

The Characters, Chronology, and Critters of Christmas

Jack Hughes

December 23, 2007

[I'm] back from Russia, [and] I only preached about fifty hours in six days—no biggie. So, you don't have to be scared this morning—it's when I go away and I *don't* preach that it gets scary.

I'd ask you to turn in your Bibles someplace, but we're going to be all over the place. You could put a marker in Matthew 2 and Luke 2 because we're going to kind of switch around between those two places.

One of the tricky things of being in the ministry [for] a long time is [that] Christmas happens every year, but there [are] only so many Christmas texts. You preach through Matthew, you preach through Luke, you preach through Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6 and Micah 5:2, and then you start getting creative. You start looking for *any* verse in the Bible that talks about Jesus' birth, and you start going through the epistles and finding little fragment texts that kind of talk about Jesus' birth or [His] being born. Then pretty soon you end up in Revelation talking about dragons trying to eat children. (I think that was two years ago.¹ Somebody brought up [his] child's picture of the sermon, which showed this big dragon trying to eat this baby, and I said, "Well, [he] must have been listening.")

¹This sermon is available at:

<http://www.calvarybiblechurch.org/Sermons.aspx/audio/sermon/2004/20041219>

We're eventually going to have to go back and start over, but this morning we're going to do an overarching survey of the whole Christmas story. This is not going to be your typical exposition of a text, but I think it would be helpful to survey the whole picture of what the Bible says and then emphasize the big idea of Christmas as a whole. In the process of that, [I will] debunk a lot of the myths and fictions that have arisen around the Christmas story. So that's what we're going to try to do this morning.

There are all sorts of [Christmas] songs out there. That's where most of the myths come from: songs like "Frosty the Snowman," "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," and "Here Comes Santa [Claus]." [These] are all cute little Christmas songs that everybody hears every Christmas. I'm not worried about those songs really corrupting you. Most of you will escape those kinds of songs altogether. But then there are songs like "The Christmas Song":

Chestnuts roasting on an open fire,
Jack Frost nipping at your nose,
Yuletide carols being sung by a choir,
And folks dressed up like Eskimos.²

It kind of lulls you into a happy Christmas stupor. The song goes on to weave in a little Santa, flying reindeer, toys for good little boys and girls, and the true meaning of Christmas is never mentioned.

There are other songs, like "Winter Wonderland," "White Christmas," and "I'll Be Home for Christmas," which all talk about good Christmas feelings, memories, and happy times of generic Christmas cheer, but never mention the true meaning of Christmas. Still other songs promote innocuous, happy times—"Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," "Happy Holidays," "We Wish You a Merry Christmas." All these songs are songs atheists sing. They're songs written to *hide* the true meaning of Christmas. They

²Lyrics taken from:

http://www.allchristmaslyrics.com/chestnuts_roasting_on_an_open_fire_lyrics.htm

never tell us anything about Christmas. An atheist can sing these because the atheist doesn't want to think about this virgin conceiving and giving birth to the Son of God, who lived a perfect life, died on the cross for our sins, was buried and rose again on the third day, and is coming back to judge atheists. They don't want to think about that. Who wants to sing about that? That would ruin their Christmas. There [are] a lot of songs that have arisen that are really atheist Christmas songs. Now, if you're a Christian, it doesn't mean you can't sing these songs, or [that] it's a sin to sing these songs. [However], it becomes sinful when we miss the meaning of Christmas, when we think about Christmas as "walking in a winter wonderland," and there's no Jesus there.

There are still other songs, like "O Christmas Tree," which is a song of praise and adoration *to a tree*. There's a name for that in the Bible. [In the song] you talk about how faithful that tree is, how unchanging that tree is, how the tree sings to us, and does things for us. It's almost like that tree is a god, and to some people it is. It's like an altar they set up in their living room[s] for a short time [to] worship. All these songs—and I could go on and mention many others that you know of—are reinforced by pictures, TV programs, movies, [and] books. What they create is this huge, dark smokescreen that hides the true meaning of Christmas from the world.

You may be sitting out there, thinking, "Well, it hasn't fooled *me* because I'm a Christian and I read my Bible." Well, we'll just have to see about that, won't we? I want you to know, every couple of years, I give [out] a little Christmas quiz that I made up. Oftentimes people do pretty [well] when they get about fifty percent right—people who come to Calvary Bible Church. That's not very good. You start asking questions about the Christmas story and all of a sudden what comes to mind is the songs—the smokescreen songs—that permeate into the Christmas story and distort the true meaning of Christmas and what really happened. Since the Christmas story is in the Bible, since it is a very significant event, we need to have our thinking correct in this area.

As I thought about this, I thought, “OK, [what are] these distortions?” I started writing them down, and thinking about it. I thought, “They come in three different categories. There [are] chronological distortions, character distortions—about the characters involved [in the Christmas story]—and critter distortions. So, we’re going to talk about the chronology, characters, and critters of Christmas. What I’m going to do is a survey of the Christmas story. We’ll be hopping back and forth mostly from Matthew to Luke, since those two gospels are the ones that contain the Christmas story, and then we’ll slay some sacred Christmas cows along the way, and pop some Christmas bubbles. Be ready for that.

Get ready, because we’re going to be going back and forth [between a number of different Bible verses]. I also want to say that when you [ask], “Where should [we] begin?” we could begin in Genesis 3:15, which is the first promise of the Messiah, but we’re going to pretty much skip the Old Testament. If you want to know about those prophecies, you can come back here December 30, [to the Doctrine of Christ class, during which] we plan on doing a survey of some of the prophecies fulfilled in Jesus’ first coming. So, if you are interested in that, you can show up in the Doctrine of Christ class [on] December 30 at 6 p.m.³

The gospel of Luke starts the Christmas story with the priest named Zacharias, who is serving in the temple. Zacharias is a godly [person, and] so is his wife. He [is] an older man. The angel Gabriel appears to him, and says, “Your wife is going to conceive and give birth to the forerunner to the Messiah” [see Luke 1:8-17]. He doubts the angel. The angel then says, “OK, you’re not going to be able to speak until the day John is born,” and so [Zacharias] can’t speak. But Elizabeth does get pregnant [see Luke 1:18-25], [and] six months later the angel Gabriel appears to another [person], this time a young lady—Mary—who is living in the town of Nazareth, a small village located west of the Sea of Galilee [see Luke 1:26-29]. Mary

³The handouts and audio links from that series can be found at:
http://www.calvarybiblechurch.org/teaching.aspx/doctrine_of_christ_2007

is married to a man named Joseph, in the Jewish reckoning, which we will talk about later, or “engaged” in the Gentile reckoning.

If you have your Bible, look at Luke 1:26, and you can follow along as I read this account:

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary. And coming in, he said to her, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.” [Luke 1:26-35]

Mary is approached by the angel Gabriel. She is told she is going to conceive while a virgin, give birth to a son who is none other than the Son of God, the Son of the Most High, the Messiah, who is going to rule and reign over the house of Israel forever, the one who fulfills the great promises made to Abraham, and the promise made to David, and [who fulfills] many of the prophecies which I’m sure she had heard and [with which] she was familiar. Then the angel decides to confirm to her that this is really going to happen. He says in [Luke 1:]36: “And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren

is now in her sixth month.” Mary knew Elizabeth, knew she was barren, knew she was an old woman, knew she couldn’t have children, [and now Elizabeth] is pregnant in her sixth month. Luke 1:39 tells us [that] Zacharias and Elizabeth lived in the hill country in Judea, somewhere in the vicinity of Jerusalem.

Gabriel also reminded Mary, in Luke 1:37-38: “For nothing will be impossible with God. And Mary said, ‘Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.’ And the angel departed from her.” So, to give her confirmation, he says, “By the way, if you’re wondering how this is going to work, even Elizabeth, who couldn’t have a child, who is too old to have a child, is pregnant and in her sixth month. And, by the way, nothing is impossible with God.” Whenever you wonder, “How could God do this?” you have to remember that verse: “Nothing is impossible with God.” God is not lacking power or means to accomplish what He wants to accomplish. [Mary] says, “Let it be done.”

What do you think Mary did after this? It’s so fascinating to think about what’s in the white spaces here. Do you think she just got up in the morning, yawned, and said, “Mom, Dad, I think I’m going to go visit Elizabeth”? Do you think that’s what she said? No, she probably got up that very second, woke up her parents, and said, “Mom! Dad! Guess what just happened? I’m going to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit. The angel Gabriel told me!” That is such a difficult thing. I mean, what if she was your daughter? What would you think? You’d think, “Oh, child, drink some wine.” What do you do? There weren’t even any psychologists to go mess her up with. This had never happened before.

Remember, when the prophecy was given of the virgin birth back in Isaiah 7, Ahaz, the wicked king, had these oppressors [who] were coming down upon him, [and] Isaiah goes to him, and says, “Those oppressors are going to be done away with very soon.” [Ahaz] doubts, and [Isaiah] says, “OK, the Lord gives you permission to ask for a sign, any sign you want. Make it as high as heaven, make it as deep as Sheol, just ask for a sign.” [Ahaz] says, “Well, I’m not going to test the Lord,” and so [Isaiah] says,

“OK, the Lord is going to give you a sign as high as heaven and as deep as Sheol. A virgin is going to conceive, is going to give birth to a son, and they’re going to call His name God With Us” [see Isaiah 7:10-14]. That’s what was prophesied.

Now, Mary tells her parents. Surely she told her parents. I can’t imagine that she would have just got[ten] up and continued as normal after having an angel visit her in the night and tell her she’s going to give birth to the Messiah because every woman longed to give birth to the Messiah. It was every woman’s hope that she would give birth to the Messiah. It’s not easy to believe, though, what the angel told her. Look at Luke 1:39[-45]:

Now at this time Mary arose and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she cried out with a loud voice and said, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord.”

Mary remember[s] what the angel said, and so she gets up and she heads off to Elizabeth’s house. Maybe she’s looking for moral support, maybe she told her parents that she was pregnant and they freaked out, didn’t believe her, and said, “Sure, go to Elizabeth’s house while we figure it out.” Who knows? But she goes there, and what’s neat is [that] God doesn’t allow Mary to even tell Elizabeth anything. God helps Mary understand that this [has] taken place because as soon as she opens the door and greets Elizabeth, Elizabeth then is filled with the Holy Spirit and [gives] this prophetic utterance, and in that prophetic utterance she confirms that Mary is at that

time pregnant and carrying the Lord in her womb. That is amazing. This, then, causes a little chain reaction. Mary responds, and launches into what is called the “Magnificat,” [in which] she praises God and thanks God for choosing her to be the mother of the Messiah.

If you look at Luke 1:56, Luke says: “And Mary stayed with her,” that is, Elizabeth, “about three months, and then returned to her home.” [Do you] remember what the angel said previously, that Elizabeth is now in her sixth month? Mary goes to visit Elizabeth [and] stays about three months, so John is almost ready to be born when Mary returns home.

We don’t know the details of when Mary told her parents, but when she did tell her parents, they basically would have had two responses. One response is: “Well, that is amazing! You’re going to give birth to the Messiah as a virgin! And the angel Gabriel talked to you. Daniel mentions him.” That would be a hard pill to swallow, wouldn’t it? Most likely, they probably thought, “OK, who are you fooling around with? What happened?” and that she made up this story to cover up her sin. We don’t know. But the unavoidable reality was [that] when she came back she was pregnant—three months pregnant. That’s something that is hard to hide. [It was a] good thing they wore loose clothing back then.

Not only that, [but] Mary was engaged [to a man named Joseph], which made things more complicated. If you were Joseph, and you found out that your fiancé was pregnant and it wasn’t you[r child], what would you do? Let’s see what Joseph does. Look at Matthew 1:18 and following. Matthew tells us about this in such brevity that it just begs to be discussed. We can’t know anything about what isn’t said, but it is fun to think about it. Look at [Matthew 1:]18: “Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.” [Isn’t] that about as brief as you can get? What about the details? Tell us the saga here.

It says: “And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly” [Matthew 1:19]. [We] just need to stop there. Notice [that] Matthew describes them as mar-

ried, as husband and wife, because the Jews considered engagement legally binding. So, [if] you were engaged [to] somebody, you had a legally binding contract, and you were considered husband and wife, even before the wedding day happened. The only way you [could] dissolve that engagement [was] to take legal action and divorce somebody. That's what "send away" means.

Look at [Matthew 1:]20[-25]:

But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US." And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.

[There are] questions that just beg to be asked at this point. When did all of this happen? Who told Joseph that Mary was pregnant? Was it before she went to see Elizabeth or after she came back from Elizabeth's? Did Mary wake up, tell her parents, tell Joseph, and then leave? Or, did Mary wake up, tell her parents, shock them to death, and then leave [after] say[ing], "Mom and Dad, by the way, while I'm at Elizabeth's, could you tell Joseph? Thanks." It's just not good. It could be that it happened immediately: she woke up, told her parents, and [she and Joseph] got married, but it doesn't seem that that's the way it [happened] because Joseph, when he finds out about it doesn't marry her immediately, he thinks about it.

The text says [that] she immediately went to see Elizabeth, so most likely [Joseph] found out sometime after she had the dream, while she was at Elizabeth's house. He thought about it: "I can't marry this gal! She's pregnant. It's not my child. I'm not raising some kid who isn't mine!" He decides, "Well, I'm just going to divorce her and try not to disgrace the family." Then the Lord appears to him in a dream and convinces him, "No, [it was the] Holy Spirit. This is what happened," which tells us that Joseph did not believe Mary, like most men would not [have in a similar situation]. I mean, if your daughter said she was pregnant while a virgin, you would think, "Hello! That does not happen. I may have [fallen] off the beet truck, but I didn't land on my head."

Joseph went ahead and took Mary as his wife, according to Matthew 1:25, and he kept her a virgin until she gave birth to Jesus. There [are] lots of assumptions in all of this. It could be that the angel appeared to Mary, [she] told her parents, the parents did tell Joseph, and [Joseph and Mary] immediately got married. I think that's kind of stretching what actually would fit there because it would be very suspicious to have a wedding and then send your wife away for three months. That would not be a very good honeymoon.

People would [ask], "Where's your wife?"

"Oh, I sent her away for a three-month vacation."

"You just got married."

"Oh, yes."

Doesn't that seem strange? I think that the best thing to think is that she had the dream, probably told her parents, then went to Elizabeth. [Her parents] probably told Joseph. If they believed Mary, they would have told Joseph, and said, "This is what happened." Obviously he didn't believe [her] and he was going to divorce her. Or, maybe they didn't believe it either. Maybe they went and accused Joseph of defiling their daughter. Joseph, of course, didn't believe the story [and] was going to divorce her anyway. But now we have Joseph and Mary, they're married, Mary is three months pregnant, and she's continuing on in her pregnancy. It doesn't say

anything about the rest [of her pregnancy] from the three months until the end.

We [also] know that Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth. Jesus, according to Micah 5:2, has to be born in Bethlehem. So, you [have] a problem here—a ninety-mile problem. How do you get a woman in her third trimester, about ready to give birth, ninety miles south? They [didn't] have trains or cars. It's not like you could zip down there for the day. We're talking dirt roads [and] walking through fields. How do you do that? This is one of the great examples of God's providence, I think, as He begins to move to form a plan that get[s] Joseph and Mary from point A to point B so Jesus can be born in that place where He needs to be born. If you look at Luke 2:1-7, you'll see how God got them to the place He wanted them to be:

Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city.

So what you have here is [that] instead of just doing a normal census, for some reason they wanted everybody to go to their hometown. [As a result], there are people traveling all over the place. [Luke 2:]4[-7]:

Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

There's a long discussion [that could be entered into] about the inn [mentioned] there, but we don't have time for [it] this morning. The word "inn" can mean "inn, guest house, or guest room." The whole point here is that there was no room for them to stay. Some have said that Joseph would have never taken his wife down there. Why would he take this pregnant woman [when] only the men would have to register? What if your wife was pregnant with the Messiah, the Son of God? Would you leave her behind? You'd want to really protect your wife and the baby. I think that's why he took her. I'm sure it was very uncomfortable for her. Even a young, spry teenager would probably have a serious time trying to travel ninety miles. If you're a healthy teenager, you could go twenty miles a day no problem, but when you're nine months pregnant, that is a whole different thing.

The good thing is [that] she rode that donkey, right? No. [There were] no donkeys mentioned, so take that out of your nativity set. A horse isn't mentioned, [nor is] a cart mentioned. We don't know how they got down [there]. We don't know if they walked, [if] she rode [in] a cart, or [if] she did a little of both. We don't know. They were poor, so they probably didn't have their own animal. We don't know. The Bible doesn't say. But, if they were able to travel ten [to] fifteen miles a day, it would [have] take[n] them eight to ten days to travel from point A to point B, from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

If you go to Bethlehem today, there's a big church there called The Church of the Nativity. At this time of year it's like the Galleria [Mall in Glendale, California]. There are people all over the place, they're packed around it, and they're all trying to get in [to this church]. For some reason, I have no idea why, the door into that church is [about] four feet high, so [for] somebody like me [it] hits me right at the belly button. You have to bend down [to go through it], and then you go into this dark church that smells like somebody had too much incense burning in there for hundreds of years. It's nasty. You get in there, you smell all this weird incense, and there's this altar, and underneath the altar there is marble on the floor, and this fourteen-point silver star, and there's this little hole where you can stick

your hand in and touch the very place where Jesus dropped out, right there. Supposedly. What's really interesting is [that] people from all around the world go to touch that spot. I just want you to know [that] we don't know that that's where Jesus was born. You can go to Bethlehem and touch any spot on the ground anywhere, and that spot is just as good as anywhere else. They don't know where Jesus was born. They just know He was born in Bethlehem [because] that's what the Scriptures say.

We all know the songs, [such as] "Good Christian Men, Rejoice," with lyrics that say:

Good Christian men, rejoice with heart, and soul, and voice;
Give ye heed to what we say: News! News! Jesus Christ is born
today;
Ox and ass before Him bow; and He is in the manger now.
Christ is born today! Christ is born today!⁴

Sorry, no ox [nor] ass is mentioned in the Christmas story. None. Take those out of your nativity set.

[Consider also] the classic Christmas song "Away In a Manger":

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
The little Lord Jesus laid down His sweet head.
The stars in the sky looked down where He lay,
The little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.

The cattle are lowing, the Baby awakes,
But little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes;

⁴Lyrics taken from:

<http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/g/o/goodcmen.htm>

I love Thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky
And stay by my cradle till morning is nigh.⁵

There's no hay mentioned [in the biblical account of Jesus' birth]. It's reasonable to assume [that] if they were in a stall [there was some hay there], but, I don't know about you, but if my wife was going to have a baby, I would not take her into where cattle were. Granted, [the Bible] does say "manger," [but] I would pluck the manger [out of the stall] and steal it from the cattle and take it out to a place where it wasn't so smelly. I don't know. But, just so you know, the cattle weren't lowing—it doesn't mention them. And, I'm sure Jesus cried plenty, like all babies [do].

When it comes down to it, there [are] only two kinds of animals mentioned in the Christmas story and we don't even know [exactly which ones] they are. The first one is when the shepherds are watching over their "flocks by night." Those flocks could either be flocks of goat[s] or [of] sheep. [It was] probably sheep, but the Bible doesn't say. So, we aren't sure about that. Then the other animals are doves and pigeons because right after [Jesus] is born, [Mary and Joseph] take Him into the temple and offer the poor man's sacrifice, which is, if you don't have a lamb, you offer up turtledoves or pigeons [see Leviticus 12:6-8]. We don't know which one they did. They just did one of those two. So, throw out all the animals [from your nativity set and] put a couple of pigeons in [there], and then you'll at least have the right animals. Maybe [you could put] one goat and one sheep with a question mark [on] each one so you don't lead any visitors astray.

Of course, if the magi had already visited Joseph and Mary on the night Jesus was born, they would have presented Jesus with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. [Mary and Joseph] would have been loaded, and they could have bought a lamb for their sacrifice instead of a pigeon, so we know [that] for the first eight days, [the wise men] weren't there. Well, when were they there? We're getting there.

⁵Lyrics taken from:

http://www.allchristmaslyrics.com/do_you_hear_what_i_hear_lyrics.htm

I [also] want you to note that there was no little drummer boy, “pa rum pum pum pum,” playing that cute, little, onomatopoeic rhyme. [Also], we’ve all heard the song “Do You Hear What I Hear?” [that says]:

Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy,
“Do you hear what I hear?
Ringing through the sky, shepherd boy,
Do you hear what I hear?
A song, a song high above the trees
With a voice as big as the sea,
With a voice as big as the sea.⁶

And then in the third stanza:

Said the shepherd boy to the mighty king,
“Do you know what I know?
In your palace warm, mighty king,
Do you know what I know?
A Child, a Child shivers in the cold
Let us bring him silver and gold,
Let us bring him silver and gold.⁷

[It’s a] very cute song, [but] no shepherd boy is mentioned [in Scripture]. Talking lambs are not mentioned [either]. [Do you think] the poor baby Jesus [was] shivering in the cold while His mother watche[d] the

⁶Lyrics taken from:

http://www.hymnlyrics.org/lyricsd/do_you_hear_what_i_hear.html

⁷Ibid.

Messiah freeze? [No. The song] is very good for exciting empathy and sympathy, [but] it's just not true.

At that time, [however], there *were* shepherds involved. We learn about them in Luke 2:8-20. Look there:

In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased." When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

What [is] very interesting is [that God] chose to announce Jesus' birth not to Herod, not to the nobility, not to the officials, not to the rich, not to

the influential, not even to the people of the city, but to outsiders—those outside the city living in the fields watching sheep. I think He wanted [the] humble birth and humility of Christ to have a humble announcement, and so He told the shepherds.

In the song “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear,” the lyrics say:

It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth,
To touch their harps of gold
Peace on the earth, good will to men,
From heaven’s all gracious King
The world in solemn stillness lay,
To hear the angels sing.

Still through the cloven skies they come,
With peaceful wings unfurled,
And still their heavenly music floats,
O’er all the weary world;
Above its sad and lowly plains,
They bend on hovering wing.
And ever o’er its Babel sounds,
The blessed angels sing.⁸

⁸Lyrics taken from:

http://www.allchristmaslyrics.com/it_came_upon_a_midnight_clear_lyrics.htm

It's a classic song, but the Bible doesn't describe the weather. It could have been overcast that night. [Also], the text never says the angels *sang* anything. In Luke 2:13, it says: "And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and *saying*" [emphasis added], not singing. That really destroys a lot of good songs. No "harps of gold" are mentioned. No text of the Bible ever describes angels as having wings, [either]. The cherubim have wings, and the seraphim have wings, but the Bible never calls them angels. There are some living creatures in heaven [that] have wings, and they are not called angels either [see Revelation 4:8]. Whenever an angel appears and it is described, its form is [the] human form. Does that mean they don't have wings and they just appear in human form? Maybe, but the Bible never says angels have wings, and certainly they didn't sing so [that] the whole world heard them. Jesus is born and that very night, the shepherds visit the baby Jesus, telling Mary and Joseph all that had happened to them when they were in the field. They saw the angel, they saw a group of [the] heavenly [host] praising God, saying, not singing.

[Then], if you look at your nativity sets, the magi show up, but not [so] in the Bible. Turn to Matthew 2. They don't show up that night, as we already mentioned, alluded [to] by the fact that if they [had] given Mary and Joseph all those treasures, [Mary and Joseph] surely would have gotten a lamb instead of pigeons [or turtledoves] when, eight days afterwards, they circumcised Jesus and Mary gave a sacrifice for her uncleanness after giving birth. In Matthew 2:1-3, we read this:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Consider what we learn from these statements, and what we don't learn. We learn that there was more than one [magus]. It says "magi," [which is the] plural [form]. That's all we know—there could have been two, there could have been fifty [of them]. Why do we always say there are three? [It is] because they offered gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But two magi could have offered all three of those gifts each, or twenty could have combined to offer those three kinds of gifts. [We just don't know] that there [were] three [magi because] the Bible doesn't say.

[It is thought that] the magi were king makers from Persia. We don't really know where these [magi] came from or how they found out about the star, [or how they knew to look] for the King of the Jews and all that, but most believe that when Daniel was in Babylon, and [also] later on [when] the Medopersians [had] conquered Babylon, that Daniel disciplined men, talking to them about the coming of the Messiah. [It is believed] that these men were the king makers, the wise men of the Persians, [who] would instruct the nobility, and that these king makers, because of what Daniel told them, knew about the coming of the Messiah.

They followed this star "from the east." I just want you to know that they were *in* the east, so they saw the star. The star wasn't in the east; they were in the east seeing the star in the west. Some people get confused about that. It says they "saw His star in the east." *They* were in the east, and they came west. They can't be west and looking east because then they would be in the Mediterranean [Sea].

So, we have the magi. They are king makers; they are not kings. They make this huge blunder because they show up, and they tell Herod, "Hey, we're here. Where's the one who has been born King of the Jews?" I'm sure Herod is just [livid]. Herod was this psychotic, bloodthirsty killer. He was a lunatic. He killed his own sons and daughters just because he had a *suspicion* they might try to overthrow his throne. He was whacked out. He was weird. He would just kill people because they *might* take over his throne. So this entourage of magi—maybe two, maybe twenty—come[s] and say[s], "OK, where is He?"

“Where is who[m]?”

“Where is one who was born King of the Jews?”

“What?”

The text says [that] Herod and “all Jerusalem with him” [was] troubled by these things. [They are probably thinking,] “Well, nobody told *us*.”

Of course, the shepherds are out in the field, [saying], “Man, if we could ever get in[to the city], we could tell people [about what we’ve seen and heard].”

Look at [Matthew 2]:4[-6]:

Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: ‘AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.’”

What’s interesting is they leave off the part that says “His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity” [Micah 5:2]. In other words, when the Child is born, He is going to have existed from all eternity. Look at [Matthew 2:]7[-8]:

Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.”

Sure. It’s like Kaa in *The Jungle Book*, [saying] “Come to me,” [but] he doesn’t want to befriend anybody; he’s looking for a meal. Herod wants to kill the Child, Jesus. Look at [Matthew 2:]9: “After hearing the king,

they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was.” So, the star is not your typical star. It wasn’t this fixed reference point. This star actually moved around and navigated. It was kind of like an early form of GPS navigation, I guess. It moved around, and helped them find where they needed to go. They start in the east, they [see] the star, which would have been [in the] west, they travel to Jerusalem, and then they ask about it. When they [leave Herod], they [see] the star, and [from there] Bethlehem is south, so [they look] south. They go south, and it leads them to the very place where Jesus is.

Luke specifically says, [however], that Joseph and Mary, right after they did everything according to the Law of Moses, returned to Nazareth. If you look at Luke 2:39, [which] is a key text, it says: “When they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city of Nazareth.” The question that commentators have asked is this: Because Luke doesn’t include all this stuff about the magi and [Mary and Joseph’s] flight to Egypt and their return, and then their moving to Nazareth, does Luke just cut all of that out and then have them going to Nazareth? If you look at the text, it seems that this is eight days later. They circumcised Jesus, offered their sacrifice, and then they head[ed] back home. That’s logical; that’s reasonable. They live in Nazareth. It’s not like they moved [permanently] to Bethlehem for the census. They just went to the census in Bethlehem, and then they would, logically, return home.

What this means is [that] it’s probably best not to try and insert everything into this verse, but to just say, “Eight days later, after they had fulfilled the law, they went back home.” They went back home and after they got home, they probably started talking, saying, “Hey, maybe we should move back down to Bethlehem. After all, it is the city of David, and we do have the Messiah here and that would probably be the best place to raise Him.” Or maybe [Joseph] found work there, or whatever, but I think they moved back down. Why? [It is] because when the magi come and they find them, what does the text say? They came and found [Jesus] where? In a house.

Did you see that? It says, “into the house” [Matthew 2:11]. “We have come to worship Him,” and [it says in] Matthew 2:11, “After coming into the house.” Notice [that it’s] not “the stable,” [it is] “the house.” So, Jesus, [at this point in time], is a child, a toddler.

Now, you’re [probably wondering], “Well, how do you know [His parents] didn’t just have Him in the stable? How do you know that they didn’t move into a house just a day or two later when they found a place to live and [after] that [the magi] came?” Well, one of the reasons is because of [Mary and Joseph’s] offering [at the temple eight days after Christ’s birth]. Another reason is because of what Herod does. What does Herod do? When he tells the magi, “Go report,” the magi, then, [have] a dream, and their dream [tells them to] get out of Dodge, go back, just leave. God says, “Just leave.” Herod, then, gets jealous, doesn’t he? He concocts a plan to do what? Eliminate the Christ Child. He orders that all the male children in Bethlehem and [its] vicinity are all slain from what age? Two years and under. That is the age that he determined [Christ to be], based [on] what the magi told him. The magi said, “This is when it happens, and this is when He was born, and this is how long we’ve been [traveling]. So, probably Jesus is around a year-and-a-half [old].” Herod gave a six-month buffer just to make sure he got Him. That’s how we know Jesus isn’t a baby [at that point in time].

So, take the magi out of your nativity set and put them at the other end of the house. When people [who are visiting your home] say, “Where [are] the magi?” [you can reply], “They’re in our bedroom.”

“Why?”

“Because they don’t get here for another year and a half.”

So, when you hear the song: “We three kings of Orient are; Bearing gifts we traverse afar. Field and fountain, moor and mountain; Following yonder star” realize they weren’t kings, they were instructors of kings.⁹ There’s also [the song that says], “I saw three ships come sailing by on

⁹Lyrics taken from:

http://www.allchristmaslyrics.com/we_three_kings_of_orient_are_lyrics.htm

Christmas Day.¹⁰ There were no ships. Bethlehem is inland, and [the magi] came from the east. That's the Sahara Desert. There [are] no ships out there in the Sahara Desert sailing around. The magi didn't sail in any ships. No bells rang, nor does the Bible say the angels and all the souls of earth sang together the night Jesus was born.

So, when *did* all of this take place? We don't know that for certain either. But, we do have a pretty good idea. December 25 is a good guess, but it is a guess for [reasons] I can't go into right now, but [which] are pretty fascinating. There are two great works on chronology that I would encourage you, if you're into this stuff, to get. One is James Ussher's *Annals of the World*. James Ussher was a Puritan braniac who constructed a history of the world from creation to the birth of Christ. He did all this before evolution was invented, and it is a fascinating read because he just assumes [that] the Bible is true. He writes a whole history of the world using the Bible as the anchor for all of his information. It is a fascinating read because you get [a] pure, biblical perspective. James Ussher's book is good.

A more recent work is by Harold Hoehner, called *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*. Harold Hoehner has done incredible work looking at [such things as] eclipses that happened [during that time]. [For instance], Josephus mentions an eclipse, and [Hoehner determined approximately] how long after that [eclipse] Herod died. We know Herod died somewhere around March or April in 4 BC. You're thinking, "Four BC? Wouldn't that [event have been in] [AD] 0 or 1?" Well, no, because they got the calendar wrong when they invented the calendar that starts with the birth of Christ. Several hundred years [after Christ's birth], they tried to extrapolate backward [to figure out when Christ was born to create a calendar based on that date] because the calendar [they were using] at that time was based off the founding of Rome.

¹⁰Lyrics taken from:

http://www.allchristmaslyrics.com/i_saw_three_ships_lyrics.htm

Anyway, the spring of 4 BC is when Herod died. So we know Jesus was born before that. What comes down to probably the best guess that we have is [that] Jesus was born in either December of 5 BC or right after that in January of 4 BC. If you want to read an interesting little treatment on this (this is going to sound scary, but it's not scary to read; it's actually within the grasp of, I think, everybody here, [though] there [are] a couple [of] words in there, like "terminus quo" and things like that, but you can figure it out from the context), [check out] *Bibliotheca Sacra*, [which is] the theological journal of the Dallas Theological Seminary. [It is] often known as "Bib Sac." [There is] an article [in that journal] on the timing and date of the birth of Christ. [It is] very fascinating. You're thinking, "Well, where do I get that?" You can always call and ask my secretary. She might give you a copy, if you're nice. It's a very fun read. It's [*Bibliotheca Sacra*] volume 130, October 1973, page 338 and following. I'd encourage you to read that—it's very fun and we don't have time to go into the details here.

So, what does all this mean? We've surveyed the whole Christmas story, we've debunked and slayed all those things—there is blood everywhere. Now we don't know what songs to sing because they're all wrong. Actually there are quite a few good ones, and even the ones that talk about sentimental things are OK as long as you don't let them eclipse Christmas. All right. So there [are] no ships, no magi visiting the baby Jesus the night He was born, no drummer boy, no shepherd boy, no angels with golden harps singing for the whole world to [hear], no kings visiting.

So, what are the big things? The first thing Christmas says to us is this: God loves us. That is the big idea of Christmas. "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son" [John 3:16], and He was born on Christmas. The birth of Jesus is an expression of God's love to unworthy sinners so "that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" [John 3:16]. [Each year] Christmas should conjure up in your mind as a believer that God loves us, God loves us, God loves us.

Second, [we learn] that God's love for mankind caused Him to become a man Himself. The second big idea is not only that God loves us, but [that He loves us enough to have become] a man. Paul says in Philippians 2:5-11:

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. [2:5-7]

(I haven't preached this as a Christmas sermon yet. This is next year.)
[Philippians 2:8 continues]:

“Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” Then it talks about how God exalted Him and every knee will bow to Him. The whole point is that God's love for unworthy sinners was so great that God was willing to humble Himself, enter into a virgin's womb, be born a helpless baby, grow up in a sin-cursed world, and offer Himself up as a sacrifice so that those who could not save themselves could be saved. That is the great truth about Christmas. It's not trees, it's not snow, it's not Santa, it's not reindeer, it's not presents, it's certainly not shopping malls [at] this time of year.

Isaiah says, speaking in Isaiah 9:1-2: In “Galilee of the Gentiles... the people who walk in darkness Will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, The light will shine on them.” That light was Jesus. John talks about this in John 1:9-13:

There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made

through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him. . . [John 1:9-12].

That's all of us here. If any of you will receive Him, if you choose to receive Him, "to them," John says, God gives the right for those who receive Christ as their Savior, "to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" [John 1:12]. Have you done that? That is the great response [to] Christmas: receiv[ing] the great Christmas gift of God Himself in the person of Christ.

Isaiah 9:6-7 goes on to say: "For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us"—notice [that it says] "born to *us*," "given to *us*."

And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this. [Isaiah 9:6-7]

You know what? God has accomplished the first part. The child was born; a child was given. He [has] all of those great titles, but the government isn't yet resting on His shoulders. This is the third response [to Christmas], [which is] not only a response of knowing God loves you, not only knowing that God Himself became a man in the person of Jesus Christ to save you, but that you need to repent. A lot of times people think of salvation as an option. "If I want to, I can become a Christian. If I don't want to, I don't have to. I'm going to think about it."

There [are] a lot of pastors who would get up before their congregation[s], and [say], "Why don't you think about this? Maybe you would like to receive Christ." No, that's not what the Bible says. When Paul was speaking to the Greeks in Athens, in Acts 17:30, he says: "God is now declaring

to men that all people everywhere should repent.” He has commanded it. He has declared it. Repent why? For there is coming a day when He will judge the living and the dead “through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead” [Acts 17:31].

Salvation is a command. God commands you to repent. Just think about this: God creates the world. Men rebel. God puts up with them for a long time. He’s still putting up with them. He gives them His Law. That doesn’t work. He gives them Christ. Christ does everything. God does everything. God says, “OK, I came to earth. I paid the price. I made the sacrifice. I paved the way. I’ll save you by grace. I’m putting this out to you: Repent. Turn from your sins. Receive Me. Believe in My Son, and what He did, and His resurrection. I will save you. You will get to live in heaven with Me for all eternity. You will be my children. I will adopt you. I will forgive you. I will justify you. You get it all. You get it all for free. I *command* you to do this.” That’s why the sin of rejecting Christ is so grievous because God [is] saying, “I love you enough to die for you, and you’re saying, ‘No.’”

If you don’t know Jesus, you know what to do. Today is the day of salvation [see 2 Corinthians 6:2]. If you do know Jesus, you [also] know what to do: Praise God for loving you. Praise God for sending His Son. Praise God that by His grace you have believed. Then worship the King, because He’s coming back and it may be today. Let’s pray.

Father, we thank You so much for Your goodness to us. What a great God You are! Father, we have surveyed so many passages that we could have spent so much more time on, but, Father, I just thank You for Your Word—its clarity, its absolute clarity, [on] the purpose and meaning of Christmas. As we go out in the world and we hear all those songs written by, many of them, unbelievers, and we sing those tunes, and we memorize the lyrics, may they not obscure from our minds and our hearts the true meaning [of] Christmas. [It] is about Christ, the Son of God, born to live that He might die, that He might rise again so all, through faith in Him, could have the free gift of eternal life, and that He is no longer humbled, He is no longer living in humility, He is no longer a baby, He is “the king

of Kings and lord of Lords” [1 Timothy 6:15] and is coming back to judge the living and the dead. Help us to remember that and to worship our King in the way we live, the way we speak, and the way we think. May we do all these things for Your glory, honor, and praise. Amen.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture is taken from the New American Standard Bible[®], ©1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995, by The Lockman Foundation.