



*Unwrapping The Truth*

*This Christmas*

*Over 100 facts about our Christmas Celebrations  
that you may not know!*

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# Mary of Nazareth

Mary of Nazareth, which might better be translated as Myriam of Nazareth, was the eldest of two sisters to be raised by Joachim and Anna in the province of Galilee, in the small rural town of Nazareth.

We know very little about Myriam from recognized non-Biblical sources and are therefore focused on what we know from the Biblical account, aided, just a little, by what we may reasonably assume.

Our first assumption is based on the average marrying age of Jewish girls two thousand years ago, which suggests that she was perhaps sixteen to eighteen years old when she became engaged to be married to Josef ben Jacob. It was soon after that (and before the second of the three phases constituting the Jewish marriage) that the Bible tells us that an angel appeared to her with life-changing news.

The angel's greeting tells us that she was 'highly favored' by God. Therefore, based on Biblical examples of people who are recorded as having gained God's favor in the Old Testament, we can conclude that she had a pure, sincere but also a 'strong', or 'steadfast' heart. By her own testimony when replying to the angel's statement, she was also pure in body (a virgin).

A little later, when she visited her older relative, Elizabeth, she is recorded as spontaneously singing a song of thanks and praise to God. This song consisted of a compilation of several 'verses' from the Bible's Old Testament. Being able to put together a song of this nature on the spur of the moment tells us that she knew the scriptures by heart, which in turn demonstrates a significant degree of intelligence. Her earlier devotion to learning these scriptures was clearly a part of her personal walk of love and devotion to God.

The events that took place in the three years after her angelic visitation were very difficult for her. Firstly, her reputation and integrity were soon placed in doubt. Based on circumstances that were very real, she appeared not to be a virgin any longer. Secondly, she endured several

long journeys. The first of these was while heavily pregnant and then, after she had given birth to Jesus, journeys to and from Jerusalem and long hard journeys to and from Egypt. Finally the five day walk journey from Bethlehem, back to her home-town of Nazareth.

She was also told by a prophet that later in life, she would suffer heart-break, as though a sword were being run through her. But Mary's response to the life-changing announcement which had been made by the angel was simple but clearly, also sincere; *'whatever God's will is for my life is fine by me! (Paraphrased)*

It was partly that attitude and her anticipated response to the angel's announcement that she would become pregnant by a Holy Spirit induced conception, which had prepared her to be the 'highly favored' by God. A young woman chosen to bring the Son of God Himself, into the world and to be responsible for his formative education while raising Him.

## The Date

The exact date of this announcement and the birth of Jesus are not recorded in History. However, we know that the Roman Census for Taxation purposes was made by the first Emperor of Rome, Augustus Caesar, in the Roman year 746 ab (urbe condita). This is 8 BC in the Gregorian calendar we use today.

History also tells us that King Herod, who subsequently tried to kill Jesus when he was a baby, died on April 1<sup>st</sup> 4 BC. Given the time it would have taken for the census to be organised, and the events described in the Gospel accounts of Matthew and Luke to take place, it is therefore highly likely that Jesus was born in 6 or 5 BC.

Was it on December 25<sup>th</sup>? Almost certainly not. The presence of sheep in the fields alone suggests it was not in 'deep midwinter' as a popular song suggests. Also, astronomical activity suggests otherwise (see *'The Star'*). The precise date of this world-changing event taking place is not necessary for us to know and remains hidden. What took place is.

# Elizabeth

Elizabeth, described in the New Testament account of ‘The Nativity’ as being a close relation, possibly an aunt of Myriam, is also described as being elderly. In fact, she was recorded as being too old to be able to conceive a child and was known by her peers as being barren (unable to conceive a child). In the culture of that era, this was not just ‘unfortunate’ but was often associated with being a punishment by God for sin.

In fact, as Mary continued giving her account of these events to the Apostle Luke, (who methodically recorded them for us), we find that Elizabeth too, was ‘favored’ by God; having been selected to carry a baby boy who was to become a prophet and the fore-runner announcing the upcoming ministry of Myriam’s Son, Jesus. His name was John, often referred to as John the Baptist.

Elizabeth’s background is also briefly given to us: Her genealogy, which was were family records that were meticulously kept by the Jews, traced her back to being a descendent of Aaron, the Jews’ first High Priest who had been appointed to serve his brother, Moses, over fourteen hundred years earlier.

Elizabeth, along with her husband Zechariah, lived in the hill district to the South of Jerusalem. Just like Myriam, they lived in a fairly quiet area and were probably seen as being ‘ordinary’ in the community. However, their dedication to God and to honoring Him in their lives while carrying the disgrace of being unable to have children, placed them as being far from average in God’s eyes. In His eyes, they were the ideal parents to raise a great prophet, who himself had already been prophesied to come into the world ‘in the spirit of Elijah’.

The Bible describes Elizabeth as being ‘*righteous and obedient to the Lord*’. Her immediate recognition of Mary being a young woman carrying the Son of God Himself in her womb, suggests that Elizabeth’s relationship with God and her recognition of the Holy Spirit was extraordinary.

# Zechariah

Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah was a priest, who served in one of the twenty-four priestly divisions who took it in turn to burn incense in the Temple. The Temple in Jerusalem was the Jews' center of worship.

Zechariah was also old. In fact, the Greek word used to describe his age categorized him as being '*as good as dead*'. His ability to father a son was therefore in question and together with Elizabeth, after perhaps fifty or more years of marriage, they had not conceived any children.

But the same angel who appeared to Myriam had already appeared to Zechariah and told him categorically that his prayers had been answered and that he would father a son. The angel continued that the boy would be a prophet and the fore-runner of the Messiah.

This encounter with the angel Gabriel took place while Zechariah was performing his priestly duties in the Temple. But even here, Zechariah's response to the angel was less than enthusiastic. In fact, he so offended the angel by questioning whether he was telling the truth resulted in him being struck dumb for insolence. In complete contrast to Mary, Zechariah's response to the angel was '*that's not possible*'.

As a result, during the entire nine or so months that the things announced by the angel took place, Zechariah was unable to talk. However, after his son was born, he had come to accept that with God, anything was possible and in obedience, his first words were to state that his son was not to be named Zechariah but was to be called John.

While Zechariah's unbelief is a major part of the Nativity story, contrasting powerfully with Myriam's belief in the impossible, his own and his Elizabeth's roles as the parents of John place them high in the 'who's who' of the New Testament. Like Jesus' own parents, they had a valuable role in the Nativity Story. Their son, John the Baptist was not just a prophet and for runner of Jesus but also became His friend. A friend who had a powerful ministry of his own until he was executed by Antipas, one of King Herod's sons.

# Advent

Advent is a term that's often used but is not always understood.

It's original meaning was linked to the Latin word 'adventus', from which the word originates, meaning the period of time to pass while waiting for a notable person to arrive or for an event to take place.

Now, however, it almost exclusively refers to the period of time leading up to the birth of Christ, Christmas, when we celebrate the Son of God's entry into the world as a baby.

The Christian calendar includes the four Sundays that precede December 25<sup>th</sup> in advent. The purpose being to encourage a period of deep reflection, prayer and acts motivated by Christian love (charity) in the weeks preceding our celebration of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. However, it also acts as a reminder of His promised return; promised and prophesied, just as the first event was, hundreds and thousands of years in advance.



The way in which advent is remembered varies greatly, from focused prayer and Scripture reading to the lighting of candle wreaths and the daily opening of calendars containing small gifts.

For the dedicated Christian, a legitimate celebration of advent will be to share a heightened anticipation of the celebration of God first coming into the world to enable human hearts to be changed, and with that, the world we live in. For human hearts to celebrate His presence and His promises with acts motivated only by love.

# Angels

Taken from the Greek word 'angelos', meaning messenger, our nativity plays do little to represent the truth about angelic beings.

In the nativity story, the angel Gabriel appears to both Zechariah and to Mary giving them each a message concerning God's plan to use them in the future. An unnamed angel, also assumed to be Gabriel, appeared to Joseph, warning him of King Herod's intent to kill the boy who Joseph had adopted as his own son.

The only other Angel who is named in the Bible is Michael, who is accredited as being a warrior, rather than a messenger. His name means 'the great ruler who protects the people of God'. He features in Daniel (chapters 10 and 12), Jude 9 and Revelation 12. Yet whenever angels appear in the Bible they are recorded as saying 'fear not'. In other words, their appearance is potentially, terrifying.

There are over three hundred references to angels in the Bible and on many occasions, they are recorded as executing God's plans, delivering messages to humankind or serving as instruments of God's judgement.

Our artistic perception of angels being cuddly little babies with wings could therefore not be more inaccurate. We also see that angels can appear in any form, (including resembling men or women).

Contemporary stories of angelic appearances include numerous stories of angels appearing beside or behind Christians who are being threatened - often by criminals or by men 'of evil intent'. The sight of the angels cause those men to literally run away in fear. Interestingly, the innocent people being protected rarely see the angels themselves!

Based on biblical references, some early writers have tried to estimate the number of angels that exist. In the fourteenth century, this was calculated to be 301,633,722. It is highly unlikely that this is accurate. In fact some scholars believe that it may be just a small fraction of the true number.

# Gabriel

Meaning ‘God is my strength’ the name Gabriel is used many times in the bible to identify an angel. In each, he is believed to be a senior angel (an archangel) assigned to bring important messages to God-fearing men and women.

Among Gabriel’s appearances recorded in the Bible are his appearance to Daniel (chapters 8 and 9) and to both Zechariah and to Mary (Luke chapter 1).

The account of Gabriel’s visit to Mary is well known and often referred to as the annunciation (the announcement). After what may be called a traditional angelic greeting “*Do not be afraid!*” Gabriel went on to tell her that she was highly favored with God and had been selected to carry God’s own Son into the world.

Mary didn’t know any of the detail of this mission, nor did she know the eternal implication of this for all of mankind. She had just one question: “*But how?*” Gabriel went on to explain that despite her innocence and virginity the Father of this Child would be the Holy Spirit Himself.

Gabriel also knew that his mission to earth was not going to be in vain. He knew that God’s choice of a young woman would be perfect and her response would be to align herself with God’s will for her, no matter what the cost. So Gabriel heard the words that he knew would come and that Mary later recounted to the apostle Luke when she shared her story with him. “*I am the Lord’s servant, May everything you have said about me come true*”.

Of course, three months earlier, Gabriel had heard Zechariah’s response to a proclamation of good news – in fact this was an answer to Zechariah’s prayers! Yet when he was told that he was finally going to have a son, his response was full of scepticism and doubt, resulting in Gabriel striking Zechariah dumb until he came into agreement with God’s plan by naming his long-awaited boy, John.

# Epiphany

January 6<sup>th</sup>, which is twelve days after Christmas, is known as the Epiphany. This is a date historically chosen by the early Church to mark the manifestation of the divine nature of Christ to the Gentiles, (non-Jews). This symbolism is represented in the Nativity Story by the visit of the Magi.

The root Greek word of Epiphany means ‘to reveal’. The use of this word goes back to the time of the Egyptian Pharos when a day was declared sacred to honor the overflow of flood waters from the River Nile, making the surrounding land fertile each year.

## The Twelve Days of Christmas

It was in the middle ages that Epiphany became synonymous the twelve days of Christmas – January 6<sup>th</sup> being the twelfth day and the day selected to mark the visit of the Magi to Bethlehem, carrying their gifts.

In some nations, including Armenia, Epiphany was considered the most important day in the Christmas season. And for them it also commemorated the water-baptism of Christ by the prophet John when Christ was also baptised by the Holy Spirit.

From the time of King Edward 1<sup>st</sup> in 1330, to King George 3<sup>rd</sup> in the eighteenth century, the English monarch made offerings of gold, frankincense and myrrh at Epiphany. This service is still held on behalf of the monarch in the Chapel Royal each year.



# The Magi

Bringing those gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, the Magi are the last known visitors, or ‘witnesses’ of the Nativity story. They possibly arrived as soon as ten weeks after Jesus’ birth (see ‘the Star’) though traditional accounts say much longer after. Their journey took them first to Jerusalem and then onto Bethlehem, where Joseph and his family were now living.

The belief that there were three Kings coming on camels to pay homage (respect) to the new-born King of Israel, is myth based on the number of gifts they brought with them. So let’s take a look at the facts:

Firstly, they were not kings – and if they were, they would most certainly have been in carriages, not riding on camels. They were astrologers.

Secondly, travelling a distance of about 550 miles, through regions notorious for harboring criminals, robbers and assassins while carrying three highly valuable commodities, would not be attempted without an armed escort. The facts are that;

- The word ‘Magi’ is derived from the Persian word, ‘magus’ which means a member of the priestly fraternity of ancient Persia.
- Magi were prominent in the former Kingdom of Babylon, where the Israelites had been held in captivity during the time of Daniel. This Kingdom was now divided into two. The Persians and the Medes.
- The Medes occupied the land to the East of Palestine and to the South of the Caspian sea, which is in fact, modern day Iran.
- Excavations in modern day Iran have revealed the ancient city of Babylon, the city of King Nebuchadnezzar who recognised the humanity of his advisors, who were Magi and instead, turned to believe in the God of his captive Israelites; as did his successor and son, Belshazzar.

The Magi were therefore almost certainly priests. Religious men from the former region of Babylon who looked to the stars for guidance and inspiration, combining astronomy with astrology. They were well educated men who believed that the universe marked the birth of a new King on earth by the creation or sending of a new star. The star our

Biblical Magi were following had already been seen and recorded by Chinese astronomers (see 'The Star').

Thirty-five years earlier, in 40BC, the Romans had only been in control of Judea, Samaria and Galilee for a little over twenty years. Marc Antony, the general in charge of Rome's Eastern armies was in Egypt, pursuing a relationship with Queen Cleopatra VII. In his absence the, Parthian Empire invaded, intending to take the trade routes to Egypt and Africa.

The Parthian army quickly overwhelmed the Roman occupying forces.

At this time, King Herod was not a prince, but the thirty-three year old Governor of the region of Galilee. While the Parthians advanced, crushing any resistance, Herod fled to Rome. His brother, Phasael, the Governor of Judea, was killed.

Octavian, one of Rome's three ruling Republican Generals, devised a plan by which Marc Antony would fight the Parthians on their home soil, while young Herod, equipped by legions from Marc Antony's armies, would re-invade the East and expel the Parthian infiltrators. Herod's prize for succeeding would be his appointment by Rome as their 'The King of the Jews'

Three years later, in 37BC, Herod won the day and Herod literally received his crown. But he spent the rest of his life defending the territory from other invaders and his position as King.

The Parthians had never acknowledged Herod as a being the legitimate King of the Jewish race. Now, news came of Parthian 'Ambassadors' crossing the border with a large bodyguard; perhaps even a crack fighting force to protect them. Some commentators quote the size of this 'mission to Jerusalem' to have been a minimum of 150 men, including 50 mounted troops. Others consider that in consideration of Herod's possible response to their presence in his territory, it was in fact a full army that escorted their notable leaders on a mission to publicly acknowledge the birth of Jerusalem's legitimate King, right under the nose of Herod, the Parthians' former nemesis. As the Bible says "*Herod, and all of Jerusalem with him were afraid*" (Matthew 2:3).

## King Herod

Herod, now in his mid to late sixties, had spent his life fighting off invading forces and Arab raiding parties. He had also become paranoid about preserving the title awarded to him by the Romans, killing three of his sons who he suspected of treason in the process.

After establishing that the ‘wise men’ were in his country to pay homage to a new King, who they would recognised as a legitimate King of Israel, and whose ‘birth star’ was in the sky for all to see, he planned to use them to find the source of the latest threat to his position.

As the nativity story tells us, he planned to use the visiting ambassadors to trace the location of his latest adversary; a newly born baby. But his plan failed to do anything beyond stirring up further resistance to his rule by the emerging Zealot movement as his action caused the slaughter of every male child in the region who was under the age of two.

Joseph, now married to Mary and the man appointed by God to look after Mary’s child, was given a dream about what was about to take place. He immediately escaped with his young family to Egypt, where he could lay low until King Herod died; which he did on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 4BC.

## Herod Archelaus

One of Herod’s remaining sons, Herod Archelaus, was confirmed by Rome as being the successor to King Herod in Judea. The other two surviving brothers were appointed to rule other areas of ‘Roman Palestine’ as part of Octavian’s plan to dilute the power of Herod, who had previously ruled over the entire region.

But Archelaus was like his father in many ways and had petitioned Rome for his appointment over all of his father’s territory, not just a part of it. Archelaus was opposed by both the Jews and his brothers. Rome stood firm. So on returning to Judea, as a demonstration of his intent, he had four thousand prominent Jews rounded up and executed in the Temple.

# Joseph

Joseph, whose name was Joseph ben Jacob, is unlikely to have been a teenager as we believe Mary to have been. Although sparse, the Biblical accounts of him refer to both his profession and to his standing in the community. Neither of which are likely to have been considered ‘proven’ until he had successfully practised what he had been taught, a status reached at about the age of thirty.

Joseph’s profession: In the New Testament language of Greek, Joseph is described as a ‘Tekton’. This is the term for someone highly skilled; an architect or a master-builder who is proficient in the use of stone and timber for the construction of buildings. (The original translations of that word to ‘carpenter’ are inaccurate and modern translators do not refer to him as a carpenter in the sense of a person who made tables and chairs – although, of course, he would have been proficient at that too)

Unlike the Sadducees, who were religious leaders from the elitist, land-owning classes, Pharisees needed to earn a living to support their families. The vast number of Pharisee priests were therefore trained in a similar way to apprentices today, to possess a craft or practical skill. Often as tent-makers (as the apostle Paul was) or Tektons. This would enable them to work during the day (to provide for their families) and practice their religious duties during the evenings and on the sabbath.

When King Herod commissioned the building of the second temple in 19BC, history states that he abided by Jewish laws concerning work in the temple area and specifically, the fact that only Jewish Priests could work in the sanctuary area. He therefore employed one thousand priests who were trained Tektons to oversee the work of ten thousand skilled workers. (Source: Flavius Josephus’ ‘Antiquities of the Jews’, Book 15, Chapter 11).

As the adoptive father of Jesus, Joseph’s profession clearly became a part of Jesus’ own life experience; evidenced by the number of parables He told in which He referred to buildings, stones and timbers.

Joseph's character: Joseph's upright standing as a man is described in Matthew Chapter 1 verse 19, where the Greek word 'dikaios' is used. This means 'one who obeys divine laws'. 'Dikaios' is most commonly translated as 'devout' or 'righteous'.

To have such a reputation meant that Joseph had to know the law intimately; both the written laws and the oral laws which were very substantial and he had learned them by heart. Therefore, when he was twelve, it is likely that he chose to dedicate the next several years of his life to studying the law and training to be a Tekton so that as an adult, he would hold a highly regarded profession and would also be known to not only know Jewish laws, but also to vigorously uphold them.

Also, the choice of the word 'just' is best demonstrated by looking at another person who the historian Flavius Josephus wrote about using this term; James the half-brother of Jesus. (*Antiquities Book 20 Chapter 9:1*). Josephus referred to James as 'James the Just' in his reference to the man who was appointed as head of the Church in Jerusalem.

It is highly likely that before he became engaged to Mary, Joseph worked alongside the priests who worked on the construction of the Temple or perhaps did so himself. The term 'just' implies that he was held in high regard by the religious community, possibly with some official religious standing.

Little is known of Joseph after the Biblical account of his family visiting the temple when Jesus was twelve years old. However, the Biblical references to Jesus' brothers (by name) and him having sisters suggest that together with Mary, he had four more sons and at least two daughters.

Based on the assumption that he was older than Mary, (perhaps by fifteen or more years), his death before Jesus started his ministry is very likely; while Mary of course, became one of the women who accompanied the twelve disciples. History also tells us that Joseph had a brother, Clopas, who became part of the larger group of disciples (the seventy two), and that his son too was to become a disciple.

# Bethlehem

The significance of Bethlehem in the Bible, and its relevance to the nativity Story cannot be overstated. Physically, it is located just a few miles to the South-East of Jerusalem

It was common knowledge to the Jews that their Messiah would be born there, due to a prophetic word given by the prophet Micah, over seven hundred years earlier. A date which closely coincides with the date of the establishment of the Roman Republic.

Historically, Bethlehem is also known to have been the central town to a region in which hundreds of thousands of sheep were raised each year. The vast majority of these sheep were bred to be sacrificed in the Temple as a sacrifice by those who had broken one of the many hundred Jewish laws; which in reality made religious observation of all the laws impossible.

It was also in one of the fields near to Bethlehem that the shepherds encountered an incredible Angelic visitation, in which they were directed to see the newly born of the Messiah for themselves.

## King David

Jesus birth was at Bethlehem, as had been prophesied. But Joseph and Mary were both descendants of David too.

Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would come from the family of Jesse (Isaiah Chapter 11); who was the father of King David. David was Jesse's youngest son, a shepherd who was anointed to be King by Samuel, while visiting Bethlehem (a thousand or so years earlier).

Jesus, being born in Bethlehem and coming from a family line of Shepherds and Kings; taken alongside the eventual sacrifice of His body to atone for (take away) the sins of the world (as Bethlehem's sheep had been) is therefore a powerful prophetic statement.

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## The Shepherds

It seems incredible that the Angelic hosts who announced the birth of Jesus were there to celebrate His birth as representatives of the supernatural world. But they also told shepherds to join in – effectively telling them to go and see for themselves that an incredible, long-awaited event had taken place.

Shepherds were far from being highly esteemed, as the Magi were. They were workers who were paid to guard the sheep from wolves and other predators; as well as from thieves. They were usually tough, rough and perhaps often offensive members of the community. They were paid to stay awake and guard the sheep. Yet on this night, the Shepherds quickly left their sheep to go and witness the events that the Angels had told them about. *“You will find the child wrapped in cloths and laying in a manger”* they said; and the Shepherds left their work to go.

## The Stable and The Manger

Since the evolution of Christian art and the creation of the first Christmas Cards, some factually incorrect images have been used in a bid to tell the story of the first Christmas. Unfortunately, these have often been adopted or assumed to be factual. Our look at the Magi represents this well, where because three gifts were given, it is assumed they were just three people on camels.

Similarly, the stable is very unlikely to have been an open wooden structure. Stables were needed to provide warmth and shelter. At the time of Christ’s birth, warmth and shelter were commonly provided by either natural or man-made caves, dug into the hillside. In these, there was found shelter from the wind, the rain, icy cold weather and snow.

Mangers would not be made of wood. Eating troughs for animals could not be made of a substance that could be chewed. They were therefore usually carved out of stone, which could also hold water, as well as food.

# Augustus Caesar

We've already briefly looked at King Herod and King David. But perhaps equally important is the head of the Roman Empire, who named himself an 'Emperor' rather than as 'a King' when he converted the Roman Republic into an Empire in 27 BC. That way, he was the ruler of many nations, not one.

Augustus was not his real name – it was Octavian – the same general who had devised a plan to save the Roman army from humiliation when the Parthian army invaded in 40 BC. The same man who appointed Herod to be 'The King of the Jews' as a vassal (puppet) King.

It was Augustus Caesar who was responsible for Mary and Joseph being in Bethlehem when the time came for Mary to give birth. He had decreed that for taxation purposes a census should be conducted across his Empire. Under Jewish law, this could only be done by each man returning to his ancestral town or city, which for Joseph was Bethlehem.

Augustus remained the Emperor of Rome until 14 AD, when Joseph and his family had been settled in Nazareth for about seventeen years.

## Nazareth

It was in Nazareth (and in the region of Galilee as a whole), that resistance against Roman taxation had contributed to the formation of the early Zealot movement. It was the Zealots who in turn, led the Jews into entering a full-scale war with Rome. This had devastating consequences for the Jews and was well recorded by the first-hand witness we have referred to earlier, Flavius Josephus.

The Census of 6 AD was marked by some of the Zealot's early, organized encounters with the Roman army and as a result of which, Judas the Galilean and his relative, Zaducc were rounded up and executed by Rome. At this time, Jesus is believed to have been about eleven years old at this time.

# Jesus, The Name & The Person

The prophet Isaiah, who remains highly esteemed by the Jews, recorded several prophetic statements about the Messiah. These included his birth to a virgin, which was revealed to Ahaz and recorded in Isaiah chapter 7.

It would have been this scripture, undoubtedly memorized by both Joseph and Mary, which would have confirmed to Joseph Mary's innocence. This would have been after the angel had appeared to him and reassured him that this baby was conceived by God Himself.

The first two verses of the ninth chapter of Isaiah describe in detail the location in which Jesus was to be raised (later named Nazareth) and verse six lists some of the Names which He would become known by:

*“ For unto us a child is born; unto us a Son is given and the government shall be upon His shoulder. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace”*

Chapter 11 refers to the descendancy from Jesse but also states that “The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him; the Spirit of Wisdom and Understanding; the Spirit of Counsel and Might.

For many, the most personal and valued Name is revealed in Isaiah chapter 7 verse 14: The name Immanuel, which is accurately translated as ‘God with us’.

But for Mary, who was highly favored by God and was visited by Gabriel with explicit instructions (which she wilfully and joyfully consented to) His Name was simply Jesus.

This was a name that she would know derived from the ancient name Joshua, which means ‘deliverer’.

As the Angel went on to explain, *“He will be great and be called the Son of the Most High.... And of His Kingdom there will be no end”*

But the events that followed the Birth of Jesus take us to the Temple in Jerusalem where the prophetic words of Simeon and Anna stunned Jesus' parents.

## Simeon

Simeon was also described as a 'just and devout man'. It appears that Simeon was very old and a believer who had been waiting for a promise to be fulfilled: The promise from God that he would not see death before he saw the Messiah had been born.

Simeon is recorded by the Apostle Luke as telling his story in a prayer of thanks: *“Lord, now, you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word. For my eyes have seen Your (gift of) Salvation which you have prepared before the face of all peoples. He is a light to bring revelation to the gentiles and to be the Glory of Your people Israel”.*

But Simeon continued to address Mary *“ Behold, this child is destined to be the fall and rising of many in Israel. And a sign which will be spoken against. Yes, a sword will pierce through your very own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed”*

## Anna

Anna is described as a women of eighty-four years old who had devoted most of her life to serving God in the Temple by praying and fasting. She added her thanks to God for the birth and presentation of Jesus in the Temple. She then openly spoke about Him to all those she knew were there that were also looking for redemption in Jerusalem

After returning to Bethlehem and settling in the home that had been prepared by Joseph for his family, the Gospel of Matthew reveals the story of the Magi and the fact that an unusual occurrence in the Sky had brought them from the East, from the region of Iran. The appearance of a new star who these Magi knew represented the birth of a King, had compelled them follow the star all the way to Jerusalem.

# The Star

Whether this was literally a new star created by God to celebrate and mark this birth of His Son on earth, or whether this was a comet which came into the sky in an extraordinary way, we do not know. However, for the Magi and for all those who could look up and see this astronomical phenomenon, it was a stunningly real event.

If it were a comet, travelling very close to the earth's atmosphere, then we can presume that its tail enabled the comet to point in a specific direction.

There are historical records of the appearance of comets. Comets known to have been in the night sky during 12 and 4 BC can be eliminated from our search 'for the star' because 12 BC was long before the Roman Census and 4 BC is too late, because King Herod had died.

Chinese historians known as the 'Han Shu', were the recorders of the official history of the Han dynasty from 206BC to 9 AD. They record that *"during the second year of the Chien-p'ing reign period, during the second month, (March 9<sup>th</sup> to April 6<sup>th</sup> 5 BC) a suibsing appeared at Ch'ien-nui for over 70 days"*. Their catalogue reads:

## Ho Peng-yoke catalogue No 20

- 61 26<sup>th</sup> August 12 BC for 56 days. Halley's Comet (a 'po' comet)
- 63 9<sup>th</sup> March – 6<sup>th</sup> April 5 BC for 70 days. A Sui (a tailed comet)
- 64 4<sup>th</sup> April 4 BC a Po Comet

*(Catalogue number 62, recorded as appearing in 10BC cannot be verified by modern astronomers)*

If the nativity star was in fact a comet, it is highly probable that the Chinese recorders saw it and entry number 63 refers to it.

Whether a star or comet, we know that the Magi followed its path and arrived in Jerusalem.

# Gifts

The presumption that the Magi was a party of just three people has grown from the number of gifts that are recorded as being the gifts they took with them to Bethlehem. Their generosity has inspired ours, ever since as their actions are replicated each year as we buy presents for our loved ones.

Without knowing the future of this new-born King they brought gifts which prophetically spoke of His life and were highly valuable:

Gold representing His royalty (as The King of The Jews)

Frankincense representing His divinity (a Holy Essence) and

Myrrh, an embalming oil, representing his suffering and death as a man.

As the early Church started to circulate the nativity Story as part of Jesus's life story, so came the tradition of giving gifts to each other in celebration of Christ's birth and in recognition of what the Magi did.

A significant aid to this was brought by German settlers in America who brought the tradition of 'Christkind' – a mythical angel sent by Jesus to bring gifts to well-behaved children.

# Saint Nicholas

Saint Nicholas was a fourth century Saint born in modern day Turkey, in the region of Patara.

Nicholas' extremely wealthy parents died when he was young and in response to the Gospel message of giving to the poor, Nicholas dedicated his life to helping the poor and needy.

His concern for children led him to be venerated and named as a Saint who cared for children.

# Santa Claus

The original Dutch settlers in America spelled St Nicholas, 'Sinterklaas' and very soon, the German tradition of 'Christkind' lost its angelic roots and became renamed Kriss Kringle. However, the story of Saint Nicholas' generosity and concern for children continued.

A story believed to have been written by Clement Clarke Moore, known as '*An account of a visit from St Nicholas*' became better liked as a poem; '*T'was the night before Christmas*'. This presented St. Nicholas as a jolly red-cheeked elf.

But the concept of Santa Claus as we know him, originates with Frank Baum, the creator of The Wizard of Oz. He wrote Santa's biography, taking the story of St Nicholas and re-inventing the story of goodwill by creating an abandoned baby who was rescued by a nymph named Cecille. In Baum's story, Cecille named the baby 'Claus'; which means 'little one' in the language of nymphs.

As Santa stories spread and grew in the 1920's and 1930's Santa moved from the laughing island of HoHaHo to the North Pole. Here, reindeer were introduced as Santa's mode of transport.

It was in 1931 that a commercial artist, Haddon Sundblom was commissioned by Coca-Cola to develop a character for their Christmas advertising campaign. He is the Santa Claus we know today, coming down the chimney in a variation of the St Nicholas story in which Nicholas brought bags of gifts for poor children.

Today's collection of additional mythical characters include Mrs Christmas, various elves and of course, flying reindeer.

All are stories that have strayed far from the original story of St. Nicholas.

# Christmas is Banned!

Four hundred years before the focus of Christmas was being challenged by the myth of Santa Claus, the Puritans in both America and Great Britain were already appalled by the revelry, which was developing around a previously, sacred celebration.

In England, this resulted in Oliver Cromwell having the commercialism of Christmas halted by banning shops from opening – but also, banning church services taking place on December 25<sup>th</sup> which continued for thirteen years. In addition, mince pies were outlawed, as they were seen as signs of overindulgence and evergreen trees were banned due to their pagan history.

In America, the celebration of Christmas was outlawed in Massachusetts between 1659 and 1681; breaking this law being punishable with a fine of five shillings (prior to the use of the dollar).

Despite these trans-Atlantic attacks on the festivities of Christmas, celebrations continued in the privacy of private homes until the laws were eventually repealed. However, by now, various traditions had become part of the Christmas celebrations, including the cutting of Christmas Trees!

## Christmas Trees

The custom of having an evergreen tree began in the eighth century in Germany. Here, (Saint) Boniface found a group of pagans worshipping around an oak tree. Boniface is said to have cut down the tree and in doing so, found a small fir tree sprouting through the oak's roots. Taking this as a sign of the Christian faith breaking through evil, the fir tree was promoted as part of the Christian celebration.

It was another eight hundred years before fir trees were brought indoors as a form of decoration though and the first recorded decoration of a tree indoors was at Riga in Latvia, when Martin Luther is said to have put small candles on a tree.

Martin Luther's demonstration to his children of 'light in the darkness' caught on and by the end of that century, German markets were selling tree ornaments that included paper flowers and small candles were becoming popular.

The Christmas tree concept was not fashionable in England until 1840 though, when Queen Victoria's German husband, Prince Albert, introduced the Christmas tree concept to England and it quickly caught on! In fact the environmental effect of so many fir trees being cut down in forests caused enough concern for artificial trees to be developed.

In the USA, the Addis (toilet brush) company created the first 'brush trees'. These were able to stand up under more weighty decorations than the first artificial trees which were often made from feathers.

In the 1930's a period of Dickensian nostalgia caused a demand for larger and larger trees, able to be decorated with larger decorations including bells, balls and tinsel.

## Christmas Decorations

By 1860, Christmas tree decorations had become innovative and were often made with pride by young women during Advent. The 20<sup>th</sup> century also saw decorations fashionably spreading to other areas of the home.

The first recorded fire caused by a Christmas tree was in Matrawan, New Jersey on Christmas day 1887. But there were many, many more and the use of candles dropped until three years after the first lightbulb had been developed and tree lighting emerged in 1903.

Other tree decorations have come in and out of fashion, but until the 21<sup>st</sup> Century have primarily been green and red themed, echoing the natural colors of holly bushes. Green representing the continuation of life through winter and red symbolizing the blood of Jesus, shed at His crucifixion. The concept of Angels or Stars being placed at the top of the tree clearly reflect the events of the nativity story.

# Charles Dickens

Among the most popular Victorian era novelists is Charles Dickens, who was greatly responsible for a resurgence of Christmas celebrations after he bravely published his own work, 'A Christmas Carol'.

This book was partly born from the memory of hardships he had personally experienced as a young man and was also politically motivated; a novel aiming to expose the economic climate of the era (the 1840's) during which time there was widespread unemployment, famine and abusive conditions in the workplace. His aim was simply to expose those conditions and to challenge wealthier people to act with compassion and generosity towards their employees.

The Dickensian Christmas was a concept; an ideal designed to enlighten society about the challenge of economic change on traditional values.

Dickens also wrote a book called 'The Life of our Lord' which was based on the Gospels for the purpose of sharing the story of Jesus Christ with his children.

# George Frideric Handel

In a London Church close to the famous shopping area of Regent's Street, a Parish organist developed his incredible gift for musical composition. His name was George Frideric Handel.

Handel's 'Messiah' is performed at Christmas and Easter throughout the classical music world and has done so regularly since 1742 when it was written on 256 pages of manuscript in just 24 days.

Handel's inspirational work has attracted numerous performers culminating in the assembly of some of the largest orchestras and choirs of all time. In 1857, 500 musicians and 2,000 vocalists sang the Messiah for Queen Victoria and her 20,000 guests at the magnificent, new, Crystal Palace. This performance was however, usurped by a choir of 5,000 singers at the same venue in 1910.

## Hanukkah

Advent and the Jewish festival of lights, known as 'Hanukkah' share the month of December.

Hanukkah is an eight-day festival instigated to commemorate the re-dedication of the Jewish Temple in 165 BC after its desecration.

The festival celebrates two miracles: The end of Syrian occupation and the lighting of the Menorah, which miraculously burned for eight days, despite having very little oil available to fuel it. It is therefore referred to as the 'Festival of Lights'.

Hanukkah is a time of gift-giving, just as Christmas is. Jewish families will often burn nine candles in their windows as a sign of light's solidarity in the darkness.

## Candlemas

Candlemas is poised midway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox on February 2<sup>nd</sup>. This a date which by church tradition has been used as the date to commemorate the purification of Mary after the birth of Jesus. (An act required by Jewish law 40 days after the birth of a baby).

Like many dates chosen by the early church to commemorate Christian events, this was originally the date of a pagan festival; in this case, a Celtic celebration anticipating the planting of the year's crops.

Christians are known to have included this date in the Christian calendar as long ago as the fourth century and soon after, the lighting of candles on this day was introduced to symbolise Jesus Christ being the Light of the world.

In the USA, this is also 'Groundhog Day'. A day whose recognition was revived when famously, the comic Bill Murray starred in a feature film telling the story of the moral redemption of a TV reporter.

## St. Stephen

St Stephen is featured in the Biblical book 'The Acts of the Apostles' as a sincere believer in Christ who was chosen by Jesus' disciples to help oversee the care of widows and orphans in Jerusalem.

After a short while of service by distributing charitable gifts, he was arrested by the Jews for his open proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus as the motivation for his work. His subsequent trial, and particularly his speech he gave in his defense, is well recorded. This included his prayer for the forgiveness of those who were about to stone him to death and his pre-death vision of Heaven.

St. Stephen's day is celebrated as a public holiday in the Christian world on the day after Christmas day (unless it falls on a Sunday). The reason for this date is thought to stem from the belief that Stephen was the first believer in Christ to be killed for his beliefs after Christ himself.

## King Wenceslas

'Good King' Wenceslas, is a Victorian Christmas song published in 1853. It closely followed the publishing of Charles Dicken's 'book the Christmas Carol'. Both promoted the need for good deeds and compassion to be shown by the rich to the poor during a period in which the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer.

In reality, Wenceslas was a tenth century Bohemian Duke, not a King at all; but like St Stephen, was known for his charitable works, which led to his veneration by the Church as a Saint.

The story of Wenceslas is tragic. His parents, Duke Vratislaus 1<sup>st</sup> and Drahomira, were believed to be practicing pagans and perhaps for his protection, Wenceslas' care was given to grandmother, Ludmila. It was she who gave him a Christian education and training in the form of Roman Catholicism. As the song suggests, Wenceslas had a Christian, social conscience which after the death of his parents, he was able to give practical expression to as the new Duke of Bohemia.

## Why December 25<sup>th</sup>?

It's fairly clear from the Biblical narrative that the birth of Christ is unlikely to have taken place at the end of December due to shepherds being in nearby fields at night.

The term 'Christmas' does not appear to have been used as a term until the publication of a Saxon book in 1038, which was titled 'Christes Maesse' (Christ's mass).

As with many things related to the birth, life and resurrection of Christ, the December 25<sup>th</sup> date has become the nominated date for the most significant event in Human history as a result of a decision made in Rome, by the Emperor Constantine.

Previous emperors of Rome, including Caligula and Nero had wanted to be honored as gods. They appear to have believed that they could obtain immortality and wanted to be revered during their lives, as though they were gods. But soon after Augustus, the first Emperor of Rome honored himself with the title Emperor, the Bible reveals that God Himself chose to do the opposite – to take the form of a man and to come in the form of a human child to change the world from within.

History records that Constantine prayed to the 'God of his mother' (as his mother had become a Christian) that if certain events took place enabling him to win a great battle, he too would believe in her God.

For reasons that were most likely to have been totally disassociated with his wrongly motivated prayer, the battle was won and the Emperor kept his pledge, choosing to celebrate the birth of Christ on December 25<sup>th</sup>.

At this time, December 25<sup>th</sup> was not an official festival but rather, fell after the end of a seven-day feast called Saturnalia. This was a time of celebration designed to counter the darkness of mid-winter. It included hallways being decorated with boughs of laurel and evergreen trees; with lighted candles and oil lamps, street processions, bonfires and the giving of gifts. 'Jo Saturnalia!'

# Prophecies Announcing the Birth of

Prophet	Scripture	Approx Year	Fulfillment
Jacob	Genesis 49:10	1885 BC	Luke 3:33
Moses	Numbers 24:17	1350 BC	Matthew 1:1-17
Hosea	Hosea 11:1	755 BC	Matthew 2:14-15
Micah	Micah 5:2	742 BC	Luke 2:4-7
Isaiah	Isaiah 9:7	740 BC	Luke 1:32-33
Isaiah	Isaiah 7:14	740 BC	Luke 1:26-31
Isaiah	Isaiah 40:3	710 BC	Luke 1:17
Jeremiah	Jeremiah 31:15	597 BC	Matthew 2:16-18
Malachi	Malachi 5:2	420 BC	Matthew 17:12

# Jesus Christ, The Messiah

## Prophecy

The Messiah would be born in the ancestral line of the tribe of Judah.

The Messiah would be a descendant of Jacob.

The Messiah would come out of Egypt, just as the Israelites had been led out of slavery in Egypt by Moses.

The Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, the same town as King David.

The Messiah would be a descendant of King David.

He would be born from the womb of a virgin.

The Messiah would be preceded by a prophet, whose role was to announce His coming.

The Messiah's birth would lead to the slaughter of many children in the region of Bethlehem.

The fore-running prophet would come in the 'spirit of Elijah'.

# The Spirit of Peace *The writer's own Christmas message*

“Today, the Lord is speaking. . .

He's reminding us that we have a Savior; a Guide and a Deliverer.

This person, 'Immanuel' (God with us) is someone who every individual can call on and rely on, no matter what they have done or what they are facing. He wants to bring every one of us through the circumstances of our human life, into an eternal life of meaning and purpose. But first, a life of fulfilment dominated by His peace.

In contrast, the world is shouting.

Shouting for every individual to participate in the manic materialism that can so often lead to poverty. A life of grasping and clutching for more... A life of slavery to commerce; the re-cycling of money that goes through our hands, mostly never leaving 'enough'. A life that never gives true satisfaction or peace.

In fifty years – or perhaps in five . . . Perhaps in only fifty days - or perhaps in fifty hours, the light of our life on earth, may be switched off like an electric light. At that time, only the offer of the Light of the World will matter. Have we accepted it? The offer is saving from eternal darkness and the gift of eternal joy.

But the clamour and frantic activity of the world also steals our time. Time to pause and think - and listen.

Today, please, stop and listen. When you hear His voice, do not harden your heart.

There's a voice that says 'come to me; receive the peace that the world cannot give. I will give you rest'. That voice is real and the peace offered is beyond any peace we can understand.

The Spirit of Christmas is not revelry; it's the Spirit of Jesus Christ who alone, gives us Peace”.

*John Hammond*

# Listen to the Full Story

*A chronological presentation of the events of  
the First Christmas, professionally narrated  
with beautiful backing music.*



*The Nativity*

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Content compiled and written by J Harvey-Hammond

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