

CHRISTMAS TEACHING

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I got a Christmas card that made me think a little about what things like Christmas carols and cards and art tell us about Christmas. If you didn't grow up knowing about Christmas, how crazy would December in 21st century America look? There are the songs—Jesus didn't cry as a baby, and he liked drum music. An awful lot of the songs focus on snow—it would seem like a good snow on Christmas is a sign of great favor. And what about that fat red guy in the furry red suit, who hangs out with the herd of exotic cattle, one of which apparently ran over Grandma? And in 21st century America, we must worship trees! We chop one down, bring it inside, and cover it with baubles and small handmade offerings which are full of significance. Then at the end of the month, if we don't get what we want, we strip it of its finery and throw it out onto the street to die. And then there are all the Christmas cards of renaissance art. Mary always wore blue. She was a mature white adult with long blonde curls and a golden halo, and her naked newborn sits up in her lap and gives a sermon. But the only sermon and real infant is going to preach you is "I'm hungry! I'm sleepy! I'm wet! You fix this NOW!". So Christmas, to the uninitiated, would look mighty bizarre.

So let's look at the historical records to see what really happened. I'd like to spend some time looking at the Biblical account of Jesus' birth and just talking about the cast of characters involved. So using Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 as references, if you want, what can we ferret out about some of these people, and what does history from other records tell us? So for starters, what do we know about

JOSEPH?

Luke 1:27: "a man named Joseph, a descendant of David". So a descendant of the line of kings of Israel and Judah. People 2000 years ago were not ignorant. Joseph was worried about Mary's pregnancy not because he didn't know where babies came from, but because he DID. Mt shows a nice man who did not want to have his fiance disgraced despite her being preggers before the wedding; he thought he'd just divorce her quietly. That's a very compassionate move, because the penalty for a girl being sexually active (see Deut 20) outside of marriage was being stoned to death. No wonder Mary high-tailed it off to see her cousin Elizabeth! But an angel appeared in a dream to Joseph and talked him out of it. So we see that Joe is also obedient—he takes Mary home to be his wife after all, and later after another dream he packs up his little family and moves to Egypt in the middle of the night to live as illegal aliens for a couple of years. A third dream tells him to return to Israel, and a fourth dream has them move to Nazareth. We would think this guy crazy today, but dreams and visions are taken very seriously in the near east even today, and apparently it was clear to Joseph that the angel who appeared to him was from God. So Joseph is a thoughtful, not impulsive man, generous enough to marry the pregnant Mary and present her son as his own.

MARY?

The average age for a girl to enter her first marriage at the time would have been anywhere from 13-20. Mary makes me think of that movie title—*Girl Interrupted*. Just a nice Jewish girl planning her wedding, Mary should be a model for all Christians. When interrupted by God, she recognized where the interruption came from and embraced it. I would not have been so accepting about it. I need details! I have objections! But Mary calmly accepts, and rejoices.

Isaiah 7:14 was never interpreted by the Jews as being about a virgin birth, or messianic. The word for virgin (*almah*) means young woman of marriageable age. Of course, in the ANE young women who were not married were either virginal or dead from having been stoned, although there are accounts of rape victims just being put away quietly to languish as shamed old maids in the family. So it comes to the same thing in the end. If you're an *almah*, it's assumed you're a virgin. But Jews did not read the prophecy as a virginal conception. It's one of those cases where the meaning was read back into the passage later with the blessings of hindsight. It may have been one of those passages which the resurrected Jesus used to show people what all the scriptures had to say about Him.

There is no indication that Mary's pregnancy was anything but normal from that point on, but it would have been a real pain in the tuchus to have to go plodding off the Bethlehem in the ninth month. Afterward, however, things got REALLY different. How many livestock farmers stopped by to admire YOUR babies? How many foreign dignitaries popped by with presents? The first time you took your new baby to church, how many elderly people came up and said "Whew! Now I can die happy!"? I'll bet it was kind of surreal—all that power and glory of the universe wrapped up in soft and tender baby skin, which Mary got to pick up and cuddle.

ANGELS?

The angels were quite busy. They appeared to Zachariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph (multiple times), shepherds, and who knows who else. Their job was to convince people of things, and to praise God when it all came about. How did they feel about this? Don't you wonder if they felt a little jealous? Christ didn't die for their sakes when THEY fell. Peter seems to think they don't even understand how it worked when He did it for us. And yet the angels were glad to sing and praise when Jesus came to earth for the sake of us idiotic humans. What a mystery!

And why was it, of all classes on earth, that they appeared to the...

SHEPHERDS?

Near the bottom of the pile socially and financially—they were probably hired hands. They may have lived and slept outdoors. But these weren't just any shepherds—they were shepherds of the fields around Bethlehem. (Micah 5:2) Bethlehem is special because that's where the flocks were raised to provide the lambs for the sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem. (Micah 4:8) There was a watchtower above a cave in northern Bethlehem (Migdal-eder) built to protect the temple flocks, and during lambing season the pregnant ewes would be brought to this cave to protect the future sacrificial lambs. New lambs were wrapped in cloths to keep their limbs straight, and their bodies free from blemishes. This may be where Mary and Joseph had to come when the lodgings were full. So it's possible that the angels didn't need to tell the shepherds WHERE to look for the baby, wrapped in cloths and laying in a manger. Years later, Jesus' cousin John pointed him out by saying "Look, there's the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world". Even Jesus' maternity ward showed who He was, and what His job would be.

But why did the angels appear to the shepherds? Perhaps because Jesus came not so much for the high and mighty, but for everyday people, from the lowest on up.

WISE MEN?

No idea how many there were—at least two, but maybe hundreds. Probably from Persia or Chaldea, where the prophet Daniel had lived, so they may very well have known his prophecy about the 70 weeks and known that the time was about up. Probably astrologers, although maybe just astronomers, and likely a cross between the two. They came from far away to visit a mighty king and to show Him reverence—a king SO mighty that even the stars acknowledged Him. We don't know when they showed up-- probably at least 4 weeks after Jesus' birth, but up to nearly two years afterward. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were living in a house at that point. Nice thing about having a trade, it's easy to relocate and stay employed. All Joseph needed was his bag of tools. It's amazing that the magi were willing to travel that far to see this theoretical king, and reasonable that they looked in Jerusalem first. That's the city of kings, so it was a logical stop. The gifts they brought were things that were produced and valued in their homelands, but appropriate for presenting to a king. And while they don't seem to have been afraid of Herod, they were smart enough to not report back.

HEROD?

What was it about the birth of a backwater baby that he felt threatened by? Herod was a very paranoid and threatened-feeling person anyway. A key verse is Mt 2:3—all were troubled with him. Doesn't that tell you something? In 40BC the Roman senate declared him King of the Jews, and so then he invaded Palestine and established his kingdom. He tried to get in good with the natives by marrying a Jewish woman and building a bunch of public buildings, but nobody was fooled. He had ten wives, and had at least one of them and three of his sons murdered for fear that they were plotting against him. Caesar Augustus said that it was safer to be Herod's dog than one of his sons. Herod was 70 years old and ill when the magi came by, but even then he was so afraid of losing his power that he killed off a small town's infant and toddler boys on the strength of it. When he knew he was about to die, he had a number of prominent Jewish citizens imprisoned with orders that as soon as he was dead, those prisoners would die too, so that even if Jerusalem did not mourn him, it would still mourn.

QUESTION:

Which is the bigger holiday in the US—Christmas or Easter? Why?