

“In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him nothing was made that has been made.”<sup>1</sup>

The words of John. The first words in the gospel he wrote. Apostle John, known as the one Jesus loved.<sup>2</sup> The words of a best friend of Jesus.

Christmas stories, baby Jesus, right? My story starts long before there was a baby Jesus. In the beginning was the Word. Before there was earth. Before time. That is when God began preparing for the baby Jesus.

“The Word was with God, and the Word was God.” From his writings, it seems as if Jesus and the Holy Spirit revealed things to John that no one else heard.

“He was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him nothing was made that has been made.”<sup>3</sup>

#### MAP INTRO

Jesus existed in the beginning...before anything, existed. Everything that exists was made through him and by him. And, he made it all out of ... nothing.

I wish I had known those things when I was a prophet, but John didn't write them until about eight hundred years after me. I'm a prophet in the time of King Hezekiah.

Put yourself in my shoes, uh, sandals, as it were. I live a couple of centuries after King David...six centuries or so after Moses...at least thirteen centuries after Abraham... to help you. I know the Pentateuch, what you call the first five books of the Old Testament. I'm familiar with some of the rest of the Old Testament, but much of it hasn't been written yet, or at least made available to me.

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:1-3

<sup>2</sup> John 13:23, 19:26, 21:7, 21:20

<sup>3</sup> John 1:1-3

I know the stories of Abraham and God's promises to him. I know that his descendants are to be a light to the world. Yet, in my time, his descendants focus only on themselves, and they control a tiny, unimportant country.

I know the stories of Moses and the promises God made to him. I know God promised to be the protector and provider for the Hebrew people, but those promises were conditioned on the Hebrews being obedient. Which they have not been.

I know the stories of King David, and how God promised him an everlasting dynasty. However, that promise was conditional, and the Jews are not fulfilling the conditions. It is no wonder that David's dynasty is teetering on the brink of extinction.

You see, I interpret everything in light of those kinds of promises...the promises to Abraham, and Moses, and David. Everything I write, everything I hear from the other prophets. Those promises guide my understanding.

"Working on mysteries without any clues."<sup>4</sup> Maybe you know the lyrics to that classic song of your time? That's me. I know things are not what they are supposed to be, but I don't know what they are supposed to be, or how to get them there. Yeah, mystery. The Apostle Paul will use that word over and over in his writings.

The Apostle Peter says that we prophets are pointing toward Christ and the salvation that he will bring, but we really don't know what we are writing about.<sup>5</sup> We prophets are in the middle of a giant mystery, and don't know it. Paul even writes that prophets promise the Gospel<sup>6</sup>... we don't even know there is such a thing as a Gospel.

Many of the things we write about have to do with Jesus, but we do not know that. Oh, they may also be applicable to the nation of Israel, but we have no clue that some of our prophecies are really about Jesus.

There are many prophecies about Jesus as an adult, but it's the Christmas season. Let's look at prophecies we wrote about the birth of Jesus...hundreds of years before Jesus was born.

"For to us a child is born, a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulders: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bob Seger, "Night Moves"

<sup>5</sup> 1 Peter 1:10-12, 2 Peter 1:21

<sup>6</sup> Romans 1:2

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 9:6

By the time of the birth of Jesus, the Jewish people were looking for a Messiah, a savior. They knew they were to receive a savior because of many verses in the Old Testament. Their expectation of a Messiah was a man who would lead the nation of Israel to recapture their glory days under King David. The expected Messiah would likely be a warrior who would lead a rebellion against Rome, and reinstate Israel as the ruling country in the region. He might also be a spiritual leader who would lead the reconciliation of the Jews to their God.

It is within that context that this most startling prophecy is found. "For to us a child is born, a son is given".

The Messiah will not come as a warrior-king, but as a baby boy?!

God's cosmic joke on the religious leaders and government maybe. Who could have foreseen a rebellion led by a baby. Especially a baby who is The Mighty God!

My contemporary prophet and friend, Micah, drops the next bombshell. The baby will not be born in Rome. Or Antioch or Ephesus, or any of the great cities of his time, which would be advantageous for future ruler in that time. And, of course, all great people only come from great cities. He will not even be born in Jerusalem, the preeminent city of the Jews. The baby will be born in the tiny, off the beaten path, oh...little, town of Bethlehem, a few miles south of Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup> Why Bethlehem?

Jeremiah and I, and others, prophesy that the Messiah will be a descendant of King David.<sup>9</sup> King David was born in....? Bethlehem!

The next prophecy is one that has proven to be controversial through the ages. It is my own prophecy, so I can tell you with certainty what it meant when I wrote it. According to many versions of the Bible, Isaiah 7:14 says, "Therefore, the Lord himself shall give you a sign; behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."

A virgin will conceive and bear a son? Never been done before! Impossible, unthinkable...unimaginable to the people of my time.

Immanuel. Call his name Immanuel. That name?...it means "God with us." To those of us who grew up as Israelites, that name would not have been odd. After all, God has been with his people since the Exodus...at least some of the time. We have no way to conceive of the idea that God, as a man, could actually live among us.

Psalms 72 was written by King Solomon. Maybe he hoped this prophecy was to be about him, instead of a savior. "The kings of Tarshish and the coasts will pay him tribute; the kings of Sh'va and S'va will offer gifts." In other words, kings from distant places will offer gifts to the savior.

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<sup>8</sup> Micah 5:2

<sup>9</sup> 2 Samuel 7:12-13, Isaiah 11:1, Jeremiah 23:5-6

Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, offers a sad prophecy about the timeframe of the birth of the Messiah. Children will be killed.<sup>10</sup>

Another one that I wrote. There will be a messenger that arrives prior to the revealing of the Messiah. This messenger will be a kingly herald who proclaims the existence of the Lord.

So, if you live in my time and are able to see through the mystery, and interpret the relevant Scriptures well, here is what you would expect about the coming Savior: he will be preceded by a messenger, he will be a descendant of King David; his mother will be a virgin; he will be born in Bethlehem; children will be killed because of him; he will receive gifts from kings; and...the long awaited Messiah will come as a baby.

“In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God.” And then God was with us.

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<sup>10</sup> Jeremiah 31:15

There's a bunch of people who start the Christmas season early. Too early by most others' estimations. Some claim it's mostly commerce driven. Not always. Believe it or not, I've heard of a family who starts their Christmas on May 1. True story. And it's very difficult for them to wait even that long to begin the preparation for the celebration of that blessed event... that they just celebrated four months prior. So, you may be a two weeks before? Three weeks before? The day after Thanksgiving? Just know this, the one true God started early to prepare for the birth of the Messiah, earlier than anyone's story you've heard. I'll start with his actions about a thousand years before.

[VIDEO OPEN]

A thousand years before Jesus was born, King David ruled over Israel —the height of its glory. He defeated virtually all of the surrounding nations, he instilled peace in the region, he gathered an enormous amount of wealth. Yet, Jesus said that David acknowledged the day would come when a new Lord would rule.<sup>1</sup> And Jesus strongly indicated he was that Lord.

Several prophecies in the Old Testament testify that the Messiah would be a descendant of King David. For that to happen God had to keep the line of David alive through all of the upcoming disasters that were to befall Israel. And, there were a lot of them.

Babylon! The Babylonians conquered Judah, the Southern Kingdom. They wiped out Jerusalem, took all of the prominent Jews into exile. At that time, it appeared to be the end of the existence of the Hebrew nation, this would include the kingly line of David.

However, God planned for the Israelites to be in exile for only about seventy years, at which time they would return to Israel. While the Israelites were in captivity, they became familiar with the Babylonians. More importantly, the Babylonians became familiar with the Israelites and their God. Then, the Persians defeated the Babylonians, and that meant the Persians became familiar with the Israelites and their God.

The Babylonians and the Persians were the repositories of knowledge and great wisdom, information, and advanced technology in that part of the world. In those cultures, anything they learned was sure to be written down, catalogued, remembered, and used at the appropriate time. Their records went back to the time writing was invented.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 21:41-45

I am one of the wise men, a magician or Magi, of the Babylonians and Persians, in the time of Jesus. You can learn of my predecessors in the book of *Daniel*. The Magi revere wisdom and knowledge. Of all the wise men in Babylon and Persia, Daniel was the wisest. You can be assured that we captured as much of his wisdom as we could, and have studied it through the ages.

My predecessors learned firsthand from Daniel that the God of the Jews is the most powerful of all gods.

Our prideful King Nebuchadnezzar went from threatening to kill Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, to witnessing a mindboggling miracle that none of us could explain. The king praised God, and defended all Jews. Throughout Daniel's life, we continued to learn the unmatched power of the one true God of the Jews.

Something else the Magi learned from the Jewish prophets — one day, a savior will come. We didn't know when, we didn't who this savior would be, but we watched the signs, we studied world events, so that when that savior appears, we will be able to worship him. And with our fabulous wealth, we expect to take lavish gifts to this long-awaited savior.

Based on historical precedent, the Magi naturally assumed the coming savior would be an earthly king or, at least, a very prominent military general or politician.

The hopes of the Magi were first sparked when Alexander of Macedonia ascended to the throne at the age of twenty. Alexander the Great. Rumors of his wisdom and military prowess reached us immediately, and we dispatched three Magi to be observers.

We learned that Alexander had acquired much of his wisdom from his famous tutor, Aristotle. We believed that if he chose to couple his earthly wisdom with Godly wisdom, he could be the savior of the Jews.

Only two years after becoming king, Alexander invaded one of the greatest kingdoms of the world...the Persian Empire. In two decisive battles, he overthrew Darius the Second, and conquered the Persian Empire. In 334 BC, at age twenty-two, Alexander controlled all of the land from Greece to Persia, including the land of Israel!

This was the critical point for the Magi. Would Alexander turn his attention to Israel, or to other matters? It didn't take long for us to be disappointed. Alexander continued his military ways and spread his empire to India. He and his followers were only intent on spreading the culture of the Greeks, which they did. Ironically, Alexander the Great died in Babylon, where the Magi have always lived!

It is in my lifetime before an earthly king catches attention of the Magi again. The Roman emperor, Augustus. He has led such a charmed life and is doing such powerful deeds that it can only be that the Jewish God is guiding his footsteps. In just a few decades, he has consolidated

Rome's power over vast distances. There is peace throughout the empire, and little political bickering. People are more prosperous than ever before. The Greek language of Alexander the Great is the international language, so all can communicate easily.

For the first few years of his rule, we watch him closely: how will he treat Israel? Basically, he treats Israel like any other country of the Empire, but does seem to give the Jews of Israel a few extra privileges. Most likely those are done out of expediency and keeping the peace, not because he has any special love for the Jewish people. We conclude that Augustus is not the savior of the Jews, but that God is surely using Augustus to prepare the world for the Jewish Savior.

We can divine that there is only one earthly king left who has the potential to be the savior of the Jews. Ironically, the Romans already made this man the King of the Jews. His name is King Herod the Great.

Herod has ruled over Israel since 34 BC, about three decades. The country is more prosperous than it has been since the time of King David. His magnificent building projects are second to none. Caesarea, Herodium, the Temple Mount, Masada, and more. Israel has become one of the critical hubs of world commerce because of Herod's building projects.

We, the Magi of Babylon and Persia, who have been at watch with wisdom handed down over centuries and centuries, have heard rumors that King Herod is declining mentally, but is still capable of rebelling against the Romans if he chooses. The time is now if Herod the Great is to prove he is the savior of the Jews. We can't imagine any other alternatives if the savior is to come in our lifetimes.

Because of Rome's oppression of the Jews, it makes sense that the savior will come soon. We have heard rumors of people claiming to be the Messiah, but none of them have proven to be viable. My friends and I fully believe the Messiah will come in our lifetimes.<sup>2</sup>

God has been preparing the world for the coming of the savior of the Jews, the savior of the world. In the meantime, we wait for it to happen. Wait for a sign. For a sign that the savior of the Jews has appeared. We Magi expect to be heading to King Herod's palace soon. We have our three camels packed with lavish gifts to give him. We are prepared to acknowledge the long-awaited savior of the Jews.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 3:15

Elizabeth. It's a family name. From Elisheba. The wife of my distant relative, Aaron, of the priestly tribe of Levi. From the Exodus. I am a descendant of Aaron, I am of the priestly tribe of Levi. I will never be a priest, of course. As you can see, I am a woman. Women are mothers...but not me. I don't have... children. I wanted children, prayed for children. It just didn't...happen. Anyway, anyway, I'm Elizabeth...did I tell you that already?

My husband's name is Zechariah. He *is* a priest. We live in the hill country of Judea<sup>1</sup>, a region encompassing Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Hebron.

We are known as being righteous people. My husband and I try very hard to observe all of the commands of the Lord. (wry smile) It's not too hard really. We don't have any children to distract us. Push our buttons, or all the things that go along with that. And, we are old. Way too old to ever change our situation. You know, to have children. So, it's just us.

I'm not bitter, really, just a little worried. Moses wrote that if someone follows the laws, the Lord will love them and give them children.<sup>2</sup> Have Zechariah and I not been good enough? Faithful enough? I don't know how we could have done more! But, you know. Luke, he's a doctor, blames our childlessness on me...like most of our society does.<sup>3</sup> It's just how it is. I wish I could change it, but, it's how it is. I wanted children but I'm blamed for not having them...anyway, anyway...so, that's us, that's me. Moving on.

My husband is of the priestly division of Abijah, the eighth of twenty-four divisions. There's all these divisions of priests and <sup>4</sup> they rotate through the duties at the temple in Jerusalem. Priestly duties, and such.

One fateful day, his division is on duty at the Temple. For the first, and last, time in his life, my husband is chosen to offer incense at the altar. Only one priest can go into the altar. And if he's not pure, he will be struck dead immediately. And even if he dies, nobody can go in to get him, because then they will die. So, we continue the tradition of tying a rope to the leg of the priest

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:39

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 7:12-14

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:8

<sup>4</sup> 1 Chronicles 24



so if the Lord kills him, he can be dragged out. Anyway, anyway, it's a big deal, and Zechariah is chosen, and we're thrilled. And a little nervous, but thrilled nonetheless.

As the worshipers assemble, Zechariah goes behind the massive curtain, the curtain that separates the rest of the temple from the altar. He begins praying. He sees an angel standing on the table. On the *right* side of the table. He trembles with fear...Not the angel, Zechariah, of course, Zechariah trembles with fear.

The angel tells him that our prayers have been answered. We will have a son. We are to name him John. People will rejoice with us He will be great in the sight of God. He is not to ever have fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit before birth. He will turn many people to God...and this, listen to this...he is to prepare the way for the Lord by preparing the people for the Lord.

Zechariah is incredulous. "How this can be?" He asks the angel, "Because we are so old." The angel, he's Gabriel, he reveals that he is Gabriel! *THE* Gabriel who stands in the presence of God. He has been sent to tell my Zechariah the good news, which will certainly occur. Zechariah doesn't believe him! And because of his disbelief, my husband will be unable to speak until these things happen.

Outside, the people are getting worried. Zechariah is taking so long. Is he dead? Should we pull him out? They don't. Zechariah comes out, but he can't say a word. He makes motions. The priests understand that he has seen a vision.

Zechariah rushes back to our house and tells me the good news...or rather, writes me the good news. I immediately become pregnant. I praise the Lord for his favor.

We live in the hill country...a very quiet place. My pregnancy goes easily, and we lead peaceful lives. Content that we will have a special son. Six months speed by as if it were six days. I hear a knock on the door, and welcome the person to come in.

Mary, comes through the door. She's my cousin, much younger than me. Much. And, at the sound of her voice, my baby jumps with joy. I am filled with the Holy Spirit, and begin blessing her. In my joy, I realize that I am to serve Mary, and my son is to serve the baby she will have.

For the next three months, Mary stays with me. Talk about a special bond, nothing brings women closer than pregnancy and children. I believe our babies will have the same tight bond. My due date draws near, Mary goes back to her hometown, Nazareth, about a hundred miles away. Clearly pregnant herself, and I am thrilled for her, although she certainly has challenges waiting for her in Nazareth.

God grants me an easy birth process. My neighbors gather around the house in great joy as they share in the news that I have a son. Eight days later, they gather again for the circumcision ceremony for my child. They start to name him after his father. "No! He is to be called John!" I insist that the child is to be named John.

The crowd is uneasy. This is against tradition. Nobody in our family is named John. Surely the father will not agree. They turn to Zechariah for his response, but he still can't speak. Frustrated, he grabs a tablet and scrawls one short sentence. "His name is John."

Immediately, Zechariah praises God. My husband is able to speak, and he praises God. The neighbors are awestruck, they rejoice with us. The news spreads throughout all of the hill country. My son, John, will be a special child.

Over the coming weeks, the Holy Spirit reveals just how special our son will be. John is to be the one who prepares the people for the coming Messiah. He prepares the way for the coming king.

That phrase may not mean much to you, but it meant everything to us. In our time, the kings and emperors had complete control over their subjects' lives. Life and death control. People would do anything to please their rulers.

One of the few unpleasant aspects of being a wealthy, powerful ruler was traveling. Rich and poor alike had to suffer the bumps of the roads, lengthy travel times, poor lodgings. If an important king was known to be on his way, the people would go to great lengths to ease their travel, to please the one who had control over their lives. Fill the holes in the road. Straighten out curvy sections. Flatten hilly parts. Plant trees and shrubs. Anything to make the travel more pleasant and easy.

The coming Messiah must surely be more important than any earthly king. How will our son prepare the people? How will he prepare their minds, and hearts? (long pause)

We are country people, not wise teachers in Jerusalem. What are Zechariah and I to do? Should we keep him at home and teach him, or send him away to be taught? We struggle with those kinds of decisions, and eventually decide to keep him at home. (smiling) Of course, he doesn't spend much time in the house. That child loves the outdoors, and the wilder the better.

My dream of having a child was granted to me. A miracle. A dream of my priestly lineage of Aaron was also granted, an even more amazing miracle, the way maker for the Messiah. (starts to get up, sits back)

Proud mother? Yes, none prouder than me. Here is what the Messiah will say about my son. "Among those born of women, none have risen any greater than John the Baptist."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 11:11

The Bible does not mention me directly. Or indirectly. Yet, you know with certainty that I existed. How? Because you know my daughter, Mary, existed. Everybody has a mother, except for Adam and Eve. (smiles) I am a Jewish mother, and I have Jewish mother dreams. That my child finds the perfect husband, and that my grandchildren are special. Is there anything better than that?

#### MAP INTRO

There are other early writings about me, but the Bible is silent. Think of me as a typical Jewish wife and mother. More family oriented than the Roman mothers of my time. But, I guess, wives and mothers from anywhere at any time have a lot in common. Especially when it comes to loving our children. And grandchildren.

My husband and I are both from the tribe of Judah. When Joshua conquered the Promised Land, the tribe of Judah possessed the hill country south and west of Jerusalem, and the coastal plain and the desert all the way to Egypt.

Since the return of the Jews from Babylon over four centuries ago, many Jewish people have been mobile, and don't live strictly in ancestral lands. My husband and I are examples of that. We live in Nazareth, in the area originally granted to the tribe of Zebulun.

In modern time, the population of Nazareth is somewhat less than 100,000, with the majority being Arabic. In my time, Nazareth has less than 500 residents, virtually all Jewish. Small enough that you know almost everybody, but large enough to have a synagogue and a town water well.

Like virtually all towns in Israel, we can look around us and see the locations of many Old Testament stories. Nazareth, perched on a hillside, we can see many miles in some directions.

To the west is Mount Carmel, where Elijah was victorious over the false prophets of Queen Jezebel and King Ahab. Not far to the south is Megiddo (meh-ghee'-doe), the famous city that housed the chariots of King Solomon. A little further south is the Spring of Harod (hah-rod'), where Gideon launched his victorious campaign over the Midianite hordes. It sits below Mount Gilboa, where King Saul was defeated and killed by the Philistines.

Directly below us is a spur of the trade route named Way of the Sea. We see the brightly colored camels and traders shuttling wares back and forth from Egypt to Damascus. Isaiah

spoke of our little location, “the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor the Way to the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.”<sup>1</sup>

The trade route runs in a valley, the Jezreel Valley. There are many stories in the Bible involving the Jezreel Valley, but my favorite is the story of Deborah, the judge and prophetess.<sup>2</sup> Deborah wanted Barak to lead the battle against Sisera, who was oppressing the Israelites. Barak was reluctant, he wanted Deborah to lead. Deborah told him a woman would get the credit for winning the battle.

I love to tell that story to my daughter, Mary. Our only daughter. Mary is the light of our lives. From her birth, my husband and I have inundated her with Scripture. She loves the Lord more than anyone I have ever known. She is completely obedient to us as parents, and to the Lord.

My husband and I have so completely protected her that I am a little concerned about her future. For about fifteen years now, we’ve never let her out of the house without being accompanied by me or my husband. Mary is the definition of a good girl. (huge smile) We trust her completely, but in a small town like Nazareth, even the slightest stumble can ruin a girl’s reputation and keep her from getting a good husband.

Very soon, we will no longer be concerned about that. Mary is recently betrothed to be married to Joseph. Joseph! Truly a God-send to us. In a village of only a few hundred, you can’t expect to find a man who is so God-fearing and gentle. He is a skilled craftsman and makes a decent living.

Betrothed. That word is important to us in Nazareth. Betrothal is a solemn contract between two families, not just two individuals. It is an agreement that two individuals will get married. At the time of the contract, the future groom pays a price to the future bride’s parents. The contract is so binding that if the wedding is called off, the couple has to obtain a divorce.

I’m proud to say, that in the history of our village, no betrothal has been broken prior to marriage. A testament to how we revere betrothal. About the only thing that could cause that to happen is if the woman were to get pregnant. But the broken betrothal would be the least of their worries. We are ultra-conservative here in our little village. Because of committing fornication and adultery, the woman would be in danger of being stoned to death.

That cannot possibly happen. Not in our case. Mary is never left alone with Joseph. We see to it that! Or any other man prior to her wedding for that matter. In a small village, in a small house, it’s not hard for her father and me to accomplish that.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 9:1

<sup>2</sup> Judges 4-5

There is another reason that the marriage of our Mary and Joseph is extra special. Joseph is a descendant of David. Luke, the New Testament writer, makes that clear. Although it is not absolute, many scholars believe Matthew indicates that Mary is a descendant of David, as well. Either way, their children will be counted as being descendants of King David.

If their firstborn child is a son, he will qualify to be the Messiah that we Jews are waiting for! Probably won't be. Hasn't happened yet after hundreds of years of waiting. But, it's exciting to even be in that category, don't you think? Not exactly probable, but entirely possible, I like to say.

Speaking of possible, or shall I say, impossible. Some months ago, Elizabeth and Zechariah were visited by the angel Gabriel. They are relatives. On my side. Gabriel said they would have a child. A son they are supposed to name John! That's not even a family name! But that's not all. They are so far past child-bearing ages that no one believed their story. Sure enough, Elizabeth is pregnant! I guess we will find out if they have a son in a few more months. And if they do, I bet you can guess what they will name him.

I dream that Elizabeth does have a son named John. John will become a great prophet. He will be the messenger that is to come before the Messiah. Maybe even a symbolic Elijah that is to come.<sup>3</sup>

I dream that Mary and Joseph will have a baby within the first year of their marriage. That baby will be a son, who grows up to be a great military leader...maybe like Judas Maccabee. He will be the savior who delivers the Jews from our Roman overlords.

I dream that I will live long enough to see that happen. I will watch my grandson be the leader of the nation of Israel, just like his distant relative, King David.

(smiles) For a Jewish mother in my time, there is nothing that could possibly be better than that. (pauses, then looks up, a little startled) Is there?

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 17:12-13

Impossible. What else can I say? It was...impossible. And unthinkable. And scandalous. Deadly. Though mostly...impossible. But in that moment... my heart does not say that. My heart and my mouth say, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you say."

#### MAP INTRO

I couldn't have been happier. I mean I'm going back, back before "the moment." My future husband had paid my father a bride-price. It wasn't much, both of our families were poor. What mattered ... the contract was complete. We were now legally contracted to get married one year from that day.

I don't sleep much after that. I think of Joseph and what I know about him. Our village is small, there aren't many secrets. He is well-known to be righteous and dedicated to the Lord. He follows the Law in the smallest details.

He's quiet, Joseph, a thoughtful man. I wonder what we'll talk about, at night. Our future? Where we will live, how we will afford to feed ourselves? What will our children look like, what will our children *be* like?

How hard will it be to have children? Will we be like Abraham and Sarah, or Samuel's parents... They were very old when they had children. Or will we be able to have them quickly?

Even thinking about it makes me..... I kind of know the facts of life. And I've seen village women have a baby. But, I have no personal knowledge. I am a virgin. A man has never so much as touched me. What will Joseph be like as he teaches me what I need to know? I have no answers, but the questions torture me.

As the months go by, my life barely changes. I don't get to be with Joseph. I stay home, absolutely protected by my parents. Nothing changes.

But one day, we get word that an older relative of mine, who is far past child-bearing age, is miraculously pregnant. We're told that the angel Gabriel appeared to Elizabeth's husband in a dream and told him that they were going to have a baby boy. Soon after, she got pregnant.

"What a story. An angel to tell you that you're going to have a baby? Gabriel, at that! And then their shock when the angel's words come true. A blessing," I think, "After all their years together, to finally have a child!"

I don't want to be like Elizabeth. I don't want to wait until I'm old to have a child. I want Joseph and me to have a child right away. To conceive a son on the first night of our marriage, that would be a dream come true.

Like so many times before, my mother takes me down to the village well to draw water and wash our clothes. I sit at the well, she looks around to make sure there are no men nearby. This time of day is reserved for women, and there have never been any men there before, but my mother never takes chances. She checks just to be certain. Then she walks over to talk to her friends. All the women from the village. They huddle closely and start sharing the detailed happenings of their lives, it's going to be a while

And then I hear a man's voice. A deep, rumbling man's voice. I freeze, terrified. Being alone with a man in a public place? No. That should not be. I want to shout to my mother. It's only been a few moments since she walked away, and there is no chance for me to be accused of wrong-doing. But no sound comes out of my mouth. "Greetings, Favored One. The Lord is with you."

I can't even move.

"Don't be afraid. God favors you. You are going to conceive, and have a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and be called the Son of the Most High God. He will take the throne of David, rule over the Israelites, and his kingdom will never end."

It's an angel. The man, is an angel. And this angel is not talking about some future time after Joseph and I are married, he is talking about now. About me having a baby now! I can think of nothing to say, except point out the obvious.

"How will this possibly happen? I am a virgin!"

"The Holy Spirit will come on you; the power of the Most High will overshadow you. The holy child that will be born to you will be named the Son of God."

Silent. I'm absolutely silent. I have no way to process what the angel is telling me. And he continues. "Your cousin Elizabeth has conceived in her old age and is six months pregnant. With God, nothing is impossible."

Impossible. That word. Echoes in my head. Impossible. But my heart does not say that. My heart and my mouth say, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you say." [very long pause]

The next morning, I tell my mother the whole story. She's scared. Scared that I may be hallucinating. Scared that I will say something to somebody, start a rumor then a scandal. She

didn't see an angel, she didn't hear anything at the well. During the night, nothing out of the ordinary. In her mind, nothing could have possibly happened. She says the word, "Impossible."

My father comes in that evening, we meet as a family. I tell my story. Papa is like stone. I can't read him. Mama chimes in, tells him of the impossibility of the story. Papa is motionless. We pray. We sit in silence. Finally, my father passes judgement. "Tomorrow morning, take Mary to see Elizabeth in the hill country. You can watch over her there. Nobody will find it strange that you want to see for yourself that Elizabeth is miraculously pregnant. Return in three months when Elizabeth is due to have the baby. We will know what to do by then."

In the morning, before anyone else is up, my mother and I begin walking to the hill country. It takes us more than a week.

When we arrive in Elizabeth's hometown, we ask for directions to her house. Of course, everybody knows her, and Zechariah, her husband. We stand outside the house for several minutes, trying to decide exactly how to do this. Then my mother simply knocks on the door. We are welcomed into the house, and things go off the rails. Right in front of my mother. I greet Elizabeth, things go crazy.

Elizabeth springs to her feet! She is filled with the Holy Spirit. "Blessed are you among all women, and blessed is your baby. What is this that the mother of my Lord comes to me? When I heard your voice, my baby jumped in my womb. Blessed is she who believes the Lord will fulfill his promises to her."

I didn't know if Elizabeth is talking about herself, or about me. Mama, in shock. Elizabeth saying that I am pregnant? And that I am blessed because I am pregnant?

I break out in praise to God. I glorify him and his mighty works. I thank him for blessing me. "My soul glorifies the Lord!" "From now on, all generations will call me blessed!" "His mercy extends to those who fear him."

Impossible? Less so.

For three months, Elizabeth and I praise God, we share our hopes for our futures and our babies. We may be far apart in age, but not in dreams. It is the most joyous time, we are both mothers.

Mama, my sweet, fearful mama. For her, the three months drag on. Now it's obvious. I am obviously three months pregnant. And, it is time to go home to Nazareth and tell my Papa. And deal with it.



It's been three months. Three very long months. My soon-to-be-wife and her mother left town without any warning or so much as a good-bye. Now they are finally returning after being gone for three months. They've been to see her cousin, Elizabeth, who in her very old age is miraculously having a child. It's a big deal. I understand. Of course, Mary had to go. But now she's coming back. I'm very excited. Our whole village is excited. None of us can wait to see them.

#### MAP INTRO

It's said that the angel foretold the birth to Elizabeth's husband in a dream. Can you imagine, an angel telling your future in a dream? Especially something as impossible as them having a baby? And specifying that the baby would be a boy? Even giving the son-to-be its name? I heard that her husband didn't believe the angel.

I decide to wait in my workshop and be productive. My friends will come tell me when Mary arrives. I can't get Elizabeth's husband off of my mind as I look around my shop. How amazing it would be to have a young son to share my craft with!

Give him a tiny chisel to help shape the ox yokes that have become my biggest seller. Show him how to use a piece of lava rock from Capernaum to smooth doors and door frames. Watch him drag rocks to me that I will shape for a cornerstone or capstone. (smiles) As he grows stronger, those stones will get bigger and bigger.

(a little sad) And when I get too old or my eyesight goes, I will turn my business over to him. He will take care of Mary and me in our old age. (smiles)

The hours pass slowly. I wait and wait. And wait. What's the hold-up? Some neighbors went by earlier, chattering, but that couldn't have been about Mary's return. She would have caused a joyous celebration. I wait. Until noon, and I can wait no longer.

I walk to Mary's house. To ask her father what has happened. The road back to Nazareth can be dangerous, I'm a little frantic thinking about it. Two women, traveling.

The saddest man I have ever seen comes to the door. He's not surprised to see me, he just stands there, quietly. After an eternity, he motions me inside. Mary and her mother are sitting. Her mother is crying. Distraught. Mary, smiling.

I sit and wait to understand, to make sense of it all. Mary's father tells me this preposterous story. Doesn't spare any details. Bottom line, Mary is three months pregnant. I can't say a word. I can hardly breathe.

Then, of all things, Mary repeats the same story. Almost word-for-word. But when she tells it, she is smiling. The most serene, contented smile you've ever seen. She's so beautiful. So innocent and full of life. She finishes, and looks at me with a look that floors me. She loves me.

The future crashes into the present.

"Joseph. We have a son. His name is Jesus." She stands up. She is clearly pregnant.

Her child is not mine. Without a word, I stand up, and walk out the door.

The whole village knows. Friends, neighbors, watch me. Pity me. My betrothed is pregnant. They wait for me to gather them together in the twilight and admit that the child is mine...or, to ask for them to join me in stoning Mary for committing adultery.

In my mind, I review all of the laws of Moses. I want to follow them in this matter as I have all other things in my life. At the same time, I want to have mercy on Mary. No matter what has happened, I love her.

I resolve the matter in my head. I will agree with Mary's father to have an amicable, quiet divorce. The rabbi will be thrilled to have a conflict-free resolution. If I don't ask for her to be stoned to death for adultery, nobody else will either. I will move to another town, and look for another wife. Case closed.

Exhausted, I finally drift off to sleep. In a dream, an angel appears to me. He says, "Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has become pregnant by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins."<sup>1</sup> I wake and immediately the words of the prophet Isaiah flood my mind. "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will name him, "God with Us."<sup>2</sup>

I have no fear of obeying the Lord completely and immediately. I completely believe the angel, the messenger of the Lord.

It's just before dawn, I make my way through the quiet streets of Nazareth and arrive at Mary's house. I'll wait outside until they wake. A light is already flickering through the cracks in the wooden shades. I guess they didn't sleep much last night either

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 1:20-21

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 7:14

Her haggard father appears at the door, it's like he's aged 10 years overnight, he's been waiting for my knock. I smile at him and ask to come in. He pokes his head out the door and looks both ways. Probably looking for the angry mob he was certain would be accompanying me. He's shocked, can't even speak. I waltz right by him and into the house.

It's a replay of last night, her mother sitting in disgrace, and Mary smiling. I tell them about my dream. Within minutes we agree to the next course of action. Her father and I change our marriage contract so as to be completed today. I follow the angel's instructions completely. By mid-morning, we are quietly married by the rabbi. By noon, Mary has moved into my house as my wife.<sup>3</sup>

I suppose that a few of the self-righteous people in Nazareth are disappointed that Mary is not stoned, or at least stripped of all her pride. Our village forever tainted by the scandal. If Mary gets away with this, what will other women think they can get away with? But since I don't charge Mary with adultery, nobody else will either. Words are said, glances exchanged. But the scandal goes away rather quietly. At least for a while.

The gossip will increase with the size of Mary's belly. By the time of her delivery, the village will be vicious. I pray and plan and save money. If only Mary and I could somehow find a reason to leave Nazareth before our son is born, but we will not do it with an attitude of fear or with disbelief in God. That would not do him honor.

I wouldn't mind if Gabriel was to come talk to me again!

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 1:21

“In this world nothing is certain, except death and taxes.” That saying, probably as old as civilization itself, and you’re reminded of it every April.

Business is booming! One of the few times I’ve ever been able to say that. I’m the tax collector for Bethlehem, a small village about six miles south of Jerusalem. My job is to collect taxes for the Roman Empire, but there’s not much to collect in Bethlehem. Most the people here are poor, we live in “nowheresville” ... we aren’t located on a trade route like other cities. We aren’t a tourist destination like other cities, we don’t even have restaurants to speak of, or hotels for that matter. Nowheresville, I tell ya ...but what we do have: death and taxes!

#### MAP INTRO

Theoretically, in your world, the census is about gathering information, not about collecting taxes. In the United States and other modern countries, a census is taken every ten years or so. It is very expensive and time-consuming to take a census. The government creates lengthy forms that must be filled out. Some forms are sent by mail, or email, but many are carried to residents by census-takers who verbally ask questions. The main purpose of the census is to help governments better allocate resources and services, and to help guide policies and practices on voting. Gathering information.

We don’t observe that nicety. Whoever comes to register for the census also has to pay a tax. A small tax. After all, the government has to cover the cost of taking the census. But this tax is really rather small. The real cost is in the travel to get to the place where you register for the census.

So why is my business booming? Caesar Augustus has declared an empire-wide census! Why does that make my business boom? Part of the census is a tax valuation of real estate. If you own a significant amount of land somewhere, you have to go back to the land and get it assessed in person by the local tax collector.

According to ancient Jewish law, Jews are not supposed to transfer land outside of their family. You can imagine that in Israel, property owned in ancient times has been split many times through the ages. So, the many people who own any significant amount of land in the Bethlehem area have to come here from wherever they live. It will be so crowded; the traffic, the parking, no hotel rooms!

No hotel rooms because we don’t have them but definitely traffic and parking issues. People will have to make do with whatever they can get. It’s a real blessing if you actually have a close

relative in town that feels obligated to house you. The rest? Sleeping outside, in caves, barns, open fields, whatever.

So, a citizen of Bethlehem, it costs him nothing—he doesn't have to travel. In fact, he may even make a handsome profit by renting out a room to desperate travelers. Desperate travelers like, oh, this Galilean couple I met. Traveled a hundred miles to get here, took them well over a week. And she's so pregnant, could give birth any time. They've got to resent having to come all the way to Bethlehem for the census. She was about to pop.

Desperate for a place, they may pay all they have in this life just to get a room for a few nights. They have no reason to come to Nowheresville other than the census. Weeks off work, travel costs, the hardship of travel. They must hate the Roman Government, and me. If it rains tonight, hate us even more.

Probably wish they could be in a warm house in their hometown town, friends and family around to celebrate the birth of their child. Here in Nowheresville we offer old houses and worn-out shepherds. It's been a thousand years since something important happened here, and I bet it'll be a thousand years more before anything else important happens again.

Emperor Augustus takes a census for the same reason that your government takes them. Information! Augustus needs information to make better decisions.

He can estimate the amount of taxes that he should be able to collect, and the best ways to collect them.

He can evaluate the fertility of the land, and determine who is responsible for paying taxes. I use that information to make sure I collect enough taxes to cover what the emperor expects.

In most countries, Augustus could use the census to estimate the number of men available to be drafted into the military. That doesn't matter in Israel because Augustus has agreed to exempt Jewish men from being forced to serve in the Roman army. That is why the Galilean man with the pregnant wife is here. If he wasn't exempt, he would likely be in the army and would not have a wife.

In Israel, Augustus can use the census to count the number of men he might have to face in a rebellion. The Jews aren't exactly fond of their Roman overlords, always itching for things to change. Using the information in the census, the Romans could more easily determine who is involved in a rebellion and how best to punish their families.

The information will be used to estimate population growth and future taxes. Since the Jewish men aren't dying from military service, and the people want to have many children, the population grows much faster in Israel than in other countries of the Roman Empire.

The census info will be used to split up pieces of the country to local rulers. Right now, King Herod rules virtually all of the country, but he isn't likely to live much longer. He has been known to kill his own children, but those who survive will certainly want to rule over as much of the land as they can after his death.

It is highly likely that Herod's heirs will have to travel to Rome to secure their right to rule. You can be assured that they will have to commit to Augustus the amount of taxes they will be able to collect. If they commit to too many taxes, they might not be able to fulfill their commitment. If they don't commit to enough, the Emperor will give the land to somebody else to administer. A two-edged sword for sure.

That poor Galilean and his wife are just a cog in the wheel. The cost and annoyance of coming to Bethlehem most likely dominates their whole world. Yet, they are just a tiny piece of a little puzzle in keeping the vast empire running.

[drops voice, as if repeating a conspiracy theory]. Although I'm making a lot of money during this census, it seems like it costs way more than the benefit it will provide. Something's different. Somethings up. This feels...I don't know, can't put my finger on it. Like maybe, somehow, the Romans didn't cook this up. It's like...it's like...it's like pieces moving around on a chess board, you know. People moving to places at specific points in time. Like someone...upstairs is doing this, God maybe. A much bigger picture than I can see for sure.

The prophet Micah says "though Bethlehem is a small clan, a ruler over Israel will come out of it."<sup>1</sup> Emperor Augustus, "Ruler of the World", better watch it, his census could be setting up his own replacement. You never know anything for sure... (laughs) except for death and taxes.

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<sup>1</sup> Micah 5:2

I'm going to die soon. And nobody will mourn my death. Unless I make them. I've locked up Jewish elders from all over Israel inside the Hippodrome at Jericho. Upon my death. They are to be executed. There *will* be mourning at my death after all. That will be my last mass murder, but far from my first. I am King Herod the Great.

#### MAP INTRO

My golden coffin is studded with gemstones and draped with purple cloth. I will be buried in my finest clothes with a golden crown on my head. Crowds will line the miles from Jerusalem to my palace at Herodium, where I will be buried in a secret place. Most of the people in the vast crowd of mourners won't technically be mourning my death...they will celebrate it. (slight crazy smile) It will be just like one of my sons to snatch the crown off of my head before I am buried.

Why should you be interested in the ravings of a dying man who is certifiably crazy? Because my family and I will have great influence over the life of your precious Lord Jesus and his apostles. Even though I will be dead and gone.

I had ten wives and ten children. I murdered several of them, so none of those enter into the story of Jesus. I've endowed a quarter of my territory to my sister, Salome, but she doesn't enter into the story. Another fourth goes to my son, Archelaus, he's not important. I have endowed a fourth of my kingdom to my son, Philip. He doesn't really enter into the story either except for the fact that his wife at one time was Herodias. Now she's a real charmer. Talk about crazy.

The last quarter of my territory goes to Antipas. He is ruler over Perea and Galilee during the ministries of Jesus and John the Baptist. He is the one that harasses Jesus while he is alive, and is a participant in the trial of Jesus that led to his crucifixion. Antipas kills John the Baptist because John is critical of Antipas's marriage to Herodias, the former wife of Antipas's brother, she's the "crazy charmer".

One of my grandsons is Agrippa the First. He rules over much of Judea. He is the one who kills the Apostle James.

Agrippa the First is the father of Agrippa the Second, the one eaten by worms in Caesarea in the time of Paul's ministry.

I could go into much more detail, but I'm sure you get the idea of how influential my children and grandchildren will be in the lives of Jesus and his followers.

Have you ever wondered if you're crazy? If you were, how would you know? You couldn't trust your own opinion. You couldn't trust your closest friends. Your world could be completely upside down, but it would seem absolutely normal to you. I no longer wonder if I am crazy.

My story is interesting. At least it is to me, and to those who care about the birth of Jesus. My father is Antipater the Idumean. He was from Idumea, the land known in the past as Edom. Edom, an ancient foe of Israel. My mother is a Nabataean noblewoman. History shrouds our family's past, but it is likely that my father's family converted to Judaism at some time in that past.

My father — the slickest politician I've ever known. He became a minor official in Judea at a young age. When Rome's Pompey the Great conquered Judea, my father switched sides to be an official under Pompey. When Julius Caesar and Pompey fought a civil war, my father switched to Caesar's side. In fact, my father saved Caesar when he was trapped in Alexandria. That changed the future of the world, and ensured the success of my father. He became the first Roman Procurator of Judea.

Dear ole Dad set the one rule for my family's future. Above all, be loyal to Rome.

At twenty-five years of age, I was appointed governor of Galilee. I kept the peace and collected taxes, but the Jews hated my brutality. I was named King of the Jews by the Roman Senate. They wanted someone to control the country of Judea in the name of Rome. I took control militarily, and by marrying correctly. Well, correctly the second time. I did have to banish my first wife. With the influence of Mark Antony, I had total control of Judea by 34 BC, I was about forty years old.

When I became King of Judea, the Romans gave me almost complete control. As long as I kept civil order and collected taxes, Rome left me alone. The Jews were a different story. I was a half-Jew whose family had a questionable conversion to Judaism. The Jews hated me for that and for my innovative (brutal) methods of keeping order and collecting (extorting) taxes. For the next thirty years, until my death, we had a delightful (antagonistic) relationship.

I became fabulously wealthy during my reign as king, but nobody will remember that. There have been many fabulously wealthy men in history. I will be remembered for thousands of years because of my building projects, and there are many of them, some of which would have been enough to cement my place in history each by themselves.

My three most famous projects were Caesarea, Masada and the Temple Mount. Caesarea was the first deep-water port built on the Mediterranean coast. It completely changed the flow of international trade, helped make Judea more prosperous than it had been for a thousand years. And it helped make me incredibly rich.



Masada was a palace fortress that I built on a huge plateau overlooking the Dead Sea. It became notorious as the refuge that Jewish rebels took over and defied a Roman army. So much for dad's family rule to be loyal to Rome. Masada is a famous symbol of Jewish independence in modern times.

My favorite project was the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, where the Temple was located. It exists in modern times and is the focal point of Jerusalem for many people. I literally cut off a mountain top and flipped it over to make a huge flat platform that became the temple Mount you still see today. Some of the stones are as big as railroad cars and are cut perfectly level. Some of the trial of Jesus will take place on the Temple Mount some thirty years after my death.

As you can imagine, none of the projects were cheap, so the people of Judea had to pay taxes to make them happen. Another reason the Jews hated me.

Enough about me. Let's talk about that baby. Baby Jesus. A caravan from Babylon arrived at my palace in Jerusalem. This was no ordinary caravan, it carried Magi from Babylon who were famous for their magic, astronomy, and wisdom. A small army protected them and their riches, so it was clearly a wealthy, royal group of individuals. They had already stopped by my palaces in Machaerus, Masada, and Jericho looking for me.

I hoped that these men were wanting to sign a trade agreement. I immediately brought them into my court. Without so much as a hello, they asked the location of the newly born King of the Jews. They said they had seen his star rise. They wanted to find him, they wanted to worship him. I left the room. To talk to my advisors.

The Bible says I was disturbed by this, and all Jerusalem with me. Disturbed. Oh, I was disturbed alright. I was the King of the Jews! They wanted me to help them find my replacement? I was a renowned mass murderer. Murder was my favorite political tool. The city of Jerusalem trembled to think how I would react. I considered wiping out the caravan of Magi, disrespect and impudence must be extinguished.

I bring the Jewish leaders and teachers together to ask about this king, this Messiah and where he will be born. They immediately know of a prophecy saying he will be born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem? Are you kidding me?! Have you been to Bethlehem? This entourage in Bethlehem?! It's funny to even ponder, but I hatch a new scheme.

I return to the Magi, and inform them the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem, only six miles away. I humbly ask them to find the Messiah using their wisdom. I beg them to come tell me where the Messiah is located so that I may worship him, too. We talk about the star and signs they have seen, and I gather that the Messiah has been born within the last year or so, maybe even more recently. Not a specific target, but a target all the same.

If I take an army to Bethlehem, the Messiah's followers will hear about it and escape. Instead, when the Magi return with their information, I will take a small group of soldiers in the night, capture him. Or, maybe I will send an assassin. I've done that often enough. Although, I could always change my mind. So many alternatives to rid myself of yet another potential rival.

*I am the King of the Jews, you think that's going to change because of some baby born in Bethlehem? Yeah, that's crazy.*

Abraham. Father of the Hebrew nation. Father Abraham. Did you know he was a banker? Nah, I'm just teasing. He was a priest. Nope, teasing again. What did the mighty Abraham do? He was a nomadic shepherd. He had other kinds of animals, too. But he was a sheep herder.

Jacob, re-named Israel. And his sons. They were rich. They were probably bankers... or lawyers, right? Nope, shepherds. In fact, when they settled in Egypt, the Pharaoh and Joseph sent them to the far away, remote sparse lands of Goshen because that land was bad for farmers, but good for shepherds. Egyptians despised shepherds.<sup>1</sup>

Moses, the greatest of all prophets. Giver of the Law. Surely, he was a trained... lawyer or judge. Nope. A shepherd. For forty years. Tending sheep when he saw the burning bush.

Stunning coincidence. Three of the greatest Jewish men of all time. Revered by every Jew! They were all shepherds.

#### MAP INTRO

Now, let's discuss King David. The preeminent king of Israel. Maybe the richest man who ever lived. The blessed Messiah is supposed to come from his family. King David was surely a banker, a doctor, a lawyer....You know where I'm going with this...Maybe traded stocks and bonds. NO. NO. NO. Not only was he a shepherd, BUT He thought of himself that way, even after he was King.

The four greatest, most influential, infamous, illustrious, renowned, greatest Jewish men in the history of our people. Shepherds, all shepherds. With that in mind, you would guess that the Jews of my day revere shepherds.

Now, let's talk about priests. Name all the famous priests in the Old Testament. Let's see. Aaron. Too easy. He was the first priest. (slyly) Isn't he the one that built the golden calf? Oh yeah, that was before he officially became a priest. We'll count him anyway. Aaron.

Who else? Scholarly types will probably think of Melchizedek, the priest who served communion to Abraham. Or the father-in-law of Moses, a priest of Midian. We don't know too much about either one of them. You might have even remembered Zadok or Jehoiada or

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 46:31-34

Zephaniah...but probably not (smiles). Priests in the Old Testament are important only because of the functions they perform. They are seldom important people.

King Herod is near the end of his life. From the mountains where I graze my sheep, in the daylight, you can see the Temple Mount he built, along with the Temple, in the very far distance. The priests that run the Temple are home, in their fine houses. Eating in their fine robes. They have special Temple rules that benefit them, at the cost of the regular people who worship there. It's commonly said that they are so greedy that they devour the homes of widows.<sup>2</sup>

Priests...bah! They are so self-important. They control the people with their rules. Self-serving, not servants of God.

I sound bitter at the priests, you say. Guilty as charged. They despise shepherds, just like the Egyptians did. They despise us, but we are one reason they are rich. We tend the sheep and the lambs that are used in Temple sacrifices. Kinda funny...but it's not.

The priests are the ones who decide which animals are fit to sacrifice. They have to be unblemished. So, let's say a poor man from Galilee raises his own lamb. He cares for it like a baby. Makes certain it is perfect. He carries it the hundred miles to the Temple just to make certain nothing happens to it. He is so joyous when he arrives at the Temple and hands it to the priest.

"Oh, no!" shouts the Priest. "This lamb is imperfect. See this blemish." He calls over other priests who verify his findings. "We cannot sacrifice a lamb like this. But for a few shekels, we will exchange your lamb for a certified Temple lamb." The broken-hearted Galilean has no choice but to do as they say. They have the power. He is powerless. That night, another group of lambs is delivered for us to tend for a few days. Then, we send them back as certified Temple lambs along with some of the priests' own sacrificial sheep that they will sell to others for too much money.

If I were God, I'd be furious with his Temple priests. And we are ashamed, shepherds, we are complicit in their schemes. Maybe we deserve to be despised (sadly). We wouldn't do this, except we are too poor to have our own land or our own sheep.

One of the only benefits of being a shepherd is being awake at night. Especially during lambing season. (pointing) Jerusalem, dark. It's too expensive to have lights. (point the other way) Bethlehem, dark. (Points in the middle) Even Herod's Palace at Herodium is dark. But the people in those places are asleep. Shepherds are awake. Protecting our sheep. Waiting to help the ewes who are about to deliver lambs. Like King David. (sadly) I don't feel much like King

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 12:40

David most nights. Nothing really changes except the seasons. but it's so peaceful the whole world is asleep, except for us.

If you stare at a star, it appears to get brighter, have you ever noticed that.? Like that one (points up) It seems to be getting brighter. Wait, it IS getting brighter. Wait, wait, It's an...an...angel. And we shepherds ... get..to...see him.

"Don't be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy to all people. Today, a savior is born in Bethlehem who is Christ the Lord. And this shall be the sign that you have found him...you will find a baby in swaddling clothes lying in a feeding trough."

The stars seemed to explode...it's like every one of them becomes an angel. Untold numbers of angels in the sky. The sky, the air reverberates with their voices of praise, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will toward men!"

It might be seconds, minutes, hours. Time seems to stand still. We thrill in the experience. Shepherds honored. Honored beyond belief by our Lord God in Heaven. Honored...like Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David.

The angels fade away and the stars re-appear. We walk toward one another. Silent. Night. Then out of the dark, one whispers "Let's go to the little town of Bethlehem. Let's see what has come to pass, that which the Lord has made known to us."

Shepherds. The Lord makes it known to us. Not priests. Not kings...shepherds.

Ready? Doesn't matter. It's here. It's time. It's been a long time coming. Isaiah the prophet. A long time of preparation, waiting, watching, thank you, Magi. The way is prepared. Elizabeth having a baby in her old age, I'm so thankful for that miracle. I know she is, too.

I'm...thankful. All the time. It's just how I am.

Mary's mother, Mary, Joseph, thank you, thank you, thank you. For the part they play in this most amazing story. The world as it is economically ...politically, to shepherds...perfectly set up to fulfill all the prophecies, all the details in place. You can't help but be thankful? But now, it's time. Time for the world to receive the gift that started it all in the first place.

#### MAP INTRO

I'm a messenger. An angel to be exact. The main function of an angel is to be a messenger. There's flexibility in presenting our messages. Sometimes we come in dreams, sometimes in human form, sometimes in *other* ways. Stars, for instance. I carried my most important message ever in the form of a star.

More than twenty centuries ago, God sent me to Earth for one glorious reason. To announce the birth of Jesus. You're used to hearing the Christmas story over and over during the month of December, so may not sound that much of a big deal. It's a great story. Seems it's used for commercial purposes sometimes, to get people to buy things. You know, for presents, to give gifts.

I wanted it to be... very special, my coming to earth, to properly announce that... very special event. I chose to come in the form of a star! Perfect, right? But a star unlike any other star.

I decided to look a little larger and a little brighter than an average star, you now know what I mean? Not much, just enough. My most distinguishing characteristic would be my location. I positioned myself above the little town of Bethlehem. Unlike virtually all of the other stars in the sky, I would not move,

"That's a pretty subtle message," you might be thinking. May take years for anyone to notice a star that's not moving. Oh no! The message was received almost immediately by— the Magi — these astrologers and wise men of the east, continually scanned the skies above Israel waiting on a sign. A sign that a messiah, a savior, a king had appeared. When they see the unmoving star, immediately, a small caravan of Magi and their soldiers will dispatch to Israel. They will not

arrive for many months. But I'll still be waiting for them. They will deliver gifts to give this special person.

Gold, a gift for a king. Frankincense a gift fit for a deity. (long pause) Myrrh, an embalming oil, a symbol of death.

Mary and Joseph have left Nazareth and travel toward Bethlehem. They sleep outside every night. I hover above the birthplace of their son and I revel in the thought that they may see me in the sky. Bright, big, stationary.

They take the steep, uphill road from Jericho, pass through Bethany, and crest the Mount of Olives. I watch as they stare at the Temple Mount that King Herod had built. The Temple on it is a marvel to them. Instead of turning to enter Jerusalem, they take the road toward Hebron and head south. In the distance, they see Herodium, the imposing artificial mountain King Herod built for his palace there.

Crazy King Herod will be a big part of this humble family's story, but they don't know it yet. The Magi will alert King Herod about the birth of a new king. To kill his rival, Herod will kill every baby boy in Bethlehem.

I will warn the magi to return a different way so they will avoid King Herod. I will also warn Joseph and Mary to take their son to Egypt before Herod goes on his insane tirade. (smiles) How will Joseph and Mary pay for their stay in Egypt? Let's just say they will make good use of the gifts from the Magi.

Joseph and Mary walk the six miles to Bethlehem, passing herds of sheep tended by the Temple shepherds. In the same places, King David, Joseph's ancestor, shepherded ten centuries before.

They near Bethlehem, Joseph gets increasingly anxious. He knows Mary will deliver soon. He had expected that he would be able to stay in a relative's house, because he has many relatives there, and Bethlehem typically has few visitors to compete with. But, as they see more and more travelers, Joseph begins to understand that many others are coming to Bethlehem to register, too. The odds of staying with a relative are greatly reduced.

At the last possible moment, at the last possible house, they find the last possible place that is remotely suitable. It is twilight as Mary and Joseph turn the corner and see the large opening of a cave-like room. They smile at each other in wonderment. Bigger than any guest room they could have expected. Fresh air. Privacy. The wonderful smell of cut hay. In the corner is the manger, a feeding trough. Shaped perfectly for a baby's bed.

One star, the first star of the night bright enough to be seen. (smiles to acknowledge it is her) seems to get brighter as the night darkens. They unpack meager possessions, lay blankets on the fresh, soft hay...lighting one tiny oil lamp. Ready to rest from the long journey. Praise God for safe travel.

Barely made it in time. A twinge. Jesus sneaking into the world unnoticed except for his parents.

The twinge grows in intensity. Birth pains. Growing quickly. A baby is coming unlike any other baby ever born or ever to be born.

The next pains hit harder. Mary has watched many babies be born. She tells Joseph what to do.

Doesn't feel like the event that would divide time from before this day and after this day. I can't contain myself, shine even brighter. The time had come.

And God becomes a baby. The king of the universe wrapped in humility, normalcy, everydayness.

I want to do more. Should I appear as an angel to them? Tell them all that's going on? Behind the scenes, in heaven, in history? No. They are holding the gift. God Incarnate. What more could they have?

"Glory to God in heaven, and on earth, peace, good will to men." With these words, countless stars...countless angels, announce the most important gift ever given, given to all humankind.

He's here. He's finally here. Merry Christmas.