

## Questions About the Birth of Jesus – Part 2

by Dr. John Ankerberg

We've been asking historians and archaeologists, "Is the Jesus of history the same as the Jesus of the Christian faith?" What can we really know about Him? A few years ago these questions captured the attention of ABC, resulting in a two-hour program entitled, "The Search for Jesus," hosted by Peter Jennings.

Many of the conclusions given about Jesus in the ABC Special didn't seem to ring true, so we decided to check with several well-known scholars and ask them for a second opinion. In this article, they will respond to some of the questions raised about Jesus' birth. Peter Jennings stated, "On the question of where Jesus was born, only two Gospels even talk about it, and they tell it differently." But this is not true. Matthew states: "Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king." Luke writes: "Joseph also went up from Galilee from the city of Nazareth to Judea to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem," and then he tells us this is where Mary gave birth to her firstborn son. In light of these clear statements, one can't help but wonder what motivates modern scholars to question the fact that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. We talked about this with Dr. Ben Witherington, Professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminar. He is the author of the highly acclaimed book, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*.

**Dr. Ben Witherington:** What they want to do is, they want to stress the differences in such a way that it then warrants the conclusion that "since the birth narratives are sort of riddled with contradictions, then you know, we can assume that the rest of the stories that come after that have to be very critically scrutinized, and there's only going to be a distinct minority of that evidence that could possibly be historically veracious". It sort of sets them up for a way of coming to the conclusion that only a distinct minority of the rest of the tradition is trustworthy.

Some of the other scholars say that the disciples, because they were Christians, just padded the case. Therefore the historical Jesus is different again from the Jesus of faith, because they just went on and made it up to talk about their own experience and to kind of impress the crowd. It was almost like an evangelistic tool to bring people in. What would you say to that?

**Dr. Ben Witherington:** Well, I would say that it takes, and it did take, in the first century A.D. a great deal of courage to be a Christian, and to claim that a

crucified manual worker named Jesus from Nazareth, against all expectations, turned out to be the savior of the world, now this is a fantastic claim. Early Jews were not looking for a crucified Messiah, so far as we can say. Greco-Roman persons were certainly not looking for a crucified manual worker being their Messiah. So here we have these people, evangelizing the world and claiming this is the truth that you need to know about: Jesus died and rose again, and this demonstrates who he is. It takes an awful lot of guts to put that message out there. Now you can say an awful lot about what people are willing to live for, but what people are actually willing to die for is another question. These early Christians were prepared to die for an honest testimony about those facts. It's hardly likely that these are things that they would make up about Jesus.

### **Does the Jesus Seminar speak for Evangelical scholars?**

You may have picked up a newspaper and read the opinions of a group of scholars referred to as the Jesus Seminar. Well, many people assume that the opinions of this group represent what most scholars think about Jesus. We decided to ask our scholars how Evangelical scholars from around the world evaluated the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar. What they said might surprise you.

**Dr. Craig Evans:** The opinion is not very good, to put it mildly. Continental scholarship, they either haven't heard of the Jesus Seminar or if they have, they dismiss it derisively. British scholarship, it's just the same way. "The Jesus Seminar! Oh, you must be kidding. Does anybody take them seriously?" That's the European response. I've seen that firsthand.

**Dr. N. T. Wright:** Those conclusions represent one section of American scholarship. It's not even all American mainstream American scholarship. And here in Britain and in Europe most of the scholars who are working on the Gospels and so on frankly wouldn't give that stuff the time of day. My guess is that most British, French, Belgian, German scholars today, if they have heard of the Jesus Seminar, would simply say, "Well, I'm afraid that's some funny people in America and we're carrying on with our scholarship and we're not going to bother about that."

What about in scholarly circles in our own country? When you go to your meetings with the other scholars, do they lead the way?

**Dr. Craig Evans:** No, they do not. They try to be influential and they've had positions of leadership at the Society of Biblical Literature. I'm an active member of the Historical Jesus section of the Society of Biblical Literature. Three to four hundred typically show up typically at their meetings. That's about ten times what typically show up at a Jesus Seminar meeting. And the Jesus Seminar guys, when they present their distinctive views like a non-eschatological Jesus or the Gospel of Peter as a primary source for the other Gospels, those views are simply—to put it in slang—blown out of the water. These are minority opinions and they do not hold sway in the larger cross-section of Gospel scholars throughout North America.

### **Was Jesus born in Bethlehem?**

Christians all across the world look to Bethlehem as the place where Jesus was born. But in the ABC Special, Peter Jennings visited the Church of the Nativity in

Bethlehem and said that this sanctuary revealed a lot about the enthusiasm of fourth century Christians but not very much about the life of Jesus. We talked with Jewish archaeologist Dr. Gabriel Barkay, who was recently awarded the prize for archaeology in Israel, and asked what scholars have discovered about this site.

**Dr. Gabriel Barkay:** Following the Six Days War some archeologists have studied the site of the Church of Nativity and found out that it is right on top of the ancient mound or ancient tel of early Bethlehem. Bethlehem of First Temple Period of the Davidic Dynasty's time, and Bethlehem of the time of Jesus was built right on the site where today the complex of the Church of Nativity is built. Excavations by the Italian scholar, the late Father Bellarmino Bagatti revealed under the complex of the church a series of caves. Most of the caves were dwellings of antiquity. So it is very much plausible that we deal in the case of the Church of Nativity where the real site existed in the time of Jesus.

Now, if you enter into the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the guide will take you down some stairs and show you a cave. Archaeologists have discovered that at the time of Jesus, people in Bethlehem built their houses to make provision for the occasional guest. Most homes were multi-leveled. They had a lower room or cellar that was usually used as a storeroom. In areas like Bethlehem, where there were caves, a cave beneath the house or in back of the house would be used as a storeroom for food or supplies. It could also be a place where the family animals would be fed and sheltered at night, protected from the cold, thieves and predators.

When Joseph and his pregnant wife, Mary, made the journey to Bethlehem, they were returning to his ancestral home, the place from which his family originated and where undoubtedly some relatives still lived.

In Jewish society in Jesus' day, the family was made up of an extended group of people with a patriarch at the head. Married children and their children usually lived with or near the father and mother. Relatives from other towns were welcomed by the patriarch and brought under his protection during their stay in his village.

In a wealthier home, a third room or even a fourth room would be added for guests and for entertaining. The word for "guestroom" is the Greek word *kataluma*. It is also sometimes translated "inn." Luke used this word in the Christmas Story in Chapter 2 when he wrote: "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 *kataluma* – the guestroom, the inn." Here, Luke is probably referring to the third room, the guestroom, in the family home in Bethlehem.

*Kataluma* is the same word used by Luke in chapter 22 to refer to the upper room where Jesus had the Last Supper. It, too, was a guestroom in a home. Luke uses a different word in the Parable of the Good Samaritan to describe the inn where the Good Samaritan took the man who was robbed. These facts may shed new light on the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth.

**Dr. Stephen Pfann:** In ancient villages, as in villages just before the modern time, they were made up of two or three major patriarchal families. And generally, with each one of the homes associated with a patriarch, there would be a guestroom. And this guestroom would be reserved for people coming in, friends

of the family, people from outside. And it would be the good pleasure of the patriarch or leader of the family, to be able to be the host to these guests. And in the case of Jesus and his birth, we find that Mary and Joseph end up coming and finding that there is no room in the inn, according to Roman standards, if you had a Roman city, but in a village what you have are guestrooms in patriarchal homes.

When Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, most likely Joseph went straight to his paternal home and stayed in the guestroom. Jewish custom would have demanded that he receive protection and help for himself and especially his wife Mary who was pregnant. Some time passed while they were staying with his family, and then it came time for Mary to be delivered. But Bethlehem, like Joseph's family guestroom, would have been filled with families and relatives returning for the Census. In Joseph's father's house there would have been no private place for Mary to have her baby because the guestroom was filled with relatives. There would be no private place until someone had the bright and compassionate idea to suggest that she could have the baby down below, away from the crowded *kataluma*, the guestroom, in the warmth of the storeroom and animal cellar. There she could have privacy but still be within the security of the family home.

So Jesus was safely born in the city of David as the angels told the shepherds in Luke 2:11 and laid in a manger or feeding trough for the animals. That a child should be found lying in a manger was unique, and yet it may have reflected, not a situation of abandonment and isolation, but one of compassion and protection and of the order of family life in traditional Jewish society of the first century. It is also interesting to note that the traditional site of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is in the middle of the city where the family homes would have stood in antiquity and not in the surrounding countryside.

**Dr. Claire Pfann:** We sometimes read Luke and we picture Joseph and Mary traveling in the rain on a cold December night. And Mary is in labor, in pain, about to deliver this baby and Joseph frantically walks from door to door knocking on the Motel 6's of Bethlehem—which there weren't any, of course—trying to find accommodations. But actually, if we really read what Luke has to say, he says they went to Bethlehem, which was Joseph's ancestral home. That means they had extended family there. They were going to a place where they were known and loved, and where they would receive hospitality. It also says in the Gospel of Luke, "While they were there the time came for her to be delivered." Now, that's a non-specific amount of time. How long were they there before the baby was born? Two days? Two weeks? Two months? It could have been three or four or five months. We really don't know. So the picture of them being in a familial setting, surrounded by people who they might know, and that might help with the delivery, is actually supported by both Luke and by Matthew.

So there are four historical and archaeological facts that mark the place where Jesus was born. First, archaeology has shown that the Church of the Nativity was built on the area of the Bethlehem of Jesus' day. Second, the Church sits on the top of a hill where typically patriarchal homes were built. Third, there is a cave underneath the Church of the Nativity which usually would have been used as a storeroom

or a place to keep the animals. And fourth, tradition points to a cave in Bethlehem as being the very place where Jesus was born.

**Dr. Stephen Pfann:** The tradition of a site, like a birth site, like Bethlehem is actually strengthened by the fact that the earliest record that we have of the tradition of Jesus' birthplace goes back to Justin Martyr, who 15-20 years after Bethlehem was totally destroyed by Roman armies, said that the pilgrims came to visit a cave, a *cavea*. We go there today, it's at the top of a hill, which is just where a patriarchal home would be built—on top of a hill. And patriarchal homes are kept for many generations, and kept within the family. So the tradition of Jesus' birthplace there in the middle of the second century, is actually extremely close to the time when those homes were still in existence in Bethlehem. So knowing that Jesus was born there, that his family's patriarchal home would have persisted there until their destruction around 137 AD, and then just 15 or 20 years later Justin Martyr saying that that's where people commemorated his birth, actually brings it into the category of probably being the place where Jesus was born.

**Dr. Randall Price:** Now we find also that when you go back to the history books and look at Paulinus of Nola, he notes that Hadrian who was the Roman emperor from around 117 to 138 AD built a sacred grove to Adonis over the site of Jesus birth to efface Christianity. And this was the very purpose of Roman religion to supersede previous religion. So indeed they recognized already that something very dramatic in the case of Christianity had occurred at that spot. And then we have at the beginning of the 4th Century, Helena the mother of Constantine, coming to identify the spot that tradition says Jesus was born, and she identifies that place today as the Church of Nativity built on the foundations that she laid. Then in 385 AD St. Jerome comes to that spot to be there to translate the Vulgate and yet he says already in the time of his arrival it's the most venerable spot on earth. So these things together point to the fact that from earliest antiquity, Bethlehem was the one place noted in the Christian world as the birthplace of Jesus.

Now, if one follows the logic of the critics who say the events surrounding the birth of Jesus were created by the church after Christ lived and the story of Bethlehem was simply fabricated, then if this story was made up, there should also have been other competing stories that were made up about the place where Jesus was born. But that's not the case. I asked Dr. Pfann, in terms of Bethlehem again, were there any other spots, geographical spots, that tradition grew up around that Jesus was born there, or is it only this spot?

**Dr. Stephen Pfann:** There's only one tradition concerning Jesus' birthplace, and that's Bethlehem. Just as every science has to have some kind of a gradient in terms of credibility on any subject, as archaeologist we also have to create a gradient which we can use against the evidence that we have. And I've been working with an A B C D rating, a four-step rating for credibility. "A" would be that it's certain, "B" is probable, "C" is plausible, and "D" is rumor or speculation. Now it all depends upon what kind of facts you have on the ground.

And only the most certain types of facts is that something is still in existence there with an inscription or something of this sort that actually helps you to understand that this is really certainly the place. Probable means that you have

all kinds of corroborative evidence from archaeology, from the literature, methodographic studies, that would maintain something being probably the way that it was. Then it goes down the line that way as the evidence becomes weaker and weaker.

I would say that at this point, in terms of all that we know about traditional sites, that [Bethlehem] is probably the place where Jesus was born.

**Dr. Claire Pfann:** The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem has strong evidence to support it as being the place of the birth of Jesus. Certainly, the church lies on the heart of ancient first century Bethlehem, that small Jewish village of extended patriarchal homes. And if we look at the archaeology of that type of hillside, terraced homes with courtyards, cave basements, and sleeping units attached, we would see, if we could just lift that church off, the kind of archaeological pattern that would characterize Bethlehem in the first century. Tradition has held it as the birthplace of Jesus for all these centuries, a tradition that was probably kept alive by the Jewish Christians in the land from the time of the Resurrection of Jesus as they searched back into His origins.

### **Some corrections to Christmas traditions**

Now, in the Christmas Story, there are some things that have been embellished by tradition that need to be corrected to stay true to the facts.

**Dr. Edwin Yamauchi:** Well, first of all we have to dispense with certain popular Christmas ideas about the Magi from the crèches and Christmas cards and Christmas carols. First of all, the New Testament text does not call them kings; it does not tell us that there were three, but that's an inference from the fact that there were three gifts. And the Magi were not necessarily wise men. The word Magi is the Greek plural of the word *Magos* and originally this was a Persian word. And in the Persian tradition, Herodotus, the Greek historian, tells us in the fifth century that these were the Medes who served as priests and diviners for the Persians. But by the fourth century in the Hellenistic period the word had come to mean astrologer. There is a very strong tradition of astrology as a science that developed out of Mesopotamia and this was then transmitted to the West to the Greeks, the Romans, and the Jews.

There are some modern scholars who have claimed that the Magi are fictional characters created by Luke and added to enhance the Christmas story. But Dr. Yamauchi says there are good reasons for believing they were real people. Why? Because as was just pointed out, the Magi were astrologers and astrology was condemned by Moses in the Old Testament Law. Therefore, it would not have enhanced the story of Jesus' birth but been embarrassing to the early Christians to include the Magi. So why did Luke do so?

**Dr. Edwin Yamauchi:** Well, we believe, or I believe, that this occurred. It's not a Midrash, as some scholars suggest, but something which actually happened and which is a wonderful anticipation of Gentiles being brought into the Kingdom of God. And the irony is, of course, that these Gentiles from the East, by perhaps a misguided sense of astrology, nonetheless thought that something wonderful was happening in Judea, that a King was being born who was to be worshipped with gifts, were willing, under limited knowledge, to take action and to bow down

to this newborn baby, when Herod the Great, who had his scholars advise him of the prophecy of Micah that the Messiah was going to be born in Bethlehem, didn't move a foot or half a yard to do anything about this. Rather, he wanted to kill this infant born in Bethlehem.

Contrary to the conclusions Peter Jennings gave in the ABC Special, there is a lot of historical and archaeological evidence that undergirds and validates the information given in the Gospels about what happened when Jesus was born.