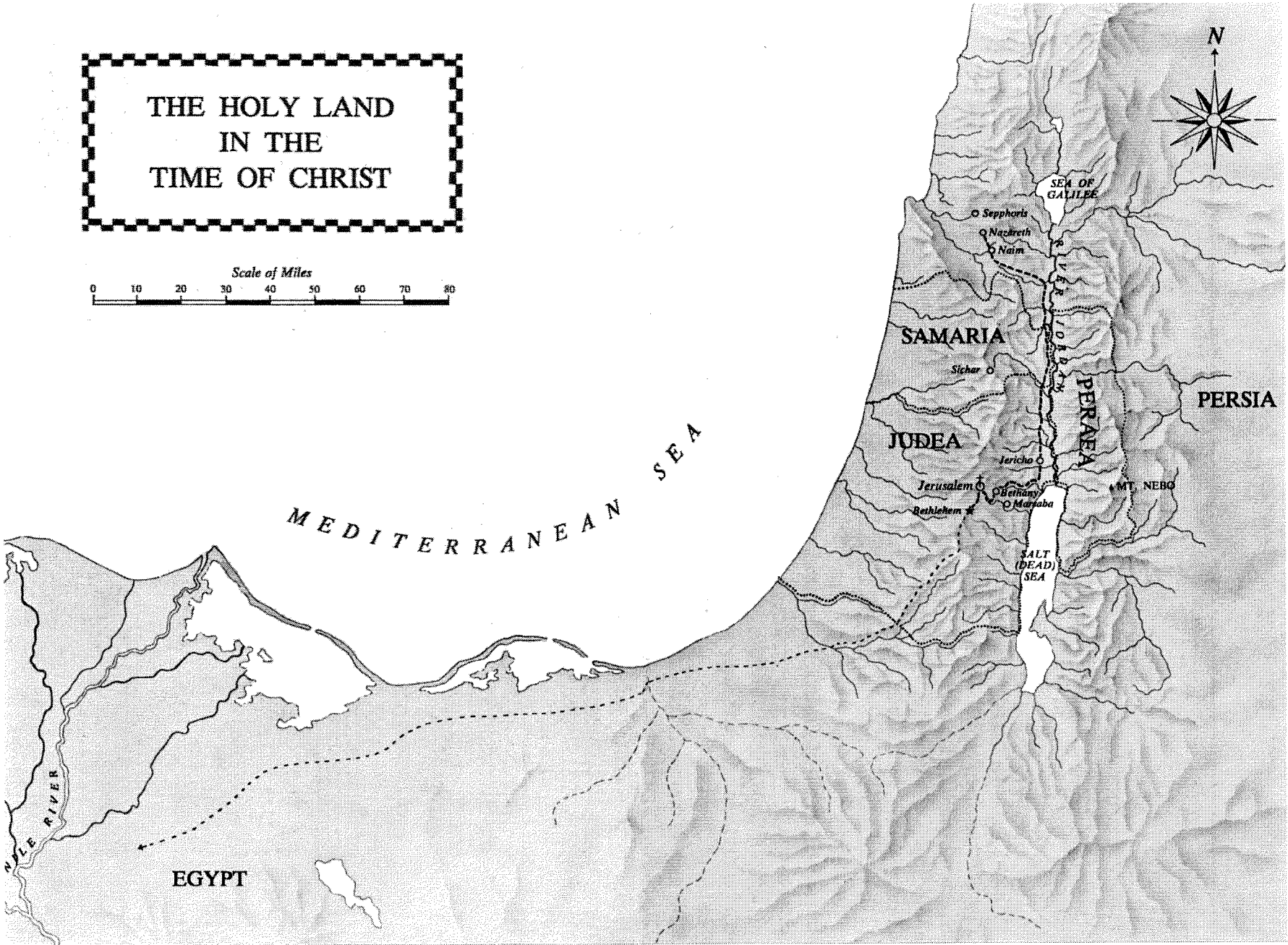
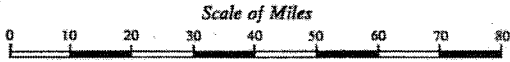

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THE HOLY LAND
IN THE
TIME OF CHRIST



Chapter One

The Birth, Infancy, and Youth of Jesus

The Pre-Existent State of Christ

John 17:1–5

Christ was from the beginning with the Father in glory. As the Apostle John declares, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Christ is the “only begotten *Son* [or *God*],” that is, “God the One and Only” (John 1:18, NIV).¹ In other words, Christ, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped” (Philippians 2:6, NIV). Thus we speak of Him as being “eternally generated,” that is, Christ has always existed from eternity past. As the Nicene Creed states, Christ is “begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.”

Though He is the Son (John 3:16), still He is perfect God, a member of the Trinity through whom all things were created (Colossians 1:16). This challenges our conception of Jesus as being born as a little baby and growing up as a child; but, at the same time, it shows us the wonder of God’s plan of redemption. The birth of every child is a miracle in a sense of God’s special blessing; and, were it not so ordinary, we would think it more of a miracle. Jesus’ birth as a little babe—though He was God from the beginning with the Father—is a unique event in the history of the world, and therefore we call it supernatural. Christ was supernaturally formed in the womb of his earthly mother Mary as a result of the power of the Holy Spirit, having come upon her (Matthew 1:18). Unlike all other persons in history, Christ was not simply created through natural human conception.

The Fullness of Time

Galatians 4:4, 5

Jesus Christ came into the world at the perfect time in human history. As Paul declares, “when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:4, 5). To see this fact more clearly, we will briefly consider the physical, intellectual, and spiritual conditions of the world at the time of Christ’s birth.

- (1) *The Physical Conditions of the World.* The government, law, and transportation network of the Roman Empire provided a unity of nations—a solidarity without petty divisions. In addition, the capital of the empire was far away from Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ, and there was peace in the entire empire. These physical conditions helped prepare the way for the Prince of Peace and the spread of the Gospel throughout the then-known world.

1. Note that the term for “begotten” in Greek (*μονογενής*) simply means “only,” or “unique.” It is the same term used in Hebrews 11:17, which speaks of Isaac being Abraham’s “only begotten [son]”; obviously Isaac was not his only son, but he was his “unique” son, in that Isaac was the *only* son given to Abraham as God’s promise. Etymologically *μονογενής* is not connected with *begetting*, or “procreating,” but—in regard to John’s use of the term (1:14, 18; 3:16, 18)—refers to the unique position that Christ holds; He is none other than God Himself.

- (2) *The Intellectual Conditions of the World.* Greek philosophy had challenged the intellectual and religious beliefs of the people, revealing the truly bizarre natures and activities of their gods. Thus these old beliefs began to evolve into legends and myths. Even the ideas of the Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato, who sought solace in worldly things, satisfied only the mind—not the soul—and soon became obsolete. Nevertheless, the wide diffusion and assimilation of Greek knowledge and culture opened the door for new ideas.

The Greeks also gave the Mediterranean world a universal language, which became a powerful vehicle for the Gospel, comparable to the printing press in Luther's day. Paul wisely used the Greek language to the Gospel's advantage in the New Testament church.

- (3) *The Spiritual Conditions of the World.* As mentioned above, the old state religions had lost their hold on many of the people, creating a spiritual vacuum. Therefore, religious syncretism began to develop, mystery cults multiplied, and Hermeticism (occult sciences, especially alchemy) and Gnosticism (religious movements that taught salvation through secret "knowledge," believing that matter was evil) became popular. Nevertheless, people began to seek the truth, which they ultimately found in the Person and work of Christ (John 14:6).

Prophets had been silent for 400 years. However, their prophecies were now pointing to the imminent appearance of the Messiah. It was at this time that the wise men from Persia or Media recognized His star in the East. Furthermore, there was a limit to the time in which He could appear. Christ was to come before the destruction of the second temple, as the Old Testament asserts, "... And *the Lord*, whom you seek, *will suddenly come to His temple*, ...' says the LORD of hosts" (Malachi 3:1, italics added). Therefore, the *fullness of time* was ordained by Providence. Almighty God set the stage for the coming of His Son, fulfilling His promises down to the minutest detail.

The Annunciation of His Birth

Luke 1:26–38, Matthew 1:18–25

The announcement of Christ's birth was preceded by another proclamation. While Zacharias administered the priest's office before the Lord, an angel appeared and gave him the promise that his wife Elizabeth would give birth to a son (Luke 1:5–25). Zacharias, however, did not believe the angelic message and became speechless until the promise was fulfilled and John the Baptist was born. John was sent by God to prepare the way for the Lord. Now Mary was Elizabeth's cousin, and God had also promised Mary a son, but He would be the Savior of the world—God's Son incarnate.² In those days, Mary went in haste to visit Elizabeth who, being filled of the Holy Spirit, immediately blessed Mary and the Christ Child within her womb (Luke 1:39–45). Filled with joy, Mary began to magnify the Lord (Luke 1:46–55). God also appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying that a son would be born in the home they were to establish (Matthew 1:18–25). Because of the truth of this angelic message we know that Jesus was virgin-born.

The Census

Luke 2:1–5

In those days, Augustus was sitting on the throne of the Roman Empire, and the touch of his finger could set the machinery of government in motion over nearly all of the civilized world. He was proud of his power and wealth, and it was one of his favorite occupations to compile a register of the populations and revenues of his vast dominions. Consequently, he issued an edict, as the evangelist Luke says, "that all the world should be registered," in other words, that a census—to serve as a basis for future taxation—should be taken of all his subjects. One of the countries affected by this decree was Palestine, whose king,

2. We should not worship Mary as divine, or place her above Jesus, even though God ordained that Jesus should be born of her and has highly favored her.

Herod the Great, was a vassal of Augustus. It set the whole country in motion; for, in accordance with ancient Jewish custom, the census was taken, not at the places where the inhabitants were residing at the time, but at the places to which they belonged as members of the original twelve tribes. These enrollments to be taxed were taken every fourteen years. In so doing, the Roman ruler—wicked and sinful as he was—was unwittingly accomplishing God’s purpose in fulfilling the prophecy that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem, rather than in Nazareth.

Jesus’ birth sets the birth dates for all other people. In history we use the letters B.C. and A.D.—B.C. meaning “Before Christ” and A.D., which stands for the Latin *anno Domini*, means “in the year of our Lord.” This decides the recording of all historical dates of all time. History is not merely a record of “History” in the affairs of men, as God sustains and governs all; but, in terms of our numerical dates on the calendars, *it recognizes the supreme Person of Christ in history*. Would that all who use the calendars and dates in history—past, present, and future—might knowingly, as well as unknowingly, say with Paul, “to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Ephesians 3:21).

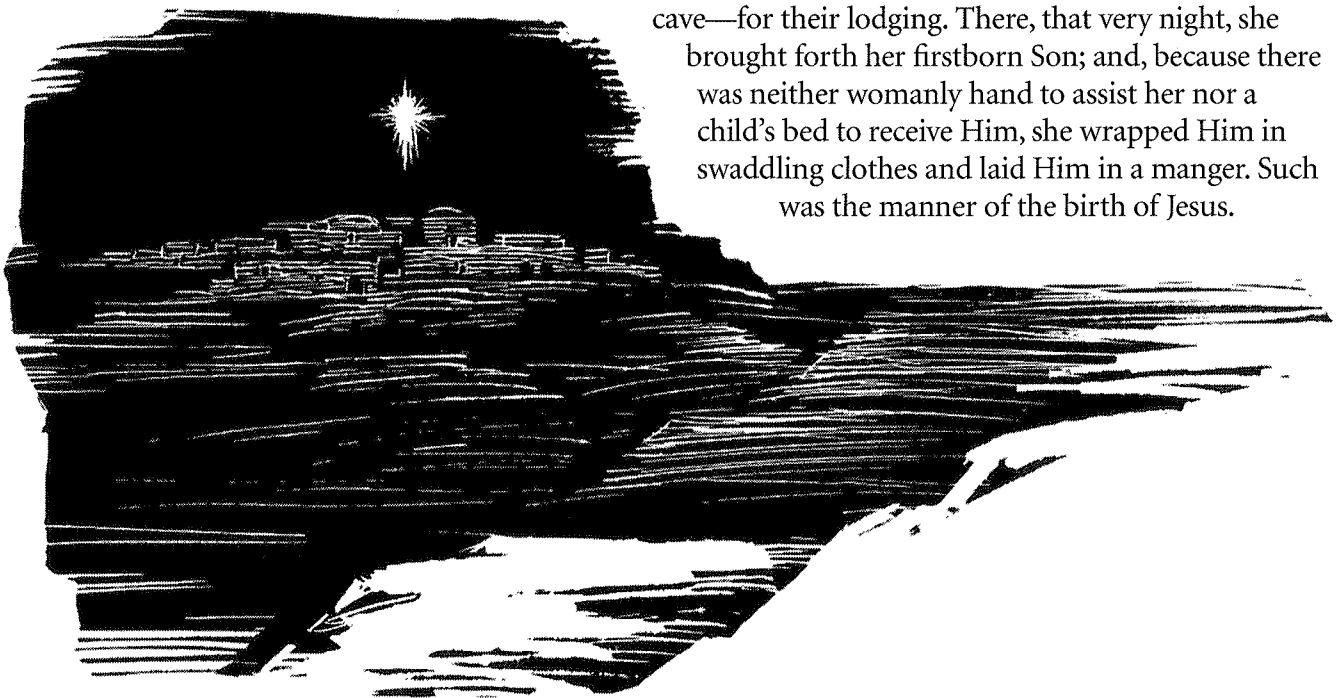
The Birth of Christ

The Nativity

Luke 2:1–7

Among those whom the edict of Augustus drove forth to the highways were a humble pair in the Galilean village of Nazareth—Joseph, the carpenter of the village, and Mary, his espoused wife. They had to go a journey of nearly one hundred miles in order to enroll themselves in the proper register; for, though peasants, they had the blood of kings in their veins and belonged to the ancient and royal town of Bethlehem in the far south of the country. Day by day the emperor’s will, like an invisible hand, forced them southward along the weary road, till at last they climbed the rocky ascent that led to the gate of the town. Most probably Joseph was daunted with anxiety, and Mary was well-nigh dead with fatigue. When they reached the inn, they found it crowded with strangers, who—bent on the same errand as themselves—had arrived before them. No friendly house opened its door to receive them, and they were

forced to use a nearby stable—most likely a shepherd’s cave—for their lodging. There, that very night, she brought forth her firstborn Son; and, because there was neither womanly hand to assist her nor a child’s bed to receive Him, she wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger. Such was the manner of the birth of Jesus.



The next morning the noise and bustle broke out again in the inn and inn yard; the citizens of Bethlehem went about their work; the registration proceeded; and, in the meantime, the greatest event in the history of the world had taken place. We never know where a great beginning may be happening. Every arrival of a new soul in the world is a mystery, and the potential and destiny of that person is known only to God. Joseph and Mary alone knew the tremendous secret—that on her, the peasant maiden and carpenter’s bride, had been conferred the honor of being the mother of Him who was the Messiah of her race, the Savior of the world, and the Son of God.

I never felt the full emotions of this scene till, one day, I stood in a room of an old inn in the market town of Eisleben in central Germany. I was told that on that very spot, four centuries ago—amidst the noise of a market day and the bustle of a public house—the wife of the poor miner Hans Luther, who happened to be there on business, being surprised like Mary with sudden distress, brought forth in sorrow and poverty the child who was to become Martin Luther—the hero of the Protestant Reformation.

Foretold in Ancient Prophecy

Micah 5:2

It had been foretold in ancient prophecy that He should be born on this very spot: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting” (Micah 5:2). The proud emperor’s decree drove southward the anxious couple. Nevertheless, another hand was leading them on—the hand of Him Who overrules the purposes of emperors and kings, of statesmen and legislative bodies, for the accomplishment of His designs, though they know them not. It was God alone who hardened the heart of Pharaoh, called Cyrus like a slave to His foot, made the mighty Nebuchadnezzar His servant, and in the same way could overrule for His own far-reaching purpose the pride and ambition of a potentate called Augustus Caesar.

The Group Around the Infant

Although Jesus made His entry on the stage of life so humbly and silently; *although* the citizens of Bethlehem dreamed not what had happened in their midst; *although* the emperor of Rome knew not that his decree had influenced the nativity of a King, who was yet to bear rule—not only over the Roman world, but over many a land where Rome’s eagles never flew; *although* the history of mankind went thundering forward in the channels of its ordinary interests, quite unconscious of the event which had happened, *yet it did not altogether escape notice*. As the babe leaped in the womb of the aged Elizabeth, when the mother of her Lord approached her, so, when He—who brought the NEW WORLD with Him—appeared, there sprang up anticipations and forebodings of the truth in various representatives of the OLD WORLD that was passing away.³ A dim and half-conscious thrill, which drew a group around the Infant’s cradle, went through these sensitive and waiting souls, here and there. Look at the group which gathered to gaze on Him! It represented in miniature the whole cast of characters that would confront Jesus during His future public ministry.

3. The reference here to the “new” and “old” worlds refers to the worlds before and after the coming of the Messiah—the “old world” of the Old Testament and the “new world” of the New Testament, until the present.

The Shepherds Represented Those of Lowly State

Luke 2:8–20

First came the shepherds from the neighboring fields. That which was unnoticed by the kings and great ones of this world was so absorbing a theme to the princes of heaven that they burst the bounds of the invisibility in which they shroud themselves, in order to express their joy and explain the significance of the great event. And, seeking the most worthy hearts to which they might communicate it, they found them in these simple shepherds, living the life of contemplation and prayer in the suggestive fields, *where* Jacob had kept his flocks, *where* Boaz and Ruth had been wedded, and *where* David—the great Old Testament type⁴ of Christ—had spent his youth. These simple shepherds—by the study of the secrets and needs of their own hearts—learned far more of the nature of the Savior who was to come than the Pharisees, amidst the religious pomp of the temple, or the scribes, burrowing without the seeing eye among the prophecies of the Old Testament. The angel directed them where the Savior was, and they hastened to the town to find Him. They were the representatives of the peasant people, with the “honest and good heart,” who afterwards formed the bulk of His disciples.

Simeon and Anna Represented the Devout

Luke 2:21–38

Next to them came Simeon and Anna, the representatives of the devout and intelligent students of the Scriptures, who at that time were expecting the appearance of the Messiah and afterwards contributed some of His most faithful followers. On the eighth day after His birth, the Child was circumcised, thus being “made under the law,” entering into the covenant, and inscribing His name in His own blood in the roll of the nation. Soon thereafter, when the days of Mary’s purification were ended, they carried Him from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord in the temple. It was the Lord of the temple entering the temple of the Lord; but few visitors to the spot could have been less noticed by the priests, for Mary—instead of offering the sacrifice usual in such cases—could only afford two turtle doves, the offering of the poor. Yet there were eyes looking on, undazzled by the shows and glitter of the world, from which His poverty could not conceal Him. Simeon, an aged saint, who in answer to many prayers had received a secret promise that he should not die till he had seen the Messiah, met the parents and the Child, when suddenly it shot through him like a flash of lightning that this at last was He; and, taking Him up in his arms, he praised God for the advent of the Light to lighten the Gentiles and the Glory of His people Israel. While he was still speaking, another witness joined the group. It was Anna, a saintly widow, who literally dwelt in the courts of the Lord, and had purified the eye of her spirit with the “euphrasy and rue”⁵ of prayer and fasting, till it could pierce with prophetic glance the veils of sense. She united her testimony to the old man’s, praising God and confirming the mighty secret to the other expectant souls who were looking for redemption in Israel.

4. A *type* is “a representation by one thing of another.” Bible students are especially interested in “types of Christ” found throughout Scripture. For example, Adam is a type of Christ (Romans 5:14) and so is Isaac (Hebrews 11:19); also the Passover is considered a type of Christ (1 Corinthians 5:7).

5. This phrase is undoubtedly an allusion to the poetic locution of John Milton—a Puritan and literary giant of the seventeenth century—encountered in his immortal work, *Paradise Lost* (Book XI, Line 414); here, Michael the Archangel purges Adam’s spiritual eye to see the full effect of the sin he had committed in the garden. Medicinally, *Euphrasia* (eyebright) and *rue* are herbs that have been used for centuries to cleanse the eyes and supposedly to make eyesight both sharp and clear, especially when vision becomes dim through overexertion of the eyes.

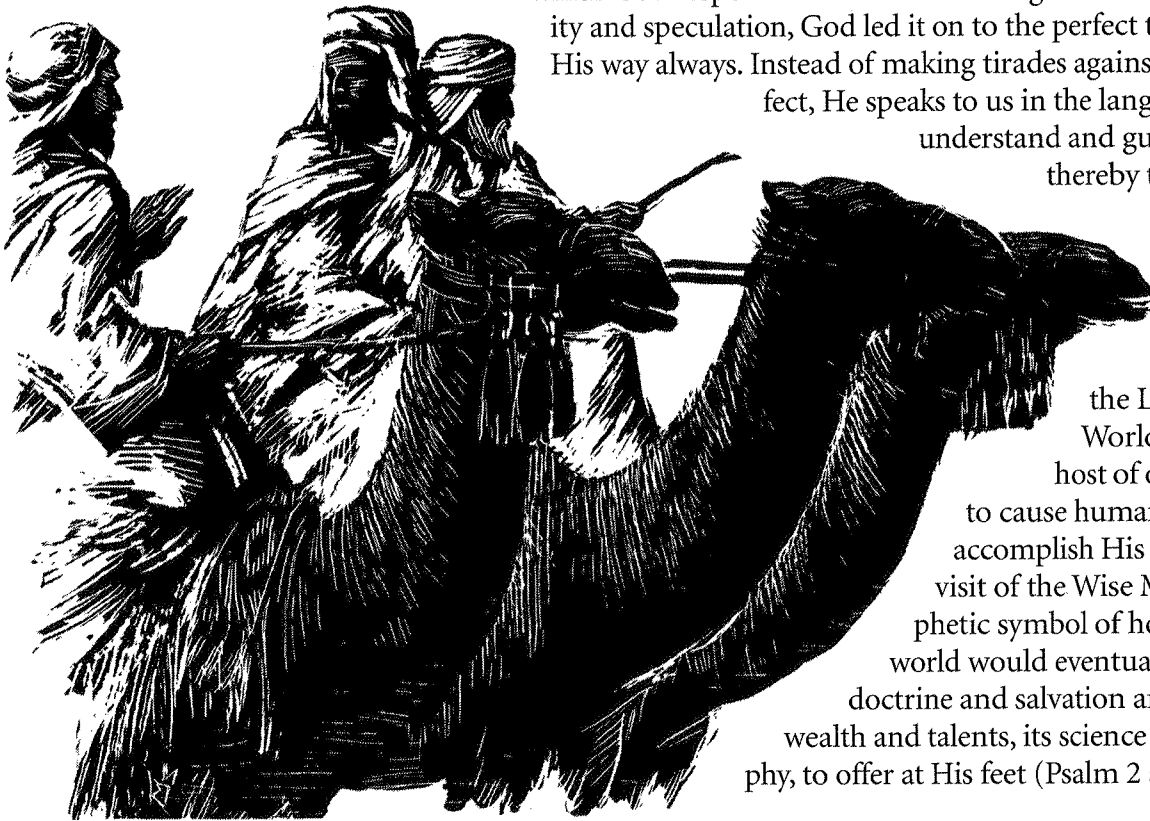
The Wise Men of the East Represented the Intelligentsia

Matthew 2:1–12

The shepherds and these aged saints were near the spot where the Messiah entered the world. Nevertheless, there were others, living at a much greater distance, who also took interest. It was probably after the presentation in the temple and after the parents had carried their child back to Bethlehem—where it was their intention to reside instead of returning to Nazareth—that He was visited by the Wise Men of the East. These were members of the learned class of the Magian leaders in the fields of science, philosophy, medicine, and religious mysteries in the countries beyond the Euphrates. Tacitus, Suetonius, and Josephus—noted historians—tell us that, in the regions from where the Magi came, there then prevailed an expectation that a great king was to arise in Judea. We know also, from the calculations of the great astronomer Kepler, that at this very time there was a brilliant temporary star visible in the heavens. Now the Magi were ardent students of astronomy and believed that any unusual phenomenon in the heavens was the sign of some remarkable event on earth; and it is possible that, connecting this star—to which their attention would undoubtedly be eagerly directed—with the expectation mentioned by the ancient philosophers, they were led westward to see if it had been fulfilled.

But there must also have been awakened in them a deeper desire, to which God responded. If their search began in scientific curiosity and speculation, God led it on to the perfect truth. That is His way always. Instead of making tirades against the imperfect, He speaks to us in the language we understand and guides us

thereby to the perfect truth. Just as God used astronomy to lead the Wise Men to the Light of the World, so He uses a host of other methods to cause human beings to accomplish His purposes. The visit of the Wise Men was a prophetic symbol of how the Gentile world would eventually hail His doctrine and salvation and bring its wealth and talents, its science and philosophy, to offer at His feet (Psalm 2 and Micah 4).



All Those Gathered Around the Christ Child

The visitors of the Christ Child represent Jesus' life in fullness—poverty and riches meeting at one place—with the working of evil Herod already active to slay this newborn King. All these gathered round to worship the Holy Child—the shepherds with their simple wonder, Simeon and Anna with a reverence enriched by the treasured wisdom and piety of centuries, and the Magi with the lavish gifts of the Orient and Gentile knowledge. It is noteworthy that these Wise Men represented science, philosophy, medical skill, and religious mysteries, and they gave Him expensive gifts and truly worshiped Him. So, it is true

today that *wise men still seek Jesus*. Old and young alike, who are indeed spiritually wise, will seek Christ Jesus and all His redemptive work.

The Horrific Face of Herod

Matthew 2:1–21

But, while these worthy worshippers were gazing down on Him, there came and looked over their shoulders a sinister and murderous face. It was the face of Herod the Great. This prince then occupied the throne of the country—the throne of David and the Maccabees. But he was an alien and low-born usurper. His subjects hated him, and it was only by Roman favor that he was maintained in his seat. He was able, ambitious, and violent. His reputation was as a cruel, crafty, crude, and despondent tyrant. He had been guilty of many a crime.

He had made his very palace swim in blood, having murdered his own favorite wife, three of his sons, and many of his relatives—not to mention many of those who were his subjects. He was now old and tortured with disease, remorse, the sense of unpopularity, and a cruel terror of every possible aspirant to the throne which he had usurped.

The Magi had naturally turned their steps to the capital, to inquire where He was to be born whose sign they had seen in the East. The suggestion touched Herod in his most painful place; but with diabolical hypocrisy he concealed his suspicions. Having learned from the priests that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, he directed the strangers there but arranged that they should return and tell him the very house where the new King was residing. He hoped to cut Him off with a single blow. But Herod was foiled; for, being warned by God, they did not come back to tell him but returned to their own country another way. Then his fury burst forth like a storm, and he sent his soldiers to murder every babe under two years of age in Bethlehem. He might as well have attempted to cut an invincible mountain asunder as to sever the chain of the divine purposes. “He thrust his sword into the nest, but the bird was flown,” for Joseph and Mary had fled with the Child to Egypt and remained there till Herod died. Then they returned and dwelt at Nazareth—being warned by God in a dream not to go to Bethlehem, for there they would have been in the kingdom of Herod Archelaus, the like-minded son of his blood-thirsty father. In reflection, Herod’s murderous face, glaring down on the Infant, was a sad prophecy of how the future powers of the world, in God’s perfect time, would persecute Christ and cut off His life from the earth.

