran. The capital at the time of Jesus' birth was Damghan and means "Village of the Magi."

servants, officials, goods, fodder, supplies for the trip and frequent stops at caravansaries along the way.

For the Magi, if not in a commercial caravan, they would have still had to transport enough goods and supplies for the trip. The caravans moved at the pace of a walk. At, say around ten miles a day, it would take them around three to three and a half months to get to Jerusalem. For this, at least twenty to forty camels would be needed, along with handlers and servants. The trip was extensive and very important to these Magi. We have no idea how many actual Magi came on the journey, but it is likely as many as could make the trip would be involved. One trade route from the east did go through the desert to Damascus, a major trade stop, and on down the coast to Egypt and Africa with a branch into Jerusalem from the west. As mentioned, a caravansary would have been somewhere along the route nearing or close to the city itself.<sup>14</sup> From there they would use the same route back to the west, not south to Bethlehem. The Luke use of the word "inn" is a repeated tradition as the actual word is closer to "guest room." However when Luke records Jesus parable of the Good Samaritan in chapter ten, he indeed uses the word translated "inn" and is the Greek for caravansary. Jesus may have spoken about a caravansary with which the Jews were familiar.

The tradition of there being "three" wise men stems from number of the gifts mentioned among the "treasures" they brought to the house. There was likely more than one gift of each commodity given, and possibly even more commodities than the ones mentioned. The word "gifts" can also be translated "sacrifices" or "offerings." This might be a more appropriate translation considering the situation and the Magi's view of who they believed Jesus to be.

Much has been made of the three "gifts" mentioned in Matthew. Some attribute them to a prophetic portrait of Jesus' life, death and burial. A quaint idea, but unlikely as the magi had no idea what the future of Jesus was to be. But these gifts would have been the most impressive and useful to the family in their need to escape from Herod. This may be the main reason for them being mentioned. Gold, of course for expenses. Frankincense comes from the near east and would have been readily available to the Magi. It is made by tapping *Boswellia* trees much as is done to maple trees for syrup. The sap or resin that oozes out is allowed to harden into what is called "tears."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See footnote 92

<sup>15</sup> See the appendix for pictures of these resins.

These "tears" are used for many purposes. In the minds of the Magi they might have thought of the needs of a child and his mother when selecting this gift. It was and still is used for religious and medicinal purposes. Mixed with burning coals, its smoke gave off a sweet aroma. This smoke was effective in relieving stress and depression. It could be chewed as a gum and helped as a digestive aid. Steamed, its oil was used as a skin conditioner. It has been used for hundreds of years as a treatment for healing wounds, relieving the pain and itch of insect bites, for arthritis, strengthening the female hormone system and purifying the air.

Myrrh is another aromatic resin harvested and processed much like frankincense. It comes from a shrubby and thorny tree and hardens into chunks of resin that are processed for many uses. In the Bible, Myrrh is mentioned thirty-seven times. It was an expensive commodity brought from the East for trade purposes. In Genesis 37:25 Joseph's brothers sold him to Ishmaelite traders. They are described as, "a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing aromatic gum and balm and myrrh, on their way to bring *them* down to Egypt."

In the book of Esther we read, "Now when the turn of each young lady came to go in to King Ahasuerus, after the end of her twelve months under the regulations for the women--for the days of their beautification were completed as follows: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and the cosmetics for women--the young lady would go in to the king in this way:..." (2:12-13)

It is mentioned several times in the Song of Solomon as a fragrance for a woman, and in it was also used to add fragrance to bedding. It was also carried in a pouch to give off a fragrance and also used in wrappings for a corpse to offset the smell of decay. In John 19: 39-40 we read, "Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds *weight*. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews."

It could also be ingested to aid in health and ease pain and as an external pain reliever.

Both frankincense and myrrh were expensive and considered a luxury. It was an appropriate gift for a king. There may have been other gifts as well that were treasured among the Magi. The trade from the east had been going on for over two thousand years before Christ was born. Goods brought from the east could include, silk from china, as well as other fabrics, rice, grains, carvings and castings from ivory, gold, silver, stone, wood as well as pottery, jewelry, spices, tea and much

more. India and surrounding nations on the famed "Silk Road" would add tea, spices, rugs, carpets, clothing, tapestries, incense, dried fruit, oils, and a great selection of cosmetics, and household goods. It is quite possible that some of these items were brought to the house by the Magi as well.

In verse 12, God warns the Magi in a dream not to return to Herod so they left for Persia via another route. This was likely the east route on the Transjordan that also connected to the major east-west trade routes. Immediately afterward, verses 13 and 14 tell us, "Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him." So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt."

The gifts were immediately put to use as Joseph had to purchase or arrange the means to get his family to Egypt.

The traditional names of the wise men; Gaspar, Balthasar, and Melchior, neither appear in the Bible nor in any other literature until about 500 A.D. Then they begin to appear in Christmas traditions. Perhaps these names were attributed to them in a Christmas play or drama written and performed around that time. We have no detailed information about this.

## **SESSION XXVI**

# **THE MIRACLE OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH**

**By: Bob Stewart**

Matthew 1:18-25

When I was in seminary, I had a good friend who was in youth ministry, and an evangelist. We often had discussions about theological issues and I was surprised one day to find out he didn't believe in the virgin birth of Christ. Over the years, I have found many Christians with doubts about this truth. I have never had a doubt about it myself, but spent time studying the issue about why it seemed a necessary part of God's plan. Jesus never referred to it, nor did His disciples. But people were aware of it. Jesus' enemies referred to His being conceived out of wedlock, and made a point of it in a discussion with Jesus recorded in John 8:37-45, saying to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God."

Being an unwed mother carried with it quite a burden of shame in those days. Even Joseph, Mary's betrothed was shocked by her announcement that she was with child. It could be that Jesus and His parents were scorned for this event all through His youth. It had to be difficult for both the boy and His family. One couldn't blame people in those days, after all who was going to believe the virgin conception and birth story? So little is said of it and nothing is made of it outside the gospels. Neither Paul nor any other writer mentions it. It is only mentioned once each in Matthew and Luke. Was it really necessary that Jesus be born of a virgin? And if so, why?

Travel back with me three thousand years to the time of David's reign over Judah and Israel in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was a small, rather primitive fortress originally of pagan origins located southeast of the present temple plateau. It was yet to become the great city and spiritual center of Israel. Right now it was simply a command post from which David continued Saul's effort to organize the scattered tribes of Israel and Judah into a united fighting force to thwart the efforts of the Philistines and others to drive the Jews into the sea. Not much has changed, has it?

Several years later, after David had solidified his rule and been accepted as the King of Judah and Israel, God made him a promise with these words, "Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever." (II Samuel 7:16)

Then later to David's son Solomon God said, "As for you, if you will walk before Me as your father David walked, in integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you *and* will keep My statutes and My ordinances, then I will establish the throne of your kingdom over Israel forever, just as I promised to your father David, saying, You shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel". (I Kings 9:4-5) See also: I Kings 2:1-4; I Chronicles 22:6-10.

In Psalm 89:35-36 God states, "Once I have sworn by My holiness; I will not lie to David. His descendants shall endure forever, and his throne as the sun before Me. It shall be established forever like the moon, and the witness in the sky is faithful."

Isaiah 9:6-7 reads, "For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of *His* government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this." It is this "zeal of the Lord" we will learn to appreciate.

These promises were spoken over a period of two hundred years between 700-900 years before Christ was born. There are more like this, of course. Then Luke records the angelic visit of Gabriel to Mary with these words, "Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming in, he said to her, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord *is* with you.' But she was very perplexed at *this* statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. 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; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end."

But a contradiction comes into the picture. In 600 B.C., as the Davidic dynasty was continuing on, the last good king of Judah – Josiah - had restored in Judah the spiritual centrality of the worship of God. The previous two kings, Manasseh and Amon, had destroyed this. The Lord, we are told, was not amused by how the descendents of David, generally speaking, were handling the spiritual affairs of their people. Even after Josiah's reforms, the Lord decided Judah would be destroyed, because Manasseh had so thoroughly corrupted the people and the



worship of God. Josiah's successors to the throne were Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin – also known as Jechonia, or Coniah - and Zedekiah. Every one of these men did evil in the Lord's sight and "played the harlot" with Egypt, Babylon, and their gods.

So God made this pronouncement upon the house of David through Jeremiah the prophet in his 22nd Chapter saying,

"As I live," declares the LORD, "even though Coniah, the son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, were a signet *ring* on My right hand, yet I would pull you off;

Is this man Coniah a despised, shattered jar? Or is he an undesirable vessel? Why have he and his descendants been hurled out and cast into a land that they had not known? O land, land, land, Hear the word of the LORD! Thus says the LORD, 'Write this man down childless, A man who will not prosper in his days; For no man of his descendants will prosper sitting on the throne of David or ruling again in Judah.'" (22:24-30)

Then in his 36<sup>th</sup> chapter Jeremiah reiterates this curse.

"Therefore thus says the LORD concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah, "He shall have no one to sit on the throne of David, and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat of the day and the frost of the night. I will also punish him and his descendants and his servants for their iniquity and I will bring on them and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the men of Judah all the calamity that I have declared to them--but (because) they did not listen." (36:30-31)

We have quite a challenge here. On the one hand, God promised that the throne of David would endure for all time and saying, "Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever." But on the other hand He said, "For no man of David's descendants will ever sit on the throne of David and rule again in Judah."

So, how do we reconcile these contrary declarations? And, let me say, they are contrary. But, we don't reconcile them. God does. And this is where it gets astonishing to see how the "zeal" of the Lord accomplishes this.

Matthew does us the favor of listing the royal genealogy of Jesus as it came from David through Joseph in the first chapter of his gospel. Note especially verses 1, 11. Jeconiah's presence in the lineage (verse 11) does two things.

(1) It substantiates the Davidic lineage of Jesus but (2) It negates Jesus' right to the throne of David because of the curse. None of the rest of the Davidic line after Jeconiah ever sat again on the throne of David as king ever again, even to our present day. The last king of Judah, appointed by Nebuchadnezzar, was Zedekiah, a kinsman but not a son of Jehoiachin. Further, in Jesus' day, three objections were made to the possibility of his being the promised Messiah/King of Israel. (1) His origin or lineage, ~~John 6:41-42, 7:40-44, 50-52~~ and (2) the circumstances of His birth which we have already discussed from John 8:39-41. Finally, the Jews accused Jesus, in John 8:48 of being a Samaritan and having a demon. Jesus did not deny the charge He was a Samaritan but used the "demon" comment to continue His debate with the Jews.

Further, and even more astounding, the same prophet, Jeremiah, who pronounced God's judgment upon the house of David claims in his 33<sup>rd</sup> chapter, 'Behold, days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will fulfill the good word which I have spoken concerning the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 'In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch of David to spring forth; and He shall execute justice and righteousness on the earth. 'In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell in safety; and this is *the name* by which she will be called: the LORD is our righteousness.' "For thus says the LORD, 'David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel.'" (33:14-17)

Now Jeremiah is starting to annoy me. Why doesn't he make up his mind? Is this an unsolvable contradiction? At first glance, perhaps. I stated earlier that Jesus' right to the throne as a descendant of David was nullified by the curse on David's line – and it would be absolutely a fact if Jesus was born of Joseph! That's right! If he were born of Joseph!

Okay, now we are seeing the answer. We find it in Luke 1:30-35:

“The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. 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; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.’ “Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ The angel answered and said to her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.”

And now also note Matthew 1:16 as well as Luke 3:23.

Matthew 1:16: “Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.”

Luke 3:23: “When He began His ministry, Jesus Himself was about thirty years of age, being, *as was supposed*, the son of Joseph, the son of Eli...”,

He wasn't the son of Joseph, but of the Holy Spirit by Mary, also of the house and lineage of David. But her line is traced not from David's son Solomon, but from his son Nathan (Luke 3:31).\*

“...the son of Melea, the son of Menna, the son of Mattatha, the son of Nathan, the son of David...”, We read in Gabriel's announcement to Mary that Jesus “would reign over the house of his father David.” This makes it clear that Mary is of the house of David, even though Jesus' real father is the Holy Spirit. Thus, Mary's line being from David, legitimizes Jesus' claim to the throne of David! But at the same time He escapes the curse on the descendants of David through Jeconiah.

Further, Biblical laws pertaining to marriage, adoption and inheritance allow the legacy of the father, upon his death, to fall even to a slave if he is accepted as a son.\*\* In Joseph's case, he decided not to put Mary away at the discovery of her unwed pregnancy, and though disgraceful in the eyes of the community, he legally “adopted” Jesus as his own son. This is why we read nothing of Joseph after Jesus begins his ministry at the accepted age of 30. Joseph has already died, leaving Jesus as sole heir to the throne of David. This answers the mystery of Joseph's disappearance from the Gospel narratives after Jesus' Bar Mitzvah and why.

But it was the miraculous virgin birth that resolved the irresolvable conflict of the two contrary divine declarations regarding the house of David and provided the fulfillment of all of God's promises, in both cases. Joseph will be accorded, I believe, great reward for his faith for believing the impossible.

Isaiah had foretold the miracle that God had to produce in order to fulfill His promises in both cases.

“Then the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying, “Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; make *it* deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!” Then he said, “Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the

patience of my God as well? "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:13-14)

At his annunciation to Mary, Gabriel the Archangel answered her question, "How can these things be?" with the words, "Nothing is impossible with God"!

In our lives, sometimes we wonder if God is really all that concerned about us. We silently ask, "Will all the promises we believe in really come true?" "Is being faithful to God and denying ourselves all the worldly pleasures in this brief life really worth it?"

Paul answers this for us writing to the people at Philippi, "*For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*" To Rome he wrote, "What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *is* against us? But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The virgin birth should demonstrate to us that the "zeal of the Lord" in fulfilling His promises to us who await these things will work in our behalf in due time to bring about the fulfillment of all His promises to us. In days of despair or doubt, the virgin birth becomes a beacon of hope and courage to the faithful of God.

\*\*\* See the two excurses on, "Mary's lineage from David through Nathan" and "The Levirate law and laws of inheritance" available upon request.

## SESSION XXVII HEROD THE "GREAT"

The dubious title comes from his impressive efforts in his building work and political acumen. He is also known as "King Herod" and "Herod I."

He was born in 74/73 B.C. in Idumea, (the ancient Edom). He was the second son of Antipater and his wife Cyprus, the daughter of an Arabian sheik. His older brother was Phasael. Antipater, (an Edomite) had converted to the Jewish religion, though not a Jew himself. However, Herod was raised under the Jewish faith though not a devout Jew, to say the least. It was more a political alliance move than a true faith conversion.

At this time, Judea was governed by John Hyrcanus who was a descendant of the Maccabean (Hasmonean) line that had defeated Antiochus II Epiphanes in c. 165 B.C. E. After that event celebrated in the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah (feast of lights) Judea then moved from Greek to Roman domination. Rome was led by a senate and had no singular leader or emperor at this time. However, there were those who sought to create a throne of Rome under a single leader. Most of these were military men.

It was the Roman general Pompey who installed John Hyrcanus as ruler over the Jews. Herod's father, Antipater, had supported Julius Caesar in a war in Egypt and later supported Pompey's choice of Hyrcanus for high priest and king of Judea. As a result was granted Roman citizenship and appointed as regent of Judea. This was the role of "vice president" so to speak. The Romans had a special interest in Judea because their general [Pompey the Great](#) had [conquered Jerusalem in 63 BCE](#), thus placing the region in the Roman sphere of influence. However, as noted, Rome had no emperor and was run by a senate who appointed political and military leaders at this time.

But Herod's father, Antipater, found Hyrcanus a weak leader and so exercised more of his own authority. He worked to get his sons involved in the government and Herod was soon appointed as governor of Galilee when about twenty-five years old. This was in 47 B.C. The Jews were happy with Herod as he cleaned up a major bandit and his followers.

Herod himself was a powerful young warrior and skilled with many weapons, especially the javelin as I recall. There was considerable political turmoil

occurring at during this time period. It was the time of Mark Anthony, Octavian, Julius Caesar, Cassius, Brutus, all who had ties with Cleopatra.

On March 14th 44 B.C. (the famous "ides of March") Julius Caesar was murdered by Brutus and Cassius. Cassius had the ambition to rule in Rome. But Octavian and Mark Anthony instituted martial rule in Rome. There was political chaos for a time and Cassius demanded a great tax to attempt to secure the throne in Rome for himself. To secure all the silver demanded, Hyrcanus, Antipater and his sons had to take harsh measures to procure it. This rendered them unpopular and Antipater, Herod's father, was killed in the uproar. Cassius failed in his attempt, but due to Herod's success in gathering tax funds had given him more political power as a reward.

Then in 40 B.C. the Parthians invaded Israel. They cut John Hyrcanus' ears off attempting to disqualify him from the high priesthood and rule in Judea. Hyrcanus was then banished to Babylon. Hyrcanus' nephew Antigonus grasped the throne but Herod went to Rome to plead with the Romans to restore Hyrcanus to power which they did and Pompey was the man who, under Herod's influence did so.

However, Herod had political ambitions and after several years of Roman political infighting where Octavian became the victor and ultimately Emperor of Rome under the name Augustus, Herod had smartly aligned himself with the parties whom he believed would become victorious and was installed as King of Judea by Augustus. He accepted the title "King of the Jews" or "King of Judea."

This appointment caused a lot of resentment among the Jews. After all, Herod was not a Jew. He was the son of a man from Idumea; and although Antipater had been a pious man who had worshipped the Jewish God sincerely, the Jews had always looked down upon the Idumeans as racially impure. Worse, Herod had an Arabian mother, and it was commonly held that one could only be a Jew when one was born from a Jewish mother.

To gain some popularity with the people Herod married Hyrcanus' grand-daughter Mariamne who bore him five children. However, Herod already had a wife, Doris and a young son Antipater. He banished them from Judea so he could gain favor with the Jews by marrying Mariamne. This was in 37 B.C and this ended the Hasmonean Dynasty and ushered in the Herodian dynasty. Herod was 36 years old. Jesus was about 34 years from being born.

During this 34 year period, Herod, under Roman instructions to keep peace in his realm, continued to curry favor with the Jews while at the same time irritating

them. For example, as governor he helped get synagogues built for them in Galilee and eliminated the constant threat of bandits. But he also strategically "eliminated" political opponents. He rebuilt and enlarged the defensive walls in Jerusalem and installed a fortress. However, he named it Antonia (in honor of Mark Anthony) and placed it at the corner of the temple grounds so Roman soldiers could look right into the temple court. But he totally reinforced and enlarged the temple area with a great retaining wall and filled it with soil. The wall still exists today and is called the Western wall or the "wailing wall" early on. He then embarked on rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, a huge project magnificently done to the specific specifications of the Jews, but at the same time installed a golden Roman eagle on its face. To offset the uproar, he cut taxes. But then build Roman style complexes including Roman hippodromes and athletic complexes objectionable to the Jews. But then he built fortresses to guard against marauders. And so on.

Then, over the period of his rule, he ended up marrying ten wives and also built a temple to Augustus in Samaria to encourage emperor worship. This was to gain favor with the emperor, of course, as Herod could care less about spiritual matters. He also built the fortress and luxurious personal residences at Jericho, Masada, Herodium, and the Caesarea Maritime port containing a residence (later used by Pontius Pilate for a time) and a prison. It also had a Greek/Roman style theatre, a commercial center, hippodrome, all distasteful to the Jews as were all things Roman.

Due to his many marriages there erupted conflicts among the sons who all vied for power under their father's authority and reign. From 14 B.C. to his death in 4 B.C., Herod's personal and family life was in chaos and there were other political threats and challenges from outside his realm as well. Due to some very complex political matters, he actually executed his beloved wife Mariamne and several of his own sons. He had a total of fifteen children by ten wives, and ten of them were sons and family feuds were constant.

Under the charge of treason against their father, Herod's sons Alexander and Aristobulus, were tried and executed. Donna and I stood in the theatre at Caesarea where it is reported that Herod sealed off the exits, filled the orchestra with about four feet of water and personally drowned two of his sons. The theatre, by the way, was designed to hold water for plays involving ships and battles at sea.

In 5 B.C. Herod, in his last days, had another son, Antipater killed for plots against himself as he lay dying from the effects of years long disease, and made a will

leaving everything including political authority to Archelaus and Antipas, sons by his wife Malthace.

One to two years earlier, in 7 or 6 B.C., Herod was not well. He had lost considerable physical strength and mental acuity but not political power. He had unexpected visitors one day. Magi from Persia came to inquire about a strange astronomical sighting. We know the story. The Magi, after their visit to Mary, Joseph and the young child Jesus, did not return to Herod and tell him anything.

In Matthew 2:16-23 we read,

16: Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. 17: Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: 18: "A VOICE WAS HEARD IN RAMAH, WEEPING AND GREAT MOURNING, RACHEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN; AND SHE REFUSED TO BE COMFORTED, BECAUSE THEY WERE NO MORE." 19: But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord \*appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and said, 20: "Get up, take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child's life are dead." 21: So Joseph got up, took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. 22: But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Then after being warned *by God* in a dream, he left for the regions of Galilee, 23: and came and lived in a city called Nazareth. *This was* to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: "He shall be called a Nazarene."

It wasn't a long wait, maybe less than a year but not more than two when Herod was reported as having died.

There are no images of Herod because to engrave his image anywhere or even on a coin would have been the last straw for the Jews.

After his death in 4 BCE, the kingdom was divided among his sons. [Herod Antipas](#) was to rule Galilee and the east bank of the Jordan as a tetrarch; [Philip](#) was to be tetrarch of the Golan heights in the north-east; and [Archelaus](#) became the ethnarch ("national leader") of Samaria and Judaea. All are mentioned in the New Testament. Herod was buried in one of the fortresses he had built, Herodion in the Judean wilderness.



**SESSION XXVIII**  
**ZACHARIAS AND ELIZABETH**

Luke 1:5-25, 5: "In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6: They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.

This passage tells us that both Zacharias and Elizabeth were of the tribe of Levi. How do we know this?

7: But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years. 8: Now it happened *that* while he was performing his priestly service before God in the *appointed* order of his division, 9: according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10: And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering. 11: And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. 12: Zacharias was troubled when he saw *the angel*, and fear gripped him. 13: But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John. 14: "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. 15: "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. 16: "And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. 17: "It is he who will go *as a forerunner* before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, **TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN**, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." 18": Zacharias said to the angel, "How will I know this *for certain*? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years." 19: The angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20: "And behold, you shall be silent and unable to speak until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time." 21: The people were waiting for Zacharias, and were wondering at his delay in the temple. 22: But when he came out, he was unable to speak to them; and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple; and he kept making signs to them, and remained mute. 23: When the days of his priestly service were ended, he went back home. 24: After these days Elizabeth his wife became pregnant, and she kept herself in seclusion for five months, saying, 25: "This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked *with*

*favor upon me, to take away my disgrace among men."*

Luke 1:34-56, 34: Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35: The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God. 36: "And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. 37: "For nothing will be impossible with God." 38: And Mary said, "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Now, Elizabeth was a blood relative of Mary. However, Mary and Joseph were of the tribe of Judah and Elizabeth and Zacharias were of the tribe of Levi. Elizabeth was old and advanced in years. In what way could Mary and Elizabeth be blood relatives and which way is the most likely?

An aunt or great-aunt: Elizabeth was Mary's mother's or Mary's grandmother's sister. This is most likely.

A cousin or second cousin on her mother's side: Mary's mother's sister married a Levite and their daughter was Elizabeth. However, Elizabeth, in that case, might be closer to Mary's age. So it could have been that Mary's grandmother married a Levite and they gave birth to Elizabeth.

A cousin or second cousin on her father's side. Mary's father's sister married a Levite and their daughter was Elizabeth. Also, however, Elizabeth, in that case might be closer to Mary's age. So perhaps Mary's father's aunt married a Levite and Elizabeth was their daughter.

39: "Now at this time Mary arose and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah, 40: and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. 41: When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42: And she cried out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed *are* you among women, and blessed *is* the fruit of your womb! 43: "And how has it *happened* to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me? 44: "For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy. 45: "And blessed *is* she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord."

Elizabeth's greeting was extraordinary and prompted by the Holy Spirit. What did Elizabeth understand about Mary's pregnancy?

46: And Mary said: "My soul exalts the Lord, 47: And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. 48: "For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant; For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed. 49: "For the Mighty One has done great things for me; And holy is His name. 50: "AND HIS MERCY IS UPON GENERATION AFTER GENERATION TOWARD THOSE WHO FEAR HIM. 51: "He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered *those who were* proud in the thoughts of their heart. 52: "He has brought down rulers from *their* thrones, And has exalted those who were humble. 53: "HE HAS FILLED THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS; And sent away the rich empty-handed. 54: "He has given help to Israel His servant, In remembrance of His mercy, 55: As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and his descendants forever." 56: And Mary stayed with her about three months, and *then* returned to her home."

Why did Mary stay an additional three months?

Luke 1:57-80, 57: "Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth, and she gave birth to a son. 58: Her neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her; and they were rejoicing with her. 59: And it happened that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to call him Zacharias, after his father. 60: But his mother answered and said, "No indeed; but he shall be called John." 61: And they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by that name."

How did Elizabeth come to know that the angel had told Zacharias that the name of the child would be John? What does the name "John" mean?

From the Hebrew "Yehochanan" a compound word from "Yah" the abbreviated name for Yahweh and "(c)hanan" to grant favor or be gracious. So, "The favor or grace of the Lord" or "The Lord is gracious (or grants favor)."

62: And they made signs to his father, as to what he wanted him called. 63: And he asked for a tablet and wrote as follows, "His name is John." And they were all astonished. 64: And at once his mouth was opened and his tongue *loosed*, and he *began* to speak in praise of God. 65: Fear came on all those living around them; and all these matters were being talked about in all the hill country of Judea. 66: All who heard them kept them in mind, saying, "What then will this child *turn out to be?*" For the hand of the Lord was certainly with him. 67: And his father

Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying: 68: "Blessed *be* the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, 69: And has raised up a horn of salvation for us In the house of David His servant-- 70: As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old-- 71: Salvation FROM OUR ENEMIES, And FROM THE HAND OF ALL WHO HATE US; 72: To show mercy toward our fathers, And to remember His holy covenant, 73: The oath which He swore to Abraham our father, 74: To grant us that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies, Might serve Him without fear, 75: In holiness and righteousness before Him all our days. 76: "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; For you will go on BEFORE THE LORD TO PREPARE HIS WAYS; 77: To give to His people *the* knowledge of salvation By the forgiveness of their sins, 78: Because of the tender mercy of our God, With which the Sunrise from on high will visit us, 79: TO SHINE UPON THOSE WHO SIT IN DARKNESS AND THE SHADOW OF DEATH, To guide our feet into the way of peace." 80: And the child continued to grow and to become strong in spirit, and he lived in the deserts until the day of his public appearance to Israel."