

Rethinking
The
Nativity

Dr. Jeffery Elliott

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DEDICATION

To those who love Christmas and
cherish the true meaning of the celebration!

CONTENTS

1	Is Your Nativity Wrong?	1
2	Joseph, the Forgotten Character	5
3	Mary, Loving Mother of Jesus	13
4	Angels and Shepherds, the Meaning of the Message	23
5	The Wise Men, a Mystery for the Ages	31
6	Baby Jesus, Infant Creator	43

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IS YOUR NATIVITY WRONG?

**And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby,
keeping watch over their flocks at night. Luke 2:8**

As you drive around, you'll see a variety of Nativity sets in people's yards. You'll see them underneath their Christmas trees or in their houses for decorations. But the Nativity has come under attack recently for not being historically accurate. I've sat through many church services where there's either been a video presentation or a sermon on why everything is wrong about your Nativity. But the truth is, the Nativity was never intended to be a historical representation of the night of Christ's birth. Instead, it is an artistic interpretation of the events surrounding the birth of Christ. It is a teaching tool that incorporates all of the various elements of the biblical record. We have a tendency in our culture to try to tear down Christmas. And yet, Christmas is the largest holiday celebration worldwide, and for good reason.

Christmas is a time when everyone feels compelled to regurgitate the same pablum you hear every year about how the Nativity you

have delicately placed under your tree, on your mantle, in your yard, or at your church is completely wrong! It's almost like a badge of honor to be the first to tell you that.

Recently, I saw a snappy little video with a string of pictures overlaid with text and sappy Christmas music. The title was Five Things Christians Get Wrong About Christmas. It then proceeded to use words like “scholars suspect” and “probably” along with “could have been.” Basically, saying we don't really know anything; we just want to be negative and try to ruin your Christmas.

I may be a little touchy about this subject, but I really don't like being told that the way I celebrate Christmas is wrong. I grew up in a wonderful family where my mother made Christmas as magical as possible while keeping Christ the center of it all. So, I love Christmas. She would place a very traditional manger scene under our Christmas tree every year. Presents were placed around the Nativity but never in front of it. An illuminated angel adorned the top of our tree.

So, let's look at what the naysayers get wrong about the Nativity being wrong. First, let's look at its history. What better place than the Biblical Archaeology Society to discover where the Nativity originated? The following is from their article Christmas Stories in Christian Apocrypha.

The scene, first assembled by St. Francis of Assisi in 1223, is iconographic, meaning its various elements are intended primarily to depict theological—not historical, nor even literary—truths. It harmonizes two very distinct stories: Luke's birth of Jesus in a stable, visited by shepherds, and attended by an angelic host and Matthew's Magi, who are led by a star to the home of Jesus' family

sometime before Jesus' second birthday.¹

Nativities are not little time machines intended to give us a historically accurate window into the past. They are art! They are ART people! Looking at early Christian art, you will find pictures of people with halos around their heads. That does not mean that the real people walked around with their heads glowing like a nuclear reactor. It was artistically symbolic. The same is true of the manger scene.

So, if your Nativity is the traditional stable with white European representations of Renaissance art, livestock, angels, and three wisemen, then it's alright. If it has all black characters, it's alright, too! If it takes place in a cave instead of a stable, that's fine. Why? because it is an artistic expression of theological truth: Jesus came into this world under special circumstances. The rest is artistic license.

So relax and enjoy those manger scenes! Celebrate the season! Don't worry about whether they are historically accurate—they are not supposed to be! They are art!

Dr. Jeffery Elliott

JOSEPH THE FORGOTTEN CHARACTER

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. Luke 2:4

As a child growing up in Clarksville, Tennessee, in the 1960s, Christmas decorations were very limited compared to today. However, it seemed that every house had some kind of Christmas decorations. One activity I enjoyed was driving through the neighborhoods with my parents at night, looking at all the colorful lights. My father intentionally drove down one street where one of the houses had a blow-mold Nativity. I can still see it. Dad would stop the car and point it out. Such great Christmas memories.

Let's see what a Nativity needs to tell the whole story. You have to begin with what's called the holy family. That starts with the baby in the manger. Then you have Mary. Then you have the shepherds.

Well, I mean, let's see. You've got Joseph there, too. Sorry. You kind of forget about Joseph. But you go on, and you have the shepherds and angels. You'll have some farm animals, sheep, and the wise men. It is actually preferable if you put the wise men with your nativity. Why? Because this is an artistic representation to teach the story of the birth of Christ, which contains all of the elements of the story.

What is your favorite character within the Nativity? You probably have one. It might be the baby Jesus. Maybe it's Mary. How about the angels with the shepherds? Or maybe your favorite is the Three Wise Men.

I bet there's one character that you never think of. When I was a kid, we would have pageants with children dressed up as the various characters. Some girls wanted to be Mary, and some guys wanted to be a Wise Man. I always got stuck as a shepherd. We don't know how many shepherds there were, and if you've got 100 children, you can assign several to be shepherds. In one church I pastored, we had children dressed as little donkeys, sheep, and cows, and they would crawl around on their hands and knees and make the appropriate sounds.

The one character that nobody ever asked to be was Joseph. Have you ever thought about that? In the manger scene, we need to have Joseph there, yet we never really think much about Joseph. Joseph is the forgotten character.

How about the hymn, the Christmas carol devoted to Joseph? You know, the one called It Came Upon a Midnight Clear? Oh wait, no, that's about angels and shepherds. Maybe it was the one about Ave Maria. No, wait, that's about Mary. We Three Kings? No, that's about the three wise men. Let's see. It's, oh, come on, help me out. You know the Christmas carol about Joseph, right? Two Thousand

years! It's been two thousand years, and we can't even come up with one Christmas carol about Joseph. There has finally been a song about Joseph released in 2020 by King + Country.

Joseph is an important character in this story, and I want to help you understand why. We're going to the Book of Matthew. You may not be familiar with where the Christmas story is found in Scripture. It's found in two books of the Bible: Matthew and Luke. Chapters one and two in each of those books contain the elements of the Christmas story that we find in our Nativity.

I want us to rethink the Nativity. I want to help you understand where it all came from and what its elements are. I'm hoping you will discover a couple of surprises along the way. Our first question is, why Joseph? Why was he chosen? What do we know about Joseph? We know that he originally was from the town of Bethlehem and lived in Nazareth, but that is about it.

Did you know that the donkey that Mary rode on her way to Bethlehem is more famous than Joseph? We know more about that donkey. He has his own animated television Christmas special first aired in 1977? It was called Nestor the Long-Eared Christmas Donkey. But do you remember the Christmas special about Joseph when you were a kid? No? That's because there wasn't one. Why? Because we don't talk about Joseph.

What we can find out about Joseph. Matthew begins with a genealogy. That shouldn't surprise you because Matthew is writing primarily to the Jewish population, and the purpose of his writing is for them to understand that Jesus is the Messiah. He fulfills the Old Testament prophecies. That's why there's so much discussion about prophecy within the book of Matthew. We get bored with genealogy. When I was a kid, I decided to read the Bible. I opened it up and

started reading through Genesis. The first couple of chapters were fine until suddenly, I got to “so-and-so begat so-and-so.” I quit reading. Then, I decided to open the Bible to the New Testament and start there. The first chapter of Matthew was “so-and-so begat so-and-so.” One day, I let the Bible fall open somewhere and read from there. It fell open to First Chronicles, which had “so-and-so begat so-and-so.” That ended my Bible reading for a while because I thought the Bible was mostly about genealogy.

But genealogy is critical to the Jews, and there's a reason why there's so much genealogy in the Bible. Matthew starts with Abraham and will go from Abraham up to Jesus. The reality is that most of the genealogies in the Bible, especially in Genesis, are there to connect Jesus all the way back to Adam. That's what the central genealogical record throughout the Bible is about. And so we come to Matthew, and Matthew starts with Abraham and records the genealogy of Jesus. Any idea why he would begin with Abraham? Because Abraham is the beginning of the nation of Israel. Abraham is an essential character in Jewish life. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was the father of Jacob. We skip to Mathan, the father of Jacob, and Jacob, the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born and who was called Christ. That's where we're introduced to Joseph in the Bible.

Now, we know that Jesus is the product of Mary being a virgin and God conceiving Jesus inside of her. And Jesus being born of a virgin. But when it talks about Joseph being the father of Jesus, it's talking about it from a legal standpoint. Within the Jewish community, the lineage was always taken through the father. Even if that father had not sired that individual, an individual could still be part of that lineage as they were adopted into the family. This was equal to being born into the family, sired by that father. If an

individual was adopted into the family, it was seen as being the child of that father. That's how serious it was. When Matthew was delineating the genealogy, he took it from Joseph.

But here's an interesting point. If you go to verse 6, you will discover that it says Jesse, the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon. I bring this up because David is within Joseph's genealogy. And what is the prophecy about David? David will have a descendant who will sit on the throne of Israel for all eternity. And who is that individual? It is Jesus. It was essential for the Jews to understand that Jesus' genealogy traced back to David in order to fulfill that prophecy. So, one of the things that we know about Joseph is that he was a descendant of David. There is another genealogy that doesn't deal with Joseph. We will look at that genealogy later on, as it is important as well. Joseph was descended from David, and therefore, he fulfilled the prophecy of the Messiah being the descendant of David.

There are a lot of stories and speculations about Joseph that have no solid historical background. One legend tells us Joseph was a very old man. It says that he had been married before Mary, that he had children from that previous wife, and that all of the brothers and sisters of Jesus mentioned in this Gospel come from that previous marriage. Some say that he was as old as ninety. Now, ninety was a very old age at the time of Jesus' birth, and most people did not live that long because of illness and injury. To give you an idea of what it was like, think about Solomon. Think about how wise and wealthy he was. He ruled over Israel for forty years. He died at the age of fifty-five. So, for an individual to be ninety when he married Mary really brings up a lot of questions in my mind.

Another legend says he was about 33 years old and lived until

Jesus was 28. He died at about the age of 62. I would tend to believe this account. However, we have nothing in scripture or any reliable source about Joseph's past or death. All of the theories come hundreds of years after the event.

Why Joseph? Catholics venerate Mary. They believe that she remained a virgin all of her life. So, the legend that Joseph was ninety years old meant that he simply had to be there to care for her and baby Jesus. Again, I do not believe this is the case. We can find better reasons for Joseph's selection in scripture than in legends. Joseph was a faithful follower of the law.

Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. Matthew 1:19

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. Luke 2:22

Joseph was a God-fearing man who did his best to keep the Jewish law. He was faithful to it, and when God told him to do something, he did it. If you were about to marry a young woman, and you found out she was pregnant, and you had a dream, and in your dream, you were told everything's going to be okay, go ahead and marry her. What would you do? Would you get up the next morning and go, "I know God spoke to me, and I know everything's going to be all right. I'm going to obey God, even though I'm going to be ridiculed by everybody around us, and nobody's going to believe my story." Would you do that? Really? It takes an incredible amount of faith in God and obedience to do whatever God calls you to do, to do what Joseph did. And yet, as we read about him, we pass over his name as though it is completely meaningless and he has no part in

the story whatsoever. We don't sing songs about him, we don't make Christmas specials about him, and when he is in the Nativity, we don't even notice him. He's just a forgotten individual, but this is what is neat about Joseph. He loved God, he followed God, and he obeyed God without question. If I could have an epitaph on my tomb, I wish it could be "He followed God without question." I obeyed him. I did what he told me to do. And I was faithful. That's the legacy that Joseph knew.

Matthew reveals another trait about Joseph.

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod.
Matthew 2:13-15

Not only was he obedient and faithful, but he also was a protector of his family. Herod had decided to kill all the children two years and under. Joseph was very concerned about his family. God told him to get out of there. They went to Egypt so that they were out of Herod's reach. But notice when the angel came again later and said, "Herod is dead. You can go back now." Joseph had another concern for the safety of his family.

But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth.
Matthew 2:22-23

Joseph was a protector of his family. He was also a provider for his family. We know that he was a carpenter. He was a protector and a provider.

Over the 2000 years since the resurrection of Christ, many Christians have loved God, followed his way, been obedient to him, and tried to serve him in any way they could. Many of them didn't have a great talent for singing. They weren't fantastic preachers with golden voices that could lead many to Christ. They were simply individuals who had families. They sought to teach them about God. They sought to raise their children in the admonition of the Lord. And as they passed from this world, their names were forgotten.

When we look at people like Paul, Peter, and John, all of whom are famous in Scripture, we tend to think, "I can never be like them." Obviously, they were great Christians. We might think they were super Christians, and God probably loved them much more than he loves me. We can see ourselves as this tiny little individual of no significance. When that thought crosses your mind, I want you to remember Joseph, the forgotten character of the Nativity.

The truth is that Jesus was born in that little manger for Joseph. So that he could grow up, die on the cross, and pay for Joseph's sins because Joseph trusted in God. And he died for you, and he died for me. Whenever you feel you're not much of a Christian and can't do much for God, I want you to remember that God loves you just like he loved Joseph. And remember, the reason Jesus came to be born in a stable was to die on the cross so that he could pay for your sins so you could spend eternity with him.

MARY

LOVING MOTHER OF JESUS

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Luke 1:26-28

When I was a child, we did not have an elaborate Nativity. All of our Christmas decorations were simple but loved. One December day, my mother came home excited. She held a small box. As she opened it, she gently lifted a small angel dressed in a golden gown and arrayed with white Christmas lights. It became one of my mother's favorite Christmas decorations. She would place a small plastic Nativity at the foot of our Christmas tree and her angel on top. As I grew older, my mother let me decorate our Christmas tree. I would lovingly put the Manger scene at the bottom of the tree,

surrounded by the presents, and I placed her treasured angel on the top of the tree.

The second most popular character in the Nativity is Mary, the mother of Jesus. Joseph is the forgotten character of the Nativity, and there is not much about him in the scriptures. The shepherds are only mentioned in one place in scripture. The Wise men show up in Matthew, and that's all you ever hear about them. Mary is carried throughout the Gospels. She is the only one other than Jesus who is carried through to the crucifixion.

When we look for Mary in the story of Christmas, she is dealt with more in Luke than in Matthew. Matthew mentions Mary, but focuses on Joseph. Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience. He is trying to convince them Jesus is the Messiah they have been expecting for so long. Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecy their prophets have told them about so many times. And that's why Matthew focused on Joseph.

In Luke, we find an emphasis on Mary. We see the angel Gabriel visit her. We find her praise to God. It has her delivery of the child. It talks of her reaction to the shepherds and what they had to say. Then she and Joseph present Jesus at the temple, and we find out it is her soul that a sword will pierce. We see Mary much more in Luke than we do in Matthew.

Luke has a different audience. He was writing to the Greeks. He comes at it from a historical perspective. Every time that he mentions something that happens, he puts in historical markers. This happened during so and so's reign, and he gives as many as six historical markers to help us understand when these events happened. In fact, it is Luke who helps us find the key to when Jesus was actually born. When Mary actually got pregnant. He gives us historical markers to

help us understand that. We will look closer at that passage in the next chapter.

Throughout my lifetime, there was a particular story about Christmas that I learned and believed for many years. Here are some of the elements of that story. Mary got pregnant, and she rode a donkey to Bethlehem. Do you remember that portion of the story? That is not found in scripture. The donkey has become an important part of our Christmas pageants. But did Mary ride a donkey? Very likely. Could she have ridden a cart drawn by a donkey? More likely. Those things are very possible, but they're not specifically mentioned in scripture. We carry ideas that are not in not in scripture. Sometimes, we must go back to scripture and read the actual words for ourselves instead of thinking we know what they say.

And then there is the innkeeper. Every little pageant has an innkeeper. The innkeeper always had a line. Do you remember it? "There is no room in the inn." And yet the innkeeper does not exist in scripture. He's never mentioned. Another element that has arisen out of tradition more than anything else. Was there an innkeeper? Probably. This was probably somebody's house, and they had a couple of spare rooms. Mary and Joseph were going around trying to find a place to stay and could not find anything. The scriptures do say that there was no room at the inn and that they had to find lodgings elsewhere.

Recently, I saw an explanation of where we get the song Silent Night. It is a picture of Mary on the donkey with Joseph, and Joseph is saying, "All right, all right, I should have made a reservation." Underneath, the caption reads, "And that was the start of Silent Night."

Was Mary a virgin? Was Jesus born to a virgin? And does it

matter? The answer is yes and yes. Jesus was born of a virgin, and it does matter. Let's look at Luke's description of Mary.

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. Luke 1:26-27

It is important to recognize Jesus was born of a virgin because of the sin issue. Isaiah prophesied this.

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14

Your Bible may have a footnote that says the Hebrew word for virgin in Isaiah can be translated as "a young maiden," not specifically a virgin. That's because, in Hebrew, there is no specific word for virgin. It is a young maiden. Within the Israelite culture, the idea of a young woman who was unmarried not being a virgin was unheard of. It was a concept they did not have because they took virginity so important. Today, we do not have such an idea. We see this idea so embedded in the culture from the translation known as the Septuagint. Before the birth of Jesus, the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek. This translation is known as the Septuagint. It is the version of the Old Testament used during the New Testament times. They translated from Hebrew to the more exact language, Greek. They had two choices of words for this passage in Isaiah. One was a Greek word that meant a young maiden who was unmarried, and the other word meant a virgin. Guess which word they chose? They chose the Greek word for virgin because they understood this

was a supernatural prophecy. But this is not the only prophecy of the virgin birth of the Savior.

You are most likely familiar with the story of the serpent and Eve. The serpent tempted her to eat the forbidden fruit. She did and realized she had disobeyed God. Adam ate the fruit as well. As God begins to pronounce judgment, he starts with the serpent. And when he speaks to the serpent, he says,

**“And I will put enmity Between you and the woman,
And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your
head, And you shall bruise His heel.” Genesis 3:15 (NKJV)**

I specifically chose the New King James Version for this passage because it uses “seed.” Modern translations use offspring. That does not give you an accurate understanding of this scripture because the word “seed” is extremely important. In producing the next generation, the seed comes from the man. But here, God told the serpent, between your seed and her seed, the woman's seed. Scholars look at this as the first prophecy of Jesus' virgin birth because it refers to the woman's seed. This means that it does not come from a man but from a woman. This is known as the proto-evangelism. The first prophecy of the Good News. This was God's plan all along. So, we know from these scriptures that Mary was a virgin.

Let us look at Mary herself. What type of young woman was she? Notice how the angel addressed her.

**But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you
have found favor with God. Luke 1:30**

We know that Mary was a descendant of David. We also find that she was a devoted follower of God because she found favor in the sight of God. He chose her because of her devotion to him and

brought about the birth of Christ through her. What can we learn from Mary? What exactly did Mary do? Think about it for a minute. Mary gave birth and raised a son. She did not create a large ark at a time when God was going to bring a flood. She didn't build a gorgeous temple the way that Solomon did. She didn't rule a kingdom like David. She raised a son. She was the mother to Jesus.

Today, we look at raising children as a trivial issue. We treat it as something to be handed off to an organization such as a daycare so mothers can go and do something important. Or we think of it as not that big of a deal because everybody does it. One of the things that we can learn from Mary is there are no small tasks in the kingdom of God when we serve the Lord. Mary served God by being the vessel that brought Jesus into the world. She served God by raising Jesus as well. By changing his diaper. By making sure he was fed. She made sure he was clothed, felt loved and cared for, and was also given guidance. In fact, one of the things we discover about Mary is she took Jesus to the temple every year at Passover. Mary took her son, Jesus, to church.

We also learn Mary served God unquestioningly. When the angel Gabriel brought the news to her, notice her response. Was it, "Let me pray on it?" Or maybe, "Pastor, can I get back to you in about a week?" How about, "I'm sorry, Gabriel, that doesn't fit my lifestyle choice?"

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Luke 1:38

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. What would our lives be like if we said "Yes, Lord," when he came to us and said I want you to do this? You look at every major character within the scripture, such as Noah and Abraham. When God spoke to them,

they immediately obeyed. What would our lives be like if we immediately obeyed? Mary served God unquestioningly. I know she asked, how is this going to happen? But it wasn't from a standpoint of, I don't know if I really want to be involved with this. She just wanted to know its mechanics.

Sometimes, service requires sacrifice. How often have you turned down serving God because it would require a sacrifice on your part? Think about Mary. She is a young virgin. Suddenly, she shows up pregnant, and she's not married. What was her life like? We often talk about the sacrifice she had to make, but all through her life, there was sacrifice. Notice the prophecy of the sacrifice she would have to make.

Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." Luke 2:34-35

When we look at the characters of the Nativity, we see Joseph passed away before Jesus' ministry began. The shepherds shared what they were told about the story, and are never heard from again. The wise men who came to the birth are never seen again. The one character who is present throughout the Gospels is Mary.

Looking at the crucifixion in John, we find Mary.

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother. John 19:25

Mary was there at the crucifixion of her son. The sword pierced her own soul as Simeon prophesied. While Mary was willing to do whatever God asked her to do, and as she obeyed him and served

him all of her life, she came to this point, and she had to witness the crucifixion of her own son. Out of all of the ways to execute someone, crucifixion is the most gruesome, horrible method. And yet, she stood there and watched. As Mary stood there, she was the mother of Jesus, but she was also a sinner. While Mary was a very special individual, she was still just like the rest of us. As she stood there, she not only watched her son die, but she watched her Lord and Savior die as well. I think that Mary knew that Jesus died for her sins.

We looked at Matthew's genealogy of Christ, which follows the legal lineage through Joseph. Luke gives us the genealogy of Christ through the biological lineage of Mary. In Luke, we find Mary is a descendant of David. You see, you've got the father's lineage, which was the legal lineage and very important in the Jewish community, but you also have Mary's lineage.

Luke's genealogy has a different lineage until verse 31. It says, "The son of Nathan, the son of David." We see Mary's genealogy traced back to David because the Messiah has to be in line with David. We have the legal lineage of the adoptive father and the biological lineage of the birth mother, both of which lead back to the one ancestor, David.

Instead of stopping at Abraham, as Matthew did, Luke continues. It says the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, and then continues. There is a connection between the Christmas story and Genesis. Genesis is a crucial foundational document. Today, so many within the church are trying to throw out Genesis, yet everything here goes back to Genesis. Do we doubt that there was a man named Abraham who had a son named Isaac, who had a son named Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel? Do we believe those were historical

characters? Are these in the lineage from Mary to David historical characters? Yes. We have archeological confirmation. When we go from David back to Abraham, are these listed here as historical, actual people who lived? Did Abraham have a father? Is Terah a real historical person? If he is, then is his father Nahor? Do you see where I'm going with this? I'm going back to a man named Noah, who many say was a myth. Many in the church say Noah never existed. He passes over from one section of Genesis to another, supposedly. He passes from the historical section of Genesis, so they say, that starts in chapter twelve with Abraham, into what some want to call the mythological section of Genesis. That would mean that the genealogy of Christ suddenly vanishes into thin air, like a mist on an early morning, and ceases to be a real people. I bring this out because I want you to understand that it takes Jesus' lineage all the way to Adam. It treats Adam as a real historical person. An actual figure who lived and walked the earth. It is absolutely critical to the Christmas story that Adam was a real individual because, without Adam, there was no reason for Jesus to be born.

Paul tells us that Adam brought sin into the world.

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. 1 Corinthians 15:21-22

And death is the wages of sin.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23

The Bible tells us very plainly our sins separate us from God. Jesus was born on Christmas Day, that he might die on Good Friday for our sins and be resurrected on Easter Sunday. That's the true

meaning of Christmas. None of the garbage you hear on television, see in greeting cards or read in worldly books about Christmas. The actual reality of Christmas, the meaning of it, is that every one of us has been separated from God by our sins, and we can trace that sin back to Adam. Adam is treated as an actual, historical person who disobeyed God and brought sin and death into the world. But God loved us so much that he sent his son Jesus to be born on Christmas, live a sinless life, and die on the cross for our sins.

ANGELS AND SHEPHERDS THE MEANING OF THE MESSAGE

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” Luke 2:13-14

Little Billy was watching his mother prepare the Christmas dinner, and he was fascinated with all the preparations. He watched her as she took the ham and cut the end off before she put it in the oven. But he couldn't figure out why she cut the end off. He asked, “Mom, why do you cut that end off?”

She replied, “Well, I don't know. My mother always cut it off, so that's how I learned to do it.” This got her thinking, and she called her mother, “Mom, why did you always cut the end off of the ham?”

Mom said, “Well, I'll tell you, I don't know. My mother always did

it. Why don't we ask her when we all get together for our Christmas dinner?"

So, with the great-grandmother there, they said, "Mom, why did you cut that end off of the ham?"

She answered, "Oh, because my pan was too short." This just goes to illustrate how we can do things without realizing why we do them. We can forget the purpose. And that brings us to our Nativity. The purpose of the Nativity is to create visual storytelling. For a long time, humanity was illiterate and needed a visual image to remind us of all the elements of the story.

We've talked about Joseph being the forgotten character in the Nativity and Mary being the second most popular character in scripture. Then come the shepherds and the angels.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." Luke 2:8-14

We see the shepherds and angels. The shepherds have taken on a

specific role in our belief that Jesus was not born on December 25th. Have you ever heard that? All of my life, the sermons of Christmas seem always to start, “Now we know that Jesus was not born on December 25th. We don't know when he was born, but we know it was not December 25th.” I find that very interesting because the early church fathers believed that Jesus was born on December 25th. We blame it on the shepherds here because we say shepherds would not be out in the winter in the freezing cold taking care of sheep out in the pasture. Yet, that idea comes from England and New England in the United States. The idea is that we have a frigid December. I lived for a while in southern Alabama, down in Gulf Shores, Alabama. It just doesn't get that cold down there. Now, we had a fireplace. And when we wanted to have a fire for Christmas, we would turn the air conditioner on early in the day until it got cold enough in the house to light a fire. Then we would dress in shorts and T-shirts. Longitudinally, Bethlehem is about the same place as Gulf Shores, Alabama. When you look at the temperatures for Bethlehem in December, the lowest they get is the mid-40s. It is not that cold for the shepherds. Today, Bedouins keep their sheep out in the field at night in December. Do you know why? Because it's a lot of work and effort to haul food to animals held up in a pen or a barn. We would imagine that it would be even more difficult two thousand years ago. We must also remember that these individuals spend most of their time outside. Their Netflix didn't work back then. They didn't have televisions and central heating. The idea that we can use that to discount that Jesus was born on December 25th is ridiculous.

I'm not here to tell you that Jesus was definitely born on the 25th of December. The scripture doesn't give us a specific date. However, we can find historical markers that help us come to a conclusion.

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest

named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.

Luke 1:5

It starts with Zechariah. Luke records that he was of Abijah's division. That is not just trivial information. In First Chronicles 24, David sets up 24 divisions or courses of priests for service in the temple. Each course served for one week twice a year. Abijah's division is the eighth. Dr. Taylor Marshall places Zechariah's service in the last week of September based on the work of Josef Heinrich Friedlieb. For a long time, we did not know, in modern times, precisely what that schedule was. But in 1947, shepherds in Israel found the Dead Sea Scrolls. Within the Dead Sea Scrolls, we found the schedule for the courses of service and discovered that Zechariah served in the temple in September.

Elizabeth conceives at the end of Zechariah's service (end of September), and John the Baptist is born forty weeks later (near the end of June). The Church, Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern all celebrate the birth of John on June 24th. If John the Baptist were born on June 24th, then six months later, it would be December 25th.

The twenty-fifth of December was not chosen randomly; it is connected to the entire Liturgical Calendar because the dates align with scripture. It all starts in September. Notice the timeline for the following celebrations.

September 23	Conception of St John the Forerunner
March 25	Feast of the Annunciation (celebration of Gabriel's visit to Mary and the conception of Jesus)
June 24	Nativity of John the Baptist (celebration of the birth of John the Baptist)
December 25	Nativity of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ

(Christmas)

From September 23 to March 25, is six months. Gabriel said Elizabeth was six months pregnant when he came to Mary. September 23 to June 24 is nine months. That is, from conception to the birth of John the Baptist. From March 25 to December 25, it is nine months, from conception to the birth of Jesus Christ. Christmas was chosen to be December 25 because it is part of a more extensive system of dates. It had nothing to do with pagan holidays.

Bodie Hodge, a speaker, writer, and researcher for Answers in Genesis, concedes the possibility of December 25th as Christ's birthday in his article "The Origins of Christmas."

"Rosh Hashanah is celebrated on the first of Tishri, which is normally the seventh month (Leviticus 23:24) and is the start of the civil year. If this were the reference point for the news when the angel Gabriel met Mary, then the sixth month from this would have been the twelfth month on the normal Jewish calendar (or February/March), and if this were the case, then Jesus would have been born nine months later in November/December. So, it is not without biblical merit that December may have been the date of Christ's birth if we use Rosh Hashanah as the start of the new year."ⁱⁱ

Julius Africanus was a Christian historian who lived from 160 to 240. He influenced Eusebius (another Christian historian) and other early church historians. Julius believed that Jesus was conceived on March 25th, which would put his birth on December 25th. It was the year 220. So, less than 200 years after the resurrection, Christians believed Jesus was born on December 25th. At this time, Christianity was still outlawed in the Roman Empire. It would be almost one hundred years before Christianity was legal. It would be ridiculous for an illegal religion to try to replace a Roman holiday.

Augustine, an influential early Christian theologian from the fifth century, wrote, "For he [Jesus] is believed to have been conceived on the 25th of March, upon which day also he suffered; so the womb of the Virgin, in which he was conceived, where no one of mortals was begotten, corresponds to the new grave in which he was buried, wherein was never man laid, neither before him nor since. But he was born, according to tradition, upon December the 25th."

Historically, Jesus's birth on a day other than December 25th is a recent idea. It was assumed to be correct until a couple of hundred years ago. There seems to be more evidence in favor of December 25th than against it.

And so, I think the shepherds get a bad rap here when we say, well, you can't be born in December because of the shepherds. However, as we can see, the shepherds were out there and were not part of society's elite. Often, they had to desecrate the Sabbath because they had to work on the Sabbath to take care of the sheep. They were looked down upon. They were usually very young men caring for the sheep because they had no other skills. I want you to imagine what the situation would have been like. You're out in the middle of nowhere and do not have streetlights. It gets dark out there. They are probably huddled around a small fire. Maybe they are discussing what's happening in their community or playing a small musical instrument.

All of a sudden, an angel appears before them. Do you know what happens in Scripture whenever an angel appears? That's right. It's a terrifying experience. The angel says, "Hey, don't be afraid; I've got good news for you." This right here is the very core, I believe, of the Christmas message.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in

the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Luke 2:13-14

I believe this is the most misused phrase that has ever been written. Non-believers who want to try to leave God out of Christmas talk about peace on earth. If you watch shows, read stories, or listen to songs that are outside of the realm of Christianity, Christmas is some kind of magical time that brings peace to the earth. But do we have peace on earth right now? No. We have Russia invading Ukraine, Hamas attacking Israel, and Israel retaliating. We don't even have peace on earth in our own homes. Is that not true? We misunderstand this phrase, yet it is the key to understanding why we celebrate Christmas and making your celebration more exciting.

Why do you celebrate Christmas? Why do you get excited about It? Is it the gifts that you receive? What gives you the excitement within your celebration? It should be this phrase right here: peace on earth. Here is the problem: We think peace means the cessation of hostilities on this planet. You see, God isn't concerned with that because we face a bigger problem than whether or not war is happening. And it goes back to the book of Genesis.

God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the perfect garden. They were to live forever. There was no death. There was no sin. They were provided with everything they needed. The world was perfect at that point. Then, they ate the forbidden fruit, and as a result, their bodies began to die, and sin entered the world. Their children suffered the same fate, and their children's children, all the way up to us today, every one of us dies. The Bible tells us that death was not part of God's creation. Death is a result of sin. Death is the reminder that we are separated from God by our sins.

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and

sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.
Ephesians 2:1-3

By nature, we were objects of God's wrath because we were separated from God by our sins. The story of Christmas is not about a snowman that came to life when somebody put a hat on him. It's not about a reindeer with a red nose. It's not about the food, family, or gifts. It's about every person being separated from God. But God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, born on Christmas. He was born so that he could pay for my sins. Instead of being objects of God's wrath, Jesus brought peace between us and God. That is what "peace on earth, goodwill toward men" means. Christmas is a celebration of the peace I have with God because Jesus paid for my sins. Paul helps us understand this "peace on earth" in his letter to the Romans.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith,
we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.
Romans 5:1

That baby in the manger grew up, died for my sins, rose from the dead, and gave me peace with God. But because of his birth, death on the cross, and resurrection, I have peace with God. Right now! Amen. This is the Christmas gift you can have—the gift of peace with God.

THE WISEMEN A MYSTERY FOR THE AGES

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem. Matthew 2:1

We've talked about Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. We come now to the one element everybody says does not belong in the Nativity. But if the Nativity is a teaching tool telling the story of the birth of Christ, then they obviously need to be there, and that would be the wise men. I don't know about you, but the wise men were my favorite as a kid. Here's why.

We used to have little pageants with the children playing the varying parts. I always got the part of a shepherd. The shepherds had no lines, no sparkle, and no pizzazz. But the wise men were always dressed in the most elaborate costumes. Not too long ago, my family went to Gatlinburg for Christmas, and we went to Dolly Parton's Stampede show. They performed the story of Christmas and had the

wise men arrive in elaborate costumes. I always wanted to play one of the wise men, but I never got that part.

There is also an air of mystery about the wise men. They ride into the Christmas story and disappear as quickly as they come without another word. Because of this lack of information, many legends about their origin have arisen over the centuries. The Bible is the only reliable source of information. Despite the legends, we do not know their names or even how many wise men met the Christ child. And despite the Christmas carol about the three kings, we do not know whether they were royalty.

One of my greatest concerns is the illiteracy of the Bible that we have in America today. We don't know where to find important scripture, we don't know what it really says, and we are being taken in by people that will just say, well sure, that's in the Bible, the Bible says this, or the Bible says that, and they never use an actual verse. Whenever somebody comes to me with an outlandish idea, I first ask them, "Show me the verse." I want you to know where the verses are. The Christmas story is contained in the first two chapters of Luke and Matthew.

Let's look at the story that revolves around the wise men.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked

them where the Messiah 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 shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. Matthew 2:1-12

In modern translations like the NIV, they are referred to as Magi. The King James Version calls them wise men from another country. These are not Jews. This is the first encounter of Gentiles coming to worship the Messiah. They came to worship the king born because of the star they had seen.

Notice the gifts they brought to the newborn king. We recognize

gold, but we are unfamiliar with frankincense and myrrh. Yet, these were very familiar in biblical times. Some believe that the three gifts symbolize Jesus's threefold ministry. It is doubtful that the wise men selected these gifts for any symbolic meaning. These were common luxury items. We understand the various uses of gold. Frankincense and myrrh were used as perfumes and incense. They are found in the Song of Solomon as perfumes and in Esther as part of her beauty treatment before she was presented to the king. These passages show that the ancient world was familiar with them for centuries.

Who is this that cometh out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all powders of the merchant? Song of Solomon 3:6 (KJV)

Now when every maid's turn was come to go in to king Ahasuerus, after that she had been twelve months, according to the manner of the women, (for so were the days of their purifications accomplished, to wit, six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with sweet odours, and with other things for the purifying of the women;) Esther 2:12 (KJV)

While the wise men may not have meant any symbolism in selecting their gifts, there is symbolic meaning nonetheless. The first gift, gold, symbolizes Jesus' ministry as the king of kings. Gold is fit for royalty. It reminds us of the crowns on the heads of kings. Jesus is a king. He is the prophetic fulfillment of all the scriptures that say a descendent of David would sit on David's throne for eternity. In Revelation, when Jesus returns to defeat the Anti-Christ and his armies, we find the following,

On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written:

king of kings and lord of lords. Revelation 19:16

The second gift, frankincense, is a prescribed incense. It is a fragrant gum resin from *Boswellia* trees. It was used in the service of the Temple.

And he shall bring it to Aaron's sons the priests: and he shall take thereout his handful of the flour thereof, and of the oil thereof, with all the frankincense thereof; and the priest shall burn the memorial of it upon the altar, to be an offering made by fire, of a sweet savour unto the Lord: Leviticus 2:2 (KJV)

Modern translations do not use frankincense but incense instead because modern readers are unfamiliar with the word. Frankincense reminds us of Jesus' ministry as our high priest who intercedes for us.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. Hebrews 4:14

But because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Hebrews 7:23-25

The third gift, myrrh, was used in medicine and embalming because of its antibacterial qualities. It is a yellowish-brown to reddish-brown aromatic gum resin. Its fragrance made it a perfume. We find myrrh listed in Exodus 30 as an ingredient in a sacred anointing oil. However, the symbolic meaning rests in Jesus' ministry of sacrifice because it was explicitly used in his embalming.

And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came

to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. John 19:39 (KJV)

I want to address a couple of things I have heard over the years that I think are completely wrong. The first is how we view when the wise men arrive at the house where the baby is staying. For over half a century, I've been listening to preachers, seminary professors, Sunday School teachers, atheists, and general acquaintances tell me every Christmas that the wise men do not belong in the manger scene because they didn't arrive until two years after his birth. I believed what I was told for years because they were the experts. But then I began researching Christmas.

We base our 'two years after the birth' theory on one piece of evidence.

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Matthew 2:16

Herod was a ruthless king who would think it nothing to add extra time to the age of the children he was going to kill just to make sure he killed anyone who might gain power and take his position. Also, Herod may have assumed that the star appeared at the birth of Jesus. Since conception is a biblically important event, the star may have appeared nine months earlier than Herod expected, throwing off his estimation of the child's age by almost a year. We have based this theory on the flimsiest evidence and completely ignored the harmonized timeline of Luke's account and Matthew's account of the events surrounding the birth. This theory requires the family to stay

in Bethlehem for two years. But the Bible says explicitly they stayed only forty days.

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. Luke 2:22, 39

Joseph and Mary took Jesus from Bethlehem to Jerusalem after “the time came for the purification rites.” We find in Leviticus 12:1-4, 6 that the purification rites would be performed forty days after birth. Then they returned to Nazareth, not Bethlehem. If they returned to Nazareth forty days after the birth, how could the wise men visit them in Bethlehem two years later?

You may ask, “How long did it take the wise men to travel to Jerusalem?” Since we believe they came from Persia, we can read scripture to find out.

He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the gracious hand of his God was on him. Ezra 7:9

Ezra made the trip from Babylon to Jerusalem in four months. Travel did not change much from Ezra’s time to the birth of Christ, so we can estimate that the wise men took about four months to make the trip. If the star appeared at his conception, they had plenty of time to plan the trip, travel to Jerusalem, and then to Bethlehem soon after the birth.

The second mistake I feel we make involves our view of the star. When we read the Bible, we are reading it from our perspective, the perspective of a science-driven culture, a culture that deals in exactness. We are a culture that deals with details, and we have come to a much more fluid culture, the Jewish culture of the ancient East. And as we come to that, we tend to be blinded. It's like we're like a horse with blinders on.

We have a virgin who has conceived a child and given birth. Do you know how many times in human history that has happened? Once. It was a supernatural event. We have an angel who announced to Mary that she is going to get pregnant without sexual contact. Another supernatural event. That angel also appeared to Zachariah to announce they would have a child they named John the Baptist—another supernatural event. Then suddenly, at the birth of Mary's child, angels appeared to shepherds to announce this birth—another supernatural event.

And then we have these wise men. All of that is supernatural. So naturally, when we come to the star, we try to figure out if we can find an astronomical event using science that could account for a star that would appear, announce the birth of Christ, and then somehow guide the wise men to one specific house. I do not believe that this star is an astronomical event that occurred in history. I believe that it is a supernatural event because everything surrounding the birth of Christ was supernatural. Why would it be a natural star? We find out that in Job, God said,

“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?
Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions?
Surely you know!

Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what

were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? Job 38:4-7

There is a connection between stars and angels within Scripture. In the first chapter of Revelation, we find a connection between stars and supernatural beings.

The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches.
Revelation 1:20

Revelation shows a great drama played out in the skies.

Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. Revelation 12:3-4

The stars are referring to angels. We're dealing with a rebellion that occurred in heaven with the angels. We see a connection between angels and stars. I do not believe it was an astronomical event. I believe it was an angelic event, and its purpose was to announce the coming of Christ and guide the wise men to the house.

Who were these wise men? For years, I never really knew. They were just this mysterious group that emerged from the mist of history and then faded into the fog. But this isn't where we first encountered the wise men. In the second chapter of the book of Daniel, Daniel experiences the wrath of King Nebuchadnezzar. The king had a dream. And he wants to have it interpreted. None of the wise men could do it. As a result, the king was going to kill them all. Daniel said, "Wait, let me pray, let us fast, and see if God will give me the interpretation." God did. He not only gave the interpretation but also showed Daniel the dream. As a reward, the king placed Daniel in a

high position and lavished many gifts. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of its wise men.

This was a time in history that we would not call a scientific age. It was a time of magicians, astrologers, and astronomers. They watched the skies, looking for signs. Daniel was in charge of the wise men. Now we know why the wise men came. They came because of a prophecy. They said that we saw his star in the east. How did they know to go to Israel when they saw that star? Have you ever wondered that? There had to be a prophecy, but no prophecy is mentioned in Matthew. Daniel had a lot of prophecies. One prophecy in particular would let the wise men begin looking for a sign in the sky, a new star.

Daniel had been praying. God had prophesied that Israel would be in captivity for seventy years. That time was about up. Daniel was an old man trying to figure out why the Babylon captives weren't returning to Israel. He prayed to God, "Give me wisdom. Help me to understand this." God sent Gabriel, the same angel that went to Mary. This is what Gabriel said.

Therefore, consider the word and understand the vision:

"Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy Place.

"Know and understand this: From the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' It will be rebuilt with

streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be put to death and will have nothing. Daniel 9:24-26

Gabriel is saying there will come a time when there will be a decree that will be sent out by a king for Jerusalem to be rebuilt. When that decree goes out, it will start a prophetic clock. That prophetic clock will go for sixty-nine 'sevens' or traditionally weeks. Each week represents seven years. That comes out to 483 years. That clock will count down until the death of the anointed one, which is another word for Messiah. And that is how the wise men understood when to look for that star.

The wise men came from a country known as Persia. Today, we call it Iran. Hundreds of years before their journey to Jerusalem, they were placed under the management of Daniel. Daniel trained them in the prophecy of Israel. They knew it was coming close to the time when the Messiah would be killed because of this prophecy. So they knew they needed to be looking for a baby to be born. And when that star appeared, they knew what it was for. It is fascinating to see how all of this came about.

Daniel prophesied the death of the Messiah, which honestly wasn't seen by the ancient leaders of Israel. They didn't want to think about their Messiah dying. They didn't fully understand what his first coming was all about. They confused the first coming with prophecies about the second coming, and they're entirely different. The first coming had a specific purpose. The second coming has another purpose. The first coming was for Jesus to be born in a manger, live a sinless life, and die on the cross to take care of our sin problem because the story of Christmas does not begin in Matthew chapter one. It starts in Genesis chapter three. Adam and Eve

disobeyed God, and as a result, they brought sin and death into the world. That is the problem that has plagued mankind throughout the centuries. God created you specifically to have a relationship with you but your sin prevents that. That's the beauty of Christmas. Jesus was born to die on the cross for us to take our punishment for our sins so that we can be reconciled with God.

BABY JESUS INFANT CREATOR

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. Luke 2:7

While living in Seattle, my wife and I decided to take our kids to California. Deb is from California and wanted to show them some places she enjoyed visiting growing up. One was the great sequoia trees. Those giant trees are so large that they cut a tunnel through one, and you drive your car through it. We did that. They called it the tunnel tree. They cut this tunnel in the 1800s, and we drove through it. Then, in 2017, it fell over in a storm. They discovered that the tree's root system had decayed and no longer had the strength to stand.

Roots are vital. We can observe this in our families. I remember having Christmases when I had a great-grandmother, great-aunts, great-uncles, and second and third cousins. Roots are essential in our

family but also important in Christianity. I believe the most significant problem Christianity is facing today is that we have lost our roots.

Of all of the Christmas decorations, two seem to have survived for centuries. One of them is the Nativity. The other is the Christmas tree. The Christmas tree and the Nativity still seem to be around, and there is a connection. I believe it is a lesson for us today. When I was a child, my grandfather would find an old cedar tree, cut it down, bring it home, and decorate it. That tree was good for a couple of weeks, but then you had to remove it from the house because it would shed needles. Why did that tree die? The tree died because it had been cut off from the roots. That's the connection between the Christmas tree and our Nativity. Our nativity has been cut off from its roots, and we have lost the true meaning of Christmas.

We have not only separated Christmas from Jesus, but we have separated it from the larger story. We have been Rethinking the Nativity. We have looked at Joseph, the forgotten character within the Nativity. We looked at Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her devotion to God. We looked at the shepherds and the message of the angels. We looked at the wise men and what part they played. But did you know that you can take every one of those characters out of the Nativity and not lose the central story of what it stands for?

Saint Francis of Assisi created the Nativity scene 800 years ago, in 1223. But his Nativity consisted solely of a manger—nothing else. There was no Mary, Joseph, or shepherds. It was exclusively a manger because Francis' primary purpose was to help his congregants focus on the central reason for celebrating Christmas.

Here's a quick fact for you. Did you know that throughout the centuries, there have been times when celebrating Christmas was

illegal? No, I'm not talking about the time of Roman persecution. I'm talking about the Middle Ages when government officials would decide that Christmas had become a drunken brawl instead of a remembrance of the birth of Christ.

For years, the world has tried to break apart the Nativity—to break off its branches, so to speak. However, the greatest problem is when it attacks the roots. You see, the Nativity is not just about the birth of Jesus but about the Gospel. Let's look at the heart of the Christmas story.

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn... And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. Luke 2:1-7, 10-11 (KJV)

I have used the King James Version because it is the most familiar. A Savior was born. That's the real central meaning of

Christmas. We have looked at every other element of the Nativity, and now we will look at that babe in the manger, the infant who was born. We must understand that this is not just an infant. This was a miraculous event. This was an intervention. God broke into the natural order of things to bring “good news to all people.” I love the way that's phrased because if you know anything about Scripture, especially of the New Testament, you know the Jews did not believe the Gentiles would ever be saved. You go through the book of Acts, and you can understand just how difficult it was for the Gentiles to be accepted into the early church by the Jews. In the book of Galatians, we see how the Jews reacted to the introduction of Gentiles into Christianity.

But the angels said it's for all people, not just for the Jews. Do you know why? Jesus explains it in John when He said, “For God so loved the world.” Not just a particular section of people but everybody.

Matthew and Luke begin their Gospels with the birth of Christ, but John took a different approach. Instead of going to the birth of Christ, John explains why he's writing his book. He puts forth a premise and then offers proof that it is true. We see his premise in the first few verses.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. John 1:1-4

When John talks about the Word, he is talking about Jesus. Jesus is the Word. He uses the familiar phrase “In the beginning” because he ties his premise to the first verse of Genesis. He wants us to

understand that Jesus did not come into being 2,000 years ago, but he has always existed. The phrase “In the beginning” means before anything was created, Jesus existed. And not only did he exist, but he was with God. But wait a minute; he was not only with God but was actually God. And he's going to take this a little bit further. John writes, through Him, through Jesus, all things were made. Without Him, nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life. And that life was the light of mankind. We often read those words and don't understand their depth and meaning. Jesus is the one who created all things. Now we know the verse “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” from Genesis. But the reality is that the Hebrew word for God is plural. It is connected with the verb to create, which is singular in Hebrew. This two-word phrase is a plurality in one. We call it the Trinity. And while God the Father spoke, God the Son, Jesus, did the creating.

When this infant in the cradle was born on Christmas, it was not just a baby but the Creator of everything that existed. Every atom, every molecule, every proton, electron, or neutron was created by Jesus. That Creator, the One who is outside of creation and who has created everything, came into human flesh as a tiny baby—laying in a manger. And while we may think that is the larger story of Christmas, there's still more to it than just that. Because while Jesus came in the flesh, and the Old Testament tells us that He would be called Emmanuel, meaning God with us, we still haven't fully grasped how deep Christmas's roots go.

So many churches have strayed from the roots of the gospel. For over a century, they have preached an abbreviated gospel. They have cut the roots off it. Because the culture was steeped in the roots of the gospel, the church continued to thrive for a few generations like a Christmas tree set in a living room, all decorated, and everything

looked great. But we have reached a point where generations are disconnected from the roots. So, they ask, “Why is Christmas relevant to me?”

We love to use the Roman Road method of witnessing. Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 6:23, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” What that tells us is that every one of us is a sinner, and every one of us dies because of our sins. But we are still missing the context. How did we become sinners?

Paul gives us that context in Romans 5:12, “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way, death came to all people because all sinned.” Are you beginning to see the roots? “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man,” who was that man that sin entered the world through? Do you understand the context here yet? Do you see that the Creator who was born into that tiny little body laid in a manger was the Creator of everything? And when He created everything, He created a perfect world with no sin or death. That's the context.

“Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man.” Who was that one man? Everyone today is connected to that first sin. Paul gives us more context in his discourse on the resurrection.

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the

Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. 1 Corinthians 15:1-4

Paul gives us the roots of the gospel.

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. 1 Corinthians 15:21-22

Paul reveals here who that man was who brought death into the world, "For as in Adam all die." And he's connecting Adam as a real person to Christ, who was a real person. Do you see the roots we have cut off from the Gospel and Christmas? We have cut off the context of where sin came from. Where did death come from in our world? Has it always existed? Did God create our world full of death? Did He create our world full of sin? Is that the world that He created? No. God said of his creation that it was very good. It wasn't until chapter three of Genesis that Adam and Eve disobeyed God. But today, we have made Adam and Eve fictional, mythical characters. We don't believe they existed because we listen to pseudoscience, which tells us everything has evolved. There is no room for Adam.

Let me ask you this question. What evidence is there that the earth evolved? What evidence is there that evolution is true? Some will say it's the fossil record. But the truth is that the fossil record is simply a graveyard of fully developed creatures and shows no proof of simple creatures evolving into complex ones. Today, we know that fossils are no longer just rocks. They are pieces of the dead animals. Encased within that rock structure of the fossil, scientists have discovered that the majority of the fossils have soft tissue inside that could only exist for a few thousand years.

Looking at evolution, we find the entire theory comes from man's imagination. If you look at the history of the rise of the evolution theory, you see it was created intentionally to destroy the roots of the gospel. You can go back to the writers who started it and read of their disdain for Christianityⁱⁱⁱ. There is one in this world who does not want the full story of Christmas known. He does not want the Gospel to be shared. He wants to destroy it.

You see, Jesus is the one who created everything that existed. He is the one who created it perfectly. And yet Adam and Eve sinned against God. They broke God's law. As a result, sin entered into the world, and the death process began in them. We find out sin continued in the next generation when Cain killed Abel. As we go through Genesis, we see every generation after Adam and Eve sinned. That sin and death continue today. We have a sin problem. On Christmas Day, the Creator of everything was born in a manger. Not a palace. Not the luxurious accommodations we have today, but in a feeding trough for animals. He grew up and willingly went to the cross to die for our sins. He died for the sins of the whole world; the Creator of everything willingly laid down his life to pay the penalty for our sins because he loved us so much. Then, he rose from the dead to prove that he was God. He conquered death and the grave because he loves you. That is God's Christmas gift to you. There's only one way to receive that Christmas gift: believe in your heart and confess with your mouth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Jeffery Elliott, originally from Clarksville, Tennessee is married to his college sweetheart with two grown daughters. He earned his BSEE from Tennessee Technological University and worked as an Electrical Engineer for twenty years. Dr. Elliott has worked in the Dallas, Texas area, Rockford, Illinois, and Seattle, Washington area for such companies as Texas Instruments, Sundstrand, Boeing, Allied Signal, and Honeywell.

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“I am very concerned by the biblical illiteracy in America, even in our churches. So many reject Jesus based on a false image created by academia and popular media, never knowing the real Jesus. I write to help introduce people to the real Jesus of the Bible.”

Dr. Elliott is available to speak at your church or event. You may contact him at RevJDElliott@gmail.com

ⁱ Biblical Archeological Society “Christmas Stories in Christian Apocrypha” www.biblicalarchaeology.org
https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/bible-interpretation/christmas-stories-in-christian-apocrypha/?mqsc=E3924907&utm_source=WhatCountsEmail&utm_medium=BHDDaily%20Newsletter&utm_campaign=ZE7ADMZ02 (accessed April 24, 2024).

ⁱⁱ Hodge, Bodie. “The Origin of Christmas” answersingenesis.org.
<https://answersingenesis.org/holidays/christmas/the-origin-of-christmas/> (accessed November 2, 2017).

ⁱⁱⁱ See the Long War Against God by Henry Morris.