

Portraits of Christmas

PORTRAIT ONE

THE PEOPLE

Elizabeth (Elisheva) and Zechariah (Z'kharyah)

Mother and father of John the Baptist

Zechariah is mentioned only in Luke 1. He was a descendant of Aaron from the tribe of Levi, the priestly class. As such, he was required to marry a woman who was also of that descent, thus the Scripture tells us that Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.



Jerusalem temple model

Luke mentions that Zechariah was of the division of Abijah (or Abia), dating back to the time when

David divided the priestly families into 24 groups or classes (see 1 Chronicles 23:1–24:19). Zechariah was from the eighth course of Abijah (1 Chronicles 24:10).

The priests were required to go to Jerusalem and serve in the temple twice each year for a week at a time. It was Zechariah's time to serve. During his stay, he likely lived on the temple grounds in one of the side chambers. Zechariah was very fortunate to be chosen by lot to burn incense on this particular day. Many priests would never be given that honor in a lifetime. The Altar of Incense was located in the Holy Place in the temple. Only priests were allowed to enter this sacred room.

This altar was very symbolic, for as the incense was lifted up to the heavens so the prayers of the people outside were being lifted up to God. (See Luke 1:10.) It was when Zechariah was standing beside this altar that the angel Gabriel appeared and told him he would have a son whose name was to be John.

At first Zechariah showed signs of disbelief as he questioned the angel about how this could possibly be because he and his wife

were well along in years. Yet because of the persistence of the angel and the eventual curse of his speechlessness, Zechariah soon changed his heart. Zechariah needed to be convinced because he still had to consummate the promise with his wife. We hear the last mention of Zechariah when he delivers a beautiful song of faith in Luke 1:67-79.

Discuss: God often gave babies to older barren women to prove his almighty power. Mention those you can think of. Why do you think God frequently used this miracle?

Mary (Miryam) and Joseph (Yosef)

Mother and legal father of Jesus

Although we hear much of Mary ("The Lord's beloved") and Joseph ("He will enlarge") in relation to the birth of Jesus, we know relatively little of them prior to that time. Both Matthew (chapter 1) and Luke (chapter 3) record the genealogies of these two individuals. On close examination, however, there seems to be some discrepancy in the family lines. Matthew's line begins with Abraham and continues through David to Jacob, the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Luke, on the other hand, begins with Joseph who is here mentioned as the son of Heli, and traces the line through David all the way back to Adam. This supposed contradiction of Joseph's fathers can be understood if we realize that Matthew followed the royal line of Jesus through his father Joseph while Luke traced the ancestral line from Mary (Heli would then be Joseph's father-in-law). This becomes reasonable as we note that Matthew writes the Christmas story from the viewpoint of Joseph and Luke as it would have been seen through the eyes of Mary. (It is thought by some that Mary may have told the story firsthand to Luke as he was writing.) We remember that Mary kept a mental diary of all the things that took place in her life after Jesus was born. (See Luke 2:19.)

Mary's age has been argued endlessly. She was probably between 14 and 20 years old. We know nothing of her family other than she was the cousin of Elizabeth (Luke 1:36), the mother of John. Mary was raised in Nazareth and was betrothed to Joseph, a carpenter by trade. Although we are not certain of her birthplace and the exact home of Joseph and Mary, there are churches erected at some probable sites. Unlike Joseph, Mary appears several times throughout the life of Jesus. Certainly her words in the song she sang to Elizabeth (*The Magnificat*, Luke 1:46-55) have come true, because generations have called her blessed and the Mighty One did do great things for her.

Joseph was a plain man perhaps in his middle 20s. The young carpenter was indeed a pious Jew, for he was certain Jewish law was carefully followed at the circumcision and presentation of Jesus. Little is known of Joseph other than the fact that he was a devout, faithful, and loving man. He welcomed the shepherds and Magi into his dwelling and was a dutiful father and husband. Joseph is mentioned only once after Jesus' birth when Jesus was 12 years old. After that, Scripture is silent about Joseph. It is likely he died before Jesus began his public ministry, thus Mary was in need of a loving guardian when at Calvary Jesus appointed John to care for her.

Discuss: Name some of the high and low times in Mary's life.

The Betrothal of Mary and Joseph

Betrothal was a serious commitment made between not only a young man and woman but also their respective families. Marriages were to be of a practical nature, not just a romantic joining, thus the families were involved in the selection of a mate and there was an agreement between families. When a man and woman became betrothed, they were looked upon as having made a lifelong, unbreakable commitment. The Bible even speaks of them as husband and wife even before the formal wedding. (Note Matthew 1:19, where Joseph is called Mary's husband although they were still betrothed.) To become betrothed, a young man would propose to the woman and offer her a small gift as a pledge of his commitment. If she accepted, the couple

remained in the betrothed state for about a year. During that time, sexual relations with one another were considered adultery. Any relations with another man or woman could result in death. An edict of divorce was the only way to break a betrothal. (Note Matthew 1:19, where Joseph considered divorce with Mary.)

After the angel visited Joseph, he felt it was time to be married to put the problem of a pregnant betrothed girl behind them. (See Matthew 1:24.) Also notice that during the duration of Mary's pregnancy, although they were legally married, they had no sexual relations with one another. (See Matthew 1:25.)

Discuss: Do you think that the betrothal practices in the Bible would work today?

The Shepherds

Shepherding dates back to the earliest days of Genesis. Abel was a shepherd. Many of our favorite Bible people, such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rachel, Moses, and David, were shepherds at one time in their lives. Shepherds were not greatly respected. They were a rugged group of people who often disregarded the religious rituals of the day. The Bethlehem shepherds probably lived in the neighboring town of Beit-Sahur which is within sight of



Bethlehem. An area of grazing land still exists today that is called the Shepherd's Fields. Days

were long and boring, and nights called for a watchful eye to see that the sheep were kept safe from predators and robbers. What a statement God made when he planned that the first people to be told of the Savior's birth were ordinary, unassuming shepherds in need of worshipping the Lamb of God as much as the rest of us.

The sheep in Palestine were not the same that we are familiar with here in the West. The Bethlehem shepherds kept watch over their "fat-tailed sheep," a domestic sheep known for their large tails. (See Leviticus 3:9.) The coarse wool was used for rugs and

blankets. The animals were very strong and worked well for nomadic shepherders.

Discuss: How do you think the shepherds felt after that night was over?

Magi or Wise Men

The term *magi* is from the Greek, which calls them the *magoi apo anatolon*, or Magi from the East. The definition of magi is “wise men” or magicians. Exactly when these men entered the Christmas picture is not known. It was likely after the 40 days between Jesus’ birth and presentation. Little is known of these men who were probably from Persia or Babylon. Like the shepherds, the Magi are given no names or numbers. (Perhaps there were three Magi because of the three gifts they offered, but that is mere speculation.) They disappear from Scripture as quickly as they enter. What is certain regarding the Magi is that they were unbelieving Gentiles, not Hebrews like the shepherds. The special star appointed to guide these men to the Savior is evidence that salvation through Jesus is intended for all people. Tradition has it that the apostle Thomas baptized the Magi shortly before they were put to death for their faith.

Discuss: What was the significance of the gifts of the Magi?

THE POLITICS

Caesar Augustus and Quirinius

Roman emperor and governor

The most read chapter in Scripture begins with the naming of two pagan rulers serving a faraway government. Born Gaius Octavius in 63 B.C., Caesar Augustus became emperor of the entire Roman world in 27 B.C. after being adopted by his great-uncle Julius Caesar. Mentioned only once in the Bible, Augustus is nevertheless connected with the greatest story ever told. It was his census decree that proved to fulfill the prophecy of Micah 5:2 that the Savior was to be born in Bethlehem, not Nazareth, the home of Jesus’ mother and father. Augustus reigned until A.D. 14. He was succeeded by Tiberius (A.D. 14–37 as mentioned in Luke 3:1; 23:2), Caligula



Caesar Augustus

(A.D. 37–41), Claudius (A.D. 41–54 as mentioned in Acts 11:28; 18:2), and Nero (A.D. 54–68 as mentioned in Philippians 4:22).

Publius Sulpicius Quirinius, (Roman for the Greek name Cyrenius), is named by Luke as the governor of Syria. As such, he also had jurisdiction of Palestine, and thus he

becomes a part of the Christmas story. Here, however, we are presented with a problem of dating. History tells us that Quirinius was governor of Syria in A.D. 6–7. Yet we find that Augustus conducted three empire-wide censuses in 28 B.C., 8 B.C., and A.D. 14. That would cause some confusion with the reigning dates of Quirinius. Could Luke have made an error? This is not likely since Luke was a meticulous historian, carefully documenting world history throughout his books of Luke and Acts. (See Luke 1:3.) There are two possible explanations regarding the date of the census. Luke 2:2 speaks of the “first census”. The word *first* can be translated as “before” or “prior to.” Thus it could be the census “prior to” Quirinius, dating it at about 8 B.C. (A second census is mentioned in Acts 5:37.) Another possibility is that there is some evidence that Quirinius served in another capacity in Syria prior to his governorship. That would place him in that region at about 8 B.C. Quirinius died in A.D. 21.

Discuss: How does this account show us that God uses government to serve his purposes—even today?

The Date of Christmas

Was Jesus born on December 25 in A.D. 1? The birth of Jesus certainly was the dividing line between the ancient civilizations of “before Christ” and the post-Christ era of “anno domini” (*in the year of our Lord*). The dating of Christ’s birth has caused much discussion in biblical circles. The one thing most agree with is that it could not have taken place in A.D. 1, because Herod the Great, (mentioned in Matthew 2:1), the author of the baby-killing decree (see Matthew 2:16), died in 4 B.C.

(Matthew 2:19.) This would mean that the birth of Jesus had to take place prior to 4 B.C.

Herod the Great had three sons. Herod Archelaus ruled Samaria and Judah (Matthew 2:22). Herod Antipas ruled Galilee and is known to have beheaded John the Baptist and to have tried Jesus.

This dating error occurred in the sixth century when a Roman monk named Dionysius attempted to revise the calendar. He miscalculated the founding of Rome by four years thus placing the death of Herod in the wrong year.

To further complicate the discussion, it is also unlikely the birth happened in winter or on December 25. Some suggest that the time of year shepherds spent their nights in the fields keeping watch over their flocks must have been during lambing time in spring. If it had been wintertime, the sheep would have been kept in enclosed pens. Yet when one considers the time of year that Zechariah served in the temple, the pregnancy of Elizabeth, and the visit to Mary when Elizabeth was six months pregnant, it is more likely to assume that John was born in March around Passover time placing Jesus' birth near the end of September.

It wasn't until A.D. 336 that a date for celebrating the birth of Jesus was considered. Up until that time, it was Jesus' death that was of greater significance. (Births were celebrated more by the heathen.) In the mid-400s we read of a first Christ-mass. The date of December 25 was chosen from several suggestions because it was the date of the heathen celebration of the birth of the sun-god of the winter solstice. The Christian community hoped to counter this heathen practice by celebrating the birth of the Sun of Righteousness on the same day.

Certainly the actual date of the census and the birth of Jesus may never be known. Suffice it to say that Jesus was born when the "time had fully come" (Galatians 4:4,5).

Discuss: What are your thoughts? Should we do away with the B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (in the year of the Lord) and replace them with B.C.E. (before the common era) and C.E. (common era), as found in many textbooks today?

LUTHER'S INSIGHTS

"The birth itself is still more pitiful. There was no one to take pity on this young wife who was for the first time to give birth to a child; no one to take to heart her condition that she, a stranger, did not have the least thing a mother needs in a birth-night. There she is without any preparation, without either light or fire, alone in the darkness, without anyone offering her service as is customary for women to do at such times." [From his Christmas Sermon, 1521]

THE STORY BEHIND . . .

"ONCE IN ROYAL DAVID'S CITY"

by Cecil Frances Alexander (1818–1895)

Many of the hymns enjoyed by adults today were originally intended for children. That was the case for the popular Christmas anthem "Once in Royal David's City." Mrs. Alexander was a devoted Sunday school teacher in the mid-1800s. One day she noticed a student struggling with the concept of the Apostles' Creed, which gave her a brilliant idea: Why not write songs that will explain the various parts of the Creed? This was the beginning of three very famous songs that we still enjoy today.

Mrs. Alexander wrote a beautiful song titled "All Things Bright and Beautiful, All Creatures Great and Small" that was based on the Apostles' Creed phrase "maker of heaven and earth." She then wrote the popular Christmas carol "Once in Royal David's City" based on the Creed's statement that Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary." And it was with the phrase "[Jesus] suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried . . ." that became the wonderful Lenten hymn, "There Is a Green Hill Far Away."

Although these three hymns are still her best-known songs, Cecil Alexander has been credited with writing over four hundred other hymns. Most of her songs were written especially for children. One great exception is the stirring hymn, "Jesus Calls Us O'er the Tumult."