



Christmas Essentials – SMN Version

Tony Utting

“Christmas? Well, it’s OK for the kids, I suppose. But sophisticated grown-ups aren’t going to bother about a lot of angels and travelling stars and things, eh? Cheers, anyway!” Such is the basic assumption about the ‘Binge-fest’ Christmas of the TV adverts, and any further thought about it often ceases at that point. But let us look at just what can be said about the Nativity with reasonable certainty.

The Wise Men: They were ‘Magi’, astrologer-priests from what we now call Iraq. They did not merely notice a star appearing out of nowhere. They were waiting for it. Nor were they speaking of a star as we understand the term. They watched for a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn (they would have known them as *Marduk* and *Aion*) in the constellation of *Pisces*. It was predicted; archaeologists have discovered what is known as the *Berlin Table*, which sets out major astronomical events to anticipate between 17BC – AD10. These conjunctions are also mentioned in the *Star Almanac of Sippar*. They occurred in May, September, and November 7 BC. Assuming that the Magi knew their craft, they must have been puzzled that no announcement was made of a special royal birth in Judaea that autumn. Conceivably they made their journey to investigate the reason why, and perhaps offer their professional services to the new monarch. The caravan routes from Iraq to Jerusalem involve a journey of at least 500 miles. I have seen the progress of a ‘trading’ caravan given as an average of three miles a day. Information culled from ‘National Geographic’ magazine suggests that ten miles a day is a fair pace for other journeys by camel caravan. Also, if among those travelling with the Magi were conscientiously practising Jews, there might have been no progress at all upon the Sabbath. Therefore, allowing for a delay in even deciding to go to Palestine to investigate the significant birth indicated by the ‘star’, the apparent slow progress of their quest need not surprise us. Upon arrival, the Magi went to see;

King Herod the Great: Herod was a typical Middle-Eastern ruler, surviving by a combination of sharp wits, low politics, and brutality. He died in April 4 BC, by our reckoning, and for the final six months or so of his life he was dying by inches, suffering great pain, confused, and in no fit state to receive any guests of status, such as the Magi. Therefore, they must have had their secret interview with him when he was still in possession of all his faculties and able to bear himself in a kingly fashion, somewhat before September 5 BC at the latest. This accords with the 7 BC astrological dating suggested by *Matthew 2.16*, “..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..” in an attempt to eliminate the infant Jesus. By then the Holy Family and the Magi had all quit Bethlehem at the prompting of an Angel. ‘Angelos’ is simply Greek for ‘messenger’.

Anyone close to Herod at this time could have seen that he was not going to live long, and that murder was becoming his first response to all difficulties political or domestic. If the Magi were to be believed, his successor was in Bethlehem. Given Herod’s nature, it is a fair certainty that he made sure the Magi were under surveillance in their search for a new, and therefore rival, king, and that he had his secret service all around them as aides, interpreters, and the like. Therefore an astute member of this toxic entourage might have wished to be the means of saving the new king, and reaping a reward when once he ruled. So did he decide to speak secretly to Joseph and the Magi, and even facilitate their departure from Bethlehem? “God moves in a mysterious way...” as the old hymn puts it.

Bethlehem: Why did the Nativity occur in an obscure village? King David had fortified Bethlehem, and made it briefly his capital. Joseph was “of the house and lineage of David”, a member of the ‘Clan MacDavid’ as we might more easily grasp the concept, and Bethlehem was the historical Clan HQ. It followed that when an unwilling Herod was obliged to dress up a Roman administrative census as a Jewish tribal survey in order to get it done without a revolt ensuing, it was to Bethlehem that the ‘MacDavids’ had to trek in order to register. Joseph would have had to have presented himself to a ‘clan’ registrar and state, “I am Jusuf, ben Heli, ben Matthat, ben Levi...” and so on, to establish his credentials and associated tax liability (cf *Luke 3. 23 et seq*). This registration took place 8-6 BC, when Quirinius was *not* “Governor of Syria”. St. Luke has, unusually, got his facts muddled. Quirinius probably acted as financial overseer for this registration, and he certainly became Governor later on. The details are too complex and the arguments too lengthy to set down here but, in public estimation at least, Quirinius would have been much involved with this survey.

The Star of Bethlehem: i.e. St. Matthew’s reference to the star that “..went ahead of them until, having come, it stopped over the place where the child was..” as an exact rendition of the Biblical Greek puts it. Rather than some strange astronomical entity which floated in front of the Magi at just overhead height, it may have been the Star of David [c.f. the Israeli flag] sign painted over the gateway to the house where the MacDavids had to go to be registered. Some reference to the ‘star’ the Magi had relied upon from the outset and which had now appeared ahead of them at their destination, heard and semi-understood by St. Matthew’s informants, could well account for it. The tale of this additional wonder would still have been going strong about sixty years later, if this was the case.

Shepherds: They were in the fields, and not on the hillsides, because in the lunar month of Tishri (September/ October) the

rains fall in Palestine and the sheep browse off the weeds and grass springing up, their droppings fertilising the ground as it becomes soft enough again for the ploughing and sowing of Marchesvan (October/ November). Accordingly, some shepherds may have been just over the wall from the stable-cave below the 'inn' (*Katalyma* – Greek; unsaddling place / corral), which afforded Mary some privacy, and conformed with Jewish preoccupations about 'uncleanliness', as she gave birth.

Angels; Allow for a spectacular meteor shower, perhaps on that very night. The Orionid meteor shower, 16th – 21st October, or the Taurid shower 20th October- 30th November occur in the period. Conceivably a larger than usual chunk of matter came to Earth with an ultra-bright trail and attendant sonic boom – the BBC sound archive has just such an occurrence on record – and it was, not surprisingly, given a Divine significance by the shepherds. Meteorites with a high carbon content are known to 'crackle' as they fall, thus perhaps suggesting 'angelic' speech to the Shepherds. The Jews certainly were apt to attribute loud noises 'up there' to Heavenly beings; look at *John 12. 28-31*, taking due note of what Jesus says about it. Again, allow for the passage of time before a local folk-memory was recorded, and the celestial angels no longer become just a pretty something for the kiddie-winks. We have the gospel record of a definite event to consider, and it was written by plain people who were, nonetheless, not simpletons.

For me to do book-chapter-and-verse justice by detailed argument to all I have set out above, and which, I admit, relies upon interpretation by plausible conjecture, would require a small if fascinating book.

I am content, however, that our Biblical account of the Nativity deals with real events experienced by real people – and numbers of them, at that – who lived in the real world as they knew it. It is far less likely to be some sort of contrived fiction concocted in the late first century to exploit dupes. Our unknown prime sources – the villagers of Bethlehem, for a start – were simple folk, not as well informed as we like to think we are, and their outlook on life was different accordingly. But by their own lights they knew what they had witnessed. They passed it on to the Gospel authors, and the narrative that we have is the record of events as they recalled them.

Further, if we can accept the essential reliability of the Nativity account, why should we boggle and balk, later, at recollections of the Resurrection, supplied by the same type of prime sources?

So, with due allowance for all children, whose enjoyment of a moderate Binge-fest element in Yuletide we would be mean-spirited to spoil, let us celebrate an adult appreciation of Christmas as grown-ups, and involve our children in our well-founded celebration. Archbishop Sentamu of York, my favourite high-cleric in the real world, put it this way a few years ago:

Christmas celebrations are among the best, because they remind us that Christmas is in many ways an RSVP from God, inviting us to the party of our lives. At Christmas, each one of us is reminded anew of that most marvellous and astounding of invitations from God, and that our Maker is not only looking for us, but actually desires the pleasure of our company.

Aye, and therefore be merry, rejoice and be ye merry. Set sorrow aside.
"Christ Jesus our Saviour was born at this tide."

[A *Virgin Most Pure*, Trad. English Carol]

And a Merry Christmas to you all.

Tony Utting. Born during World War II, he was educated in Colchester, received a BA in history from the University of Bristol, and obtained a post in Her Majesty's Senior Civil Service. Tony became a member of The Society for Psychical Research and such interests occasioned him a few askance glances from sections of the Anglican Church, for his Christian convictions had also prompted him to become licensed as a Lay Minister. In both these capacities he has been able to help and reassure a number of people.

