

Followers of the Way



Advent Bible study

Prophets and forerunners

Session 1: The birth of John the Baptist foretold

[Luke 1:5-25, Luke 1:57-80, see also Isaiah 40:3-5, Malachi 4:5-6]

1:5 Zechariah was a priest, and both he and his wife Elizabeth were direct descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses. Zechariah means *the LORD remembers*, while Elizabeth has four possible meanings: *God is my oath, God's promise, God's satisfaction or God's perfection*. In choosing this couple to give birth to the son who would fulfil the prophecies of Isaiah 40:3-5 and Malachi 4:5-6, God was assuring Israel (and us) that He remembers His promises and those promises are sure.

Since the time of King David, the priests were organised into 24 groups, one of which was “the priestly division of Abijah” (Luke 1:5). Abijah was among the “heads of priestly families” (Nehemiah 12:12 and 12:17, 1 Chronicles 24:10). Each of the 24 priestly groups would serve at the temple twice a year for a week at a time.

But although Zechariah served in the temple twice a year, this didn't automatically involve going into the sanctuary to burn incense. That was an immense privilege, which priests were allowed only once in a lifetime, if at all. Priests were chosen for this function by lot (Luke 1:9) and since there could have been as many as 1,000 priests in Zechariah's section, some of them would never have had the chance to perform this sacred duty.

So, from the very start of Luke's account of the Christmas story, we see God orchestrating events and timings in a miraculous way so as to bring about His divine purposes. In the process, He sends a series of coded messages to Israel and to later generations.

1:6 Zechariah and Elizabeth are described as being “upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.” This isn't an assertion of sinless perfection, but rather a statement about their sincerity and faithfulness. In similar fashion, Mary's husband Joseph is termed “a righteous man” (Matthew 1:10). Though Jesus calls us to “be perfect, even as [our] heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48), God can nevertheless work mightily through people who fall short of that standard, yet honestly do their best to seek and obey Him. Luke describes God bringing together 5 extraordinary characters for His service at the pivotal point of redemption history marked by the coming of the Messiah – Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph, Mary and John the Baptist. Each had a necessary part to play in the unfolding of the LORD's purposes and without their faithfulness, what followed wouldn't have been possible. It's a great lesson for us: though we may only have bit parts in God's greater scheme, the tasks we've been given are no less important for all that.

1:7 The Old Testament often refers to children as a sign of God's blessing. Consequently (despite the examples of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah), not being able to have children was regarded as a sign of divine displeasure and therefore a cause for shame. The godly Zechariah and Elizabeth must have felt this deeply, and had carried the burden for a long time since (just like Abraham and Sarah) both were both “well stricken in years” (Luke 1:7, Luke 1:18, Genesis 18:11).

1:9 the priest “chosen by lot ... to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense” had to make sure incense was kept burning on the altar in front of the Most Holy Place. He would therefore add fresh incense before the morning sacrifice and once again after the evening sacrifice: see Exodus 30:7-8.

1:10 More than any other Gospel writer, Luke highlights the importance of prayer. He presents Jesus as a man of prayer, and it's typical he should point out “assembled worshippers ... praying outside” at the entrance to the temple. The time of day (morning or evening sacrifice) isn't specified.

1:11 The angel who appears to Zechariah is Gabriel (Luke 1:19), one of two archangels named in the Bible (the other being Michael). The care taken to record that he was standing “at the right side of the altar of incense” may be since this signifies divine favour, as with those whom Jesus places at His right hand in the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:33). Gabriel’s appearance at this time and place brings together elements that signify answered prayer (specifically referenced in verse 13, but also symbolised by incense), sacrifice (represented by the altar) and the fulfilment of prophecy (affirmed by verse 17 referring to “the spirit and power of Elijah”, which looks back to Malachi 4:5-6). It was the start of a new year, indicative of a new spiritual season (Gabriel appeared to Mary in the sixth month and told her Elizabeth was then in the sixth month of her pregnancy: see Luke 1:26, 1:36.)

1:12-13 Human fearfulness followed by reassurance from the heavenly visitor is a common theme of angelic appearances in the Bible: see for example Abram (Genesis 15:1), Joshua (Joshua 8:1), Gideon (Judges 6:23), the shepherds (Luke 2:9-10), Simon Peter (Luke 5:10) and many more. Zechariah is told to call his son John, meaning *graced by God*.

1:14 Joy is a recurrent theme of Luke’s telling of the Christmas story: John “will be a joy and delight” to his parents, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb “leaped for joy” (Luke 1:44), Elizabeth’s “neighbours and relatives ... shared her joy” (Luke 1:58) and the angel who appeared to the shepherds said, “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” (Luke 2:10).

1:15 Gabriel says John “will be great in the sight of the Lord” and Jesus later affirmed, “Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11). John was “never to take wine or other fermented drink”, meaning that (like Samson and Samuel) he was a Nazirite: see Numbers 6:1-21, Judges 13:4-7, 1 Samuel 1:11. Nazirite derives from the Hebrew *nazir*, meaning consecrated or separated.

Throughout his narrative, Luke emphasises the activity of the Holy Spirit – present in John the Baptist even from birth (Luke 1:15, 1:17), Mary (Luke 1:35), Elizabeth (Luke 1:41) and Zechariah (Luke 1:67).

1:16 John preached “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3), leading “many of the people of Israel ... back to the Lord their God”.

1:17 This verse points to prophetic fulfilment and the forerunner principle running through Scripture. Elijah was forerunner to John the Baptist, as John was a fulfilment of what was foretold by Malachi.

1:18 We might judge that Zechariah wasn’t unreasonable in asking for a sign, any more than Abraham (Genesis 15:8), Gideon (Judges 6:17) or Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:8) were when they did the same. The fact Zechariah was struck dumb “because [he] did not believe [Gabriel’s words]” (Luke 1:20) reflects not just God’s sovereign response to the man’s faith or lack of it, but also the outworking of His divine purposes in and through the birth of Zechariah’s son. Zechariah’s dumbness was a sign to others of the miraculous nature of what was happening, and an affirmation of the truth of what Zechariah said.

1:19 Gabriel stands “in the presence of God”. As a pale earthly shadow of what this looks like, we might think of Nehemiah standing before the king as his cupbearer.

1:20 Gabriel says his words will come true “at their proper time” or, as it might be rendered in Hebrew, at their appointed time – another of God’s *mo’ed* moments.

1:21 A priest would normally perform the burning of incense quickly, so people were surprised when Zechariah “stayed so long in the temple.” To start with, they were presumably waiting for him to come out and pronounce the customary Aaronic blessing over them (Numbers 6:24-26), but then might have stayed out of curiosity.

1:22 When Zechariah was unable to speak, the people immediately concluded he must have seen “a vision”. The basic supposition was right, even if wrong in detail. An angel isn’t a vision, but reality.

1:23 After Zechariah returned home once his week’s “time of service was completed”, he had a long wait before he could speak again. Even if Elizabeth became pregnant almost immediately, it would have been over nine months (Luke 1:20), since only as John was being circumcised on the eighth day after his birth was Zechariah’s “tongue ... loosed, and he began to speak, praising God.” (Luke 1:64).

1:24 No reason is given why Elizabeth “for five months remained in seclusion”. Maybe she wanted to be absolutely sure she was really pregnant and wouldn’t miscarry, but ultimately all possibilities are a matter of conjecture.

1:25 Whatever the cause of Elizabeth’s seclusion, it doesn’t seem to have been a depressive reaction: she bore no resentment over her long years of barrenness (Luke 1:7), only thankfulness that “the Lord has done this for me [enabled her to get pregnant] ... and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

1:57-58 The birth of Elizabeth’s son was taken as a sign “the Lord had shown her great mercy”. Mercy is defined as compassion or forgiveness towards someone it’s within our power to punish or harm.

1:59-60 Presumably, before John was born Zechariah had in some way made known to Elizabeth (most likely, in writing) what the angel Gabriel had said about the boy’s name. Hence her ability to contradict straight away the assumption that the child should be called after his father.

1:61 The reaction to an unexpected name shows the stranglehold of precedent, family tradition and societal expectation that Jesus often sought to challenge or break.

1:62 It’s not clear why people “made signs to” Zechariah, instead of just speaking to him. A possibility is that he was deaf (or, at any rate, hard of hearing) as well as dumb. If so, deafness was presumably the result of age or general infirmity, since it’s not specifically mentioned in Luke 1:20.

1:63-64 Verse 63 confirms that Zechariah was literate: see note on Luke 1:59-60. Zechariah’s written confirmation of what Gabriel had said immediately caused him to be able to speak again. Speaking truth and aligning ourselves with God’s purposes brings blessing and release.

1:65-66 Awe and wonderment are other common features of Luke’s account, both in his Gospel and in the book of Acts: see Luke 5:26, 7:16 and Acts 2:43 for further mentions of awe; and see Luke 2:18, 2:47, 4:22, 4:32, 4:36, 5:26, 7:9, 9:43, 11:14, 24:22 and Acts 2:7, 2:2, 3:10, 7:31, 8:9, 8:11, and 13:12 for use of the words wonder, amazed and amazement.

1:67-75 The coming of the Holy Spirit often releases the gift of prophecy, as with Saul (1 Samuel 19:24). Redemption, salvation, mercy and rescue feature in these following verses, recalling the Messianic mandate of Isaiah 61:1-2a later quoted by Jesus (see Luke 4:17-21).

1:76-77 Zechariah’s song underlines God’s covenant faithfulness. There’d been no prophet in Israel for 400 years (since Malachi), but he prophesied that his son would be the one to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. The Bible specifically links John the Baptist also to the prophecy in Isaiah 40:3-5.

1:79 The “rising sun ... [shining] on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death” recalls another Messianic prophecy, that “the people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” (Isaiah 9:2).

1:80 John “grew and became strong in spirit”, similar to how Jesus “grew and became strong” (Luke 2:40) and “grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men” (Luke 2:52). Growth is an important aspect of the spiritual life.

Angels and dreams

Session 2: Gabriel appears to Mary and Joseph's angelic dream

[Luke 1:26-38, Matthew 1:18-25]

The way Matthew and Luke tell the story of Jesus' birth reveals much about their different concerns and intended audiences. Writing primarily for Jews, Matthew deals only in a cursory way with things Luke relates with great care. Correspondingly, Matthew adds details of significance to Jews that Luke leaves out. So, in the context of Mary being engaged to Joseph, Matthew notes that "*before they came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit*" (Matthew 1:18, emphasis added). People who were familiar with the Jewish wedding rituals of that time would have understood the nature of the obligations bridegroom and bride owed each other at this point, even though a wedding ceremony had not yet taken place (see separate Bible study on the topic of the Jewish wedding). Luke's Gentile (largely Greek) readership were unlikely to have known this kind of detail, and for the purpose of the story of the incarnation, they didn't need to.

While Luke focuses on Mary, Matthew is interested in Joseph, too, and keen to record how the Jewish Scriptures were being fulfilled, specifically the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14: "All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' – which means, 'God with us.'" (Matthew 1:22-23). Matthew uses more than double the number of quotations from the Old Testament Luke does (53 as against 25). In fact, no other Gospel uses as many Old Testament quotes as Matthew (Mark has 36 and John 20).

With his emphasis on careful investigation and systematic eyewitness accounts, Luke includes more unique material than the other synoptic Gospels – 59%, as against 42% for Matthew and 7% for Mark. (John has the greatest amount of unique material, at 93%). Like Mark, Luke's material is organised in the form of a chronological narrative, whereas Matthew's (and John's) structure is thematic. Thorough and meticulous, Luke specifies timings (in the sixth month: Luke 1:26), while Matthew doesn't. (As a doctor, Luke also has a special interest in healings.)

Despite different approaches, the Gospel accounts mesh into a coherent and compelling whole. Both at and before Christ's birth, they record a cascade of angelic appearances, heaven-sent dreams and prophetic utterances. Angels appeared to John the Baptist's father Zechariah (Luke 1:11-20), to Mary (Luke 1:26-38) and to shepherds (Luke 2:8-15). Joseph (four times, in Matthew 1:20-21, 2:13, 2:19-20 and 2:22) and the Magi (Matthew 2:12) had dreams that turned the course of events at critical points. Zechariah (Luke 1:67-79) and Simeon (Luke 22:28-32) prophesied. There's a cascade of interventions from heaven of a kind that (unsurprisingly) is seldom, if ever, matched elsewhere in Scripture.

We know very little about Mary's background. Her age isn't specified, and since genealogical records were lost when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, there's no way to reconstruct her family line with certainty (but see Luke 3). Non-biblical sources suggest her mother was called Anne and her father Joachim, but we can't be sure of this. Nevertheless, we can tell quite a lot about Mary's character. She was:

Calm and courageous. When the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, he "was startled and gripped with fear" (Luke 1:12). By contrast, when the same angel greeted Mary – then probably still a teenager – she "was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be" (Luke 1:29), but there's no mention of her being afraid. Maybe Gabriel didn't appear to Mary in the same degree of glory he appeared to Zechariah, but all the same, the equanimity with which the young woman reacted to the visitor was extraordinary.

Well-versed in the Scriptures. After hearing Elizabeth's blessing (Luke 1:41-45), Mary responded with words that were doubtless inspired by the Holy Spirit, but modelled on the lines of Hannah's prayer when dedicating her longed-for son Samuel to the LORD (1 Samuel 2:1-10). Each woman exalted God and rejoiced in Him as Deliverer or Saviour (Luke 1:47, 1 Samuel 2:1), spoke of His holiness (Luke 1:49, 1 Samuel 2:49), recognised His bringing low the proud (Luke 1:51, 1 Samuel 2:3) and raising up of the humble (Luke 1:52, 1 Samuel 2:7-8), and acknowledged how He fills the hungry but sends the full away empty (Luke 1:53, 1 Samuel 2:5).

Thoughtful and reflective. To ponder means to weigh carefully in the mind, to think over, to reflect upon, to consider deeply, to deliberate, muse or meditate upon. It's something God chides people for not doing when they should (see Isaiah 57:1 and 57:11). Mary, however, "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." (Luke 2:19). She's one of only a few Scripture records doing so, the others being Nehemiah (Nehemiah 5:7) and Solomon (Ecclesiastes 12:9).

Full of faith. There were any number of objections Mary might reasonably have raised when Gabriel told her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35), making her pregnant with a "holy one [who] will be called the Son of God." (Luke 1:35). Moses argued at length before finally undertaking God's commission to deliver Israel from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 3:11-4:18). By contrast, Mary simply replied, "I am the Lord's servant ... May it be to me as you have said." (Luke 1:38).

Dependable and in godly submission. Mary was chosen to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 – arguably the most important task ever demanded of any human in the service of God: she's the only person the Bible describes as having the "Holy Spirit ... overshadow [them]" (Luke 1:35). She "found favour with God" (Luke 1:30) and was "highly favoured" (Luke 1:28), much as Daniel was "highly esteemed" (Daniel 9:23,10:11,10:19). Divine favour is a recurring theme of Luke's Gospel, echoing the Messianic mandate of Isaiah 61:2: hence Elizabeth recognises, "the Lord has shown his favour" (Luke 1:25), the angel who appears to the shepherds proclaims, "peace to men on whom [God's] favour rests" (Luke 2:14) and Jesus grew "in favour with God and men." (Luke 2:52). At the start of his earthly ministry, Jesus quoted Isaiah's proclamation of "the year of the Lord's favour." (Luke 4:19).

Mary's submission to the will of God was mirrored by godly submission to her husband. Scripture puts Joseph in the position of the traditional head of the family by naming him first and Mary second when the two appear together (Luke 2:4, 2:22, 2:39). The only exception is where Mary is given a special place of honour as mother of the new-born Messiah, when the shepherds "hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby" (Luke 2:16). Here the customary order of the names is reversed and Mary appears first.

There's little doubt Mary was an extraordinary person, mature beyond her years and possessing great strength of character. But this isn't to say she took everything in her stride. She was in a precarious and exposed position as an unmarried woman who was pregnant by someone other than her fiancé. Penalties for extra-marital sex were severe, and were enforced, as evidenced by a woman caught in adultery being brought before Jesus under threat of being stoned to death (John 8:3-5). At the least, Mary faced the prospect of poverty and shame had Joseph rejected her and called off their marriage.

There were few who Mary could turn to for help and advice. If she tried to speak to friends or family, the likelihood must have been that they'd have treated what she said as an elaborate attempt to hide her own wrongdoing, and in the process, she could have sparked a wave of gossip and a witch hunt for her supposed partner in crime. It must have seemed to her there was really only one person who might believe her, and have some understanding of what was going on. The angel Gabriel had said,

“Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month” (Luke 1:36). As Mary reflected on this, Elizabeth must have looked the obvious choice for someone to unburden herself to.

So, perhaps as soon as she found she was pregnant, if not before, “At that time Mary *hurried* to a town in the hill country of Judea” (Luke 1:39, emphasis added) where Zechariah and Elizabeth lived. Mary’s haste was presumably because she wouldn’t have wanted people in Nazareth to know her condition earlier than absolutely necessary, but also because she would almost certainly have felt the need of help and guidance from a mother figure (Elizabeth being a much older woman). It seems Mary stayed with Elizabeth as long as she could, “about three months” (Luke 1:57) – that is, up to “when it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby” (Luke 1:57).

Joseph, too, was beyond the ordinary run of people, described as “a righteous man” (Matthew 1:19). Though “there is no-one righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10) and the Lord alone is “the Holy and Righteous One” (Acts 3:14, 7:52, 22:14, 1 John 2:1), nevertheless, “by faith [Abel] was commended as a righteous man” (Hebrews 11:4), and in the same sense John the Baptist was “a righteous and a holy man” (Mark 6:20), Simeon was called “righteous and devout” (Luke 2:25), and the centurion Cornelius was acknowledged to be “a righteous and God-fearing man” (Acts 10:22).

Since we see less of Joseph than of Mary, his character is less well-defined in Scripture than hers. After the events surrounding the incarnation, the only references to him are as the supposed father of Jesus, as when people in Nazareth asked, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” (Luke 4:22, see also Matthew 13:55, Luke 3:23, John 1:45, 6:42). The fact he’s not mentioned at the time of the crucifixion and Jesus committed his mother into the care of the apostle John (John 19:26-27) suggests Joseph was dead by then. All the same, Matthew and Luke offer pointers as to the sort of man he was:

Kind and forgiving. When Mary “was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18), presumably after returning from her three-month stay with Elizabeth, Joseph “did not want to expose her to public disgrace [and therefore] had in mind to divorce her quietly.” (Matthew 1:19). If Joseph had been vindictive, things would have been very uncomfortable for Mary.

Teachable and obedient. Joseph was ready to change his mind when he heard from God: “But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.’” (Matthew 1:20-21). Joseph “did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife ... [and] he gave [her son] the name Jesus.” (Luke 1:25-26)

Fearing God, not man. When the angel told Joseph, “Do not be afraid to take Mary home as you wife” (Matthew 1:20), this was no small matter. Joseph doubtless faced mockery as a supposed cuckold and the disapproval of moralisers. His own family may well have urged him to put Mary away.

Caring and considerate. Though she was heavily pregnant, Joseph took Mary with him to Bethlehem (Luke 2:4-5). It’s not obvious he was legally compelled to do this. If he wasn’t, he may have wanted to protect Mary from people in Nazareth who were hostile to her. It seems Joseph acknowledged Jesus as his own son and brought him up accordingly (Luke 4:22, Matthew 13:55, Luke 3:23, John 1:45, 6:42).

Correct and conscientious. Though Mary’s position was compromised by her pregnancy, Joseph didn’t try to take advantage of her: “he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son.” (Matthew 1:25). Luke records that “Joseph and Mary [did] everything required by the Law of the Lord” in connection with Jesus’ circumcision (Luke 2:39).

Human and divine connections

Session 3: Mary visits Elizabeth

[Matthew 1:1-17, Luke 1:39-56, Luke 3:23-38]

Family and blood lines are important to God – the genealogies in the Bible are there for a reason! The genealogy in Matthew 1:1-17 is that of Joseph, “the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.” (Matthew 1:17). So, strictly speaking, this isn’t the family tree of Jesus himself, except in the sense He was legally Joseph’s son as far as the world was concerned: see Luke 4:22, Matthew 13:55, Luke 3:23, John 1:45, 6:42. Since Jesus is the Son of David, however, it’s reasonable to infer he could trace his descent to David through his mother’s line, and it seems this is what Luke 3:23-38 does.

Matthew starts with Abraham and works through the generations to Joseph, whereas Luke starts with Joseph and works back to Adam. Names from Abraham through to King David are the same in both lists, but then sharply diverge, as Matthew traces descent through Solomon and Luke traces it through another of King David’s sons, Nathan. Luke lists many more names from David to Joseph than Matthew does – altogether, from David to Joseph (or Mary) Luke has 41 generations and Matthew only 28. This may be a function of following the maternal rather than the paternal line, but more probably reflects the fact Luke, in his meticulous, methodical fashion, has included every last detail, whilst Matthew has been content to give a partial list sufficient to meet his thematic purpose.

By “[recording] the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1), Matthew focusses on Jesus as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy and of God’s covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12:3. Though Luke records that “angel of the Lord [who] appeared to [Joseph] in a dream” addressed him as “Joseph son of David” (Luke 1:25), his emphasis differs from Matthew’s. Luke wants to underline the fact that Jesus is both fully human (a Son of Adam: Luke 3:38) and fully divine (a Son of God: Luke 3:38).

If Jesus had to rely on Joseph’s blood line to show He was entitled to sit on David’s throne, there would have been a problem in Jewish eyes. It arises from this line including the evil king Jehoiakim (Matthew 1:11-12), against whom Jeremiah had prophesied (Jeremiah 22:18-30). The prophecy ends by saying, “none of his offspring will prosper, none will sit on the throne of David or rule in Judah anymore.” (Jeremiah 22:30). The prophecy was fulfilled, because the Babylonian captivity ensured no-one from this line was again king. In the event, there is of course no issue as regards Jesus’ entitlement to sit on David’s throne, since Luke’s genealogy traces descent to King David without including Jehoiakim.

Both Matthew’s and Luke’s genealogies name the same person as Joseph’s grandfather, Matthan or Matthat (Matthew 1:15, Luke 3:24). However, one names Joseph’s father as Jacob (Matthew 1:16), while the other names him as Heli (Luke 3:23). The explanation seems to lie in a Jewish tradition of framing a woman’s genealogy in her husband’s name, meaning that Heli was not Joseph’s father, but his father-in-law. If all this is right, Mary and Joseph were closely related.

Jewish law said that, if a man had only daughters to inherit from him, they could do so as long as they married within the same tribe (Numbers 27:1-8, 36:6-8). We can infer that Mary had no brothers who could have inherited their father’s estate (and right to the throne), with the result that she transmitted David’s royal inheritance to her husband on their marriage. Joseph then became heir to Heli, giving him the right to David’s throne, and this inheritance was passed to Jesus.

Luke often mentions the Jewishness of Jesus, talking of him receiving “the throne of his father David” (Luke 1:32), of Joseph being “of the house and line of David” (Luke 2:4), of Bethlehem being “the town

of David” (Luke 2:4, 2:11), of the eighth day after birth being “the time to circumcise him” (Luke 2:21), of Jewish rituals of purification and sacrifice (Luke 2:21-24), of Jesus being “the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25), of how Joseph and Mary did “everything required by the Law of the Lord” (Luke 2:39) and of the customs relating to Passover (Luke 2:41-42). His aim was to explain these things to Gentiles. But it’s Matthew’s aim to emphasise to Jews that Jesus is their long-awaited Messiah, the fulfilment of all the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had promised. Consequently, Matthew’s genealogy refers three times to one of the seminal events of Jewish history, the “exile to Babylon” (Matthew 1:11, 1:12, 1:17). Matthew structures his genealogy so there are “fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile in Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ.” (Matthew 1:17). The number fourteen in the Bible stands for deliverance or salvation. The fourteenth day of the first month is Passover and fourteen is twice seven (double perfection or double completion). The first completion was the ending of Jesus’ earthly ministry and the second was that His death ended the need for continuing animal sacrifices.

Unlike Luke, Matthew includes women in his genealogy: **Tamar** (Matthew 1:3), **Rahab** (Matthew 1:5), **Ruth** (Matthew 1:5) **Bathsheba** (Matthew 1:6, though she’s referred to only as “Uriah’s wife” rather than being named, presumably because of her adultery with King David) and **Mary** (Matthew 1:16). There are five in all, five being the number of Grace.

Mary was related to Elizabeth (Luke 1:36) and “Elizabeth ... was a descendant of Aaron” (Luke 1:5). So, Jesus was descended both from the kingly line (David) and the priestly line (Aaron). He is both “Lord of lords and King of kings” (Revelation 17:14) and “the Root and the Offspring of David” (Revelation 22:16), and our “merciful and faithful high priest” (Hebrews 2:17). Of course, He is also high priest in the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:6, 5:10, 6:20, 7:1-28), independent of human bloodlines.

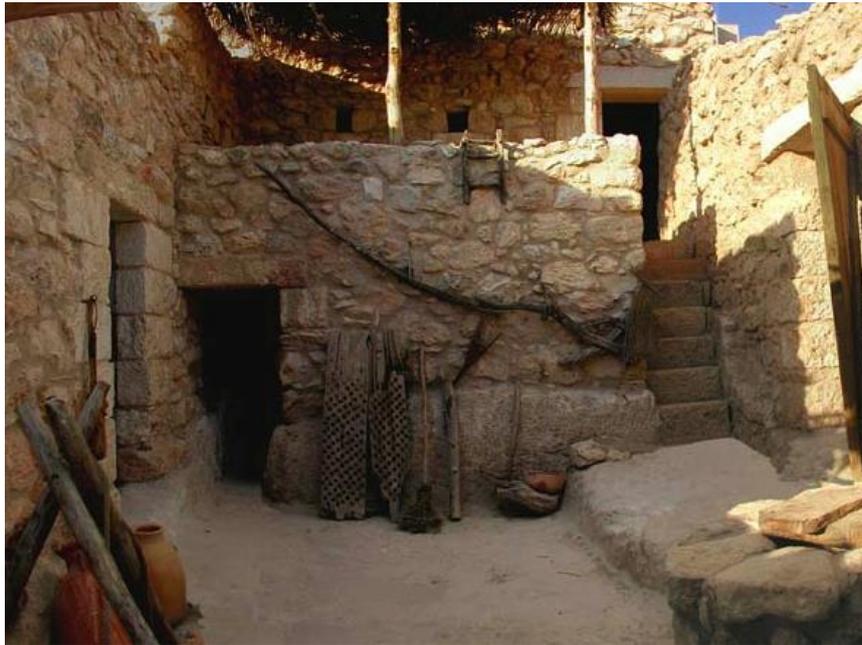


All this means that as Mary “entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth” (Luke 1:40), the kingly, priestly and prophetic were brought together in one place. The location isn’t specified, beyond saying it was “a town in the hill country of Judea” (Luke 1:39). Characterised by deep, V-shaped valleys and rising 2,500-3,000 ft above sea level, the hill country of Judea stretches roughly 40 miles from Jerusalem in the north down to slightly east-north-east of Beersheba in the south. Given the dangers and difficulties in travel at that time and knowing his obligation to serve twice yearly at the temple, the likelihood is that the elderly Zechariah would have lived within fairly easy reach of Jerusalem.

One tradition identifies the town Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in with Ein Karem on the southwestern outskirts of Jerusalem, not far from Bethlehem and upwards of 80 miles from Nazareth. If this was the

place, it was a four- or five-day journey at least for Mary, and potentially hazardous, so she'd almost certainly have joined a party of other travellers for safety and company. At all events, she doubtless had plenty of time to reflect on her circumstances while she was on the way.

Ordinary people in small communities at that time were unlikely to lock the doors to their houses. Possibly, Mary went in without knocking, simply lifting the latch and "[entering] Zechariah's home" (Luke 1:40). She may or may not have sent word beforehand that she was coming, but it seems from the text that only Elizabeth was there when she arrived, as Mary "greeted Elizabeth" (Luke 1:40) and there's no mention of Zechariah. We can imagine Elizabeth up on the flat roof or in a room at the back of the house and Mary calling out to say it was her. Perhaps it was because there was some distance between the two women that Elizabeth exclaimed "in a loud voice" (Luke 1:42) to be sure Mary heard her reply.



Reconstruction of the central courtyard of a two-storey house in ancient Israel

Mary's greeting caused the unborn John the Baptist to leap – a word the prophets link with joy (Isaiah 13:21), healing (Isaiah 35:6), supernatural ability (Joel 2:5) and release (Malachi 4:2) – while, for her part, Elizabeth was "filled with the Holy Spirit." (Luke 1:41). Elizabeth's resulting exclamation blessed the baby Jesus (Luke 1:42), pronounced a double blessing on Mary (Luke 1:42, 1:45) and acknowledged the favour God had shown Elizabeth, "that the mother of my Lord should come to me." (Luke 1:43). See page 5 for divine favour as a recurring theme of Luke's Gospel.

As seen in session 2, Mary's response in Luke 1:46-49 – striking similar chords to what Hannah said – records how God has blessed her life, and how He brings life and salvation to all. Twice she refers to God's mercy, declaring that "the Mighty One is holy." She speaks of soul (Luke 1:46), spirit (Luke 1:47) body (the "humble state" of Luke 1:48), of present circumstances (the "humble state of his servant" in Luke 1:48), things past ("the Mighty One has done great things for me" in Luke 1:49) and things yet to come ("from now on, all generations will call me blessed" in Luke 1:48).

The LORD was first called the Mighty One by Jacob (Genesis 49:24), but the term is also used by Joshua (Joshua 22:22), Asaph (Psalm 50:1, see also Psalm 132:2, 132:5) and Isaiah (Isaiah 1:24, 10:34, 33:21, 49:26 and 60:16). Jesus Himself used it when responding to Caiaphas' questioning while on trial before the Sanhedrin (Matthew 26:64, Mark 14:62).

Shepherds and priests

Session 4: The birth of Jesus

[Luke 2:1-20]

2:1 There was an Empire-wide census in 8 BC, and in 2 BC “the entire Roman people” gave Augustus the title of “Father of my country”. The Greek word translated as census is wide enough to cover some kind of registration or vote in connection with awarding this accolade. Augustus was the first Roman Emperor, ruling from 29 BC to AD 14. It seems he ordered a rolling series of province-wide censuses, seeking to consolidate his power, strengthen the Empire and reform the tax system. Though there’s no firm evidence of the census Luke talks about, there’s nothing to contradict his version of events, and they’re consistent with the overall historical framework.

2:2 Publius Sulpicius Quirinius was Roman governor of Syria in AD 6 and carried out a census at that time. This could have been the second census he oversaw, allowing for an earlier one which Luke calls “the first ... that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.” The census of AD 6 is probably the one referred to in Acts 5:37. Herod the Great ruled as a Roman client king in Judea from 37 BC to 4 BC and after his death this territory was split between three of his sons. Since Jesus was born while Herod the Great was still alive, the first census of Quirinius must have happened before 4 BC.

2:3-4 There’s great significance in where Jesus was born. To comply with a Roman census decree that apparently required people to register either at their place of birth or where their family originally hailed from or where they possessed property, “Joseph ... went up ... to Bethlehem the town of David because he belonged to the house and line of David” (Luke 2:4). Bethlehem was where David was anointed as king by Samuel (1 Samuel 16), so was the ideal place for the new Davidic king to be born.

Bethlehem means, *place of bread*. Jesus described Himself as “the bread of life” (John 6:35, 6:48), “the bread that comes down from heaven” (John 6:41, 6:50, 6:58) and the “living bread that came down from heaven” (John 6:51) – a reference to manna, the “bread from heaven” (Exodus 16:4) provided to Israel in her 40 years of desert wanderings.



Bethlehem was also significant because just outside the town stood Migdol Eder, the Watchtower of the Flock. This was a lookout tower on the road from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, and Jacob once pitched his tent there (Genesis 35:21). Micah had prophesied, “As for you, O watchtower of the flock, O stronghold of the Daughter of Zion, the former dominion will be restored to you; kingship will come to the Daughter of Jerusalem,” (Micah 4:8). The watchtower was used by shepherds for protection against wild beasts and was where ewes were brought to give birth to their young: see comment below on Luke 2:8. The population of Bethlehem when Jesus was born was probably about 300.

2:5 Even if he wasn’t strictly speaking compelled to do so, Joseph may have thought it best to take the heavily pregnant Mary with him to keep her from harm while he was away from Nazareth. Without him to protect her, she could have been subject to mockery, intimidation or violence, perhaps even stoned to death.

2:6 “*While they were there*, the time came for the baby to be born.” (Emphasis added). We don’t have to conclude that Mary gave birth almost as soon as she and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem. They may have had an extended stay, perhaps visiting family there or nearby.

2:7 The word “inn” is almost certainly a mistranslation. The language and syntax of this Gospel and the book of Acts show Luke spoke good Greek, and chose words with care. In his Gospel, he uses two different Greek words, which are both translated as “inn” in the KJV (here and in the parable of the Good Samaritan). In Luke 10:34, the Good Samaritan takes the injured man to a *pandocheion*, while in Luke 2:7 Mary and Joseph found no room at the *katalyma*. A *pandocheion* is an inn properly so called, whereas a *katalyma* is a guest room in a private house – and is translated this way when Jesus asks the question, “Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?” (Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11).

Given Jews’ emphasis on the importance of extended family, it’s almost unthinkable that Joseph and Mary visited Bethlehem and didn’t stay with relatives, just as Mary had earlier stayed with Elizabeth and Zechariah (Luke 1:56). Indeed, it would have been seen as an insult had they not done so. The chances are they stayed with family in Bethlehem until “the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed” (Luke 2:22), allowing space for them to have Jesus circumcised in the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:22-39), and then return to Nazareth straight afterwards.

With the guest room already occupied (most likely by other family members who’d come to register for the census), Mary and Joseph would have been given whatever alternative was available. The fact Mary “placed [Jesus] in a manger” (Luke 2:7) – a long trough from which horses or cattle feed – doesn’t necessarily mean animals were present at the birth.



A watchtower and sheepfold in Israel

Levitical shepherds keeping vigil near the Watchtower of the Flock would have known the prophecies concerning the birth of the Messiah. They understood the signs the angels had given them, and seemingly knew exactly where they would find the baby Jesus. Levitical shepherds are a reminder of Jesus’ priestly descent through his mother’s line and his role as our great High Priest: see comments on Jesus’ genealogy in session 3, page 8.

2: 8 Commentators tend to tell two very different stories about the shepherds Luke mentions in this verse. The first is that, since shepherds were often out in the fields for extended periods, and were unkempt and smelly, they were regarded as socially undesirable. Some assert that Jewish law treated them as unclean and even that shepherds were often on the run from the authorities. Evidence for these assertions is difficult to pin down, but it’s used to build a narrative of God revealing the birth of His Son to the lowest of the low – part of a wider story of His care for the poor and the outcast.

The second approach is to say these were anything but ordinary shepherds. Instead, they were so-called Levitical shepherds, specially chosen and trained to care for the flocks from which lambs would be selected for temple sacrifice. These animals had to be without spot or blemish (Leviticus 22:17-33, see also 1 Peter 1:19), so they needed special treatment and skilled observation. Jewish law required sheep used as an offering to be a one-year-old male that had been outside for 365 days. The creatures were destined to become burnt offerings, peace offerings and Passover offerings, and when they were ready, they’d be taken to the temple in Jerusalem to be killed: see the Mishnah Sheq 7:4 and *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* by Alfred Edersheim.

So, when the ewe was ready to give birth, the Levitical shepherds would take her to a cave or other set-apart place: see comment on Migdol Eder on page 10. This birth area was kept scrupulously clean and new-born lambs would be wrapped in swaddling (strips of cloth) as soon as they were born to make sure they'd suffer no injury that would prevent them being suitable for later sacrifice.

If this second approach is correct, it naturally adds much deeper significance to the angel's appearance to the shepherds. The statement that "This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12) then becomes not simply a convenient way of making sure these shepherds could identify one new-born baby amongst many who conceivably might have been in Bethlehem at that time, but is instead a marker of Jesus' eventual sacrifice on the cross as "Christ, our Passover lamb" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Seeing Jesus coming to be baptised, John the Baptist – who was familiar with Old Testament prophecy and presumably knew the circumstances of Jesus' birth – exclaimed, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). His statement adds weight to the idea of a link between the shepherds who "[kept watch over their flocks at night" (Luke 2:8) and the Passover celebrations.

2:9 The glory of the LORD (*kavod YHWH*, first mentioned in Exodus 16:6-7) describes the bright shining brilliance of God's presence. God's glory marked the new era inaugurated by the Exodus events and was present at the dedication of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 8:10-11), while here His glory marks the start of the New Covenant era.

2:10-11 Good news of great joy: the birth of a Saviour, the Messiah. The "Rock [our] Saviour" is first mentioned in Deuteronomy 32:15, a Redeemer in Job 19:25 and a Messiah (Anointed One) in Psalm 2:2. The birth of Jesus was the culmination of centuries of waiting and yearning.

2:13-14 In heaven there's constant praise of God: see Revelation 4:8-11, 5:12-14, 7:11-13, 15:1-4 and 19:1-8. The appearance of "a great company of the heavenly host ... praising God" shows a moment when heaven came to earth.

2:15 The shepherds had no difficulty in identifying Bethlehem as "the town of David" (Luke 2:11) the angel had spoken about. They were probably familiar with the Scriptures that later led the chief priests and teachers of the law to pinpoint Bethlehem as the place the Messiah would be born: see Matthew 2:4-6.

2:16 The shepherds "hurried off", not just because they were eager to see the child they'd been told about, but also because they didn't want to leave their sheep alone for longer than necessary. David spoke of some of the perils that could threaten a flock when he told Saul how he'd dealt with lions and bears: see 1 Samuel 17:34-36.

2:17-18 The shepherds "spread the word" and, in doing so, helped prepare the way for the ministry of John the Baptist and, later, Jesus. A head of steam would have been building among the people and increasing their expectations about the imminent coming of the Messiah.

2:19 Though all who heard what the shepherds said were amazed, this doesn't mean lasting change resulted in their lives. Many are struck by what they see or hear, then fail to take to heart what it may mean. By contrast, Mary "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." She's a good example of how to respond to what God might be doing in our lives and in the world around.

2:20 The shepherds "returned", presumably to their fields and waiting flocks. They praised God "for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told." The hearing came first and the seeing came after.

Foretelling and fulfilment

Session 5: Jesus presented in the temple

[Luke 2:21-40]

2:21 Jesus (the Greek form of Joshua, Yeshua) means *salvation* or *The LORD saves*. Mary had been told to give her son this name by the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:32). She evidently told Joseph, who must have concurred in the choice, as Luke 1:62-63 suggests fathers had the final say over naming a child – and, as far as the world was concerned, Joseph was the boy’s father.

As surnames weren’t commonly used among Jews at this time, Jesus would have been known either just as Yeshua, or if further identification were needed, (1) by reference to the man thought to be His father as Jesus, son of Joseph (*Yeshua ben Yusuf*), (2) from His place of residence as Jesus of Nazareth (*Yeshua haNozri*) or (3) in view of his trade as Jesus the carpenter (*Yeshua haCharash*).

In fact, the Greek word translated as carpenter (*tekton*, Hebrew *Charash*) can also mean craftsman, artisan, builder or woodworker, extending even to an artificer, stonemason or metalworker. Since Nazareth in Jesus’ day had few trees but plentiful sources of stone, Jesus more probably worked in stone or metal than in wood.

2:22-24 Three ceremonies took place after the birth of Jesus:

(1) he was circumcised eight days later, in accordance with God’s covenant with Abraham (Luke 2:21, Genesis 17:12);

(2) as a firstborn male, he was sacred to God and needed to be bought back at a cost of five shekels, to be paid not sooner than 31 days after birth (Luke 2:23, Exodus 13:2 and 13:12); and

(3) Mary had to be purified – a woman was ritually unclean for 40 days if she’d birthed a boy, and for 80 days if she’d had a girl. At the end of this period of ritual uncleanness, she’d offer a lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon for a sin offering, or two pigeons if the family weren’t able to bring a lamb (Luke 2:24, Leviticus 12:8)). Mary offered two pigeons, showing their family wasn’t well off.

2:25 Simeon “was waiting for the consolation of Israel” The Psalmist says, “When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought joy to my soul.” (Psalm 94:19). Consolation or consolations are also referenced in Job 6:10, 15:11 and 21:2. Simeon’s positioning was active waiting in expectation of the fulfilment of what God had promised, not passive resignation. Consolation was greatly needed in view of the unpromising circumstances of the time, with Israel under the rule of Rome’s client king, the wicked Herod the Great, a famine of the Word of God in the land (see Amos 8:11), and the lack of guidance from a corrupt and compromised religious and political elite – Jesus described the Pharisees as “whitewashed tombs” (Matthew 23:27), and “blind guides ... [who] strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.” (Matthew 23:24).

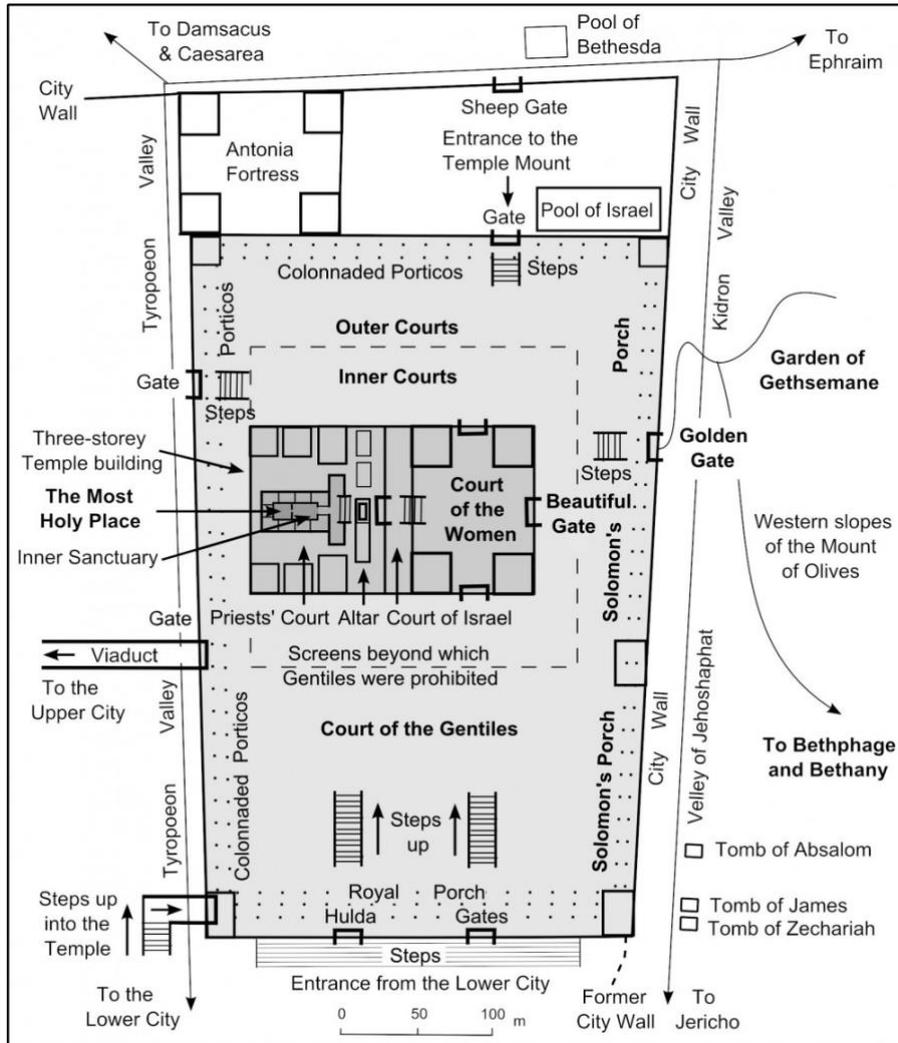
Simeon means, *he who hears* or *man of hearing*. It’s related to the verb *shama*, meaning understand or obey – as in the *Shema*, the great statement of Jewish monotheism (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Simeon, a man of hearing, had heard and understood God’s promise concerning the coming Messiah.

2:25-27 The Holy Spirit was powerfully present before, during and after Jesus’ birth, and came in turn upon virtually all the central characters of the story – Zechariah (Luke 1:67), Elizabeth (Luke 1:41), John the Baptist (Luke 1:15), Mary (Luke 35) and Simeon (Luke 2:25). The Holy Spirit was “upon” (Luke 2:25) Simeon, “revealed” (Luke 2:26) things to him, and “moved” (Luke 2:27) him to go into the temple courts on the day Jesus was there.

2:27 Most likely, Simeon was in the inner courts of the temple, probably the court of the women (as Mary and Anna would have been allowed there: see Luke 2:22-24, 2:38). These are temple courts in the sense of courtyards, not courts of law.

2:28-29 Though the Bible doesn't specifically say Simeon was an old man, that's the implication of his saying, "now dismiss your servant in peace" (Luke 2:29): he was releasing his soul to die, as the Holy Spirit had "revealed to him ... that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ" (Luke 2:26).

2:30 Maybe Simeon asked the child's name or overheard the parents speaking it. At all events, Simeon picked up on the meaning of Yeshua by saying, "my eyes have seen your salvation".



2:31 What God did through the incarnation was prepared "in the sight of all people" since the events were witnessed not only by Jews, but also by the Gentile Magi: see Matthew 2:1-12. If the events of Luke 2:25-38 took place in the court of the Gentiles, this would have added to the universal testimony.

2:32 The "light for revelation to the Gentiles" echoes Old Testament prophecies of "a light for the Gentiles" (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6) and of "people walking in darkness [seeing] a great light ... [and] a light [having] dawned." (Isaiah 9:2). The light Simeon speaks of is also "for glory to [God's] people Israel." God "displays his glory in Israel." (Isaiah 44:23). The One New Man (Ephesians 2:15) is prefigured.

2:33 Mary and Joseph "marvelled" – meaning, they were filled with wonder or astonishment. Later, Luke describes "everyone marvelling at all that Jesus did" (Luke 9:43).

2:34 Once again, Mary is granted special respect, with Simeon speaking to her rather than to Joseph, as might have been expected in a patriarchal society.

2:35 Up to this point, destiny has an entirely negative connotation in the Bible: as in “destined for the grave” (Psalm 49:15) or “destined for burning” (Isaiah 9:5). Jesus causes “the falling and rising of many in Israel” in the same way he warned, “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10:34). “Christ, the first-fruits” (1 Corinthians 15:23) is “a sign that [is] spoken against” and “the thoughts of many hearts [have been] revealed” by Jesus the Word of God, for “the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12).

Simeon’s warning that “a sword will pierce your heart also” came true not just when Mary witnessed her son’s crucifixion, but even earlier in Jesus’ earthly ministry. The occasion when Christ’s “mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him” (Matthew 12:46) suggests his family were seriously concerned about him at that point.



The building of Herod’s temple was a mammoth undertaking. Some 10,000 men (most of them slaves or pressed into service) worked on its construction, together with Roman craftsmen. Its highest wall stood 158 ft from bedrock, it was the length of five football fields and it measured some 1,000 yards wide. It took 46 years to build (John 2:20) and Herod didn’t live to see it finished. Jewish sources suggest work started only in the 18th year of Herod’s reign, meaning that construction was still going on at the time of the events described in Luke 2:21-38.

2:36 Anna is a form of Hannah and means, *grace*. Her father’s name was Phanuel, a variant of Peniel (meaning, *the face of God*), the name Jacob gave to the place where he wrestled with the angel of the LORD (Genesis 32:30, and as Penuel it appears also in 1 Chronicles 4:4, 8:25). Anna’s family was from the tribe Asher, meaning *happy* and *blessed*. The fact “she never left the temple but worshipped day and night, fasting and praying” shows that, like Simeon, she’d not grown cynical or despairing over her long years of widowhood and waiting. By grace, Anna saw the face of God and so was happy and blessed.

2:37 Aged 84, Anna was well past the average life expectancy for that time. Given that her husband died only 7 years into their marriage, she’d been a widow for many decades. God has a great heart of compassion for widows: “He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow” (Deuteronomy 10:18 and many similar references).

2:38 It seems there were many who “were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.” This was based not on blind hope but on the expectation of prophecy being fulfilled, “For the LORD will ransom Jacob and will redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they” (Jeremiah 31:11) and “on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance” (Joel 2:32).

2:39 Joseph and Mary were punctilious in doing “everything required by the Law of the Lord”. Jesus said He came “not to abolish [the Law and the Prophets] but to fulfil them.” (Matthew 5:17).

2:40 Jesus “grew and became strong”. Since He was fully man as well as fully God, the human part of Him had to grow and develop just like any other child.

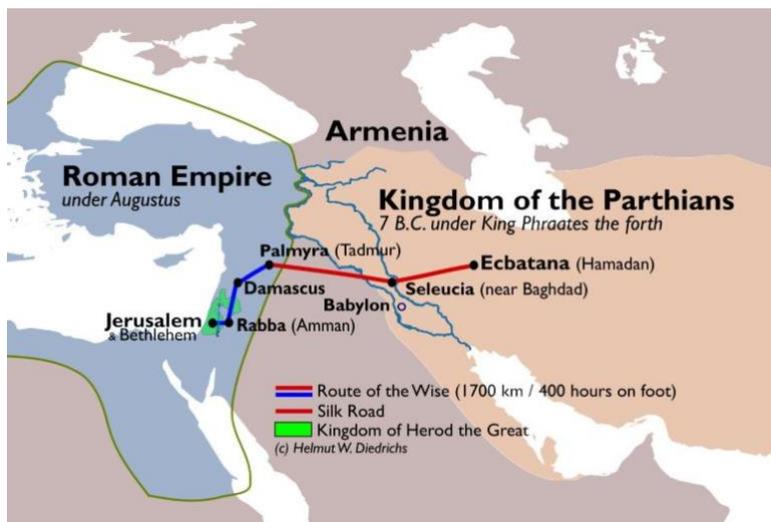
Stars and Magi

Session 6: The visit of the Magi

Matthew 2:1-12

Ancient Babylonians were known for their learning in mathematics and astronomy. They invented an early form of zero and their students were taught fractions, algebra and complex equations. Decades before Pythagoras stated his famous Theorem, Babylonians used something similar. Their method of counting in sixties as well as tens has given us sixty seconds in a minute, sixty minutes in an hour and three hundred and sixty degrees in a circle. Long study of the heavens enabled them to predict many astronomical events accurately, and they kept careful records of lunar eclipses spanning hundreds of years. Our signs of the zodiac are nearly all ones used by the Babylonians. Much of the astronomical expertise that came to the West through Greece, India and Persia ultimately derives from Babylon.

The word magus comes from ancient Persian. In its original usage it means a member of the priestly caste among the Medes and the Persians, though in modern English we're most likely to encounter it in the word magician. The Bible doesn't say exactly whereabouts the "Magi from the east" (Matthew 2:1) lived, but in all likelihood, they'd inherited Babylonian mathematical and astronomical expertise. Both Daniel 6:30-31 and other sources record how Persian king Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon, absorbing it into an empire which lasted for over two hundred years. At its height, this empire stretched to the borders of India, Pakistan and Afghanistan.



The map to the left gives one possible route for the Magi. It assumes they originated in the empire of King Phraates IV of Persia and their starting-point was Ecbatana. This city was a seat of learning and one-time imperial capital – just the sort of place learned men like the Magi might gather to study and research. Wherever the men came from, for people of that era to worship a foreign god or foreign king was highly unusual, almost unprecedented.

The Magi had enquiring minds, formidable intellect and keen scientific abilities. Their conclusions were reached by careful astronomical observation, accurate analysis of data and diligent study of ancient records. They were able to tell Herod not only that "we saw [the Messiah's] star in the east" (Matthew 2:2), but also "the exact time the star had appeared" (Matthew 2:8). They identified the rough time and general location of Jesus' birth – apparently before any Jew did so, even though the coming of the Messiah had been anticipated for centuries. And despite Judea being a small and far-off place, they knew this event was of such mammoth significance that it was worth the time, effort and expense of "[coming] to worship" (Matthew 2:2) "the one born king of the Jews" (Matthew 2:2). Such things were doubtless revealed by the Holy Spirit, but their culture may also have preserved a memory of what had been taught by Daniel, who himself became one of the "wise men" of Babylon (Daniel 1:4, 1:18-20, 4:9, 5:11). Only Matthew's Gospel has the story of the Magi, perhaps because he had a special interest in seeing the fruit of what Daniel sowed generations beforehand. Note, by the way, Balaam's prophecy that "a star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel A ruler will come out

of Jacob” (Numbers 24:17 and 19), which for all we know may have caused Daniel to tell his students to search the heavens for this star’s appearance.

Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society Mark Thompson has used historical records and computer simulations to examine a series of unusual astronomical events (called conjunctions) that happened between 38 BC and 2 BC. These involved the planet Jupiter and one of the brightest stars, Regulus. The planet passed the star travelling first in its usual easterly movement, before it appeared to reverse and pass the star a second time in a westerly direction, before once again changing course to pass the star a third time. (This phenomenon, called retrograde motion, happens when planets which orbit the sun at a slower rate than Earth appear to overtake our planet.) These three conjunctions took place on 14 September 38 BC, 17 February 2 BC and 8 May 2 BC. Thompson commented, “Jupiter, the king of planets, passing so close to the king of stars on three occasions could have been interpreted as the birth of a new king ... The retrograde motion meant Jupiter was travelling in a westerly direction in the sky and so the Three Wise Men may have followed it from Persia. By camel, it would have taken about three months, roughly the same time the planet was travelling in this westward direction.”



Photo of the Great Conjunction of 2020

Great Conjunctions happen every 20 years or so, when Jupiter and Saturn appear closest together in the sky – caused by Jupiter apparently “overtaking” Saturn. These conjunctions are called great because they’re the rarest of the planetary conjunctions visible to the naked eye. (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn can be seen without a telescope, unlike Uranus, Neptune and Pluto.)

The Greek word translated as “star” in Matthew 2:2 (*Aster*) can refer to any kind of celestial body. What the Magi saw can’t have been a meteor, since this would have appeared and faded quickly. Nor is it likely to have been a supernova (the explosive death of a star, which greatly increases its brightness for days, weeks or months). No supernova remnants from this time have been found, and no ancient culture recorded such an event. As the planet’s apparent direction of travel reversed, there would be a point at which it appeared to be stationary in the sky – when “it stopped over the place where the child was.” (Matthew 2:9).

Several alternatives have been identified as the source of the phenomena the Bible describes. Some point to a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in May, October and December of 7 BC, with Mars moving into the group in February of 6 BC. Others reference an alignment of Jupiter and Venus near Regulus on 17th June 2 BC as marking the time of Christ’s conception, with Jesus being born at Passover on 6th-8th April 1 BC, meaning that King Herod the Great died in AD 1, not 4 BC as commonly supposed. (This conjunction of Jupiter and Venus began on 12th August 3 BC and continued for the following months, before appearing to merge into a single body in June 2 BC.)

The fact there are competing theories means we shouldn’t be dogmatic about dates. What matters is that the Bible account is perfectly consistent with observable events.

Then, as now, application of human science could only take the Magi so far. It led them to search for “one ... born king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2) and it brought them to Jerusalem, but then the trail went cold. They were close, but not quite in the right place and arguably their timing was out as they arrived “after Jesus was born” (Matthew 2:1). They reached a dead end, which is why they “asked” (Matthew 2:2) where Jesus was. Seemingly, they naively assumed every Jew must know – which evidently, they

didn't – and they must have been persistent in their questioning, bringing them to the attention of the local authorities and ultimately of Herod himself. Not surprisingly, the presence of a company of foreigners (conceivably quite numerous and possibly armed) asking about the birth of a king and talking excitedly about a strange star caused quite a stir: "When King Herod heard about this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." (Matthew 2:3). Judea then parallels our own nation's spiritual situation today: dominated by a foreign power, under oppressive government, prey to deception – in all of which the religious authorities connived or were complicit.

On the face of it, it might seem strange the Magi didn't go to Herod straight away, as the obvious place to look for "one born king of the Jews" (Matthew 2:2) was in the royal palace. The implication of the phrase "when Herod heard about this" is that the king wasn't their first port of call. The Magi seem to have known the circumstances of this king's birth would be anything but ordinary.

Herod the Great was ruthless and politically astute. Among many other victims of his ambition and megalomania, he had his wife and three of his sons murdered because he thought they were a threat to him. He intended the same fate to befall the baby Jesus, which is why he "called the magi secretly ... sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.'" (Matthew 2:7-8). Herod's secrecy and duplicity was typical of his underhand and scheming way of going about things.

For all his wickedness, though, Herod knew the Hebrew Scriptures were the place to search for more information about Israel's coming Messiah. So, "when he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them, where the Christ was to be born. 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, 'for this is what the prophet has written: But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be shepherd of my people Israel.'" (Matthew 2:4-6, quoting Micah 5:2). Ironically, it was through this intervention by Herod that the Magi received God's revelation and guidance for the next stage of their journey. Seeking to use them to further his evil plans, the wily and unscrupulous king "sent them to Bethlehem" (Matthew 2:8), and "After they had heard the king, they went on their way." (Matthew 2:9).

The Magi were temporarily adrift in Jerusalem. At that point, they could have decided they'd been deluded and gone home disillusioned without ever seeing the Messiah, but they didn't. Instead, "the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed". (Matthew 2:9-10). Miraculous guidance for the Magi continued after they "bowed down and worshipped [Jesus] ... and presented him with gifts" (Matthew 2:11), because "having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route." (Matthew 2:12).

It's noteworthy that, notwithstanding his interest in Joseph, Matthew entirely omits him from this story. In Bethlehem, the Magi "saw the child with his mother Mary" (Matthew 2:11) and Joseph was nowhere to be seen. Whether this means Joseph wasn't there at the time, or whether he's not spoken of because Matthew wanted to concentrate on Jesus as Messiah and Mary as the embodiment of the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14, it's difficult to say.

The Magi's gifts were highly symbolic: gold for kingship, frankincense for worship and myrrh used to anoint bodies for burial. The fact there were three gifts led people to suppose there were three Magi, but this can't be known for sure and seems improbable. What's likely is that they travelled from the east in a substantial company, both for security on a long and hazardous journey and perhaps even because they came with some degree of official blessing from their own king. The Bible doesn't frame their visit as a diplomatic mission, though that can't be ruled out.

An enemy thwarted

Session 7: Massacre of the Innocents, escape to Egypt and return to Nazareth

Matthew 2:13-23

2:13 The timing was urgent, but “when they [the Magi] had gone” doesn’t necessarily mean Joseph had a dream that very same night, since King Herod was expecting the Magi would need time to “make a careful search for the child ... [then return to him to] report” (Matthew 2:8). Only after some days passed would Herod have known he’d been tricked and the Magi had “returned to their country by another route” (Matthew 2:12). But see comments on 2:14.

For the second time, “an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream” (see also Matthew 1:20, 2:19 and 2:22). Like before, Joseph showed the same prompt obedience that characterised Abraham, as for example in how he responded to the call to sacrifice Isaac by getting up “early the next morning” after God had spoken to him (Genesis 22:1-3).

Egypt appears several times in the Bible as a place of refuge and resource: Abram and Sarai went there to escape famine (Genesis 12:10), as did the starving from “all the countries” (Genesis 41:57), Jacob’s sons (Genesis 42-45) and eventually Jacob himself (Genesis 46:3-7). No doubt partly for this reason, as well as for having provided shelter to the Holy Family, Egypt has a glorious destiny alongside Assyria and Israel in being “a blessing on the earth” (Isaiah 19:22-25).

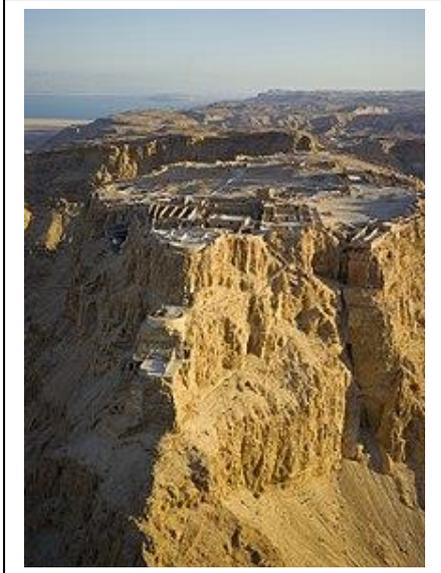
The angel’s order to “stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him” suggests Joseph and his family may have been in Egypt for an extended period. Despite the massacre of the Innocents, the paranoid and malevolent Herod may still have continued to be on the look-out for “the one ... born king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2) having escaped his grasp – hence their remaining in Egypt “until the death of Herod” (Matthew 2:15). Herod is a forerunner of Antichrist and (like Satan) wanted to kill Jesus to keep his throne: compare these events with Revelation 12:1-6.

2:14 The fact Joseph and his family fled “during the night” conveys not only hasty flight but also a need for secrecy. No-one (presumably not even the closest family and friends) could know where they’d gone or why, since Herod doubtless had agents who could be sent overseas to assassinate any who were thought to pose a threat to his regime.

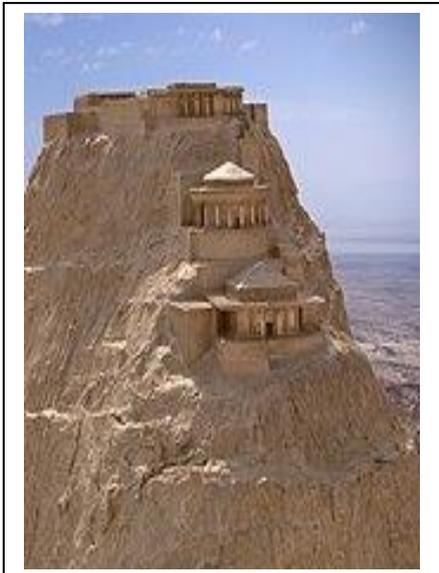
2:15 It would be understandable if prophecies about where the Messiah would come from caused Jews who studied the Old Testament Scriptures some confusion. The “chief priests and teachers of the law [Herod] asked ... where the Christ was to be born” (Matthew 2:4) correctly applied Micah 5:2 to identify Bethlehem as the place. But at the same time, the Bible said, “Out of Egypt I called my son” (Hosea 11:1) and the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 9 stated, “in the future he [the LORD] will honour Galilee of the Gentiles” (Isaiah 9:1). It’s a reminder that God has a way of confounding our attempts to shoehorn things into neat categories and exclude possibilities that don’t fit our pet theories.

2:16 The order to “kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time [Herod] had learned from the Magi” suggests Jesus was conceived over 2½ years before the Magi arrived. This satanically-inspired genocidal plan mirrored previous attempts to wipe out the Jews (and thereby forestall the birth of the Messiah) – first by Pharaoh (Exodus 1:15-16, Exodus 1:22), then by Haman (Esther 3:5-6). Tragically, just as in modern times, there was no shortage of willing collaborators to carry out the tyrant’s evil commands.

Herod the Great had fairly substantial military assets at his disposal. Historians estimate his army of about 5,000 men in 39 BC grew to something like 25,000 men by the end of his reign. It fused Roman and Greek traditions, featuring heavy cavalry and both light and heavy infantry, the latter modelled along the lines of Roman legions. Amongst the huge programme of public works Herod instituted were dual military-civilian projects, such as the palace-fortress complexes at Masada and Herodium.



Left, an aerial view of Masada from the north. Right, a model of Herod's palace on the cliff-top, which rises 1,200 ft from the valley below. During the Jewish Revolt of AD 66-70, this was the last place to fall to the legions. At the east of the Judean Desert overlooking the Dead Sea, it threatened convoys carrying salt for export to Rome.



2:17-18 Jeremiah's prophetic reference to Rachel is perhaps not only because she was a favoured wife of one of the patriarchs and mother of Joseph and Benjamin, but also in acknowledgement of her intense yearning for children: "When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children ... she said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or I'll die!'" (Genesis 30:1). Ironically, it was having children rather than not having them that was the cause of her death, as she died in childbirth: see Genesis 35:19.



The Bible mentions at least two places called Ramah (meaning, *on high* or *exalted*, possibly also meaning, *thunder*). The Ramah referred to in the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:15 is Ramah in Benjamin. This lay about five miles to the north of Jerusalem, with Gibeon and Mizpah to the west, Gibeah to the south and Geba to the east. The map to the left shows the small area in which the events of the Nativity played out. Note, too, Tekoa to the south-east of Bethlehem. The prophet Amos described himself as "one of the shepherds of Tekoa" (Amos 1:1) – perhaps one of the same Levitical shepherds as those to whom the angels appeared in Luke 2:9-14. Bethlehem is just over 7 miles from Jerusalem and about the same distance from Tekoa.

2:19 For the third time "an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph": see also Matthew 1:20 and 2:13. Nothing is said about the time the Holy Family spent in Egypt. This doesn't necessarily mean their life there was uneventful, merely that there's nothing we need to know of it for the purposes of salvation or our walk of faith. Presumably, as a skilled craftsman, Joseph would have been able to find work relatively easily, though Revelation 12:6 ("The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days") could suggest a different scenario.

2:20 Once more, Joseph was required to uproot himself and his family at short notice. Again, we might see a parallel with Abraham being told to leave Ur of the Chaldees: see Genesis 12:1. At first, Joseph was told simply “to go to the land of Israel”. Further direction came later: see Matthew 2:22-23.

2:21 There’s no record of delay or complaint by Joseph at any point during God’s dealings with him in these early years of Jesus’ life. It’s naturally possible there are things that aren’t included in the biblical narrative, but on other occasions Scripture makes no bones about the failings of its protagonists, such as with the raft of excuses Moses made for not doing as God said: see Exodus 3:13-4:18. If it really is the case that Joseph responded with unquestioning faith at all times, this marks him out as one of the most extraordinary men of God in the whole Bible. Joseph means, *He will add*.



As recorded by the 1st century AD Jewish historian Josephus, Archelaus had a bad start to his reign – a heavy-handed overreaction to disturbances in Jerusalem at Passover led to over 3,000 deaths. Archelaus was summoned to Rome to explain himself and defend his entitlement to the throne in the light a dispute over the validity of Herod the Great’s will. But despite the arguments of Archelaus’ political opponents, he was confirmed in his post by Augustus Caesar and ruled for nine years before the Romans imposed direct rule in AD 6. At all events, there was plenty to justify Joseph being apprehensive about what life for his family would be like if they lived too close to the centre of political and religious power in Jerusalem.

2:22 On Herod the Great’s death, his territory was spilt between three of his sons. Archelaus ruled in Judea, as recorded here, with Herod (also called Herod Antipas) becoming “tetrarch of Galilee [and] his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis” (Luke 3:1). Joseph wasn’t irrational in being “afraid to go” to Judea “when he heard that Archelaus was ruling [there] in place of his father Herod”, as he was “warned in a dream” – the fourth time we hear of Joseph dreaming. In this he seemingly had much in common with his Old Testament namesake, the son of Jacob mocked by his brothers as “that dreamer” (Genesis 37:19).

2:23 Whereas Nazareth features early on in the Gospels of Mark, Luke and John (Mark 1:9, Luke 1:26, John 1:45), this is Matthew’s first reference to it. Seemingly it was still an obscure place, hence he had to explain it was “a town called Nazareth”. As a measure of its insignificance, the Talmud lists 63 Galilean towns, but Nazareth isn’t amongst them. The apostle Nathaniel, who came from Cana (John 21:2), only 4 miles southwest of Nazareth, snorted in derision, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46), and Pharisees replying to Nicodemus’ attempts to get a fair hearing for Jesus said, “Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come from Galilee.” (John 7:52).

On the face of it, there’s a problem with “So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: ‘He will be called a Nazarene’” as this phrase doesn’t appear anywhere in the Old Testament. The clue is in the reference to prophets in the plural, whereas normally quotations use prophet in the singular: see for example Matthew 1:22-23 and 2:15. In other words, rather than a word-for-word quotation, this is a synthesis – pulling together a theme found throughout the prophetic writings.

Questions for discussion

Session 1

1. What does the story of John the Baptist tell us about the character of God?
2. How can we avoid mistakenly treating the trials and misfortunes of life as God's doing? If this isn't their cause, where else might they come from?
3. What does God's covenant faithfulness mean for believers in our own day?

Session 2

1. After 400 years of silence, why did God choose this moment in history to bring Jesus into the world?
2. Did Mary and Joseph need to have the characters they did in order for God's purposes through them to be fulfilled?
3. How do we strike the right balance between testing everything and obeying promptly and with child-like faith when God calls?

Session 3

1. Since the Bible warns against "foolish controversies and genealogies" (Titus 3:9), how should we treat the genealogies in Scripture?
2. What's the significance of Matthew including five women in his genealogy?
3. Does Luke's emphasis on joy cause us to re-think our approach to the coming of the Messiah and the message of the Gospel?

Session 4

1. How (if at all) does the appearance of angels to the shepherds point towards Jesus as the Lamb of God?
2. Should we expect to experience the Glory of the LORD in our own day? If not, why not?
3. Does Mary's reaction to events challenge us to ponder more on what we see and hear? If so, how can we do this better?

Session 5

1. How might God wish to offer us His consolation at this time?
2. How can we avoid becoming cynical, despairing or complacent when we wait a long time without prayers being answered or hopes fulfilled?
3. How can we seek out and speak a message of hope to people in our own nation who are looking for "the redemption of Jerusalem"?

Session 6

1. What do the Magi show us about the uses and limitations of human knowledge and ability?
2. How do the reactions the Magi encountered in Jerusalem reflect our own age, and what pitfalls do they warn us to avoid?
3. What lessons should we draw from the Magi's response when the trail appeared to go cold in Jerusalem?

Session 7

1. What do Joseph's dreams and his reaction to them tell us about hearing from and responding to God?
2. How do the events Matthew relates help us be realistic about what to expect from political and religious leaders?
3. Why did God choose a place as insignificant as Nazareth for Jesus to grow up?