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# A Different View of Christmas

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The Christmas Story we celebrate every year centers around a promised birth, a star, shepherds, magi, a manger and a baby. What most people don't realize is that the story is more than a night in a manger.

## Mary's Eighty-Mile Journey

For instance, did you know Mary, a young teenager, "hurriedly" made an 80 mile journey to the hill country south of Jerusalem shortly after Gabriel made his amazing announcement? Nobody knows who accompanied her. Or whether she walked or rode a donkey. We do know she visited her elderly relative, Elizabeth, who also carried a miraculously conceived son, John the Baptist. Two miracle babies carried by two women, one young and the other old.

The text says Mary arrived when Elizabeth's pregnancy was six month along (Luke 1:36) and stayed  for three months (Luke 1:56). Add those numbers together and it's easy to conclude Mary remained with Elizabeth until John's birth. I can't help but wonder if when she returned to Nazareth Joseph noticed  her tummy had grown. Was that when he considered divorcing her quietly? Was that when the angel appeared to him in a dream and explained the miracle she carried (Matthew 1:20-25)?

## The Shepherds Came, the Magi Later

A second unknown fact involved the shepherds and magi. Did you know *only* the shepherds visited Jesus at the manger in Bethlehem? Unlike the traditional Christmas story, which compresses the events, the magi appeared to worship Jesus two years later at a home in Nazareth (Luke 2:39). Yes, the chief priests and scribes told Herod the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Matthew 4-6), and Herod told the magi.

But there's no record the magi worshiped Jesus while he slept in a manger in Bethlehem. In fact, when they found Jesus we read, "They entered the house and gazed upon the young child with Mary, His mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him. Opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. After God warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their own country another way.

After they departed an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, “Arise and take the young Child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you, for Herod will seek the Child to kill Him.” Egypt So Joseph arose in the middle of the night and took the Child and his mother and withdrew to Egypt.

They remained there until the death of Herod, to fulfill what the Lord spoke through the prophet, saying: “Out of Egypt I called My Son.” - Hosea 11:1 Herod was enraged when he realized the wise men had deceived him. So he ordered the killing of all boys in Bethlehem, and the surrounding countryside, from two years old and under—

according to the exact time provided by the wise men. This fulfilled the words of Jeremiah the prophet when he said:" (Matthew 2:11).

## If Not a Star, Then What?

A third unknown fact involves the star. When the angels appeared to the shepherds they said: "Zacharias was troubled when he saw the angel, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, “Don’t be afraid, Zacharias, because your request has been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son, and you’ll name him John." (Luke 1:12).

The angels said nothing to the shepherds about a star. Seem logical if an identifying star hung over the manger God would have mentioned it to the shepherds. It also seems reasonable that if it rested over Bethlehem for months or years, Herod and the rest of Israel would have noticed?

If not a star, then what was it? I believe it was greater than a star. After the magi left Herod Matthew says, "And lo, the star which they had seen in the east, *went on before them*, until it came and *stood over where the child was.* And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy" (Matthew 1:9-10). Does this sound similar to a another biblical story? Maybe the one where God led the nation in the wilderness with a cloud in the day and a pillar of fire at night (Exodus 13:21).

The Matthew passage above says the star moved "on before them." Have you ever had a star "move on before you?" I get the impression the star vanished and  when it reappeared it led them to the home of Joseph and Mary in Nazareth.

If not a star, what was it? Could it have been God's shekinah glory (a visible manifestation of the glory of God which led the nation in the wilderness, which Moses saw and which the disciples beheld at the transfiguration of Jesus)? That conclusion seems more likely since a literal star wouldn't appear, disappear, and move on before them--guiding them to the two-year old child.

As you celebrate Christmas consider that the manger scene, with the shepherds and magi, condenses history. A careful reading expands it. Once expanded, a marvelous and multi-layered story emerges with facts I missed for years. But one thing I didn't miss is the miracle of Christ's birth in a manger 2,000 years ago.