

(These notes are taken directly from Rick Renner's Book, "Christmas – The Rest of the Story")

Why Did God Choose Mary?

What We Know About 'Nazareth'

The Scripture tells us that the angel Gabriel came to Mary when she was in the little obscure town called Nazareth. Although Nazareth is named in the New Testament, very little is known about it. In fact, even when we take into account ancient, extra-biblical sources, very little is understood about this tiny Galilean town located west of the Sea of Galilee.

What we do know is that it was a small agricultural village, and archaeological research concludes that during the time when Mary and Joseph lived there with Jesus, there were about 120 to 150 people living there. Although one historian speculates there were as many as 480 residents, it was still a very small, obscure village.

It was so far off the beaten track and separated from any main roads that no one would have gone there unless they intended to go there. This helps us better understand why Nathaniel responded to his friend Philip with the question, "...Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46 NKJV)

Scholars agree that Nazareth was so called because a branch of Jesse's family — a clan of the Davidic dynasty — had relocated and moved to Nazareth about the year 100 BC. Remember, the angel Gabriel said to Mary that her son would sit upon the throne of his father David. This prophetic declaration proved to be spot-on.

Joseph and Mary Were Descendants of David

A careful study of biblical history reveals that both Mary and Joseph were descendants of David. Concerning Joseph, Luke writes, "And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because *he was of the house and lineage of David*)" (Luke 2:4). So, Joseph really was of the seed of David, but in order for Jesus to be born of the seed of David, Mary also had to be in the Davidic royal lineage.

Regarding Mary, the angel Gabriel said, "He [Jesus] shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David" (Luke 1:32). This verse clearly reveals that Jesus was conceived and birthed *without any male sexual involvement*. God Himself is the Father, which means Mary also was in the Davidic line. Luke 1:69 goes on to say, "And [God]

hath raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David.”

Even the apostle Paul confirms Jesus' being David's descendant saying, “Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh” (Romans 1:3). The only way Jesus could be “of the seed of David according to the flesh” was for Mary also to be of the lineage of David. She, too, had to have David's royal blood flowing through her veins. Thus, Jesus was born into the royal Davidic line that lived in the little obscure town of Nazareth. His genetic heritage literally made Him the King of the Jews.

The Significance of the Little-Known City of Sepphoris

Geographically, Nazareth was situated on a hill about 400 feet above a valley, and from its position, one could look and see the pristine city of Sepphoris. It was about four miles to the northwest of Nazareth and was a very important place during the time of Jesus.

When Herod the Great died, his kingdom was divided between his three sons: Herod Archelaus, Herod Philip, and Herod Antipas. History records that Herod Antipas became the tetrarch or ruler of Galilee, and shortly after this proclamation was made, Antipas declared Sepphoris as the capital of his new northern kingdom.

In order to display the splendor and opulence of a true capital city, Antipas launched an enormous campaign to give Sepphoris a total makeover. As you might imagine, he spared no expense. He embellished the city so greatly that it became the most splendid city in the Middle East. Jewish historian Josephus tells us that Sepphoris was the largest and most beautiful city in the region.¹

Interestingly, the city of Sepphoris rose to such prominence that Jewish leaders constructed a very beautiful and luxurious synagogue there, and it was this synagogue that became the largest center for sacred Jewish scrolls. As a matter of fact, this collection of scrolls was so extensive that after the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the Sanhedrin and all the theological leaders relocated to the city of Sepphoris where this extraordinary library of scrolls was housed.

Mary's Father Was a 'Scroll Scholar'

Now you may be thinking, *What's the connection between Sepphoris and Mary the mother of Jesus?* To understand the connection, we must go back and learn about Mary's earlier life. We know from early Christian writers that Mary's parent's names were Joachim and Anna, and they were very wealthy people. As benefactors, they gave much of their resources to the work of God while they were living in Jerusalem.

History reveals that Mary's father, Joachim, eventually relocated his family to Nazareth at some point in her young life, and while they lived in Nazareth, he served as the overseer of the sacred scrolls in the synagogue of the nearby town of Sepphoris. This means his life was built around a commitment to the Scriptures. He and his wife, Anna, didn't just send Mary to church (synagogue) on her own — they went also and were submerged in the Scriptures themselves.

As a scroll scholar, he was in the synagogue all the time, as that is where the scrolls were kept. Consequently, his family was involved in service to the Lord as well. Today, we might say Mary's father was a dedicated, church-going man of the Word. He and his family were in church, and their lives were built around serving God.

Mary Was Dedicated to God from Infancy

Other early Christian writings tell us that Mary's parents were older and had no children. They prayed for a long time for God to give them a child, and like Hannah, the mother of the Old Testament prophet Samuel, they had made a vow that if the Lord would give them a child, they would give that child to the Lord. Early Christian writers recorded that when Anna gave birth to Mary, she and her husband presented Mary to the Lord and dedicated her for His service. From the time she was an infant, they instilled in her that she was to be the handmaid of the Lord and to obey whatever God's will was for her life. Moreover, her parents told her she had been born into the world for a *special purpose*, and she believed it.

To help Mary grow spiritually, her parents enrolled her in a special school near the Temple in Jerusalem. It was specifically designed to train young girls in the Scriptures. Clearly, Mary's parents nurtured her in a home where God's Word was a priority, and it shaped her spiritually and made her spiritually sensitive. She was raised to believe she was to obey God.

Accordingly, when God revealed His will to her through Gabriel — that she had been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah — she accepted it without deep struggle. She had been intentionally prepared by her parents and taught to serve God faithfully — explicitly obeying whatever God asked her to do.

Mary Was the 'Handmaid of the Lord'

The Bible tells us clearly in Luke 1:26-30 that Mary was highly "favored" by God. The angel Gabriel says this twice in these five verses, indicating she had been singled out by God Himself for the purpose of giving birth to and raising the Son of the Most High. To meet the requirements of this monumental assignment, Mary had to be a *virgin*. Under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, Isaiah prophesied when he said, "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a *virgin*

shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14).

Matthew confirms that Mary met this crucial qualification. He said, “Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, *before they came together*, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 1:18). There are skeptics who say that this word *virgin* just means an unmarried girl, but that is simply wrong. The Greek word for “virgin” in this verse specifically describes a young girl that has never experienced a sexual relationship with a man — ever.

When Gabriel first appeared to Mary and told her she was favored of God, the Bible says, “...She was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be” (Luke 1:29). The angel went on to say, “And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end” (Luke 1:31-33).

Can you imagine what was going through Mary’s mind in that moment? The Bible says, “Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?” (Luke 1:34) It’s important to see that Mary didn’t say, “This cannot be done.” Instead, she asked, “*How* will this be done?” She didn’t argue or doubt that what the heavenly visitor declared would come true. With an open heart, she simply asked how it would happen because she was a virgin.

Scripture says, “And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. ...And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her” (Luke 1:35,38). The word “handmaid” here describes *a female servant*. Thus, Mary was basically saying, “I am your servant and I’m available for whatever assignment you want to give me.”

When God’s divine assignment came, Mary was ready. She had been raised from infancy with the knowledge that she was a handmaid of the Lord and was willing to serve in whatever way God asked.

So why did God choose Mary to be the mother of His Son? First, she descended from the house of David, which was a requirement. Second, she was presented by her parents to the Lord and dedicated as an infant to do the will of God. Third, Mary had been trained in the Scriptures and raised to serve God in whatever way He asked. As a virgin handmaid of the Lord, she was ready and willing to accept God’s assignment to conceive, give birth, and raise His Son, Jesus.

Why Did God Choose Joseph?

Joseph Was of the Lineage of David

One of the reasons God chose Joseph to be the earthly father of Jesus was because of his connection to David. As we saw in Lesson 2, the Bible says, “And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David)” (Luke 2:4). Although Mary was impregnated by the Holy Spirit and Joseph was not a genetic contributor to the formation of Jesus’ life, *positionally* his heritage linked him to David and made him a prime candidate to raise Jesus.

Joseph Was a Highly Skilled ‘Technician’

When most people read Matthew 13:55, which says that Jesus was “the carpenter’s son,” they erroneously think that Joseph was poor, but that doesn’t line up with historical facts or the context of the Greek in this verse. The Greek word for “carpenter” here is *tehton*, which is where we get the word *technology*. The word *tehton* describes *a person that is highly advanced in whatever skill he possessed*. It depicts *one who makes exquisite furniture, jewelry, mosaics, stonework, or even one who is a building supervisor*. Thus, the word “carpenter” is a very limiting, poor translation of the word *tehton*.

As a *tehton* — translated here as “carpenter” — Joseph was highly advanced in the technical skills he possessed. He was not just a simple carpenter that worked with wood. Rather, he was a highly paid professional. Furthermore, this word *tehton* pictures one who had the expertise to envision and create with his hands a well-wrought finished product.

The word *tehton* is so connected to the idea of creativity that it was used by some ancient writers to depict literally giants or poets who produced masterful literature and poetry. Importantly, this word *tehton* was also used to describe one who could create wonders out of matter or who could manipulate materials in a marvelous way that surpassed ordinary technical skills. So when the Bible says Joseph was a “carpenter” (*tehton*), it is saying he was a high-level craftsman with amazing skills.

Joseph Was Highly Paid

The fact that Joseph was a sought-after artisan means he was also generously compensated for his work. These masterful technicians created such things as elaborate frescos painted on walls, magnificent mosaics that covered floors, sculptures carved from marble, and luxurious pieces of jewelry fashioned from gold or silver and then adorned with precious jewels. They used ivory in jewelry and furniture making, and the furnishings they designed were extravagantly

embellished with ornate elements of bronze, silver, and gold and then decorated with precious jewels.

Interestingly, one scholar has noted that a *tekton* was so highly skilled that he could create shiny and splendid things whose extraordinary beauty almost made them appear to come to life. Hence, the principal meaning of a *tekton* was *one who was highly advanced and skilled; a versatile craftsman or artisan who had the technical skills to create wonders out of matter in ways that had never been seen before.*

Jesus Was Also a Tekton

It's likely you've heard the old saying, "like father, like son." Well just as Joseph was a *tekton* (carpenter), so was Jesus. When the people of Nazareth heard Him teach, they said, "Is not this the *carpenter*, the son of Mary..." (Mark 6:3). The word "carpenter" here is again the Greek word *tekton*, and it describes Jesus before He began His ministry. It's also important to note that they called Jesus "the carpenter," attaching a definite article. This means He wasn't just any carpenter — He was viewed as *the best carpenter in the city of Nazareth*. He had a reputation for being able to create shiny, splendid things that seemed to come to life!

Isn't that amazing! Both Joseph and Jesus are called *tektons*. They were masterful artisans who possessed the ability to mentally envision what others could not see and then create with their hands a fabulous, finished product. Just imagine: Jesus was serving as an apprentice at His father's side, learning to manipulate materials in marvelous ways and create wonders with extraordinary beauty.

If you think about it, Jesus is still doing the same thing today. As a master artisan at His Heavenly Father's side, He continues to create masterpieces out of ordinary people. The apostle Paul captures this concept clearly in Ephesians 2:10, where he wrote, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus...."

The word "workmanship" is a translation of the Greek word *poiema*, which describes *a poet who expresses his fullest creativity when he composes and writes*. It pictures something artfully created by one who possesses the extraordinary ability to write or illustrate a masterpiece. The use of this word in Ephesians 2:10 tells us that the day we got saved, Jesus Christ — the Great Artisan — released all His creative genius to make us into something shiny and splendid! He recreated us so wonderfully that people just stand in awe of what we've become. That's what the Bible means when it says we are His *workmanship*.

'Carpenters' Were Also Masterful Stoneworkers

There's still another meaning of this word *tekton* (carpenter). It was also used to depict *a master stonemason, a masterful stone carver, or an architect who is engaged to architecturally design or construct a monumental building or temple fashioned of stone*. These craftsmen could take stones and cut them so that they would fit snugly alongside one another.

Again, this description in the natural also applies to Jesus and should come as no surprise to us. According to First Peter 2:5, we are *living stones* that Jesus is cutting, sanding, and shaping as He builds us up into God's spiritual house. He is a master stonemason.

Additionally, this word *tekton*, which is wrongly translated as "carpenter" in Matthew 13:55, also depicted *the chief overseer who directed other builders and other artisans in a massive building project*. We could even call him *a building supervisor*, and people like Joseph who possessed such skills were highly compensated. When we come to the very bottom of the list of what the word *tekton* means, we find it can also indicate a *woodworking carpenter*.

Taking together all the facts we know, in all probability, Joseph was a highly advanced masterful artisan, not a woodworking carpenter. The fact is that there wasn't much wood in the region with which to work. There was, however, an abundance of stone, and knowing that the nearby city of Sepphoris was being totally renovated and embellished by Herod Antipas to become his capital city, it seems very likely that Joseph was working there.

To carry out the exquisite work being done in Sepphoris, which became known as the "ornament of Galilee," there was a need for masterful artisans. What's interesting is that most of the workers in Sepphoris lived in nearby towns such as Nazareth, which was only about four miles away. More than likely, Joseph was one of these "carpenters" (*tektons*) who worked in Sepphoris while living in Nazareth.

These *tektons* were specialists who could architecturally design and construct monumental buildings, temples, villas, and palaces. Likewise, they were also well trained to create sculptures carved from marble and impressive stone capitals that gracefully sat atop columns. Moreover, they crafted floors designed and inlaid with magnificent mosaics and walls covered with outstanding frescoes. Some *tektons* fashioned ostentatious furnishings made of bronze, silver, and gold, veneered with ivory, and adorned with precious stones.

This is who Joseph was — an extraordinary masterful artisan who had already gained a great reputation for himself even at his young age. Most scholars believe he was probably a building supervisor or some other extremely proficient

craftsman with enormous authority. In any case, he was highly skilled, greatly appreciated, and abundantly compensated for what he did.

Joseph Qualified To Be Entrusted With *True Riches*

In Luke 16:11, Jesus said, “If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?” Apparently, God had been watching Joseph and had seen how faithful he had been with the skills, resources, and finances that had been entrusted to him. His actions proved that he was responsible and ready to be entrusted with “true riches.” Specifically, God knew Joseph was a man who could be entrusted with the raising of His Son, Jesus.

Think about it. If God was going to give someone the greatest assignment that had ever been given in the human race — the responsibility of raising the Son of God — would He give it to someone poor and unsuccessful? Or would He entrust the task to a reliable, successful individual that had proven themselves to be trustworthy again and again? The answer is rather obvious.

In the same way that God was watching Joseph, He is also watching *you*. The question is, what has He observed from your actions? Do you stick with projects even when things become difficult? Have you proven yourself to be a person of integrity? Can God trust you with a bigger assignment? For Joseph, the answer to these questions was a resounding yes.

Joseph Proved To Be *Merciful*

In addition to being trustworthy, Joseph also demonstrated great mercy. Matthew 1:18 says, “Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.” As we saw in the last lesson, the word “espoused” describes the Hebrew *betrothal* process. Joseph and Mary had announced their engagement and were “espoused” to each other. According to Jewish custom, couples were engaged for one year. During that year, preparation for marriage took place, and sexual purity was required.

It was during this year of preparation that Mary would have relocated from Sefhorris to Nazareth to live with Joseph’s parents. The fact that Joseph remained sexually pure showed him to be a man of integrity. Remaining sexually pure was viewed as a way of showing God that they were serious about having His blessing on their lives. At the end of that year, they were to be joined officially and sexually. However, it was during this time of separation and preparation that Mary became supernaturally pregnant with Jesus.

The way in which Joseph handled this unexpected situation revealed what kind of man he was. Matthew 1:19 says, “Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily.” The words “just man” mean a *righteous man*. When Joseph discovered Mary was pregnant before they had come together sexually, it could have been hurtful to Joseph’s honor. But he didn’t want to make her a public example, so he decided to put her away privately.

In other words, he did not want Mary to suffer humiliation and public embarrassment. He truly loved her and cared more about her than his own reputation. This revealed how kind and humane Joseph was.

Given the fact that Joseph was “espoused” to Mary, he had the “legal right” to put her away publicly/divorce her — and he could have even required her to be stoned for becoming pregnant before marriage. However, he decided to take the route of kindness and mercy rather than a legalistic approach. This means Joseph — a man who loved God’s Word and was very committed to Scripture — was not religiously mean and legalistic. He was just the kind of man God desired to be the foster father of His Son.

Joseph Was *Spiritually Attuned* and *Obedient* to God

Another important facet of Joseph’s character is revealed in Matthew 1:20, which says, “But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife; for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.” Amazingly, even amid an extremely difficult situation, Joseph’s heart was so spiritually attuned that he could hear God speak. God needed a man of this caliber to raise Jesus — one that was spiritually attuned and who would respond to His leading.

Not only was Joseph able to hear God’s voice, but he was also *obedient* to God’s voice. Matthew 1:24 and 25 (NLT) says, “When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born....”

Once Joseph heard from the Lord, he did not hesitate but quickly obeyed what he was told to do. This tells us that obeying God was not new in Joseph’s life. The first time God asks someone to do something hard, it is usually a struggle to obey. Obviously, Joseph had been previously tested before being chosen for this assignment — and his past obedience qualified him for the task. Over time, he had developed a pattern of obedience. God knew Joseph would obey His directives, which is another reason He knew He could entrust Joseph with the responsibility of helping to raise Jesus.

Joseph's Actions Displayed *Deep Trust in God*

Shortly after Jesus' birth, the Bible says, "...The angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word; for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt" (Matthew 2:13,14). This act of obedience was extremely significant.

Joseph had been working very hard and had proven himself to be an outstanding man of integrity. By this time he had built a reputation in the city of Sephorris as a highly skilled professional (*tehton*), and he was earning a good income. Nevertheless, he was quick to obey when God spoke to him.

Egypt was very different from Israel. Joseph had no contacts or a permit to work. To leave and go to Egypt was a drastic, life-changing move into a pagan environment. It meant leaving all the comforts and security of what he and Mary had known and starting over from scratch. As difficult and undesirable as this move seemed to be, Joseph didn't argue with God. Instead, He promptly obeyed, demonstrating that his obedience to God was far more important than his hard-earned status.

Joseph knew he was to obey God regardless of the cost. God would be faithful to provide for their needs. In fact, this helps us see why the Lord brought unexpected gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Jesus and His family just before their trip to Egypt (see Matthew 2:11-15).

How about you? What does your level of obedience reveal about you? Does God know you will do whatever He asks you to do? Or does He know you will drag your heels and argue with what He asks of you? The honest answer to these questions will reveal whether or not you are ready for God's next assignment.

Joseph Was a *Solid Spiritual Leader* for His Family

Consistency is very important when you're a parent. Joseph was well aware of this, and it showed. Luke 2:41 and 42 says, "Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast."

Notice it says Joseph took his family *every year* to celebrate the Passover. This shows that he was very consistent in leading his family spiritually, which is a father's responsibility. Joseph didn't send his kids to church while he stayed home. He led them spiritually, and he did so by example.

Without question, God's selection of Joseph to be Jesus' foster father was not an accident, nor was it the result of a random choice. He had watched Joseph for quite a long time, and He knew all these things about his character. God had seen Joseph was trustworthy with his talents, his business, and his money. He had watched him be merciful instead of judgmental. He knew Joseph was the spiritual leader in his family and was spiritually tuned to the voice of His Spirit. Joseph had a track record of prompt obedience and was willing to sacrifice everything to do what God asked.

Friend, just as God had His eyes on Joseph, He has His eyes on you. He is studying you to see if you are being faithful to what He has already asked you to do. Are you walking in integrity — doing what is right even when no one is around? Are you merciful and humane or legalistic and judgmental? Are you leading your family spiritually and by example? Do you take them to church regularly and go yourself, or do you simply drop them off? Do you show that serving God is an option or that it is serious business? The bottom line: what good things can God say about you? If you're falling short, don't feel condemned. Receive God's conviction, repent of any wrong, and start working to make things right today.

Who Were the Shepherds?

Special Shepherds with Special Sheep

Immediately after Mary delivered baby Jesus, the Bible says, "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8). What's interesting is that very near Bethlehem today, there is an ancient field called the Shepherds' Field where shepherds used to abide and keep watch over their flock day and night. There is a long-held tradition that these particular shepherds bred and raised sheep that were to be offered as lambs without blemish for temple sacrifices — especially at the time of the Passover.

The Jewish historian Josephus wrote that every year, up to 260,000 lambs were sacrificed in the Temple in Jerusalem during Passover.¹ That said, Jewish regulations required that these sacrificial lambs be birthed very near to the city so they could be easily and quickly transported to the Temple where they would be sacrificed.

For this reason, these Bethlehem Shepherds were a special group under rabbinical care who raised lambs to be used for Temple sacrifice. They were charged to maintain a clean stable for a birthing place and to work close to Bethlehem because it was only about five miles from Jerusalem. Sacrificial lambs that were to be offered to God had to be without blemish, which means they had to meet very strict religious standards. To ensure those legal requirements were met, these special shepherds bred and raised lambs in a very controlled

environment. At the time of a newborn lamb's birth, every male was inspected to assure it was without defect. Immediately after the newborn lambs were birthed, these shepherds wrapped their legs in strips of cloth or swaddling clothes to protect them from injury. The shepherds then placed the newborn lambs into a stone feeding trough — a manger — until a priest came to inspect them and declare them to be without blemish and fit to be used as sacrificial lambs.

When the Angel Announced Jesus' Birth, He Also Declared Jesus' Life Mission

Once the angel calmed their fears, he said, "...Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people" (Luke 2:10). Interestingly, the word "behold" is again the Greek word *idou*, a word expressing *bewilderment*, *shock*, or *wonder*. In this verse, it is the equivalent of saying, "Wow! What you're about to hear is absolutely amazing!" The phrase "good tidings" is the Greek word *euangelidzo*, which describes *the greatest news anyone has ever heard*, and the words "great joy" describe *gargantuan* or *enormous joy*.

The angel then said, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). This tells us that when the angel appeared to the shepherds, the birth had already taken place — and it occurred in the City of David, which is Bethlehem, just a stone's throw from Shepherds' Field.

Who had been born? The angel said, "...a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). These words were a declaration from the very beginning of who Jesus was and what His mission on earth would be.

Jesus is "Savior." The word "Savior" is the Greek word *Soter*, meaning *Deliverer*, *Savior*, *Healer*, and *Preserver*. This was a divine announcement that Jesus had come to set mankind free from the dominion of Satan's rule on earth (see 1 John 3:8). Thus, Jesus brought *saving power*, *delivering power*, *healing power*, and *preserving power* to those who put their trust in Him.

Jesus is also the "Christ." In Greek, "Christ" is the word *Christos*, meaning *Christ*, *the Anointed One*. It is the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew word *Messiah*. Thus, the angel announced that Jesus is *the Anointed One* — the long-awaited Messiah that was *anointed to deliver, to save, to heal, and to preserve*.

Jesus is "Lord." The word "Lord" is a translation of the Greek word *Kurios*, which is capitalized in Greek just as it is in English, and it means *Lord* or *Absolute Lord*. It is the identical word used for *Jehovah* in the Septuagint, which is the Greek version of the Old Testament. Thus, the angel declared that Jesus was *Jehovah in the flesh*, and there is no higher authority or power than Jesus Christ in all the world or all the universe. He reigns supreme!

‘Swaddling Clothes’ Was the Sign

We saw in our previous lesson that the phrase “wrapped in swaddling clothes” is the Greek word *sparganoō*, and it describes *bandages or strips of material used for wrapping the little legs of newborn lambs to protect them from injury*. Remember, these were shepherds under rabbinical care who were raising lambs to be used for temple sacrifice in Jerusalem. When a newborn lamb was birthed, it was customary for them to wrap the lamb in swaddling clothes. Once the sacrificial lamb was wrapped, it was then placed in a manger to be inspected by a priest to make sure it was a lamb without blemish.

In essence, the angel was telling the shepherds: “I know that your assignment is to care for the little sacrificial lambs that are born under your watch and to wrap them in swaddling clothes, but I’m announcing to you that you’ve had your eyes fixed on the wrong lambs. The real Lamb of God has just been born in Bethlehem. When you find Him, you’ll know it’s Him because He will be wrapped in swaddling clothes just like you would normally use for newborn lambs. This is a sign especially for you.”

When the shepherds found Christ, they knew it was him because he was dressed in swaddling clothes, just like the angel had told them. The moment they saw Him in those strips of cloth was *a eureka moment* indeed.

The Bible tells us after they found Him, they departed and began to report the good news to anyone who would listen. The people who heard what these rabbinical shepherds had to say wondered at their words (see Luke 2:17,18). “These are no ordinary shepherds,” the people said. “They are rabbinical shepherds who really know what they’re doing. Their job is to watch over and care for sacrificial lambs, and if they say they’ve found the real Lamb of God, they’ve made an amazing discovery.”

Who Were the Magi?

Our story of the Magi begins in Matthew 2:1, which says, “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem.”

In the *King James Version*, the visitors are called “wise men,” which is a translation of the Greek word *magos* — the plural form of *magi*. Herodotus, a Greek historian, noted that the Magi were *a special cast of sacred leaders for the Medes that provided priests for Persia*.¹ It seems they were gifted in the study of astronomy and were strongly influenced by Daniel who served in Babylon many centuries earlier. Although they were not kings, Tertullian noted that “[they were] “well-nigh kings” [in many respects].”²

Indeed, Magi were an elite, powerful, fabulously wealthy group of high-ranking priests who were devoted to interpreting dreams and who gained an international reputation for being experts at studying the constellations, which was regarded as a science at that time. A combination of scientists, politicians, and religious leaders, they were staggeringly wealthy, and they possessed so much power and political clout that, if they chose to do so, and if they, as a group, agreed to it, they had the ability to depose a king with a single word. Or with a single word, they could install a new king of their preference in the place of the one they deposed. For this reason, they were viewed as *king-makers* in Eastern lands, and without their endorsement, it would have been difficult for anyone to become or to remain a king. Interestingly, Magi were so powerful we do not have an equivalent authority for them in the world today.

Nero and Herod Both Had Close Calls With Magi

History documents that there was a rendezvous between the Magi and Emperor Nero when another emperor wanted to come to Rome to pay homage to Nero. Accompanying this outside emperor were Magi.

Although Nero was delighted that another king was coming to pay homage to him, he was deeply puzzled and terrified when he heard that Magi were traveling with him.

Knowing the tremendous influence of the Magi and that they could create serious problems for his reign and for Rome, Nero rolled out the red carpet for them, offering great accommodations and entertainment the entire time they were there. To be clear, this is the same ruthless Nero who was afraid of no one and killed anyone he wished. As the Magi left, he loaded them down with extravagant gifts with value beyond imagination. Once they departed, he threw a party in the city of Rome, celebrating the fact that nothing dreadful happened during the Magi's visit.

When Magi entered the city of Jerusalem looking for the newborn King (Jesus), Herod reacted in much the same way Nero did. In fact, he had never forgotten that in 39 BC, certain Magi were in support of a coup to depose him. *Why are these Magi coming here, and what do they want?* Herod must have asked himself as the huge caravan of travelers made its way into the city of Jerusalem. He knew these magistrates were powerful and could depose him with a single word and install someone else in his place. Frightened of what their intentions were and what their visit might bring, Herod welcomed these mighty and wise men from the East with great pomp and celebration.

What Does History Tell Us About the Magi?

Although Mark, Luke, and John are silent about the Magi, Matthew includes helpful information about them. The biblical connection with the Magi dates to the

time of Daniel more than 600 years before Christ's birth. Daniel served under Kings Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar of Babylon and Kings Darius and Cyrus of the Medes and Persians. When Daniel was taken into captivity to Babylon in about 600 BC, many scholars believe he became the head of the Magi, and as such his prophecies and writings were not only well-known but also considered sacred by Magi for centuries.

Clearly, Daniel was highly proficient at interpreting dreams and visions and hearing from God, and as a result, his influence was felt in Babylon for centuries even after his death. Although Babylon was a pagan empire, Daniel possessed such a godly influence that the Eastern Magi revered Daniel's faith, his prophecies, and the Scriptures he treasured. He had spoken and written many prophecies regarding the future, including the coming of a great world leader that would be born in Israel. This, of course, was the long-awaited Messiah, the King of the Jews. The Magi believed — and were waiting and looking — for this world leader that Daniel had prophesied to be born.

Interestingly, in the years leading up to Christ's birth, there was a wide-spread belief throughout the Roman Empire that a new world leader, unlike any leader before him, was about to be born and usher in a new golden age. Even the pagan world sensed and wrote concerning a powerful deliverer that was about to emerge on the scene, and that belief was due primarily to the writings of Daniel and other prophecies he had shared.

This clearly demonstrates how God can use a man (or woman) that is devoted to Him even in their service to ungodly people.

The Magi Came From the 'East'

The Bible clearly states that the wise men — or Magi — came “from the east to Jerusalem” (see Matthew 2:1). The Greek in this verse literally says they came *from the place of the rising of the sun*, and in earliest history, this could refer to ancient Media, Persia, Assyria, or Babylon. All these regions had Magi like the ones that we're discussing.

Ancient commentators give various opinions about where the Magi came from. For example, St. Maximus and Theodotus of Ancyra suggest the Magi came from *Babylon*.^{3,4} Clement of Alexandria and Herodotus assert the Magi came from *Persia*.^{5,6} Justin, Tertullian, and Epiphanius all propose that the Magi came from *Arabia*.^{7,8,9} If we calculate the route required from each of these locations, we find all of them would have required that the Magi travel through the Syrian desert to Damascus, then southward along the sea of Galilee until they finally reached Jerusalem.

And from each of these locations, it would have meant they traveled 1,000 to 1,200 miles. To travel such a distance with a massive caravan would have

required at least 3 to 12 months.

The fact that these Magi were from the East meant they clearly understood that you were to treat great people greatly. They would never have shown up to visit a king empty-handed. Therefore, they needed time to prepare and fashion an extensive catalog of fabulous, magnificent gifts for this newly born world leader. When we combine the travel time and the time needed to prepare their gifts, we know that the Magi arrived in Jerusalem nearly two full years after the birth of Christ. This means when the Magi finally appeared, Jesus was no longer a babe — He was a *toddler*. They were looking for a toddler king.

How Many Magi Were There?

Another question that is often asked is how many wise men showed up to see Jesus. Although the Bible doesn't tell us the specific number, some early Christian writers say there were *twelve* Magi that came to Jerusalem in search of Jesus, while others say there were *three*. The number three is likely based on the inference of the three gifts — gold, frankincense, and myrrh — that are mentioned in Scripture.

It's likely you've seen a picture or movie where three lonely kings show up at a stable, each one carrying a small box: one with gold, one with frank-incense, and one with myrrh. But this is not accurate. Magi would never have shown up with just three measly gifts to present to the newborn King of kings. On the contrary, the inventory of gifts they were hauling would have been enormous.

Interestingly, one early Seventh Century document suggests that there were three Magi, and their names were Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. Early frescos (wall paintings) actually show Gaspar as the oldest of the three — possibly about 60 years of age, European-looking, with a white beard, and the one who gave a gift of gold. Melchior is shown as a middle-aged man of about 40 years of age, Persian-looking, and the Magi who gave a gift of frankincense. Balthasar is shown as a young man of about 20 years of age, Ethiopian-looking, and the one who gave a gift of myrrh. Of course, these are very interesting traditions, but they're impossible to verify. The truth is we don't know how many Magi showed up or what their names were. Nevertheless, Matthew's gospel says they came, so we know their visit did take place.

How Did the Magi Travel?

Do you remember hearing the song "We Three Kings"? It opened with the words, "We three kings of orient are bearing gifts we traverse afar." This song tends to paint a picture of three well-to-do men wearing heavy cloaks and head wrappings, traveling across the desert alone on camelback with small gifts tucked in their minimal baggage. But is that an accurate image? Is that really how Magi

traveled?

The truth is, this imagery is as ridiculously inaccurate as the president of a great nation riding a bicycle across the country by himself to visit another high-ranking official. It's just not something that happens.

History reveals that Magi traveled in a huge caravan with hundreds of servants to manage their cargo and provisions as well as to care for their animals. Also, along for the journey were many highly trained bodyguards and an army to protect the Magi through hostile territories. Again, these were powerful, highly influential individuals who were on a mission — in this case, to see and welcome the greatest ruler the world had ever known.

If there were three Magi, there would have been several hundred servants, soldiers, and bodyguards to accompany them and their cargo, which contained a plethora of extravagant treasures for the Christ-child. If there were 12 Magi, there were likely a thousand or more servants, bodyguards, and army personnel traveling with them to ensure their safety on their long journey and assist in carrying all the amazing gifts for the newborn King of kings.

Again, when Magi traveled, they did so in massive and luxurious caravans. They were regal, impressive, and the upper crust in the Eastern lands, and were treated lavishly. The coaches they were often transported in were very plush and carried on long poles by servants. These coaches were draped on every side with lavishly decorated, luxuriant materials to protect them from the weather elements of sun and wind.

When they traveled long distances, they may have dressed less formally. But before the Magi entered the city of Jerusalem where starstruck people would have filled the streets to see them, they would have exchanged their travel clothes for garments made of exotic materials and intricate weaves indicative of Eastern lands. Likewise, they would have also adorned themselves with jewels that were intended to exhibit their power and vast wealth. That's just a little insight that we know for sure about Magi.

The Magi Came To 'Worship the King'

Matthew 2:2 informs us that when the Magi entered Jerusalem, they were "saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him." Clearly, their arrival created quite a stir. Everyone — including Herod — heard that they were approaching the city, and it is likely they knew of their visit long before they actually arrived.

Interestingly, the word "saying" in this verse is a translation of the Greek word *legontes*, and the verb tense indicates ongoing activity. Thus, a better translation

here would be that as the wise men entered Jerusalem, they kept on *saying and saying and saying*, “Where is He that is born King of the Jews?” As they rode up and down the streets in all the different districts of the city, the people heard these powerful “king-makers” *asking and asking and asking* for the whereabouts of the newborn King.

The word “King” is also important. It is the Greek word *basileus*, which describes a *king; an emperor; or the highest ruler*. In this case, it is capitalized in the Greek just as it is in English, which denotes it is *the greatest and highest King to ever be born*.

The Magi kept asking and asking where the King was so that they could “worship” Him. This word “worship” is the Greek word *proskuneo*, which means *to kiss the ground when prostrating before a superior*. It carries the idea of *falling down and prostrating oneself; to adore on one’s knees; or to worship with all necessary physical gestures of worship*. Worship was in the hearts and on the minds of these wise men. Their intention was to find the prophesied King of all kings and bow themselves to the ground before Him in worship and adoration.

What About the Star?

Note that the Magi said, “...For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him” (Matthew 2:2). Keep in mind that the Magi were experts in studying the constellations, and because of Daniel’s prophecies that a world leader would be born in the future, they believed that when this particular star appeared in the heavens, it was the confirming sign for which they had been waiting.

The star has been immortalized in Christmas songs, paintings, movies, and greeting cards for 2,000 years. Many people even place a star on the top of their Christmas tree. For hundreds of years, astronomers and historians have been trying to determine exactly which star this was.

German scientist, mathematician, and natural philosopher Johannes Kepler proposed that what the Magi saw was an alignment of Jupiter and Saturn recorded in 7 BC, which was about the same time when Jesus was born.¹⁰ This alignment of Jupiter, Saturn, and the moon took place in the constellation of Aries while Venus and Mars were in neighboring constellations. Interestingly, it would’ve produced a powerful, much brighter than usual, star in the night sky that would have been visible throughout the Roman Empire at that time.

Something else fascinating is that Jupiter is known as the “king” planet, as it is the largest of all planets in our solar system. It is also of great significance because it was associated with royalty. Thus, this alignment would have been perceived by the Magi as an announcement of the arrival of the long-anticipated world leader.

Although some have suggested that the dazzling display the Magi saw was a comet, there's no record of a comet at that time. Others have advocated that the Magi saw a *stella nova*, which is a star that increases and decreases in magnitude over time. Still others have said that they saw a supernova, but they could have never seen a supernova — not even with the assistance of a telescope. All these suppositions prove incorrect because they don't fit Matthew's account.

The Bible says, "...And, lo, the star which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was" (Matthew 2:9). Thus, the star led them and guided them to where Jesus was, which is not something a star would naturally do. This magnificent sign in the night sky seems to have been a supernatural display of God.

When the Scripture says the Magi had "seen His star in the east," the word "seen" is a Greek word that means *to delightfully view, to scrutinizingly look at, or to behold with the intent to examine*. That is exactly what the Magi did. When they saw the star, they delightfully viewed it in the night sky again and again and again — taking a careful, scrutinizing look and examining it from all angles to fully understand its implications. Once these experts studied this dazzling display, they then made their conclusion: it was, indeed, THE SIGN that the world leader Daniel had prophesied about had finally been born.

Isn't it amazing that these mighty Magi came to worship Jesus! These king-makers were acknowledging the young Christ Child as the world leader — the King of kings — for whom they had been waiting. Due to Daniel's prophecies and what they saw in the constellations — and a figuring of dates fixed on what Daniel wrote and what other scriptures said — they knew it was time for the King of kings to be born. That is when the star appeared to announce Jesus' birth.