

UNDERSTANDING THE BIG PICTURE OF THE BIBLE  
WEEK 10 - Christmas As Seen From the Hebrew Scriptures

“. . . and you shall call His Name Jesus,” the angel told Joseph, “for He will save His people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21)

Christmas is Jewish! The Jewish people were living in the exciting expectation of the coming of the Messiah. God had promised that the Messiah would come and deliver them. Christmas is a fulfillment of what God had promised in the OT.

What do we celebrate at Christmas? We celebrate the birth of the promised Messiah of Israel – the One Whom God had promised to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles (Isa. 49:6).

Before the birth of Jesus, we read in the book of Luke the birth announcement of John the Baptizer. The angel Gabriel was sent by God to tell Zacharias that he would have a son who would be named John. John would serve as the herald for the Messiah. John would announce the Messiah, Jesus, Who would come as the ultimate sacrifice for sin. At Jesus' first coming, He came to die for sin. The angel, Gabriel, appeared to Zacharias to announce the birth of his son while Zacharias was serving in the Temple in Jerusalem – at the time of SACRIFICE!

As we read through the Christmas accounts in Matthew and Luke, we're told that the people in Judea were discussing all that was transpiring prior to Jesus' birth (Luke 2:18) And, they were MARVELING at the happenings.

The Christmas accounts from Luke and from Matthew speak to Jesus' FIRST COMING and His SECOND COMING!

Luke 2:8-12 - This doesn't make much sense unless you know what was written about the Messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures. What does this mean to us in 2014 in Arizona? Firstly, why would an angel of the Lord appear to shepherds? Shepherds were the lowest of the low! These Jewish shepherds were under a rabbinical ban since they were living in the fields. Because they were with their flocks in the field 24/7, they couldn't obey the regulations in the Law re: washings, and purification rites, and foods. These Jewish shepherds, who were shunned by the Jewish community, were visited by an angel of almighty God! God's grace reaches down to the lowest of the low. God's grace reaches down to you and to me.

Where were the shepherds watching their flock? Luke 2:8 – in the “same country” – in the Bethlehem area. Where was Jesus born? Micah 5:2 – the prophet Micah wrote that the One Whose days are from everlasting, the Messiah, would be born in ---- “Bethlehem Ephrathah”. Firstly, we need to know that there were two Bethlehem's. There was a Bethlehem in Galilee – 6 mi. NW of Nazareth (Josh. 19:10, 15 – in the listing of cities given to the tribe of Zebulun). And, there was a Bethlehem in Judah. Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judah. However, Micah 5:2 specifically tells us that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem Ephrathah. Ephrathah means FRUITFUL. Ephrathah was the ancient

name of Bethlehem. Ephrathah in Jesus' day was just to the north of where the people lived. It was still part of Bethlehem. Ephrathah was the northern part of Bethlehem - on the road to Jerusalem. This is crucial: sheep that were destined to be sacrificed in the Temple in Jerusalem had to be tended/kept within a certain radius of the Temple. Ephrathah was in that radius! This ruling was made by the Rabbis. Scripture tells us in Micah 5:2 that Jesus came into the world in the part of Bethlehem known as Ephrathah – where only sheep that were going to be sacrificed in the Temple were kept!!

AND, in Ephrathah there was a tower – a watch tower called the “tower of the flock.” The sheep that would be sacrificed were kept in the “tower of the flock”! Scripture tells us about that watch tower in Genesis 35:21 and in Micah 4:8.

Ewes, mama lambs, were brought to the “tower of the flock” to give birth to baby lambs that would be sacrificed! Micah 4:8 mentions the “tower of the flock” and tells us that the kingdom comes to the “tower of the flock”. Who will bring the Kingdom to this earth? Jesus! Could this be where Jesus was born? Scripture doesn't say that Jesus was born in a stable or in a cave. Did Mary and Joseph travel to this “tower of the flock” after they were told that there was no room at the inn?

Bible commentators and historians have speculated. They've guessed at where Jesus was born. Some have suggested a stable, some a cave. I'm suggesting that Jesus was born in this “tower of the flock”. Scripture does tell us that Jesus was laid in a manger. There were mangers (feeding troughs) in this “tower of the flock”.

Consider: if Mary gave birth to Jesus in this “tower of the flock” where SACRIFICE was the focus, what a message God was proclaiming to the world – here is My Son, the perfect Lamb of God Who will be sacrificed for sin! Proverbs 18:10 – He is a strong Tower!

And then we read in this passage that the GLORY OF THE LORD shone around the shepherds. The glory of God is God's manifested presence. In the OT God chose to manifest Himself in the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud as He led the people through the wilderness. The glory of God filled the tabernacle in the wilderness and the Temple in Jerusalem. We read of the glory of God departing from the temple in Jerusalem in the book of Ezekiel (Eze. 10). The glory of God is back – at Jesus' birth! John 1:14 – *The Word of God was made flesh and dwelled among us and we beheld His glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*

The angel speaks of “good tidings of great joy. . . .” Isa. 41:27 tells us that the Messiah will bring good tidings at His first coming! These good tidings speak of the Gospel – of forgiveness of sin. And these good tidings would be for ALL people – both Jews and Gentiles. God's plan of salvation is offered to the WORLD!

The Angel told the shepherds this would all happen in the City of David – the ancient Bethlehem where David was born. The Jewish shepherds knew that the Messiah would be a descendant of King David.

A Savior? Why would that be important to the Jewish people? Being saved is a very Jewish teaching in the OT! God told the Jewish people in Isaiah 46:13: *I will place salvation in Zion – Jerusalem - For Israel My glory.* The Hebrew word for salvation is YESHUA!

The Messiah would be born:

- Isa. 7:14 - *a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son*
- Isa. 9:6 - *unto us a Child is born. . . .*

A “sign” – the Babe would be wrapped in swaddling cloths (Luke 2:12). How is that a sign? ALL babies were wrapped in swaddling cloths so that their limbs would be straight. How are the shepherds going to find this special baby – this Savior - wrapped in swaddling cloths if ALL babies were wrapped this way at birth?

What did God require of the sacrifices? The sacrifices had to be without blemish. Lambs born to ewes in the place where the sacrificial lambs were kept (in the “tower of the flock”) were wrapped in swaddling cloths! If, as a lamb was being birthed – kicking and flailing – and they bruised themselves, they would not be eligible for Temple sacrifice. Lev. 22:27 – lambs, goats and bulls were eligible for sacrifice at 8 days old! The lambs destined for Temple sacrifice had to be wrapped in swaddling cloths so that they wouldn’t bruise.

As part of the sign we read that the Babe was to be found lying in a manger – feeding trough/stall. Within the Luke account concerning the shepherds, there are two images of lowliness and humility: the lowly shepherds and in lowliness the Messiah came.

Luke 2:13-14. . . *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace toward men on whom God’s sovereign pleasure rests.”*

Luke 2:15 – *let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass which the LORD HAS MADE KNOWN TO US!*

Had the angel told the shepherds where to find the Baby? NO! Had the shepherds asked? NO! How many mangers could there have been? A LOT! Many of the homes in these towns had mangers. When people traveled, they traveled with their livestock. If you accommodated visitors, their livestock were accommodated as well. Mangers could be as simple as a ledge protruding from the wall inside the house. Hay would be placed on that ledge for the livestock. Mangers could be found in siderooms in homes. And, oftentimes there were mangers in the “livingrooms” – in the main room of a home. Animals were kept in many of the homes. Check out I Sam. 28:24 [Witch of EnDor] and Judges 11:31 [Jephthah]).

The shepherds might’ve had to comb the entire city looking for this baby in one of the many mangers in Bethlehem. However, Luke 2:16 tells us that they came with HASTE and found Mary and Joseph and the Babe. I believe they knew exactly where to find the Babe because they knew the prophecies in Micah. The shepherds knew where the sacrificial lambs were birthed and kept. I’m suggesting that they found Him, Jesus, Who is our strong tower (Prov. 18:10; Psa. 61:3; Psa. 144:2) in that watch tower in Bethlehem Ephrathah – in the “tower of the flock”! This is the tower where the sheep destined for Temple sacrifice were born. This “tower of the flock” might very well have been the birthplace for Jesus Who came first as the Suffering Servant – the ultimate sacrifice for sin.

The account of the shepherds speaks to the Messiah Who came as the Lamb of God - Who came to die for our sins. He's coming again. Time has gone by and we're waiting. Scripture speaks to a gap between the Messiah's first coming and His second coming. We're in the gap!

In Matthew 2:1-12 we read of the Magi who appeared on the scene following a gap of possibly two years from the time of Jesus' birth. And, we see the wise men visiting Jesus with a different "agenda" than the agenda of the shepherds. The Jewish shepherds were told by the angel – He's here – the One you've been expecting. The shepherds came to the family soon after Jesus was born. They found Him as a newborn lying in a manger (Luke 2:12, 16). The Gentile wise men saw the star when Jesus was born; however, it took them time to travel across the desert from Persia to Israel. The wise men traveled first to Jerusalem (Matt. 2:7, 16) – the city where King David reigned and where the Messiah will reign as King at His second coming. Distance between Persia and Jerusalem: approx.. 1111 miles. At Jerusalem the wise men encountered Herod who told them to go to Bethlehem where they found Jesus in a house. He was not lying in a manger (Matt. 2:11). And, He was a "Child," not a baby (Matt. 2:11).

AFTER the birth of Jesus, wise men from the East (how many wise men?) traveled to Jerusalem to find the King of the Jews! The shepherds found Jesus as the Lamb of God Who would be sacrificed! Jesus was sacrificed as the Lamb of God at His first coming. The Magi looked for a King. Jesus will return as a King at His second coming. We know there's a gap between Jesus' first and second coming. There's a gap between the shepherd's visit and the visit by the wise men.

The Magi were not kings. They were King-makers. The wise men looked for kings. Wise men were known as those who interpreted dreams (Dan. 2:1-4). However, they could not interpret King Nebuchadnezzar's dream. King Nebuchadnezzar was the King of Babylon at the time. He had captured many of the Jewish people including Daniel. Daniel, who was a faithful Jewish boy, was able to interpret King Neb's dream. And because of that, the King put Daniel in charge of the wise men. Daniel became the Chief Administrator/master over the wise men (Dan. 2:48). In the book of Daniel, Daniel wrote about when the Messiah would appear in Israel. Do you think Daniel might've shared that information with the Magi? The information about the Messiah was passed down from generation to generation among the Magi – the wise men.

Fast forward to the time of the wise men's visit to Jerusalem. History teaches that their king, the Persian king, had been dethroned and that the wise men were looking for a new king. Thus, the Magi traveled to Jerusalem to find the One they had heard about through Daniel – the One Who would be the King of the Jews – JESUS!

The Magi brought the child gifts:

- gold – symbolizing royalty
- frankincense – speaks of deity; frankincense was used on the altar of incense (in front of the Holy of Holies) in the Temple. Frankincense was a sweet aroma to God.
- myrrh – was used to embalm the dead

These gifts truly depict the Messiah Who is God (frankincense), Who would die for sin (myrrh), and Who will return and reign as King (gold).

In the Christmas accounts in Matthew and Luke, we so clearly see Jesus' two roles and two comings: at His first coming He came as the Suffering Messiah, the Lamb of God; at His second coming, He will come as the Conquering King.

What a glorious time to celebrate the One Who came through the Jewish line because of God's unfailing promises to Israel – to celebrate the One Who is coming again.

**GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST!**

**QUESTIONS:**

Was anything new to you in this lesson? If so – what? And, how is it impacting you?  
How do the Christmas accounts fit into the big picture of the Bible?

**HOMEWORK:**

**MARVEL** at God's gracious plan of redemption!