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Swaddling Clothes for a King

LUKE 2:1–20

For much of the twentieth century in Western society, giving birth was viewed as little more than a medical “procedure.” Hospitals. Doctors. Nurses. For a time hospitals wouldn’t even allow fathers to be present at birth.

Thankfully, the harsher, clinical atmosphere has softened, and we’re again recognizing the birth process as a normal part of life. Birthing rooms in some hospitals offer warm colors; older siblings are sometimes invited to visit, and Mom and Dad can spend some time alone with the newborn in an almost-like-home setting.

When Jesus was born, things were much different. No hospitals. No doctors. No nurses. The Gospel of Luke, written by a medical doctor, describes the event in a simple, natural way. Joseph and Mary had traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register for the required Roman census. “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” (Luke 2:6–7).

Who helped Mary with the delivery? We’re not told, but it’s reasonable to assume a midwife or some older women from the town assisted the mother-to-be. Every village must have had a group of wise, experienced women who helped young mothers through the process of delivery. Since both Mary and Joseph traced their family lines back to David, it’s reasonable to assume the women of Bethlehem would have come to the aid of these out-of-town relatives. There may have been no space available to house the young couple, but these women must surely have had room in their hearts to show compassion to a young woman going through labor and delivery for the first time.

If Joseph followed the custom of the day, he was outside waiting anxiously for news about the condition of his wife and child. Perhaps some of the men from the town were also gathered with him, offering words of encouragement and advice. “I’m sure everything will be fine. Perhaps the child will even be a son!” one might have said, unaware that Joseph already knew the sex of this unborn child! (See Matthew 1:18–21.)

After giving birth, Mary wrapped her newborn son in

“cloths” or, as you might remember from the King James Version of the Bible, “swaddling clothes” (Luke 2:7). But why would Mary wrap her son in strips of cloth bound tightly around His body?

Some ancient writers saw the swaddling clothes as a picture of the divine nature being concealed, swaddled as it were, in human flesh. Others saw a typological relationship between Jesus being wrapped in cloths and placed in a manger as a baby and later being “wrapped in a linen cloth” and laid “in a tomb cut into the rock” following His crucifixion (see Luke 23:53).

But could there be a simpler explanation?

In ancient times the wrapping of a child in strips of cloth was a sign of the parents’ loving reception of their child. In the Middle East, a newborn was bathed in warm saltwater and then wrapped in strips of soft, warm fabric. How do we know this? Two Old Testament passages give us insight into these practices.

The first is from the Book of Job. Toward the end of the book, God confronted Job and asked Job to explain how He created the world. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? . . . Or who enclosed the sea with doors when, bursting forth, it went out from the womb; when I made a cloud its garment, *and thick darkness its swaddling band?*” (Job 38:4–9, italics added).

God describes the “birth” of the world, and He pictures the dark clouds swirling around the planet as the strips of cloth He wrapped around this new creation.

If the Book of Job pictures God blessing His new creation by wrapping it in swaddling cloths, the prophet Ezekiel uses the imagery to picture a far sadder scene. He describes the history of the city of Jerusalem as the story of God’s compassion toward an unwanted child. The city’s origins gave no hint as to its future greatness as Israel’s capital and the site of God’s holy temple. He writes, “As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water for cleansing; you were not rubbed with salt *or even wrapped in cloths*” (Ezek. 16:4, italics added).

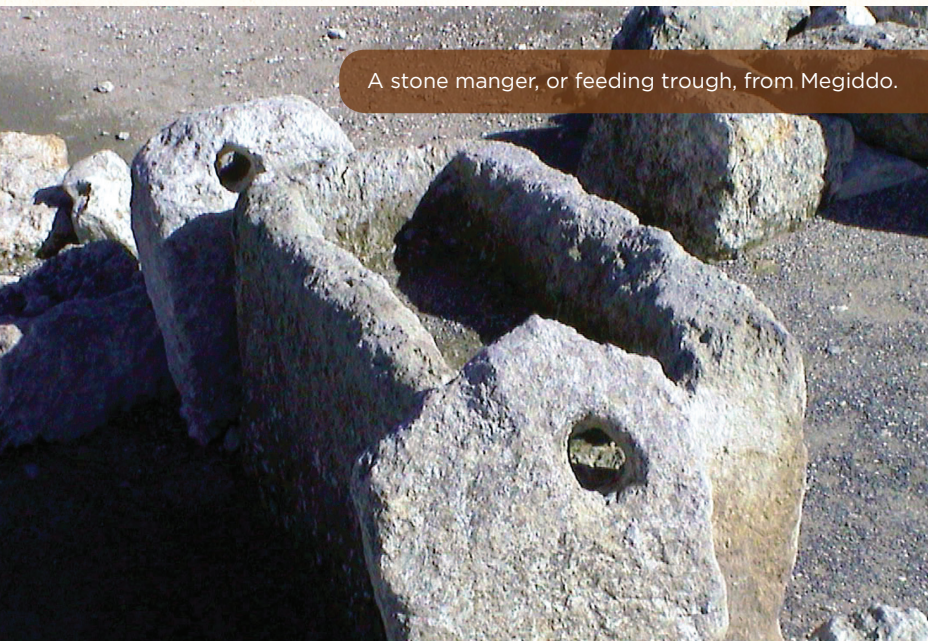
As an “unwanted child,” Jerusalem was neglected and uncared for until God showered His grace on her. But note carefully that wrapping the child in swaddling cloths was part of the normal care and love one would expect at a child’s birth.

If all newborns were wrapped in swaddling cloths, in what sense was the wrapping of Jesus in such cloths symbolic? Remember, when the angels appeared to the shepherds, they gave them a sign. “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” (Luke 2:11–12).

The key here is to note that the swaddling cloths by themselves are *not* the sign. The shepherds would find the child wrapped in swaddling cloths *and* lying in a manger. The likelihood of both events happening randomly was extremely remote. A toddler could conceivably climb into a feeding trough, but a child wrapped tightly in swaddling bands (as a newborn would be) could only be placed there deliberately. And what mother would place her newborn into the equivalent of a barnyard feeding trough? That’s how the shepherds would know they had found *the* child.

A newborn king—even the Jewish Messiah—wrapped



A stone manger, or feeding trough, from Megiddo.

in swaddling cloths? That wouldn't be unusual. The cut of the cloth and style of the fabric might have differed, but whether the newborn child was the son of a prince or a pauper, one would expect to find him swaddled.

But a newborn child—especially a king—being deliberately placed in a manger, a common feeding trough for animals? That certainly made it easy for these shepherds to search through the village until they found the child whose birth had just been announced. And yet, I wonder what was going through their minds as they started on their scavenger hunt, searching for the King of the Jews in a barnyard manger.

In many ways things haven't changed. People today still struggle to accept Jesus as the Messiah, or as the Son of God, or as their personal Savior, because He doesn't match their preconceived ideas. But God asks us, just as the angels did the shepherds, to look beyond expectations and focus on the facts. One doesn't expect to find a newborn king in a manger, but that's where this one was. That was the sign. And one doesn't expect God's Son, the Messiah, to die on a cross, but this one did . . . to pay the price for our sins.

And maybe that's what makes Jesus Himself such an amazing gift from God. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).



DO YOU HAVE A PERSONAL relationship with the Jesus of the Bible? Do you know the One who was born in Bethlehem, who died on a cross in Jerusalem to pay the penalty for your sin, who rose from a borrowed tomb three days later, who ascended to heaven, and who is coming back again? If not, why not begin your thirty-day journey of discovery by coming to know this one about whom God said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased” (Matt. 3:17)?

Read through the Gospel of Luke to learn what God says about this one called Jesus. And perhaps, like those shepherds so long ago, you will find yourself “glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them” (Luke 2:20).



Wise Men from Where?

MATTHEW 2:1–18

Today might not be Christmas, but since when does the Christmas story need to be limited to December 25? In fact, although the Western church celebrates Jesus' birth on that date, we don't know the exact day He was born. The earliest reference to His birth being on December 25 was written a few centuries after the time of Christ. And while this could be the correct date, we simply can't be sure.

One thing we *do* know, however, is that the presents for Jesus never arrived on the day He was born. To understand why, let's go back to Bethlehem and look more closely at the details of His birth.

On the night Jesus was born, a heavenly host of angels blasted away the darkness to announce His birth to the shepherds. They went to Bethlehem to find the baby, who was swaddled in strips of cloth and lying in a manger.

Early church tradition places the manger in a cave, and that does make good sense. Bethlehem is located in the limestone hills that form the mountainous backbone of Judea. Thousands of natural caves dot the hillsides in the region, and many are used as sheepfolds. It's easy to imagine a homeowner in Bethlehem using the cave just outside his house as a shelter for his animals.

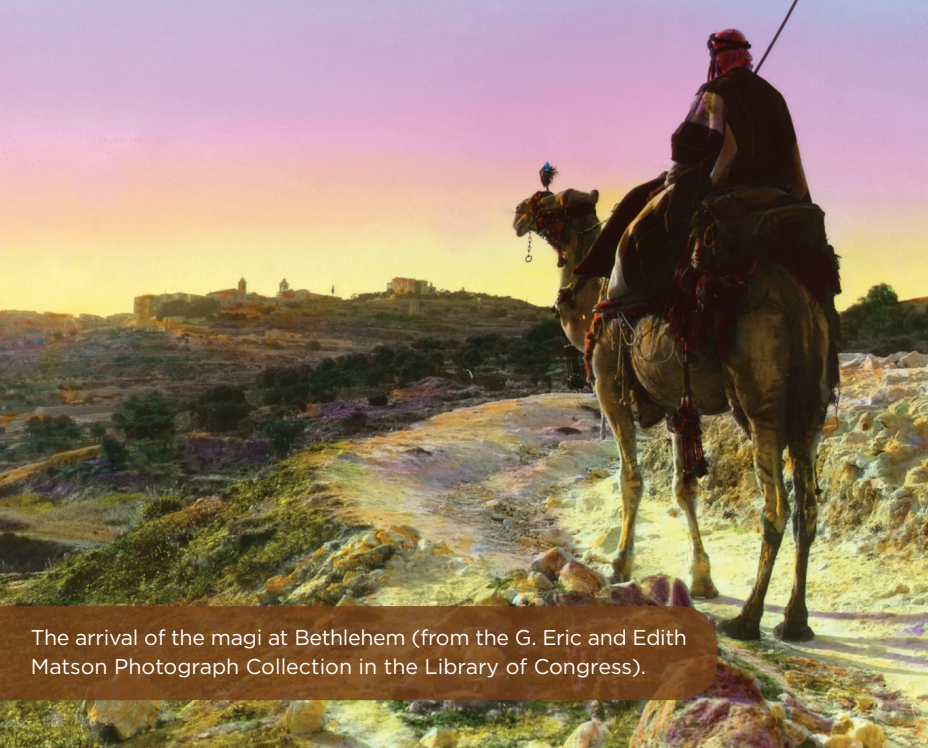
Eight days after His birth the baby was circumcised and named Jesus, or *Yeshua*—the Hebrew name Joshua—which means “the LORD is salvation.” Forty days after His birth, Joseph and Mary made the five-mile journey to Jerusalem with their infant son, “to present Him to the Lord,” as Luke describes it in 2:22. They made this trip in strict obedience to the Law of Moses, fulfilling the command given in Leviticus 12.

The fact that they offered “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons” (Luke 2:24) tells us something of the financial condition of this young family. You see, the Law said the woman was to bring “a one year old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering” (Lev. 12:6). But then it made allowance for those without the financial means to do so. “But if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two young pigeons” (v. 8). Joseph and Mary couldn't afford the cost of a lamb.

The Gospel of Matthew picks up the account of Jesus' birth from this point. Mary and Joseph must have traveled back to Bethlehem and resided there for some time. Herod was still ruling as king, though the end of his despotic reign was drawing near. Somehow the birth of this rival king had escaped his notice. That is, until a caravan of wise men rode into Jerusalem.

Tradition has fixed the number of wise men at three, and has even supplied us with their names: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. But the Bible tells us neither the number of wise men nor their names. What the Bible *does* tell us, however, is quite revealing. Matthew describes these travelers as "magi from the east," and this has led to much speculation. Some believe these travelers were from Babylon and trace their interest in the birth of the Messiah back to the time of Daniel, who was placed in charge of the wise men of Babylon (Dan. 2:48).

Others see in the word *magi* links to the Persians, who lived in what is now called Iran. Magi were the priestly caste of the Persian Zoroastrian religion. They paid particular attention to astronomy and astrology. Certainly they would have noticed an unusual—and unexpected—star in the sky. But I'm not sure if we can read too much into their identification based on this one word, because the same Greek word, *magos*, is used elsewhere



The arrival of the magi at Bethlehem (from the G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection in the Library of Congress).

to describe a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet on the island of Cyprus during the time of Paul (Acts 13:6–8). The word seems to describe individuals known for their wisdom or ability to ferret out knowledge, whether through a God-given ability (like Daniel), or through occult activity, astrology, or the interpretation of dreams. It was used to describe people from Persia, Babylon, and even Cyprus.

There is a third possibility for the identity of the wise men, though it's not as well known. These wise men

would also have lived east of Judah, but not as far as Babylon or Persia. It's possible that these wise men were *sheikhs*, Arab princes of the desert who came to find the Messiah. The possibility isn't as far-fetched as it might first seem.

The Book of Isaiah includes a fascinating prediction that is often overlooked in the midst of the other amazing prophecies in that book. In Isaiah 60, the prophet writes, "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. . . . *The wealth of the nations will come to you. A multitude of camels will cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba will come; they will bring gold and frankincense, and will bear good news of the praises of the LORD*" (Isa. 60:1–6, italics added).

A light will shine, and men will come on camels from the Arab kingdoms of the East bearing gold and frankincense. Sound familiar? The groups named by Isaiah are Arab tribes from the Arabian Peninsula. Imagine, Arabs coming to celebrate the arrival of the Jewish Messiah!

But let's return to the last of the events surrounding Christ's birth.

Herod—and everyone else in Jerusalem—must not have seen the star when it first appeared at the time of Christ's birth, but these wise men had. After their meeting with

Herod, the star *reappeared* to the wise men and “stood over” (Matt. 2:9) the house in Bethlehem to which it was leading them. Think about that for a second. This must have been more than just a mere star, planet, meteor, or comet. Such heavenly bodies could point you in a general direction, but they couldn’t identify a specific house in a small village.

So what was the star?

Could the original sign in the sky have been the angelic choir in Luke 2 that appeared to the shepherds? No one in Jerusalem bothered to look to the sky that night when “an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them” (v. 9). As bright as God’s glory was when it accompanied this angel, imagine what happened when “suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host” (v. 13). The glow in the sky must have been visible for miles, perhaps for hundreds of miles. Could this be what the wise men saw that first night? Certainly it’s possible. And the reappearance of this angel could be the “star” that guided the wise men to Bethlehem, to the very house where Jesus and His parents were staying.

Significantly, the wise men found Jesus and His parents living in a house, not a stable (Matt. 2:11). Months had passed since the time of Jesus’ birth. Perhaps some of the many people who had come to Bethlehem to be

registered in the census had now gone home. Or perhaps some family in town had pity on this poor couple with the new baby and had made room for them in their home. But for whatever reason, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are now in more comfortable surroundings. But only for a little while longer.

The wise men must have departed from Herod in the late afternoon or early evening. And Herod carefully calculated how long it would take for these wise men to accomplish his bidding. Two hours or less to ride to Bethlehem (just a five-mile journey). An hour or so to search the village for the child. Perhaps it would be too late to return to Jerusalem that night, but they should definitely be reporting back early the next day.

The wise men and Joseph must have had their separate dreams that very same night. Joseph and Mary left early the next morning, fleeing toward Egypt, while the wise men hastily sought another roadway back toward the East—one that avoided Jerusalem. How long did Herod wait before sending his soldiers to Bethlehem? Knowing Herod, not too long!



AND THAT BRINGS US BACK to Mary,

Joseph, and Jesus . . . to Jesus' Christmas gifts . . . and to us. How could a family so poor that it couldn't even afford the normal sacrifice for a newborn son ever hope to get away from someone as powerful as Herod the Great? Fleeing to Egypt was as daunting a journey for them as running away to a far-off country halfway around the world would be for us today.

But remember Isaiah's prophecy . . . and Matthew's record of its fulfillment. "The wealth of the nations will come to you. . . . They will bring gold and frankincense" (Isa. 60:5-6). Indeed, the magi "presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh" (Matt. 2:11). God's provision—His "Christmas present"—arrived right on time!

So what does the future hold for you? Our world seems to be facing uncertain times. But pause and remember that God knows your every need. The God who took care of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus is the God who has also promised to take care of you.