

The Christmas narrative is one of the most familiar stories in the entire Bible and rightfully so. But because of that familiarity, there is so much rich material that gets buried in the way we traditionally tell it. In this session, I want us to look at the fascinating and very diverse group of people involved in the Christmas narrative. In our last session we laid the groundwork by looking at Jesus' mother Mary and why Jesus being born of a virgin is so vital to His coming to earth. If you haven't seen that one yet, it would help you to go back and take a look.

As we pick up the story, Mary and Joseph, who as we previously discussed, were both descendants of King David, have been called to the City of David, called Bethlehem, to take part in the Roman census. The name "Bethlehem" means "House of Bread" was about 100 miles from Joseph and Mary's home in Nazareth, so that would have been a very long and difficult journey, especially with Mary being very pregnant! And to make matters worse, when they finally got there, they weren't able to get a place to stay because the inn or boarding house was already full. But even that was an act of God's providence when we see the first group of people who would hear the news!

Bethlehem was along the route where people commonly travelled between Egypt and Jerusalem and there had been an inn there since the time of King David to accommodate the many people who made the journey. When there was no room available, it probably wasn't unusual for people to either sleep outside in the courtyard or in the stables on the ground floor of the inn where travellers would keep their animals, so Mary and Joseph had to avail themselves of that option.

So with that in mind, it is interesting to note that the first people to be informed of Jesus' birth were shepherds working on a night watch. Nonetheless, an often overlooked prophecy indicates that these were no ordinary shepherds. The Book of Micah 4:8 foretells that the Messiah would be revealed from the Migdol Eder, or "Tower of the Flock." This was a watchtower where they kept the lambs which were to be used as sacrifices for the Jewish Passover holiday. So the Shepherd's responsible for these special lambs were the first called to see the One Who was to be the true Passover Lamb. Isn't that powerful?

Jewish Law had very strict standards regarding the condition of sacrificial animals. They had to be without blemish or defects of any kind. For their protection, baby lambs were wrapped up in what we're called swaddling cloths to keep them from thrashing around and injuring themselves. When the shepherds arrived and saw the baby Jesus wrapped in these same cloths there was no doubt about what they were witnessing.

**THE WISE MEN:** Of all of the people described in the Christmas story, perhaps none are more misunderstood than the Wise Men, or Magi. Although they are depicted as part of our modern Nativity scenes, they were not at the manger at all. At the time of their arrival, Jesus is described as a young child, rather than as an infant and they were by this time living in a house, as opposed to a stable. At any rate, Jesus could have been as much as two years old by the time the Wise Men arrived. The Magi were an order of priests and scientists from the region of

Persia, which is now modern Iran. In the Old Testament we read about the tragic events that led up to the Jewish people being carried away captive to Babylon. The Babylonian Empire was later overthrown by the Persian Empire. A key person living in the region at that time was the Prophet Daniel. Daniel worked with the order of the Magi and may have been the one who introduced them to the Hebrew Scriptures and the prophecies of the coming Messiah.

Tradition says there were three Wise Men, but while the Bible doesn't specifically tell us how many there were, three men simply passing through carrying small gift boxes would not have caused the kind of reaction that these men did. Magi actually travelled in large caravans and we're men of tremendous political power and influence, regarded as, and remember this title, King Makers and we will go into that further in our next discussion. The gifts they brought Jesus, gold, frankincense and myrrh were common gifts given to honor kings and other nobility but many theologians believe, and I agree, that they also had symbolic meaning. Gold pointed toward Jesus as the King of Kings. The incense represented His being the Great High Priest and myrrh, which was an exotic perfume made from the gum of certain types of trees, was used among other things, for preparing dead bodies for burial which was later done in Jesus' case as well. Of course, these gifts in large quantities also had immense monetary value, enough to abundantly fund Jesus' ministry for life.

Again, we will pick up here in the next session when we talk about Jesus' early years. As we go through these studies, I hope you will be inspired to look deeper than what you may see on the surface. When we are looking at something of this magnitude, we want to make sure our traditional religious understandings don't block us from seeing all that God has for us. So until next time, keep it real!