

THE REAL MEANING OF CHRISTMAS



BY DICK TRIPP

THE VIRGIN BIRTH AND ALL THAT

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Foreword

The Rev. Dick Tripp, a retired Anglican minister in the Diocese of Christchurch, has brought to us an excellent book with biblical background to the Christmas event, based on years of study and evangelism. The reader soon appreciates how widely Dick has read on the subject both in Scripture itself and the insights of others. From his contact with people in the parish when he was a Vicar he has been able to share valuable insights about the birth of his personal Savior and Lord.

I found three parts of his writing especially helpful and readers will certainly be enlightened by other parts themselves. Firstly, in the chapter 'Why it matters who Jesus was', there is the use of the suffering of Job to help us understand why God had to become man. He quotes Job 9.33-35 "If only there were someone to arbitrate between us, to lay a hand on us both, someone to remove God's rod from me, so that his terror would frighten me no more." It is Jesus' capacity as both fully human and fully divine that he is able to be the perfect high priest and advocate for me in the presence of God.

Secondly, in the chapter 'Why the virgin birth makes sense', he quotes an illustration that appeals to me as one who has shown in physics that light is both a wave and a particle phenomena. This helps us understand the two natures of Christ.

Thirdly, in the chapter 'What the virgin birth reveals', under the sub-heading 'Jesus is Lord of creation', Dick gives a delightful Scriptural background to the reason for animals to be depicted in nativity scenes, though there is no mention of them in the Gospels.

Near the end of the book Dick Tripp makes the observation that the miracle of the virgin birth is much easier to grasp if someone has been born again themselves, coming to know Jesus Christ as personal Savior and Lord.

Bishop Henry Paltridge, formerly of the Anglican Diocese of Meru in Kenya.

Introduction

A story is told of Warren, the brother of the well-known writer C. S. Lewis. He was travelling on a bus when they passed a church which had a Christmas crib in front. He overheard a woman exclaim, "Oh Lor"! They bring religion into everything. Look—they're even dragging it into Christmas now!"

For the majority of our Western population Christmas is little more than a secular holiday. No doubt look some forward to the partying and the excuse for a booze-up. For some it is little different from any other day in the year. As someone declared, "So why's Christmas just like a normal day

in the office? You do all the work and that fat bloke in the suit gets all the credit." Some would relate to the Austrian lass of sixteen who wrote, as reported in a leaflet of the European Christian Mission:

Christmas always brings fear to my heart. For a few minutes we watched the lighted candles on the tree. We open our presents, we have a holiday and better things to eat. We live peaceably together. But afterwards the days are no different than they were before. The already dirty snow lies banked up on either side of the road. There just remains a great emptiness.

One sophisticated magazine published the following greeting to its readers:

From most of us to some of you, then, a very very alienated Christmas, a disenchanting New Year; some degree, if you insist, of peace on earth; and whatever you may find to your advantage in good will toward men.

Others can appreciate a time of celebration, even if they are unsure of what it is they are celebrating. If they think Christianity has something to do with it, though not usually church attenders, they may well attend a service or a carol singing event. After all, for those who watch television, there does not seem to be much in the world to celebrate. The emphasis given by Christians to the birth of Jesus may have its appeal to many, even though they interpret Christmas in basically secular terms. There is, after all, something special about babies. The emphasis on children always has its appeal. We were all young once and the world's great thinkers often had lowly origins.

I suspect that the majority of Westerners who know something of history would acknowledge the religious origins of traditions associated with Christmas, whether Christian or pagan. Pagan religions of the Northern Hemisphere held the celebrations of their gods as the cold and darkness of winter began to be replaced by the warmth and light of spring and the sun reached its turning point. For the Romans, it was the feast of Saturnalia (not surprisingly described by historians as "an orgy") that began on December 17 and lasted up to seven days. The worshippers of Mithras celebrated the birthday of their god on December 25, the date then accepted as the winter solstice. Sometime around A.D. 336 the church in Rome capitalised on these pagan festivals and made the occasion an opportunity to celebrate the coming of Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2). A third-century theologian said it well: "We hold this day holy, not like the pagans because of the birth of the sun, but because of Him who made it." None would claim that Jesus was actually born on this date, as we don't have enough information to know that.

However, not everything is clear here. The Roman Emperor Aurelian passed an edict in A.D. 274 establishing the festival of *Natalis Solis Invicti* (Birthday of the Unconquerable Sun) while dedicating a temple. Notable church fathers Tertullian and Augustine were convinced that Christmas preceded this pagan holiday. Alvin J. Schmidt, in his scholarly work *Under the Influence*, states that in northern Africa, Christians were already celebrating the birth of Jesus on December 25 in A.D. 243, thirty years before Aurelian's edict. If this is true, it wasn't Christianity that Christianised a pagan festival, but a pagan emperor attempting to paganise a Christian festival that predated it by thirty years. Alfred Edersheim, one of the foremost scholars on ancient Jewish culture and sacred writings, says, "There is no adequate reason for questioning the historical accuracy of this date."

There is also the interesting suggestion that the early Christians may have taken the Jewish Festival of Lights, or Hannukah, the essential elements of which have many similarities to those we celebrate at Christmas, and adapted it to the celebration of the birth of Christ. This would be similar to the ways they took the Jewish festivals of Passover, First Fruits and Pentecost to celebrate significant events from the life of Jesus. Hanukkah last for eight days, beginning on the 25th of the Jewish month of Kislev (November-December), so it usually falls in December. This feast is mentioned in John 10:22, in a passage where Jesus' relationship with God is discussed. It could be that, from the very beginning, the Church has celebrated the coming of Jesus into the world during December.

Some, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, will not celebrate Christmas because of pagan associations. However, what could be more true to the message of the New Testament than taking some aspect of culture that has been taken over by the "**elemental spiritual forces of this world**" (Colossians 2:20), whether Mithras or Mammon, and transforming it into a celebration of the One who came to renew all things?

Of course, this does not mean that the truth or flourishing of Christianity depends on the celebration of Christmas. After all, Christianity spread at a rapid rate through the Roman Empire and beyond well before, as far as we know, Christians celebrated Jesus' birth as an annual event. It is significant that the early preachers and teachers of the gospel did not even mention Jesus' birth. It is not mentioned in the early sermons that are recorded in the book of Acts. Paul does not mention it at all in his letters. He does say that Jesus was "**born of a woman, born under the law**" (Galatians 4:4), but the point of this is simply to underline his true humanity and the fact that he was accountable to moral constraints as are the rest of us. It does not appear in the earliest Christian confessions that are found in the New Testament

letters. When the Gospels came to be written later, only two of the four mention the event. In the next chapter I will suggest why this was so.

Several times in history the celebration of Christmas has been banned. In 1643 the British Parliament officially abolished the celebration of Christmas, and between 1649 and 1660 Christmas carols were banned in Oliver Cromwell's austere new republic. The pilgrims to the New World in the seventeenth century invented a new festival called Thanksgiving, hoping it would enjoy greater importance than Christmas. For a time, observing Christmas could result in imprisonment in Massachusetts, and for nearly two centuries it was largely ignored in the New England states. When Mobutu Sese Seko was President of Zaire it ceased to be a public holiday as it was not "authentically African". But Christianity is not dependent on this particular celebration on this particular day, however much the birth of Jesus may mean to believers. The Armenian Church celebrates the birth of Jesus on January 6. In A.D. 303 the Roman Emperor Diocletian "celebrated" the Nativity by having nearly 20,000 Christians burned to death!

The real issue for Christians is not the timing of the event, but who it was that was born, why he came and his significance for all of humanity. Christians regard the coming of Christ, including his birth, teaching, death and resurrection, as the most important event of human history. If the Christian view of these things is true, then we can rightly agree with the expressive statement of Ralph W. Sockman: "The hinge of history is on the door of a Bethlehem stable." The influential Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, declared in *Religious Experience*:

As we think of the baby in the manger to whom this Christmas Day the worship of a world is offered, let us remember that his childhood tells us something of the eternal truth of God. It is this which gives Christmas its significance. [Our] belief depends for its value primarily upon its truth. If it is a beautiful fiction, its power is gone. The claim of the Christian Gospel is not chiefly that it is uplifting or comforting but that it is true.

One of the issues I will explore in this book is the evidence for the fact that these things are indeed true. Tolkien said, "There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true."

According to Luke's account, the angel announced to the shepherds, "**I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people** (Luke 2:10)." If Christian beliefs about Jesus are indeed true, then it is certainly good news, but only, of course, if they are understood. Kenneth Kantzer declared:

Christmas is good news—the best of all good news. It tells us what God is like, it tells us what man is like, and it tells us what the Christian life is like.

This is all man needs to know to live and die by—but he needs to know all of it.

I would certainly not claim to know *all* of it, but hopefully this book will help to clarify the important issues, issues that are as relevant to us in the twenty-first century as they were in the period when Jesus was born.

And what about the virgin birth, or what would be more accurately described as the virgin conception, the idea that Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary by the Holy Spirit without the aid of a human father? Recent surveys have shown that more Americans believe in the virgin birth than believe in evolution, whereas half of Church of England clergy doubt or disbelieve it! One of my aims is to show that the Virgin Birth not only makes more sense than any other view that has been suggested as to how Jesus entered this world of ours, but also points to truths that have great significance and encouragement for all of humanity.

So let's begin by exploring what the real issues are as we consider these questions.

Crucial issues

What we believe about Christmas, and the significance we give to it, will depend almost solely on who we believe Jesus was and the importance we believe him to have to the history of the human race. There are very few people whose birthday is celebrated after their death. However, in the case of a few individuals who have had a significant influence, their birthdays may be celebrated for a number of years. Millions of Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus because they believe that he was more than just a human being, but was in fact the Second Person of the divine Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.¹ We believe that this was a unique event, God entering into his own creation in order to redeem and transform it into what ultimately will be “**a new heaven and a new earth**” (Isaiah 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1). If this is indeed so, then one might logically expect that his coming into the world could be a little different from the way the rest of us begin our human journey.

So the most important question, then, is not how he came, but *who* was he? The next important question is *what* did he come to do? If we can establish the answers to those two questions, then we can explore how it was that he came. To try to prove who Jesus was by attempting to show how he began his human journey, either by normal human conception or by some

¹ I explain why it is that Christians believe in a Triune God in the booklet *Understanding the Trinity* and in the chapter ‘The cross and the Trinity’ in the book *Why Did Jesus Die? Unearthing the meaning of the Cross*.

other way, without having first explored the much more significant evidence for who he was, will only leave us floundering (or arguing!). As Richard Longenecker put it in an article 'Whose Child Is This?' in *Christianity Today*, "In a theology that is biblically based, the virgin birth is neither the basis for nor the evidence of the Incarnation." We look to other evidence for that.

Because this is such an important question, I intend to explore it in some detail. I shall do so by examining the way in which the early disciples became convinced who Jesus was, and why it was that, as a consequence, they had no problem in living with the stories of the virgin birth, stories they had lived with from the beginning, even though it was not a central plank of their preaching. One reason that both Luke and Matthew were possibly motivated to include the account of Jesus' conception and birth in their stories was not just because it actually happened that way, but to counteract reports that his birth was illegitimate. Such reports were widespread among both pagans and Jews in the second and third centuries and no doubt were circulating in Jesus' own day. A further reason that the Church included the virgin birth as a foundational truth in the Nicene Creed of the fourth century was to counter a rising heresy in the early church, the mistaken belief that Jesus was not really human but only appeared to be flesh and blood, a belief known as Docetism. At what date the clause about the virgin birth found its way into the baptismal confessions of faith cannot be determined.

It is likely that the public ministry of Jesus lasted about three years. John mentions three of the annual Jewish Passovers during that time (2:13; 6:4; 11:55). As it was fairly early on that Jesus chose twelve of his followers to be most closely associated with him in this ministry, this group probably lived with him for about two and a half years. During this period they saw him in every possible kind of situation, on numerous hikes through the countryside, over mealtimes, on social occasions, in private discussions, in debates with religious leaders and others, in teaching situations and in times of rest and relaxation.

During this period, whatever thoughts they may have had about him, one thing seemed clear—he was a genuine human being. They saw him joyful (Luke 10:21). They saw him in tears (John 11:35; Luke 19:41). They saw him weary (Matthew 8:24; John 4:6). They saw him angry (Mark 3:5; John 2:13-17). They saw him distressed (John 11:33,38) and they saw him in mental agony (Matthew 26:37,38; Luke 22:44). However, other things must have caused them to wonder if his humanity, however remarkable, was all that could be said about him. They had every opportunity to observe his character, an observation that caused them to declare later that they believed him to be without fault (1 Peter 2:22). They had seen him do remarkable

things. They saw him heal the blind, the deaf, the crippled, the diseased, restore to health people who were demon possessed, and on three occasions at least, they had seen him raise the dead (Mark 5:38-43; Luke 7:11-17; John 11:41-44). They also saw him still a storm, feed a multitude and walk on water (Matthew 8:23-27; 14:15-21, 22-32). However, Jesus had told them on several occasions that it was not his own power that enabled him to do these things, but it was God his Father working through him by the Spirit (Matthew 12:28; John 5:19,30; 8:28; 14:10).

They had, on many occasions, listened to his authoritative teaching, so much of which centred on himself and his mission. They had heard him make claims that it seemed only God had a right to make, such as the right to forgive sins, a claim that the religious leaders rightly recognised as blasphemous if it were not true (Mark 2:1-12).² John tells us that at least some of his followers believed right from the beginning that he was the Messiah promised by the Old Testament prophets, a belief that was no doubt influenced by the testimony of John the Baptist (see John 1:29-51). How they conceived of this promised figure, and what he would accomplish when he came, we can only imagine, as various views were current at that time. It was not till the final months of Jesus' ministry that they were prepared to openly declare to Jesus himself that this was their belief (Matthew 16:13-16). Even then, they had distorted views about what he had come to do and how he would achieve it (vv. 21-23). When he finally met his death in Jerusalem, they were devastated.

However, one event was to change all this and enable them to see things in a totally new light—the resurrection. The disciple Thomas is usually remembered as “the doubter” because he could not believe what the other disciples told him, how Jesus had appeared to them on the evening of his resurrection. A week later, when confronted with evidence he could not deny, he became the first disciple to openly declare who Jesus really was—**“my Lord and my God”** (John 20:24-29). From this point on they constantly referred to Jesus in terms that could only be used of one who was more than merely human, who was in fact divine.³ Of course, there were still issues they had to work through. How did all this fit in with the strict monotheism in which they had been raised? The church spent many years debating the relationships that existed within the trinitarian nature of God, and how Jesus could be both human and divine, and such debates continue today. However, the rest of the New Testament clearly presents Jesus as the Creator

² In the booklet *Is Jesus Really God* I have listed all the things that Jesus said about himself, things that no ordinary human being could say unless seriously deluded.

³ In my book *Why did Jesus Die? Unearthing the meaning of the Cross*, in the chapter ‘The Cross in Acts’, I have listed all the terms used about Jesus by the early preachers of the gospel.

and Sustainer of the material universe (Colossians 1:15-17; Hebrews 1:1-3), the one **“in [whom] all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form”** (Colossians 2:9), “the Lord” who is to be worshipped along with his Father (e.g. Revelation 5:9-14), the Judge of the human race (e.g. Matthew 25:31-46; Acts 17:31; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10) and the one who will one day return in power to usher in God’s eternal kingdom (e.g. 1 Corinthians 15:24,25). The light of the knowledge of God’s glory [is] displayed in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). Altogether greater than the angels, and worshipped by them, he **“was made lower than the angels for a little while”** (Hebrews 1:5-13; 2:5-9). He **“is the same yesterday and today and forever”** (Hebrews 13:8). And if this is indeed who he is, then it excludes other possibilities. As the great Scottish theologian Hugh Ross Mackintosh expressed it:

When we come to know God in the face of Jesus Christ, we know we have not seen that Face elsewhere, and could not see it elsewhere. Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and there is no door, nor way, leading to the Father but by him.

As it was the resurrection that was the final and conclusive demonstration to Jesus’ disciples as to who he really was, it was this, rather than the manner of his entry into human existence that was the focus of their preaching in the early days of the gospel. Von Camenhausen, in *Virgin Birth*, has this to say about the lack of emphasis in the beginning on the manner of Jesus’ birth:

Mark and John stand over against the infancy stories in Matthew and Luke; and almost all primitive Christian literature confesses by its silence that the ‘doctrine’ of the virgin birth was foreign to it, or at least a matter of secondary importance or indifference.

However, that does not mean that it has no importance or that it is not worth celebrating. After all, the angels celebrated it and had very good reason to do so, because of who he was and what he had come to achieve.

It is still the story of the risen Christ today that gives meaning to our celebration of his birth. John H. Westerhoff III, in *A Pilgrim People: Learning Through the Church Year*, puts this eloquently:

Now is the time to sing, envision, enact, and retell a story of God coming unexpectedly in the worst of times as a baby born poor, born homeless, born to die that all human life might be transformed and dreams made real. It’s God’s Good News—but only because we already know the story of Easter.

So, if Jesus is indeed who the New Testament declares him to be, then we have something here that is not only unique in human history, but obviously of great significance. Man on the moon pales into insignificance when we

think of God on earth. It explains the statement of the great Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon that “the greatest and most momentous fact which the history of the world records is the fact of Christ’s birth” or that of Charles Malik, the Lebanese philosopher and diplomat: “the hinge of history is Jesus Christ.” It means that, in the birth of Jesus, God was putting into motion a chain of events that has unimaginable consequences for the human race. Karl Barth wrote, “The mystery of the Incarnation unfolds into the mystery of Good Friday and Easter.” As Isaac Williams put it in *The Nativity*:

The unfathomable depths of the divine counsels were moved; the foundations of the great deep were broken up; the healing of the nations was issuing forth; but nothing was seen on the surface of human society but this slight rippling of the water.

In other words, what happened in the womb of Mary was setting in motion a chain of events that will ultimately result in the judgement of the world, the salvation of God’s people and the renewal of all creation.

This shaking of the foundations by the birth of Jesus is vividly pictured in the highly symbolic language of the book of Revelation. In chapter 12 we read that the birth of the “**male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre**” provokes the enmity of Satan (pictured here as “**an enormous red dragon**”) who attempts to “**devour her child the moment he was born**”. Satan is fully aware, not just of who he is, but the possible outcome of his birth and the defeat of all his own plans (see vv. 1-9).

Again, if Jesus was truly God, the Second Person of the Divine Trinity, he did not begin in Bethlehem. As Donald Macleod points out in *The Person of Christ*: “He is sent forth as one who already has being, not as one who comes into being by being sent.” Teilhard de Chardin, in an expressive comment on Paul’s description of Jesus in Colossians 1:15-20, put it like this:

The prodigious expanses of time before the first Christmas were not empty of Christ. They were imbued with the influx of his power. It was the ferment that stirred up the cosmic masses and directed the initial developments of the biosphere. It was the travail preceding his birth that accelerated the development of instinct and the birth of thought on earth. When Christ first appeared in the arms of Mary, he had already stirred up the world.

Isaiah’s prophecy, given 700 years before Christ’s birth, is significant in this respect: “**For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end**” (Isaiah 9:6,7). It was certainly true that a child was born in Bethlehem. But more than that, “a

son is given". God was offering us the gift of his eternal Son. Of course, there are mysteries here, which I will explore a little later. As Augustine put it in *On the Birthday of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, "The Heavens cannot contain him; a woman carried him in her bosom".

Though John, in his Gospel, gives no details of his birth, he tells us clearly who he was. **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...Through him all things were made...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth"** (1:1,3,14). One of the reasons he speaks of Jesus as the Word is that it is through him God communicates with us. This has obvious links back to the opening verses of the Bible—Genesis 1:1-3.

This point, that the baby resting in Mary's arms was indeed the Creator of the universe, is beautifully captured by Thomas Pestell (1584-1659) in his "Psalm for Christmas Day Morning":

*Behold the great Creator makes
Himself a house of clay,
A robe of virgin flesh He takes
Which He will wear for ay.*

*Hark, hark, the wise eternal Word
Like a weak infant cries!
In form of servant is the Lord,
And God in cradle lies.*

It is this emphasis on the person of Christ, who he really was, that makes sense of the virgin birth. However, before looking at the details of his birth and the questions it raises, let's explore the reasons why it matters who he was.

Why it matters who Jesus was

Does it really matter whether we believe Jesus was fully God and not fully human, or whether he was fully human and not fully God? I don't see how a being could be partly God, though being partly human could have more possibilities. There is, of course, the possibility that he was a minor God, created before this universe by God the Father, a view similar to the held by the Jehovah's Witnesses. However, I don't believe that fits the picture we are presented with in the New Testament, and when we look at all that was achieved by the cross, it seriously diminishes much of what Christians understand about God's grace and love. These are issues I explore in Part 2 of my book *Why Did Jesus Die? Unearthing the meaning of the Cross*. The way I propose to deal with it here is to look at two alternatives to the biblical understanding of who Jesus was.

Suppose Jesus was God, the Second Person of the divine Trinity, but was not fully human. First, it would seem to contradict all that the disciples observed of his human characteristics—his desire for friendship, his weariness, his hunger, his tears, and his expressions of emotion such as joy and distress.

Second, this would mean that the life that he lived on earth would have been lived without the limitations and temptations that we humans face daily. For us to live such a compassionate, dedicated and morally blameless life would be something altogether beyond our reach. After all, we are not God. To set him up as an example as to how we should live, to say **“Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did”** (1 John 2:6), would be a mockery. However, the Bible declares that he **“has been tempted in every way, just as we are”** (Hebrews 4:15). It also declares that it is **“Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted”** (Hebrews 2:18—the Greek word translated “temptation” can also have the meaning of “test” or “trial”).

One of the great benefits of being a Christian is in knowing that there is no trial or experience of suffering that I may have to face with which he is not in some way personally acquainted. It is true that he performed remarkable miracles of healing and of power over nature. However, he made it clear that this was not done from his own resources, but the result of his Father performing the miracles through him, and in doing so, bearing witness as to who he really was (John 5:36). He declared that he could do nothing of himself but was totally dependent on his Father to do these works (John 5:19,30). In other words, though eternally God, he chose to live on earth with all our human limitations, dependent on his Father to do what needed to be done through the Holy Spirit within him, the same Spirit we receive when we commit our lives to him (Matthew 12:28; Ephesians 1:13,14).

There is a third and more serious consequence of his not being fully human. The New Testament constantly and consistently declares that it was through what Jesus achieved for us on the cross that we are saved from the consequences of our sins and reconciled to God. It was only as a human being that he could die as our representative and bear the weight of our rebellion against God. The writer of Hebrews spells this out: **“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death...For this reason he had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make**

atonement for the sins of the people” (2:14-17). In a later passage in the same letter, he quotes from Psalm 40:6-8 and refers it to Jesus: **“When Christ came into the world, he said, ‘Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, ‘Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, my God’ ”** (Hebrews 10:5-7). As he explains elsewhere in the letter, the sacrifices of the Old Testament were not effective in dealing with sin, but were signposts looking forward to the cross. But note what Jesus says: **“a body you prepared for me”**. It was in this human body that God prepared for him in the womb of Mary that he was able to offer himself as the perfect sacrifice for our sins.

James Denny rightly insisted, in his significant book *The Death of Christ*:

The New Testament knows nothing of an incarnation which can be defined apart from its relation to atonement...not Bethlehem, but Calvary is the focus of revelation and any construction of Christianity which ignores or denies this distorts Christianity by putting it out of focus.

I explore this theme in greater detail in my book on the cross, mentioned above. As Mary Ashcroft put it in an article in *Christianity Today*, ‘Gift Wrapping God’, “The naked baby must be flesh so that God can be stripped again, trading his dusty garments for the splinters of the cross.” Or as Martin Niemoller, the German pastor who spoke up against the Nazis, expressed it, the cradle and the cross were hewn from the same tree.

The New Testament places some emphasis on Jesus becoming “flesh” (John 1:14). In fact, John says in his first letter, **“This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of antichrist”** (1 John 4:2,3).

In an article in *Christianity Today*, ‘Incarnate Forever’, the noted theologian James Packer says, “Without diminishing his divinity, he added to it all that is involved in being human.” It is this truth—that Jesus, though fully divine, became fully human—we describe as the “Incarnation”, a word derived from Latin meaning “in the flesh”. And the picture given us in the New Testament is of a Jesus who is still both human and divine. C. S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity*, says, “The man in Christ rose again, not only God. That is the whole point.” John Stott, in *Authentic Christianity*, writes:

The Incarnation was a historical and unrepeatable event with permanent consequences. Reigning at God’s right hand today is the man Christ Jesus, still human as well as divine, though now his humanity has been glorified.

Having assumed our human nature, he has never discarded it, and he never will.

Job in his distress cried out, **“If only there were someone to arbitrate between us, to lay a hand on us both, someone to remove God’s rod from me, so that his terror would frighten me no more. Then I would speak up without fear of him”** (Job 9:33-35). It is in Jesus’ capacity as both fully human and fully divine that he is able to be the perfect high priest and advocate for us in the presence of God. **“For there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus, himself human”** (1 Timothy 2:5).

The noted journalist and writer Malcolm Muggeridge eloquently expressed what this truth meant personally to him:

Surveying the abysmal chasm between my certainty that everything that human beings try to achieve was inadequate to the point of being farcical, and my equal certainty that human love was the image of God’s love irradiating the whole universe, I grasped a cable-bridge, frail, swaying, but passable. And this bridge, this reconciliation between black despair of lying bound and gagged in the tiny dungeon of the ego and soaring upward into the white radiance of God’s universal love—this bridge was the incarnation.

Suppose Jesus was fully human, but not divine. First, it would mean that the testimony given in the New Testament from so many different angles indicating his divine status, some of which we have mentioned above, was a false testimony. Second, it would mean that he must have been such a remarkable human being that God chose him for the special mission of bringing salvation to the world, which is what the Bible is all about. At his baptism God spoke from heaven and spoke of him as **“my Son whom I love”** (Matthew 3:17). We could perhaps imagine that he had led such a devoted life that God chose to adopt him into this special relationship and for this special mission. However, this would mean that Jesus was not speaking the truth when he spoke of the special relationship he had with his Father before he entered human existence (e.g. John 8:58; 17:5).

The greatest disadvantage of such a view is that it would contradict all that the New Testament declares about the amazing depth of the love of God revealed in the cross and how it could be an event that brings such hope to a suffering world. How could God be such a wonderful God, as the Bible declares him to be, if he had chosen an ordinary human being, or even some kind of archangel or minor god to do his suffering for him? Is God so busy or detached from ordinary human experience that he must delegate the rather troublesome business of saving the world to an underling? How could one who was *merely* human, die for the sins of others? And how could the death

of such a human set in motion a process that would finally result in the renewal of the whole of creation, as the Bible declares is achieved by the death and resurrection of Jesus (e.g. Romans 8:21; Colossians 1:19, 20). George Carey, in *God Incarnate*, says, “In a way we have to risk speaking of an incarnate-atonement, because it is one movement, one action, of God who redeems.”

Also, our Christian understanding of God’s attitude to the incredible suffering that is experienced in this world is so much dependent on the fact that Jesus was himself God. Peter Keefe, in *Making Sense out of Suffering*, makes this point clearly when considering the question of how we could get God off the hook if he is a truly loving God and yet created a world where there is so much suffering. He says:

God’s answer is Jesus. Jesus is not God off the hook but God on the hook. That’s why the doctrine of the divinity of Christ is crucial: If that is not God there on the cross but only a good man, then God is not on the hook, on the cross, in our suffering. And if God is not on the hook, then God is not off the hook. How could he sit there in heaven and ignore our tears?

And if Jesus was *merely* human, how do we explain his influence in history? How do we explain the fact that so much of our greatest art is devoted to the theme of Jesus—Jesus born, Jesus worshipped by shepherds and wise men, Jesus teaching, healing, dying and rising again, Jesus in glory? How is it that Jesus is the theme of so much of our greatest works of music and literature? How is it that it is Jesus who has been the inspiration for millions of acts of love and sacrifice over the last 2,000 years? As Jesus dared to say to some of the religious leaders of his day, “**one greater than Solomon is here**” (Matthew 12:42). Charles Gore wrote in *The Incarnation of the Son of God* (1891):

I do not think it can be reasonably [said] that Christianity has meant historically, faith in the person of Jesus Christ, considered as very God incarnate, so much so that if this faith were gone, Christianity in its characteristic features would be gone also.

Dorothy Sayers, the celebrated writer of crime fiction who had a passion for theology, and was a very clear thinker, summed up the importance of this truth very bluntly in a lecture she gave during the Second World War:

The central dogma of the Incarnation is that by which relevance stands or falls. If Christ was only man, then He is entirely irrelevant to any thought about God; if He is only God, then He is entirely irrelevant to any experience of human life.

It is the fact that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human that provides the foundation for the message the New Testament declares, a message so remarkable and transforming that it is worth proclaiming to all the nations (Matthew 28:19; Luke 24:47) and taking to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The purpose of his coming was not merely to communicate God's message to us, nor even to share friendship with us on our level, but to share his very nature with us by transforming us from within. This is what the New Testament teaching about the Holy Spirit is all about, the Spirit we receive when we put our faith in Jesus (e.g. Romans 8:15,16; Galatians 4:6,7).

In a very real sense, Jesus was beginning a new race. Griffith Thomas expressed it like this in *The Principles of Theology*:

The first Adam had failed, and a new race was necessary, of which Jesus Christ was the new Head. This necessitated a fresh creation, and the Virgin Birth meant this.

The second-century bishop and theologian Irenaeus expressed it well: "He became what we are that he might make us what he is." Or as Augustine said of Jesus, "the one who, already Son of God, came to become Son of man, so as to give us who were already sons of men the power to become sons of God." Calvin filled that out further still: "The Son of God became Son of Man, and received what is ours in such a way that he transferred to us what is his, making that which is his by nature to become ours through grace."

Why the virgin birth makes sense

If all we have been saying so far is the true picture, that Jesus was fully God yet became fully human, a scenario which, I believe, is the only one that fits all the facts, then the question presents itself as to how he became human. I have yet to come across any theory that presents a more logical explanation than the one we have in the Bible: that Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary before she had sexual relations with Joseph, to whom she was engaged at the time. If Joseph was his biological father, then how could their offspring be the One who had existed from eternity in a Father-Son relationship with the eternal God? James Orr once wrote, "Among those who reject the virgin birth I do not know a single one who takes, in other respects, an adequate view of the Person and work of the Saviour."

It is interesting that Matthew traces the ancestry of Joseph back to King David through his son Solomon. I believe that it is this line that gave him the legal title to the throne of David. As the angel Gabriel said to Mary, "**The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David**" (Luke 1:32). This

had been foretold six centuries before (Jeremiah 23:5,6; 30:9; 33:14-26). However, though Joseph was the legal father of Jesus, Matthew does not say that Joseph was his biological father, but **“the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus”** (1:16). Luke, however, gives another genealogy through Nathan, another son of David. He begins by stating that Jesus **“was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli”** (not of Jacob as in Matthew—Luke 3:23). Some have thought that the phrase “so it was thought, of Joseph” could be put in parenthesis, so it would read something like “(it was *thought* of Joseph, but *really*) of Heli”, Heli being the father of Mary. This would make Jesus a flesh-and-blood descendant of David, but through his mother, not his human father. Not being a Greek scholar, I cannot say how legitimate a translation that is. Whether or not this is indeed the genealogical line of Mary, Paul states in Romans 1:2-4 that Jesus was a direct descendant of David, which must have been through his mother. He speaks of **“the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life [literally: “according to the flesh”] was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.”**

It is interesting that when God established his covenant with Abraham, initiating new possibilities for his relationship with humans, he initiated it by means of a miracle birth when Sarah was ninety years old. **“God...said to Abraham, ‘As for...Sarah, I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of many nations’”** (Genesis 17:15,16). This covenant blessing is echoed in the words of Luke 1:28,42, **“Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you...Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!”** Mary is a sign of the continuity of the people of God, of Israel and the Church.

What is plain here is that we are entering the sphere of the supernatural. Peter Kreeft, in *Making Sense Out of Suffering*, says:

The incarnation was the biggest shock in history. Even his own people, whom he had prepared for 2,000 years for this event, could not digest it: “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not” (John 1:11). Even his own disciples could not understand him. It was the unthinkable, “the absolute paradox” (as Kierkegaard calls it) that the eternal God should have a beginning in time, that the maker of Mary’s womb should be made in Mary’s womb: that the first one became second, the independent one became dependent as a little baby, dependent for his very earthly existence — not on

“the will of the flesh” but on the new Eve saying yes to the angel where the old Eve had said yes to the devil.

We can debate the question as to where Jesus got his Y chromosome, which one would imagine would be necessary to be truly human (Mary would have had only X chromosomes), as do scientists John Polkinghorne and Arthur Peacocke,⁴ but we cannot put a limit on what God can do. After all, the angel Gabriel said to Mary, **“No word from God will ever fail”** (Luke 1:37). Peter Larson, in *Prism* says:

Despite our efforts to keep him out, God intrudes. The life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities: a virgin’s womb and an empty tomb. Jesus entered our world through a door marked “No Entrance” and left through a door marked “No Exit.”

As P. T. Forsyth put it, “The incarnation would be equally a miracle however Jesus entered the world.”

The least we can say is, if God wanted our love and affection, he moved correctly. The experience of birth and family life are among our most intimate and precious experiences. And a baby growing up in a family learns all about people.

What is perhaps the greater miracle is the amazing condescension of God. As Madeleine L’Engle expressed it in *A Stone for a Pillow*:

The Virgin Birth has never been a major stumbling block in my struggle with Christianity; it’s far less mind-boggling than the Power of all Creation stooping so low as to become one of us.

Or, as Michael Card put it in an article in *Decision*, “It was not a matter of theology but of love—and that makes it a mystery.”

In his book *Quantum Physics and Theology*, John Polkinghorne, a top theoretical physicist and Anglican clergyman, gives an interesting analogy from science to the human and divine nature of Christ. In the nineteenth century science had shown quite decisively that light possessed wave-like properties. However, early in the twentieth century, phenomena were discovered that could only be understood on the basis of accepting the revolutionary ideas of Max Planck and Albert Einstein, which treated light as sometimes behaving in a particle-like way, as if it were composed of packets of energy. Yet the notion of wave/particle duality appeared to be absolutely nonsensical. From 1900 to 1925, the physicists had to live with the paradox of the wave/particle duality unresolved. However, the theoretical discoveries

⁴ Peacocke: *Theology for a Scientific Age*, pp. 275-79; Polkinghorne: *Science and Christian Belief*, pp. 143-45; *Scientists as Theologians*, pp. 78-80.

of Werner Heisenberger and Erwin Schrödinger in 1925-26 brought to birth an internally consistent theory that required the adoption of novel and unanticipated ways of thought. Similarly, the quest for a deeper understanding of the revelation of God given in the New Testament eventually led to a Trinitarian understanding of the nature of God, as was spelled out in the Councils of Nicaea, A.D. 325, and Constantinople, A.D. 381. It also led to an incarnational understanding of the two natures of Christ, human and divine, present in one person, spelled out at Chalcedon in A.D. 451.

Of course, dealing with God takes place on different terms from our study of the physical world, as it involves awe and worship and obedience. Quantum physics has provided scientists with some understanding of reality, but for eighty years has had to live with the fact that not all its problems have yielded to solutions. Niels Bohr once said that anyone who claimed fully to understand quantum physics had just shown that they had not begun to appreciate properly what it is all about. This echoes an earlier statement of William Temple when he said, "If any man says he understands the relation of Deity to humanity in Christ, he only makes it clear that he does not at all understand what is meant by Incarnation."

A further thought worth considering is that God no doubt had the incarnation in mind when he first created humans "**in his own image**" (Genesis 1:27), whatever we may understand by that term. I find the following illustration thought provoking. A cube can be 100 percent cube in three dimensions and 100 percent square in two dimensions *only because* the square is the image (in two dimensions) of the cube. Jesus Christ is 100 percent God in his divine dimensions and 100 percent human in his human dimensions only because humans in the first place were created in the image of God.

Some feminists have alleged that the virgin birth is somehow degrading to women. However, it completely excludes males so I don't see how that is implied. Rather, it is a sign of God's initiative and the futility of all efforts to achieve salvation by human effort.

One problem that remains is the question of Christ's sinlessness. The New Testament indicates that he was without sin (e.g. 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; 1 John 3:5). It is sometime argued that the virgin birth is no aid to the explanation of Christ's sinlessness, as the taint of sin would be conveyed from one parent as readily as from two. However, the conception of Jesus in Mary's womb was not the creation of a new personality. It was the entering into a new mode of existence of a Personality that had already existed from eternity and was already known in angelic circles as "**the holy**

one “. Beyond that we cannot go. The angel Gabriel declared to Mary, **“The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God”** (Luke 1:35).

What the virgin birth reveals

The story is told of a kindergarten teacher who was supervising some artwork of children. She stopped to ask a child what she was drawing. The child replied, “God.” The teacher gently reminded the young girl that no one knows what God looks like. Without raising her head, the girl went on drawing and said, “They will in a minute!”

The many religions and beliefs that exist in the world bear eloquent testimony to the problem of knowing what God is really like, if indeed he exists at all. However, if the virgin birth and all it implies is really true, and God himself grew from childhood and lived among us for thirty-three years, then we have a sure place to start exploring. It means that, in the person of Jesus, God has made himself both knowable and available. The New Testament declares that **“The Son is the image of the invisible God”** (Colossians 1:15) and Jesus himself dared to say, **“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father”** (John 14:9). Christians have always claimed that in his character, in his actions, and in his words, Jesus has revealed an accurate picture of God, simply because of who he was. It is my purpose here to focus on a few things indicated to us about the character and ways of God from the fact of the virgin birth.

The amazing condescension of God. Yancey, in *Christianity Today*, expresses it eloquently:

Unimaginably, the Maker of all things shrinks down, down, down, so small as to become a single, barely visible fertilised egg. And the egg divides and redivides until a foetus takes shape, and finally a baby comes from Mary’s loins to join puny human beings on their speck of a planet.

C. S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, “If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab.”

When Queen Elizabeth visited the United States, reporters delighted in spelling out all that was included in her four thousand pounds of luggage. There were two outfits for every occasion, a mourning outfit in case someone died, forty pints of plasma, and white kid leather toilet seat covers. She brought along her own hairdresser, two valets, and a host of other attendants. A brief visit of royalty to a foreign country can easily cost twenty million dollars. When the Lord of the universe visited our planet he brought nothing but himself.

God's passionate love. Marcion, an influential heretic of the second century, had cried, "Away with that lowly manger, those dirty swaddling clothes." He denied that Jesus had ever been born humanly at all. How could one who was truly divine be associated with messy nappies and afterbirth? In *Grace Choices*, Jeff Lucas gives the answer:

The gap between the throne of God and the stable of Bethlehem is surely the widest chasm, certainly in terms of contrast, that there has ever been. But what motivated such a journey, if it was not passion? Mark Stibbe comments on the passion and pain of that mission: "The Father loves us with a selfless passion. The word passion comes from a Latin word that means suffering. The Father's love for us is a love that cost, that hurts, that suffers."

God often does his greatest work through insignificant people and events. C. S. Lewis, writing about God's plan, said: "The whole thing narrows and narrows, until at last it comes down to a little point, small as the point of a spear—a Jewish girl at her prayers." In *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey gives a significant example of the difference between human expectations and God's way of doing things:

Jesus was born under Caesar Augustus, at a time when hope wafted through the Roman Empire. More than any other ruler, Augustus raised the expectations of what a leader could accomplish and what a society could achieve. It was Augustus, in fact, who first borrowed the Greek word for "Gospel" or "Good News" and applied it as a label for the new world order represented by his reign. The empire declared him a god and established rites of worship. His enlightened and stable regime, many believed, would last forever, a final solution to the problem of government.

Meanwhile, in an obscure corner of Augustus's empire the birth of a baby named Jesus was overlooked by the chroniclers of the day. We know about him mainly through four books written years after his death, at a time when less than one-half percent of the Roman world had ever heard of him. Jesus' biographers would also borrow the word gospel, proclaiming a different kind of new world order altogether. They would mention Augustus only once, a passing reference to set a date of a census that ensured Jesus would be born in Bethlehem.

God's power is often most revealed in events that, from a human perspective, appear as weakness. God spelled this out to Paul when he requested healing for his "thorn in the flesh": "**My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness**" (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). This principle is clearly revealed in the virgin birth, where he came in dependency and weakness; not in an outward show of power to batter his

people into submission, but as an act of love and enticement to bring about a response of love in return. This truth is beautifully expressed in a poem by Robert Southwell (c. 1561-95), 'New Heaven, New War':

*This little babe so few days old,
Is come to rifle Satan's fold;
All hell doth at his presence quake,
Though he himself for cold doth shake;
For in this weak, unarmed wise,
The gates of hell he will surprise.
With tears he fights and wins the field,
His naked breast stands for a shield;
His battering shot are babish cries,
His arrows made of weeping eyes,
His martial ensigns cold and need,
And feeble flesh his warrior's steed.*

Oswald Chambers wrote in *The Shade of His Hand*, "Jesus Christ founded His Kingdom on the weakest link of all—a Baby."

This truth was even more clearly revealed through his death. As Paul declares, "**He was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power**" (2 Corinthians 13:4).

He came to serve. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul says, "[**Christ Jesus**], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (2:6-8). The Greek word for "made himself nothing" is literally "emptied himself", and this is plainly illustrated in the virgin birth. That he did so in order to serve our needs, particularly our greatest need, that of forgiveness, is further and even more clearly revealed by his cross.

The courage of God. The journalist and philosopher G. K. Chesterton made this point: "Alone of all creeds, Christianity has added courage to the virtues of the Creator. The need for such courage began with Jesus' first night on earth and did not end until his last."

Jesus is Lord of creation. Most artists of the Nativity scene have followed the long-standing tradition of including animals—an ox, an ass or sheep—in their painting, as do Christmas family cribs. Although there is no mention of these in the gospel records, Alister McGrath, in *Incarnation*, points out that commentators on the birth of Christ, from the second century on, have linked the scene with Isaiah 1:3, "**The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner's manager.**" He writes:

It seems that this prophetic passage was then linked with the birth of Christ, thus reminding us that the whole of the created order is involved in the birth of Christ and the new creation which will result from his incarnation, death and resurrection. The only witnesses to the birth of Christ were the animals who were temporarily deprived of their feeding trough so that Christ might use it as his crib. Yet their witness can be seen as the created order tacitly acknowledging that their creator has entered his own domain to begin the vast work of recreation and renewal from within.

The love of God for his creation. In the story of the creation in Genesis 1, we are told six times that God saw that what he created was good. This is in sharp contrast with some other religions that see the material world as something evil and from which we must eventually escape. In this sense Christianity could be said to be the most materialistic of all religions. In *Nature, Man and God*, 1934, the influential Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, wrote:

It may be safely said that one ground for the hope of Christianity, that it may make good its claim to be the one true faith, lies in the fact that it is the most avowedly materialistic of all the great religions. It affords an expectation that it may be able to control the material, precisely because it does not ignore or deny it, but roundly asserts alike the reality of matter and its subordination. Its own most central saying is: The 'Word was made flesh', where the last term was, no doubt, chosen because of its specially materialistic associations. By the very nature of its central doctrine Christianity is committed to a belief in the ultimate significance of the historical process, and in the reality of matter and its place in the divine scheme.

Temple was alluding here to the three great material truths, namely creation, incarnation and resurrection. God's love for his creation, and his commitment to it, could not be seen more clearly than in the fact that he himself, in the person of his Son, was prepared to become a part of it. And he is still a part of it, for when he rose from the dead he did not discard his human nature. The whole of creation will share in the renewal of all things, as Paul makes clear in Romans 8:20,21.

The revealer of God's glory. After declaring that "**The Word became flesh**" (John 1:14), John immediately goes on to say, "**We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.**" No doubt John was not only thinking of his birth, but his total life as a human: his growth, his ministry, his death and resurrection. Later, he can speak of the Father glorifying the Son and the Son glorifying the Father (e.g. 17:1,4,5). The theme of Christ as the revealer of God's glory is

traditionally associated with the season of Epiphany, which is celebrated shortly after Christmas. Historians see it as having its origins in the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, which celebrated God's glory in covenant, light and water. Traditionally, this is linked with the visit of the wise men from the East who came to worship the infant Jesus. Christian theology has always seen this as an anticipation of the revelation of God's glory to the Gentiles.

Alister McGrath points out in *Incarnation* how Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641) captures this theme imaginatively in his remarkable painting *Nativity*. The painting focuses on the baby Jesus resting in the lap of Mary. Mary is in the act of removing the cloth that surrounds her child, which seems to indicate the divine unveiling we call revelation. A light emanates from the child which begins to illumine the surrounding darkness. Mary is bathed in a glow which comes not from herself, but is reflected from that of her son.

Inklings of glory to come. The fertilisation of the ovum in Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit marked the combination of the divine with the human. The Son of God and the son of the human were the one and the same being and are still so in glory. This is not too different from the experience of believers at conversion. When we put our trust in Jesus, accept him as Lord and Saviour, receive him into our lives, however you like to express it (the Bible puts it different ways), then God gives us his Holy Spirit to dwell within us. We are "**born of the Spirit**" (John 3:8) and we too become sons of God. Whereas Jesus was *the* Son of God, we become sons and daughters by adoption. "**The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry ... 'Father' "** (Romans 8:15). Peter, describing this experience, says we "**participate in the divine nature**" (2 Peter 1:4). We will share this nature with him in the re-creation. "**Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory**" (Romans 8:17).

Some thoughts about Mary

Christians have tended to be divided over the role of Mary in the biblical story. Catholics have given her a prominence and ministry which is not supported by Scripture but which they would claim has been revealed through further revelation since apostolic days. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, that Mary was born without the stain of original sin, was declared by the Council of Basel in 1439, though it had been rejected by almost all theological leaders for the first 1200 years of the church. In 1854 Pope Pius IX, in the bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, decreed that this is "a doctrine revealed by God and therefore must be firmly and constantly held by all the

faithful." Because of an unhealthy association between marital sex and sin, a tradition developed, which can be traced to some early church Fathers, that Mary kept her virginity before, during, and after the birth of Jesus. This tradition, commonly known as Mary's "perpetual divinity", entered official Roman doctrine. Many councils referred to "Mary ever Virgin". This was associated with the unbiblical view that it is holier to remain a virgin or celibate than to be joined in marriage, a view that was declared at the Council of Trent (1545-63). Any mention of Jesus' siblings in the New Testament (Matthew 12:46; Mark 3:31-34; 6:3; John 7:3; Acts 1:14; 1 Corinthians 9:5; Galatians 1:19) is considered by the Catholic Church to refer to his cousins rather than his brothers and sisters. Very rarely the word "brothers" might refer to close relatives such as cousins, though its translation as "cousin" in Mark 3:35, "Whoever does the will of God is my cousin", does not make sense in that context. Jesus is described as Mary's "**firstborn**" son in Luke 2:7.

During the Middle Ages, in contemporary Catholic worship, Mary increasingly began to fulfil the role of mediator between the worshipper and Jesus; she was the person to whom one could pray and whose requests to her Son would not be denied. In this respect she tended to fulfil the role that is given in Scripture to the Holy Spirit. In some respects she also began to be given a role in our salvation, which in Scripture is given to Jesus alone. Recent efforts to have Mary officially recognised as *mediatrix* of all graces (meaning she shares in the distribution of the benefits of salvation), or a *co-redemptrix* with Christ himself (meaning she shares somehow in Christ's work of redemption), have raised the fear that lifting up Mary can only bring down Jesus (see John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Corinthians 3:11; 1 Timothy 2:5). The "bodily assumption" of Mary (the belief that she was taken body and soul into heaven after she died without seeing corruption), though held as a possible and probable opinion by many, was defined as a necessary article of faith by Pope Pius XII in 1950.

In reaction to all this, Protestants have tended to go to the other extreme and ignore the role of Mary altogether. However one may view her, she can certainly be taken as a great role model for Christian discipleship. Her humble response to the word of God given by the angel Gabriel is a great example of submission and obedience to his will. She must have known well the stigma she would have to face from the local community by becoming pregnant before her formal marriage to Joseph. There are clear hints in the New Testament of this stigma that she (and later Jesus) was to face. When the people of Nazareth called Jesus "son of Mary" thirty years later, the whispered sneers would have been deafening (Mark 6:3). Jews in Jesus day took their father's name as their surname. Significantly, there is no other

instance in Jewish literature of a Jew who was named, like Jesus, after his mother. All the other family members are mentioned on this occasion without naming the father. A further possible hint is in John 8:41. Mary may well have had a visible bump on her wedding day. It would have been slightly more socially acceptable if Joseph had been the father, but he no doubt denied this. None but the most trusted friends would have believed Mary's story had she told them.

She may well have considered the possibility of losing the one who was to be her husband. That this nearly happened is recorded. **"Because Joseph ... was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly"** (Matthew 1:19). Engagement in that culture was regarded as so serious that it took a "divorce" to break it. It took another angelic visit to convince Joseph to go ahead with the wedding. It says much for him that, with Mary, he was prepared to accept the "public disgrace". I have no doubt that it was a relief to them both to have to make the journey to Bethlehem to escape the local gossip. That Mary would experience further suffering was indicated by the aged Simeon when she brought the infant Jesus to the temple for the purification rites that were decreed after the birth of a child: **"a sword will pierce your own soul too"** (Luke 2:35). The word "Mary" means "bitterness" and she accepted her lot for the Lord's sake.

Mary's worship of God, her faith in the promises of God to her ancestors and his activities throughout history, are beautifully illustrated in the prayer she uttered on her visit to her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1:46-55), commonly known as the "Magnificat". In this respect she bridges the Old and New Testaments. Her trust in her Son, which had no doubt grown over the years as she had watched him mature, is shown in the story of his first miracle at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1-11). Her devotion to him and his mission is plain from the fact that she was among the last at the cross when the male disciples had fled, apart from **"the disciple whom Jesus loved"**, and among the first followers who gathered in prayer after his final departure to heaven (John 19:25-27; Acts 1:14).

In 1886 A. Stewart Walsh published *Mary: The Queen of the House of David and Mother of Jesus*. A volume of 626 pages, it is written in praise of motherhood in general, of which Mary is the ideal example, and is highly romanticised and fictionalised. However, near the end of this fanciful work is this plea for a proper biblical recognition of Mary:

No friend of the divine Son can dethrone Him by honouring her aright: indeed, as He Himself did. It was of Him she spoke when exclaiming: My soul doth rejoice in God my Saviour! Can one truly honour Him and despise

and ignore the woman who gave Him human birth? Can one have His mind and forget her for whom love was uppermost to Him in His supreme last hours? Can one honour her aright and yet dethrone the son whom she enthroned? She bore Him, then lived for Him, and was His mother, His teacher and His disciple. He revered her, she worshipped Him.

The historical reliability of the birth accounts

Many New Testament scholars have cast doubts on the historicity of Matthew's and Luke's accounts of the birth of Jesus. I suspect it is usually because they have questions about his full divinity. As I have indicated above, once you accept, on other grounds, that he is fully divine and fully human, the Second Person of the divine Trinity who took on human flesh and blood, the virgin birth makes perfect sense. It certainly provides a better explanation for how he entered this world than do alternative suggestions.

However, I believe there are perfectly good historical reasons for accepting the birth stories as they stand. The most compelling argument comes from Luke's contacts with the earliest sources. From his own account in the book of Acts of his journey to Jerusalem with Paul at the conclusion of Paul's third missionary journey, we can estimate that Luke spent about two years there during A.D. 55-57 (Acts 21-26). From Luke's own writing, scholars can date this pretty accurately. This would be approximately twenty-five years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Now let's consider the following scenario.

The obvious original source of these stories would have been Mary herself. She alone heard the words of Gabriel; she alone was with Elizabeth; perhaps she was the one who told about Zechariah's song; only she and Joseph knew about the shepherds and the wise men from the east. As Jesus grew to manhood and other brothers and sisters came along, she would have talked many times with them about these events. By the time Jesus' siblings reached adulthood these stories would have been common family knowledge. We know that Mary and her other sons were among the earliest disciples gathered in Jerusalem in the weeks following the resurrection and on the day of Pentecost when the church was born (Acts 1:12-14). As stories about Jesus circulated among the disciples as part of the earliest teaching of the new Christians, led by the remaining eleven apostles, the stories surrounding his birth would no doubt have been included. We know that James, the brother of Jesus, eventually assumed a leadership role in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:12-22; 21:17,18; Galatians 1:18,19), a position he maintained until the mid-sixties, when, according the historian Josephus, he was martyred by the Jewish authorities by being thrown down from the

temple. There were certainly enough of the earliest disciples around who were fully aware of these stories and who could correct any distortions or mythical tales that were circulating in the Christian community.

During Luke's two years in the area he would certainly have got to know James well, if not other members of the family who may have been still in Judea. In the booklet *Did the Writers of the New Testament Get Their Picture of Jesus Right?* I have given good reasons why New Testament scholars regard Luke as a sound historian. Though we know he used a number of sources for his final book, I can imagine he would have spent many hours with James questioning him about these events, and even making extensive notes. Whenever it was that he sent out his final copy, the stories he gathered in those years would have provided much of his material. He tells us himself, right at the beginning of his work, that he got it from eyewitnesses and **"carefully investigated everything from the beginning ... so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught"** (Luke 1:2-4).

If Jesus was born around 5 B.C., the probable date, and if Mary was then in her late teens, she would have been nearly eighty when Luke visited Jerusalem. We have no record as to when she died, though it is not beyond the realms of possibility that Luke knew her. There is a significant phrase that occurs twice in Luke's stories of Jesus' birth and childhood: **"But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart"** (2:19) and **"But his mother treasured all these things in her heart"** (2:51). How did Luke know that? It sounds very much like the sort of comment that Luke would record if Mary had told him the stories herself. However, if it was not Mary, it was no doubt James or other family members.

There are other good reasons for accepting the historical reliability of these accounts. One is the fact that they are told in a straightforward way, with no attempt to provide any explanation or conclusions. This is typical of all of Luke's writing both in Luke and Acts. He is at pains to describe things just as they happened.

Another point is that Luke was a well-educated Greek, the only non-Jewish writer of the New Testament. There is a good deal of evidence from both his books that he was writing for a Gentile audience. And yet the birth stories of Jesus are as *Jewish* as anything in the New Testament. There is not a single parallel in all Hellenistic religion and mythology to the story of the virgin birth of Christ. All similar stories from Greek mythology fall into the class of legends of a woman becoming pregnant through intercourse with a divine being, a notion utterly repellent to the biblical mind. To the Greek mind, it was improper that an uncreated God should link himself with something created in this way. The word "born" as applied to God would

have been a stumbling block to the pagan mind of the early Christian world. And yet Luke records the stories as he does because that was the way it happened. It is difficult to imagine motives for inventing the story of the virgin birth if it was not a historical fact.

When we compare Matthew's and Luke's accounts of the birth of Jesus, it is plain that they are two totally independent accounts. In matters of perspective, organisation of their material, and almost every other detail, the two accounts are different. They refer to different events surrounding the birth. Neither writer was dependent on the other, nor would it seem, did either know of the other's work. And yet, in spite of this, the one major item they include—an item which goes beyond what is expected in the story—is the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. This strongly suggests that it was a common tradition within the early church prior to the writing of both Matthew's and Luke's Gospels.

In spite of all the rational arguments that point to the fact of the virgin birth of Jesus, God never compels belief. Martin Luther once remarked, with some wisdom, that the incarnation consists of three miracles: "The first, that God became man; the second, that a virgin was a mother; and the third, that the heart of man should believe this."

The biblical story in its historical setting

It may be helpful, at this point, to go through the biblical story as it is presented to us in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, and add appropriate comments to give some historical context.

Luke's account

Luke tells us that it was "**in the time of Herod the king of Judea**" that the angel Gabriel appeared to the priest Zechariah when he was chosen by lot to burn incense before the Most Holy place in the temple (1:5-10). Herod, a Jew of Idumaeans descent, had been given the title "king of the Jews" by the Roman senate, and reigned from 40 to 4 B.C. as a loyal "friend and ally" of the Romans.

There were many priests and not enough duties for them all, so lots were cast to see who would perform each function. The offering of incense was regarded as a great privilege, and a priest could not do this more than once in his entire life. Some priests never did. Other priests would go into the Holy Place with him and then retire, leaving him alone. Other worshippers waited in the outer court. This would have been the most important moment in his life. Luke describes Gabriel's message to Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth will have a son to be called John and some details concerning the

boy. He records Zechariah's initial doubt, his resulting muteness, and Elizabeth's pregnancy (Luke 1:11-23).

Luke then describes the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Mary, "**a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.**" This occurred "**in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy**". Gabriel announces Mary's conception and the nature of the child. Mary obediently accepts her role (Luke 1:26-38). The angel Gabriel also appears in the Old Testament where he is the messenger God sends to interpret visions of the future for Daniel and who speaks of the coming of the "**Anointed One**" (Daniel 8:15 -26; 9:21-27).

Luke next records Mary's visit to Elizabeth, spoken of as a "relative", "**in the hill country of Judea**" (1:39-56). As New Testament scholar R. T. France has noted, "One is old and has no children; the other is young and has no husband." But both are pregnant. And both have good news for the world. This visit may have occurred before Mary told Joseph about the pregnancy.

Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, welcomes her as "**the mother of my Lord**" and pronounces her blessing on mother and baby. Her excitement is expressed in the "**loud voice**" (or "shout"—Greek *kraugê*) she gives. Mary praises God in the words of the song known as the "Magnificat". It bears much similarity to the song of Hannah after the birth of her child Samuel (1 Samuel 2:1-10), though Hannah's song is more a shout of triumph in the face of her enemies, while Mary's is rather a humble contemplation of the mercies of God. Its revolutionary nature is often commented on, as it speaks of God's mercy being extended to those who fear God, the humble and the hungry, whereas he "**scattered those who are proud**", "**has brought down rulers**" and "**has sent the rich empty away**". It is significant that Mary speaks of "**the humble state of his servant**" (the Greek word is *doulê*—slave). Maybe this has some reference to her social standing rather than just an attitude of mind. Mary returns home after three months, about the time the birth of John is due.

Luke then tells of the birth of John the Baptist and how his father's speech is restored (Luke 1:57-80). It is notable that Zechariah's first utterance is a prophetic word of praise, known as the "Benedictus" from the opening word in Latin. It is primarily a song of praise to God for fulfilling his promises of old to deliver his people, and through the coming Jesus, whose way is to be prepared by John, "**to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.**" Farrar spoke of it as "The last Prophecy of the Old Dispensation, and the first of the New."

The birth of Jesus comes next in Luke's account (2:1-7). We are told that this took place "**while Quirinius was governor of Syria**" and that Joseph and Mary travelled to Bethlehem as the result of a decree issued by Caesar Augustus that a census should be taken. Luke has shown to be remarkably accurate in the historical details he has given us. However, doubts have been raised as to his accuracy in this instance, as history records the fact that Quirinius was governor of Syria at a later date and the historian Josephus mentions a census he carried out in A.D. 6 (mentioned also by Luke in Acts 5:37). We know from Matthew's account that Jesus was born before Herod died, which was in 4 B.C. However, there are certain inscriptions indicating that Quirinius performed military operations in Syria between 10 and 7 B.C., so there may well be other details which history has not yet revealed. Though there is no mention outside the Bible of this particular census, supposing Luke to be correct, it does point to the fact that God can well use all kinds of people and events to fulfil his purposes in history. No doubt part of Luke's intention is to contrast the gospel of Rome with that of Jesus. The fact that "**everyone went to their own town**" (Luke 2:3) to register for the census raises the possibility that Joseph may have been born or had some relatives or inheritance there.

Luke gives a simple account of the birth. "**She gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them**" (Luke 2:7). The Greek word for "guest room" has been traditionally translated "inn". However, "guest room" is a valid translation, as in Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11. As Joseph obviously had connections with Bethlehem he may well have had relatives there and planned to stay with them. Others had also come for the occasion and the guest room was occupied. The "manger" does not necessarily mean that the birth took place in a stable. It could well have been in a poor home where animals shared the same roof as the family. A tradition, going back to Justin in the second century, says it occurred in a cave. This could well be true, as modern archeological digs have shown that many homes in Bethlehem in that day consisted of several rooms built into caves along hillsides. In the front would be the living area, behind that a storage or guest room and in the back of the cave an area where animals (primarily sheep) and their food would be kept in cold weather. As it was warm enough for shepherds to be out in the fields, animals may not have been present. Jesus is spoken of as Mary's "**firstborn**". Significantly, he is also spoken of in Scripture as the "**firstborn over all creation**" (Colossians 1:15), the "**firstborn from among the dead**" (Colossians 1:18) and "**the firstborn among many brothers and sisters**" (Romans 8:29—referring to Christian believers).

Luke tells us the story of the shepherds (Luke 2:8-20). Shepherds of those times were at the bottom of the social spectrum. They were dirty and not to be trusted. You weren't allowed to buy directly from the shepherds; the law said so. Their milk or wool probably came from an animal that was stolen or had died of a nasty infection. They moved around too much. The area for several miles around Jerusalem would have been used to supply the many lambs used in the sacrificial worship of the temple. However, the shepherds who raised them could not even take their own lambs into the temple. They were regarded as "unclean" and excluded from worship. These were the ones chosen by God to be the first witnesses of the Saviour and the first witnesses to the world of his birth. Though not allowed into the temple, they were given insight to the counsels of heaven. Thomas Merton declared in *The Seven Story Mountain*:

There were only a few shepherds at the first Bethlehem. The ox and the ass understood more of the first Christmas than the high priests in Jerusalem. And it is the same today.

The message of the angel to the shepherds is significant. **"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger"** (Luke 2:10-12). The priority of his saving ministry, the universal scope of his blessings, that he is the Anointed One promised from generations past, that he is, indeed, the Lord himself, are all summed up in this brief message. It is significant that Luke uses salvation terms seven times in his first three chapters (Luke 1:47,69,71,77; 2:11,30; 3:6). The sign is twofold "wrapped in cloths" and "lying in a manger". It is not difficult to see the implications of this. As he is the Lamb of God, to be sacrificed for our sins (John 1:29), where better place to be born than in a sheep's feed box. The cloths would be very similar to those wrapped around a body for burial. A similar thought was captured by an artist who painted a window in the stable where Jesus was born. As light streamed into the stable, the crossbars of the window caused a shadow of a cross to fall upon the child as he lay sleeping in the manger.

The encouraging words **"Do not be afraid"** occur four times in the Christmas story: to Joseph (Matthew 1:20), to Zechariah (Luke 1:13), to Mary (Luke 1:30) and to the shepherds (Luke 2:10).

The message brought by the chorus of the angels was one of peace. **"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests"** (Luke 2:14). As the establisher and sole leader of the Roman Empire (27 B.C.–A.D. 14), Augustus developed what he called his "gospel" for

the people, the “good news” according to Caesar: “Divine Augustus Caesar, son of god, emperor of land and sea, the benefactor and saviour of the whole world has brought you peace.” Steve Chalke, in an article in *Christianity*, ‘The Baby Who Would Be King’, has a good description of Caesar’s peace:

On the social stage of first-century Palestine, Augustus Caesar and Herod the Great had a huge supporting cast; a complex web formed by the powerful and privileged, the religious elite, the land owners and merchants ... The prosperity and peace brought about by the strength of the Roman Empire benefited them well, perpetuating their social standing. But beneath this hierarchy were the ordinary people—the expendables; the poor and the powerless; the peasants and ‘unclean’; the women, the degraded and those written off as ‘sinners’, for whom all talk of peace and prosperity was met with ironic and hollow laughter.

The peace that Jesus brings, however, knows no social boundaries. It is a peace *with* God (Romans 5:1), a peace *of* God (Philippians 4:7), a divine flourishing that is offered to all, even shepherds.

Luke records the naming of Jesus, “**the name the angel had given him**”, on the eighth day, “**when it was time to circumcise the child**” (Luke 2:21). “**When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses**”, Joseph and Mary take him to the Temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:22). The requirements of the Law for these rituals are recorded in Leviticus 12. The purification rites after the birth of a male child were to be on the thirty-third day. A lamb was to be offered for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or dove for a sin offering (Leviticus 12:6). If the mother could not afford a lamb, she could bring “**two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and one for a sin offering**” (v. 8). As Luke has no mention of a lamb, but only “**a pair of doves or two young pigeons**” (Luke 2:24), we may assume that this reflects the poor status of the family. Jesus was born under the Old Covenant, when the purification rituals given to Israel at Sinai still applied. As the writer of Hebrews makes plain, these laws no longer apply for Christian believers under the New Covenant which has been established through Jesus’ death and resurrection.

While in the temple they are approached by Simeon, “**who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah**” (Luke 2:25,26). Because of the reference to his death it is generally assumed that he was an old man, though this is not stated. Taking the child Jesus in his arms, he utters inspired words pointing to the salvation that would reach beyond

Israel to the nations of the world through this child. **“My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel”** (Luke 2:30-32). The words spoken by Simeon are often sung in churches and are known as the “Nunc Dimittis”, the opening words of the Latin translation. Simeon indicates to Mary that there will be a cost to this salvation and the child will be **“a sign that will be spoken against ... and a sword will pierce your own soul too”** (Luke 2:34,35), a prophecy that would be fulfilled in grim detail as Mary watched her son dying on a Roman cross thirty-three years later.

Anna, a woman in the temple who is described as **“a prophet”** and **“very old”** and who **“never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying”**, came up to them and **“spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem ”** (Luke 2:36-38). As there had not been a prophet for hundreds of years, this designation is significant. The Jewish Talmud counted seven prophetesses only, so this was no ordinary distinction.

Luke tells us: **“When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth”** (Luke 2:39). This would have been after their flight from Herod to Egypt, described by Matthew. There is no way of knowing whether Luke knew of this. Politically, Nazareth was not a town of any significance. It did not make the sixty-three Galilean towns mentioned in the Talmud. Luke closes his story of Jesus’ infancy with the words, **“And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him”** (Luke 2:40).

Matthew’s account

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Matthew’s account of the birth is obviously independent of that of Luke. They describe different details in the story. About all they have in common is Jesus’ conception by the Holy Spirit and the fact that the birth was in Bethlehem. Matthew gives more attention to Joseph, to whom Mary was **“pledged to be married”**. He was **“a righteous man”** and on discovering Mary was pregnant, would be expected to make the matter public. The usual way of doing this was by public trial, causing the utmost humiliation and shame to come upon the fornicating woman. Though no doubt much distressed by the discovery, he obviously wished to save her as much embarrassment as possible and so **“had in mind to divorce her quietly”** (Matthew 1:18,19). An engagement was such a binding agreement that it could not be broken except by divorce, and the death of one of them rendered the other a widow or widower. However, the Lord appeared to him in a dream, assured him that the conception was by

the power of the Holy Spirit, and told him not to be afraid to go ahead with the wedding (Matthew 1:20). Though not physically the child's father, his marriage to Mary would give him true legal status. It is significant that the Lord addresses him as **"Joseph son of David"** for it was foretold that the Messiah would be descended from David (e.g. 1 Chronicles 17:11-14; Jeremiah 23:5,6; 33:15,16). As mentioned above, Mary was probably also a descendant of David, and in Luke's account, Gabriel declares: **"The Lord God will give him the throne of his Father David"** (Luke 1:32). The Lord also instructs Joseph to name the child Jesus, **"because he will save his people from their sins"** (Matthew 1:21). The name "Jesus" is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew "Joshua", and means "God is salvation".

Matthew adds: **"All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet. 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us')"** (Matthew 1:22,23). This quotation comes from Isaiah 7:14. In the original Hebrew, the word here translated "virgin" (*almah*) simply means "a girl of marriageable age" or "a young married woman". It is significant, however, that the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament which was translated from the third century B.C. onwards, used the word for "virgin" (*parthenos*). Though the prophecy no doubt had some direct relevance to Isaiah's own day, it was more far-reaching than the prophet himself was aware.

Joseph is obedient and takes Mary home as his wife. **"But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus"** (Matthew 1:25).

Matthew goes on immediately to the birth in Bethlehem, without giving any reason for it being there, and describes the visit of the Magi **"from the east"** (Matthew 2:1), which could have been Persia, Babylonia or Arabia. They are traditionally known as "wise men". The word "Magi" is of Persian origin and indicates they were regarded as "wise" in some fields of knowledge, which certainly included astrology in this instance. The tradition that these were three kings dates back to the time of Tertullian in the second century. This tradition may well have come through association with words from Psalm 72:10,15, **"May the kings of Sheba and Seba present him gifts ... May gold from Sheba be given him"**, or Isaiah 60:3, **"Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn"**. The fact that there were three visitors has been assumed, as three gifts are mentioned. Whoever they were, they appear to be men of some wealth which would be in sharp contrast with the humble shepherds. This is an early indication that the benefits this child was to bring would be for all social classes and people of all nations. It is perhaps significant that he was revealed to the humble and

ignorant first, and then to the wise and learned; to the poor first, and then to the rich; to the Jew first, and then to the Gentile.

The dating of the visit of the Magi is not certain. It is said to have taken place in a “house”, which may indicate that Mary had moved from the place of birth. The word for “child” (*paidion*—Matthew 2:11) implies a young child rather than a baby. When Herod plans to kill the child he orders the slaughter of all the boys in Bethlehem “**who were two years old or under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi**” (Matthew 2:16). This could possibly mean that Jesus had been born (or conceived?) two years earlier when the star first appeared and that Mary and Joseph had stayed in the vicinity of Bethlehem for that length of time. We know that Herod died in 4 B.C. so this would put the birth as early as 6 B.C. However, we can only speculate on such things.

Much ink has been spilt in speculation as to the nature of the “star”. The only clues given us in the Bible are that they “**saw his star when it rose**”, which may have been up to two years before their visit to Jerusalem, and that it “**went before them**” on the journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and “**stopped over the place where the child was**” (Matthew 2:2,9). Suggestions have included:

- *Saturn and Jupiter alignment:* Saturn and Jupiter often come close together, but every 973 years they come together and part three times over a few months. This occurred in 7 B.C. in the constellation Pisces. The third conjunction, on 3 October, occurred on the Jewish Day of Atonement. In 6 B.C. they were joined by Mars to form a remarkably rare and spectacular trio which occurs once in 805 years. Soon after that, Saturn and Jupiter were grouped with Venus, the brightest object in the heavens after the sun and moon. There is evidence that Jupiter was regarded as a good omen by astrologers, and Jewish astrologers regarded Saturn as the protector of Israel and Pisces as the sign of Israel.
- *Venus and Jupiter alignment:* Venus and Jupiter came so close together on 12 August, 3 B.C., that they appeared as one bright star. This is a very rare occurrence. There were, indeed, seven major conjunctions of planets in 3-2 B.C.. Mike Rich, writer of the film *Nativity*, chose the alignment of the star the Babylonians called *Sharu* (known to us as Regulus) with Jupiter and Venus in 3 B.C. for the story. That is the only time it has happened in 3,000 years. *Sharu* is the Babylonian word for king, while Venus is the mother planet and Jupiter the father planet. However, it is generally accepted that Herod died in 4 B.C., which we know happened after

the birth of Jesus. This date for Herod's death is based mainly on a statement by Josephus that he died shortly after an eclipse of the moon and before a Passover. A lunar eclipse occurred on the night of 12/13 March, 4 B.C.. This was just before a Passover. Some historians have suggested that it may have been a later eclipse on 9 January, 1 B.C. Most of the Christian historians and chronologers who lived from the second to the sixth centuries put the birth of Christ *after* the eclipse of 4 B.C., in years we now recognize as 2 or 3 B.C.

- *A supernova*: A supernova would be visible for several months, and it is not unknown for them to brighten up again at a later date, giving us the necessary repetition of the star appearance over Bethlehem.
- *A comet*: Chinese astronomers have recorded comets around the time we think Christ was born. Of particular interest is one that was seen between 9 March and 4 May, 5 B.C.
- *A meteor*: Lone bright meteors are to all intents and purposes random and can occur at any time, so timing and repeatability are not a problem.

Arguments have been given both for and against each of these views, and as we cannot know the personal views of these particular astrologers, there does not seem to be much point in speculating.

It is not surprising that Herod "**was disturbed**" when he heard that these eastern visitors were inquiring about "**one who has been born king of the Jews**" (Matthew 2:2,3). Though there is no record from history of his slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem other than this, everything we read of him in this story fits what we know of his character. As a puppet of the Romans he was a hated man, and the threat of revolution always hung heavily in the air. He had his brother-in-law and High Priest, Aristobulus, drowned, because he became too popular with the people. He grew more paranoid about plots to take over his throne as he aged. In 7 B.C. he executed two of his sons. He had his favourite wife, Miriamne, executed in a fit of jealousy, and later, her mother also. He ordered the execution of another son on suspicion of plotting against him, a few days before his own death, provoking Augustus' comment that he would rather be Herod's pig than his son.

This was a violent period. It is a simple historical fact that in the thirty years from 67 to 37 B.C., before the emergence of Herod the Great, no fewer than 150,000 men perished in Palestine in revolutionary uprisings. There

was no more explosive and inflammable country in the world than Palestine. The slaughter of a few infants in the village of Bethlehem would hardly have been worth mentioning. Bethlehem was a small village with an estimated population of anywhere between 300 and a 1000 people in the village and its vicinity. In such a population it has been estimated that there would be approximately between seven and twenty baby boys under the age of two.

When Herod inquired of the Jewish “**chief priests and teachers of the law**” (Matthew 2:4) where the Messiah was to be born, they told him it would be Bethlehem, as the prophet Micah had foretold that out of Bethlehem “**will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel**” (Matthew 2:6—see Micah 5:2,4). It is an interesting exercise to compare the characters mentioned in the story. There was Herod, who was resentful of anyone who might challenge his authority. Then there were the chief priests, who knew their Bibles and had all the outward show of being interested in God matters, but, when it came to such a vital matter as the coming of the promised Messiah, were not prepared to go and find out if it might be true. And then there were the wise men, who were open to what God might be telling them, and were prepared to act on it and respond appropriately. There will always be those who are resistant to any claim Christ may make on their lives, those who have a show of some religion but avoid the real issues, and those who recognise Jesus for who he is and respond in submission and worship.

The gifts given by the wise men, gold, frankincense and myrrh, have from early times been thought of as symbolic of truth appropriate to who Jesus was. Gold is seen as a suitable gift for a king. Frankincense, used in worship, is appropriate for divinity. Myrrh points to his humanity and his coming death. The only other references to myrrh in the New Testament are in association with his cross and burial (Mark 15:23; John 19:39).

The flight of the child and his parents to Egypt to escape Herod’s cruelty is only mentioned by Matthew. The Greek order of the words given by the Lord in his warning to Joseph, “**Take the young child and his mother**” (Matthew 2:13), puts emphasis on the child, indicating that from the time of his birth this unique child took precedence over all other humans, including his mother. Matthew declares that this was in fulfilment of the prophet Hosea’s words, “**Out of Egypt I have called my son**” (Matthew 2:15). This seems a little puzzling, as the original quotation (Hosea 11:1) refers to the Lord’s deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt under Pharaoh. It would seem to suggest that Jesus, himself the personification of the true Israel, was to repeat the experience of the old Israel and, also, that he was a second and greater Moses. The work of salvation brought about by God through Moses

on behalf of God's chosen people was the prototype of a greater deliverance from our bondage to sin to be achieved through Jesus, called out of Egypt in his infancy.

Matthew quotes another puzzling prophecy from Jeremiah, which he says was fulfilled in the slaughter of the children: **"A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more"** (Matthew 2:18). The original quote (Jeremiah 31:15) concerns the destruction of the land and the removal of many of its surviving inhabitants to Babylon in the early seventh century B.C. Rachel was the ancestral mother of the tribes of Benjamin, Ephraim and Manasseh. These were among the tribes taken into exile. The passage comes in a section of Jeremiah (chapters 29-33) where he foretells the return of the exiles from Babylon in the future, accompanied by many blessings from God, and includes a messianic prophecy of one who will come from David's line who will **"do what is just and right in the land"** (Jeremiah 33:15). It is very significant that the above passage concerning Rachel's children is immediately followed by these verses: **"This is what the Lord says: 'Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded,' declares the Lord. 'They will return from the land of the enemy. So there is hope for your descendants,' declares the Lord. 'Your children will return to their own land' "** (Jeremiah 31:16,17). Matthew obviously sees in Herod's slaughter of the children a repeat of the hostility faced by God's people from those who reject the Lord. The children of the grieving mothers of Bethlehem were casualties in a war between the kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of God and his Christ. Their sorrow was akin to that which would pierce the heart of Mary as she watched her son being led to the cross. But it is God who would have the last word.

Herod died in 4 B.C. and **"an angel of the Lord"** informed Joseph of this in a dream, telling him to return to Israel. Hearing that Herod's son Archelaus is now reigning, **"he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth"** (Matthew 2:22,23). Jesus could have been anything from a few months to two or three years old at this stage. Archelaus, the eldest of Herod's sons, reigned from 4 B.C. to A.D. 6. He had the worst reputation of all Herod's sons, and his repressive reign became so intolerable that Augustus was warned that unless he was deposed there would be a full-scale revolt. He was accordingly deposed and banished, and Judea became a Roman province.

The final prophecy that Matthew quotes also presents some problems: **"So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: 'He will be called a**

Nazarene.' " (Matthew 2:23). The problem is that no such words are found in the Old Testament. Isaiah had indicated his association with the area of Galilee. A child would be born in the future who **"will honour Galilee of the nations ... The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned"** (Isaiah 9:1,2,6). However, that does not seem to fit these words. Perhaps a clue can be found in the words, **"through the prophets"**. This is not meant to be a direct quotation from one prophet but a more general emphasis given by several Old Testament writers. Early on in his ministry, Jesus was known as "Jesus of *Nazareth*", and this came to be used as a term of scorn (see John 1:46; 7:52). Isaiah had said he would be despised (Isaiah 53:3). The religious authorities tended to regard him with contempt because of his association with a provincial backwater. Other suggestions have been made, but I believe this makes the most sense. It was the explanation given by the noted biblical scholar, Jerome, in the fourth century.

Christmas Traditions

Traditions that accompany the celebration of Christmas vary greatly from country to country, so I will only refer to our most common Western traditions here. The name itself derives from Old English "*Cristes maesse*", the term used for the Feast of the Nativity. From the Middle Ages this came to be known as Christmas Day.

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) is credited with introducing the first Nativity Scenes, for which he used people and live animals to teach the humble folk of Greccio, in Italy, the timeless truths of Christmas. He found enormous inspiration from the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus and often called Jesus "the Child of Bethlehem". Thomas of Celano, in *The Second Life of St. Francis*, declared:

The birthday of the Child Jesus Francis observed with inexpressible eagerness over all other feasts, saying that it was the feast of feasts, on which God, having become a tiny infant, clung to human breasts.

Historian K. S. Latourette, in his impressive series *The History of the Expansion of Christianity*, said, "The Child Jesus had been forgotten in the hearts of many; but, by the working of his grace, he was brought to life again through his servant St Francis." Francis is also credited with introducing Christmas Carols to formal church services.

Many of the customs now associated with Christmas were originally part of the winter solstice celebrations of pagan festivals. The use of greenery and lights goes back to the celebration of the Kalends of January in ancient Rome. They decorated their temples with these. Romans soldiers conquering the

British Isles found Druids worshipping mistletoe and Saxons who used holly and ivy in religious ceremonies. Fir trees and yule logs were used in pagan festivals. Ancient Germans gave us the Advent wreath and began bringing trees indoors at Christmas. They would hang a cartwheel in the roof of a hall and cover it with lights and evergreen branches to remind them that the cold Northern winter would not last forever. Christmas trees have been variously known as paradise trees and redemption trees and came to be decorated with sugar-coated fruit, candies and communion wafers, representing the sweetness of the Saviour. Laurel wreaths represented the victory of Christ and holly wreaths the crown of thorns. Martin Luther may have been the first person to light a Christmas tree, putting candles on trees, citing Isaiah 60:13, **“The glory of the Lebanon will come to you, the juniper, the box tree, and the cypress together, to beautify the place of My sanctuary; and I shall make the place of My feet glorious.”** It was the German Prince Albert who popularised the Christmas tree in Britain after putting one up at Windsor Castle in 1840.

Some people have argued that it is wrong to use items that have been used in pagan worship for the worship of Christ. However, it is interesting to note the number of times the Bible uses elements of myth and pagan symbols to illustrate spiritual truth. The Lord himself says, **“I am like a flourishing juniper”** (Hosea 14:8). In a number of places the Bible speaks of the whole of nature involved in his worship (e.g. Psalm 98:7-9; Revelation 5:13). If the whole of creation belongs to him, then let us reclaim it for him. It is interesting that the name of every weekday has a pagan origin.

Tom Smith, a London confectioner, started to develop Christmas crackers in the 1940s. Beginning as individually wrapped sweets, and then with love mottoes, he later added the “crack” after watching a log crackling in the fire. Today the Tom Smith Group produces 50 million crackers a year.

Romans observed the winter solstice by exchanging small gifts. However, the association of gift giving with Christmas, and particularly its association with Santa Claus, goes back to St Nicholas, a fourth-century bishop of Myra in Lycia in what is now Western Turkey. Though one of the most popular saints in both the Greek and Latin Churches, scarcely anything is historically certain about him. According to tradition, he was imprisoned during Diocletian’s persecutions and afterwards released, and was present at the Council of Nicaea in 325, though this latter fact is doubted as he is not recorded in any of the early lists. Legend says he was especially kind to children, scholars, virgins and sailors. Numerous cities took him as their patron, as did Greece and Russia. His feast day was celebrated on 6 December and was associated with the giving of gifts. Dutch settlers brought

the custom to the New World and English settlers eagerly borrowed the legends and festivities surrounding the kindly Saint Nicholas. The Dutch name for the saint, *Sinterklaas*, changed into the English, Santa Claus, around 1870. The Elizabethan character, Father Christmas, a jolly old man imagined to provide the Christmas feast, eventually merged with Santa.

Sir Henry Cole was a publisher and innovator who founded London's Victoria and Albert Museum and was influential in setting up the Royal College of Music, the Albert Hall and even public lavatories. He sent out the first Christmas cards in 1843. At first they were handmade and very expensive, and did not become popular till later in the century.

Our Response to Christmas

As we have seen, the events surrounding the first Christmas—the nature of Jesus' conception, the circumstances of his birth, the inspired utterances of Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna, and Mary herself, and the input from angels, shepherds and wise men—all tell us a great deal about who Jesus was and why he came. These things may not tell us as much as later events, particularly his adult character, wisdom, teaching, death and resurrection, but they are still very significant. Martin Luther once said, in his Lecture on Galatians:

The true Christian religion...does not begin at the top, as all other religions do: it begins at the bottom. You must run directly to the manger and the mother's womb, embrace the Infant and Virgin's child in your arms, and look at Him—born, being nursed, growing up, going about in human society, teaching, dying, rising again, ascending above all the heavens, and having authority over all things.

Joseph M. Stowell, in *Moody Monthly*, wrote: "The stunning point of Christmas is that God considered my needs and the worth of my relationship to Him to be sufficient cause to go through the trauma of changing places."

When all the evidence is taken into account for the reliability of the Gospel stories of his birth, character, teaching, death and resurrection, together with his influence on the human race, I find it difficult to understand how anyone cannot believe that he is who the Bible declares him to be. However, it is not surprising. When the aged Simeon took the infant Jesus in his arms in the temple in Jerusalem, he had declared, "**This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed**" (Luke 2:34,35). There are things about Jesus that force us to take sides. Of course, we can ignore him, as many do. We can fail to search

sincerely for the truth about him. But if we do look with open mind, we find some disturbing facts. The most obvious is that none of us is fit to share in his future kingdom. There is so much about him and his teaching that reveals the heart. As Jeremiah once put it, **“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”** (Jeremiah 17:9). But that is what Christmas is all about. The angels sang, **“Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you”** (Luke 2:11). It was through his death on the cross for our sins that he dealt once and for all with this problem.

However, salvation and reconciliation with God comes at a cost. The cost is our pride. We must be willing to admit that our greatest need is for forgiveness. We must also be willing to give him the rightful control of our lives because of who he is. If we are ready for this step, however, it is simply a matter of receiving, not of giving. Peter Haile, in *Decision* magazine, makes a significant point:

It wasn't the wise men's fault, but those gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh have got us into a lot of trouble. They have made us think the chief message of Christmas is one of giving. Really it is one of receiving! Giving is comparatively easy. To give makes you feel that you are somebody. When we give we are exercising initiative and satisfying a deep craving within. When we give we put someone else in our debt. When we give we increase our control over others. That makes us feel good.

Receiving is different. Receiving means submission. It means letting go of the initiative and accepting other people's tastes, ideas, and opinions. It means putting oneself in debt to the other man. That is why receiving is so hard. It is why so few people, particularly adults, receive Jesus Christ. There are plenty of people trying to give to Him. Over half the people of North America—to say nothing of Britain and Australia—are trying to give Him something by joining a church or putting money in the offering plate, but how many are receiving him?

Receiving Jesus is a lifetime commitment. But if I want what he is offering—forgiveness, peace with God, a growing experience of what it means to be his child, a growing awareness of how I can serve him in this needy world and a sure hope of glory to come—then it involves praying a prayer something like this:

God, I accept that when you came into the world that first Christmas, you came to show us what God was like in your own matchless character and to teach us what life was all about. But, above all, you came as a Saviour to deal with our sins. Though I don't fully understand all that you may have planned for me in this life or the next, I accept that you

love me and sent Jesus to die for me in order that I might be reconciled to you and become a member of your forever family.

Thank you, Jesus, for your great love.

Lord, I am coming home. I am sorry for my sins. I repent of them. I now accept your forgiveness and submit my life to you as my Saviour and Lord.

As you entered the womb of Mary I now ask you to enter my life and give me the Holy Spirit. Begin the process of moulding me into all you have planned that I should be and directing me in the path you have chosen for me.

Enable me to accept fully all that you have done for me and to be open to all that you want to do. Give me the courage and strength to live worthily of your love and to follow wherever you lead, so that I may grow in my relationship with you and make a difference in this needy world as your disciple.

Amen.

Should you make a commitment like this, then get a modern translation of the Bible and begin reading the New Testament to find out more about what the Lord has planned for you and what he wants from you. Find some other believers you can share the journey with. You are a member of a new family, God's forever family.

I finish the chapter with two stories and a poem:

A delightful story was told by Win Couchman in an article 'Christmas Grinches: Thieves of Joy', in *Christianity Today*. She is a writer, Bible teacher and lay counsellor, who, with her husband, conducts marriage conferences. On Christmas Eve, before the children went to bed, she would bring in a cake with a single candle on a birthday plate that went round and round and played "Happy Birthday". They would turn off the lights, sing along with the turntable to our Lord, and then the children would recite the exquisite story of his birth. She says:

God honoured this in a most beautiful way when our younger son, Don, was four. He always had such fulfillable dreams: a certain dump truck or bulldozer would be his specific request. Having received it on Christmas morning, he would be content. All the rest of the generous pile would be heaps of unexpected treasure.

He had had a grand day, I thought, and so I was dismayed to hear him sobbing shortly after he had gone to bed on Christmas night. I found him with his head buried in his pillow, crying in a genuinely heartbroken way. I

shook him to get his attention and asked him what was the matter. When he could speak he said, "Here it is, Jesus' birthday, and I got everything I wanted and I didn't give him anything."

Praying for just the right words, I asked, "What do you think he'd like?" A long silence followed. Donny had a strong will. He knew enough basic Bible truth to understand that giving yourself to Jesus means not only that you accept his death for you, and his forgiveness, but that you give over the bossing of your life to him. He must be the one in control.

Finally Donny said, "He wants me." Another long pause. Then he simply said, "Jesus, I'm sorry I forgot your birthday. I give myself to you. Amen." At 29, Don is still one of Jesus' birthday presents, still in the process of letting him be the boss of his life.

The second story was told by Anita Thatch in a Christmas edition of *Challenge Weekly*. As a mum of two teenagers and wife of a busy husband, she was often stressed out and couldn't see herself facing a crisis alone. From time to time she had thought of joining a church to find some security. One day, her 18-year-old son Terry suddenly asked, "Mum, why don't we go to church any more?" She had noticed he was searching for something in his life, but his question took her by surprise. "I was gob-smacked!" She recalls. "He actually remembered us going to church! I was so stunned that I didn't have an answer."

She agreed to go with him on Christmas Day. That morning the pastor spoke on "The Meaning of Christmas". He said that most people celebrate and exchange presents on this special day, but Jesus is never invited to the party. "That certainly floored me!" remembers Anita. "What a wake-up call! After all, Jesus *is* the reason why we have Christmas." As Terry kept attending church and Bible study, Anita was attracted to the things he was learning. Eventually, she attended a *Christianity Explained* course. "My heart was changed by the Truth that I heard and read from the Bible, and I surrendered my heart to Jesus Christ, who is now my Lord and Saviour." She adds:

I don't worry about my future any more—everything is in God's hands now. I know that God has a plan for my life and I thank him for the awesome way He has brought me to Himself. He is truly my main focus in everything I think about and do.

God has helped me in making decisions about things and he has revealed Himself through all parts of my life. I have more confidence in my work, as all I have to do is pray when I struggle.

I know that God is with me wherever I go, and knowing that all my past sin has been forgiven and wiped away is a big sigh of relief. It is good to know that when He looks at me He sees His child.

The Gift Unspeakable

*Again they play, the children with their toys,
Gay parties draw the older girls and boys;
Regathered families hail the festive day,
And jovial revellers their gifts display:
How strange!—how almost inconceivable,
So few receive Heaven's "Gift Unspeakable"!*

*Yet none the less, as carol strains resound,
Adoring hearts will everywhere be found;
The throne-room of the soul they will prepare,
To give the Saviour-King new welcome there:
And He will see, and say, with gentle smile,
"The nails and thorny-crown were all worthwhile."*

J. Sidlow Baxter

Conclusion

Aaron N. Meckel once said, "This broken, battered world of ours can be rebuilt about a manger crib." The Christ who arrived on this planet that first Christmas is active today, by his Spirit, in the lives of those who wish to play a part in God's mission of remaking the world and the lives of those bruised and spoiled by sin.

Ultimately, there are but two kingdoms in this universe and the choice is ours as to which we belong. There is the kingdom of the "**evil one**" (Matthew 13:38) which Paul calls "**the dominion of darkness**" (Colossians 1:13). Then there is the kingdom of God, which Paul speaks of as "**the kingdom of the Son he loves**" (Colossians 1:13). There are over one hundred allusions to this latter kingdom in the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. One day an angelic pronouncement will be made: "**The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever**" (Revelation 11:15). The first Christmas marked the arrival of the King to begin that process (though the preparations for it had begun in past history in the call of Abraham).

Noted New Testament scholar Tom Wright, in an article in *Christianity Today*, makes an interesting comparison between the kingdom of Augustus and that of Jesus. Augustus turned sixty in the year Jesus was born. He represents perhaps the best that pagan kingdoms can do. He knew that

peace and stability are good things. Unfortunately, he had to kill a lot of people to bring them about. By contrast, another King is born in Bethlehem with a price on his head. He represents a dangerous alternative, the possibility of a different empire, a different power, a different glory, a different peace. The two stand over against one another. Wright says:

Augustine's empire is like a well-lit room at night: the lamps are arranged beautifully, they shed pretty patterns, but they have not conquered the darkness outside. Jesus' kingdom is like the morning star rising, signalling that it is time to blow out the candles, to throw open the curtains, and to welcome the new day that is dawning. Glory to God in the highest – and peace among those with whom he is pleased.

One day, when the battle with evil has been fought—the ministry to the lost, the lonely, the suffering, and the disadvantaged has been accomplished, the sacrifices on behalf of justice and peace have been made—he will return in person. Alan Redpath, the popular pastor of Moody Bible Church, declared:

The immense step from the Babe at Bethlehem to the living, reigning triumphant Lord Jesus, returning to earth for his own people – that is the truth proclaimed throughout Scripture. As the bells ring out the joys of Christmas, may we also be alert for the final trumpet that will announce his return, when we shall always be with him.

Joni Eareckson Tada, the lady who, as a teenager, became a paraplegic as the result of a diving accident and yet has had a remarkable ministry to others in similar circumstances, puts this beautifully:

On this side of eternity Christmas is still a promise. Yes, the Saviour has come, and with him peace on earth, but the story is not finished. Yes, there is peace in our hearts, but we long for peace in the world.

Every Christmas is still a “turning of the page” until Jesus returns.

Angels hovering over treetops may have heralded his birth in the Bethlehem night, but one day they will herald the dawning of the new day. The glow of each candle is but a flicker compared to the Light by which “the nations will walk and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour [Revelation 21:24].”

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For those wishing to look into the meaning of the Incarnation further, an excellent starting point is Alister McGrath's thoughtful and beautifully

produced book *Incarnation*, published by SPCK, 36 Causton Street, London SW1P 4ST, UK, ©.