

THE MYSTERY OF THE MANGER

EXPLORING THE WHOLE STORY
OF CHRISTMAS



John Greco



introduction

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Exploring the Whole Story of Christmas

remember a ceramic nativity scene my mom would place on a table in our living room every year. As a kid, I wanted to move the wise men across the room somewhere, recalling that Matthew says they arrived when Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were living in a house, which, I reasoned, must have been sometime after the birth of Jesus. The star wouldn't yet

be above the stable then, since it moved along before the magi. And I had heard at church that the stable was probably a cave, since barns as we think of them today were rare in ancient Judea. I may have been an odd child, but the details of the story were important to me. Jesus is real, so we ought to get his birthday right, I concluded.

I began to critique my mother's crèche, I had begun to memorize Bible verses at school, the first being 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (NIV). If God breathed out every word of Scripture, then every word is important. We're missing out if we gloss over certain points or ignore how God himself tells the story. No matter how comfortable and familiar our nativity scenes may be, we're only cheating ourselves if we hold on to tradition at the cost of truth.

John Greco

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one

Bits of Christmas Candy

One Christmas many years ago, my sister Kerry and I attempted a gingerbread house. Neither of us had ever made one before, and we assumed it would be an easy and fun project to get us in the Christmas mood. After it was too late, we found that assembling a house of gingerbread and candy was only slightly less complicated and labor intensive than constructing a real house—and we discovered that we were about as qualified to work in the mediums of sweets and cookie as we were to build with concrete and lumber.

In the end, our gingerbread house was more of a gingerbread hovel—the kind of place that gingerbread-zoning boards would condemn and even the most impoverished gingerbread citizens would look down

upon. It was quite sad. But there is something wonderful about even the most poorly built gingerbread house: It's still made of cookies and candy. Our project may have been a failure, but the pieces were delicious. When it comes to gingerbread houses, the parts can be greater than the whole.

A good story works this way too. A master storyteller is able to weave elements and characters together to engage his audience. The completed narrative is itself beautiful and rich, but each detail has a way of giving even more to the reader. Because of this depth, the best stories can be enjoyed on multiple levels. The whole “meal” can be consumed quickly with all the ingredients being tasted together, or the elements can be savored slowly and individually to reveal nuances that might be missed when mixed with other flavors. My favorite stories are those in which the details—the ingredients—can, at times, deliver something new.

When we come to the Christmas story in the Bible, the scenes are familiar—so familiar that many of us can no longer see the elements that make it such a great story. It's like a gingerbread house that we've all forgotten is made of candy. We enjoy it on one level—that of a beautiful and meaningful account of the Savior's birth—but we miss it on all the others. There is more to be enjoyed in the story of the first Christmas if we'll stop, break off a piece, and chew on it for a while. The readings on the pages that follow are an attempt to help us do just that.



two

Shepherds and Wise Men, Egypt and Nazareth

When I was a sophomore in college, my friend Jeb and I were driving back to school from a semester break when we got caught in a terrible snowstorm on the Massachusetts Turnpike. Very quickly the roads turned treacherous, and the visibility grew poor. By the time the weather got really bad, we were too far from home to turn back and afraid that if we stopped, we might get stuck. In the moment, it made

more sense for us to continue on our trip, even if we were moving at a snail's pace.

Before long, I could see the limits of the road only by the guardrails on either side of the highway, and I was doing my best to keep my car's tires in the tracks left by the 18-wheeler in front of us. Eventually, though, the weather won. My small Volkswagen slid and spun and went off the road in one of the few places for miles without guardrails. Actually, we made our unplanned stop in a small ditch just in front of a rest stop—the only one for an hour in either direction, given our limited traveling speed. We had to wait until the next morning for a tow truck to help us get back on our way, but Jeb and I were both thankful to be out of the storm, safe and warm.

I share this story to illustrate the grace of God-given guardrails. They can help us stay on the road, not only by providing us with visual markers as guides, but also by giving us a gentle nudge if we begin to skid into danger. Without them, we might end up stranded on



The nativity narratives in Matthew and Luke are like guardrails for careful Bible reading. Though the two evangelists share their own thoughtful accounts of Jesus's birth, the Holy Spirit inspired both men.

the side of the road and waiting for a tow truck. The nativity narratives in Matthew and Luke are like guardrails for careful Bible reading. Though the two evangelists share their own thoughtful accounts of Jesus's birth, the Holy Spirit inspired both men. Therefore, it just won't do to give preferential treatment to one version of the story over the other, as if to say, for example, that Luke got the details right but Matthew was mistaken. Both got the story right—so their accounts should fit together without sacrificing bits of one or the other.

It seems that Matthew and Luke wrote independently of one another, but a harmony of their unique Christmas stories is still possible—and even necessary. For if one section of Scripture cannot be reconciled with any other, we must concede that the Bible is like a house divided against itself: unable to stand (MARK 3:25). The Holy Spirit, as the divine Author, made no mistake when guiding the minds and pens of his evangelists.▀ We can be confident that even in places where it may seem nearly impossible to put our two stories together, our puzzle has a solution.

▀ *While there is a fair amount of unique material in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the **amount of material they have in common is astounding**. About 91 percent of Mark is found in Matthew, and Luke contains 53 percent of Mark.*

What follows is merely one person's attempt at putting the pieces together; it is certainly not the only way to understand the story of Jesus's birth. But my hope is that, as we walk together through the first Christmas, wholly leaning on the shoulders of both Matthew and Luke, we will gain a deeper appreciation for both narratives—and more importantly, a greater joy in knowing more of what God has accomplished through the birth of his Son.

Mary's Pregnancy and Joseph's Faithfulness

Luke tells us about the birth of John the Baptist, a subject on which Matthew is silent, so Luke 1:5–25 stands on its own without need of reconciliation. However, when we move into the foretelling of Jesus's birth, Matthew fills out the story with information we can't find in Luke, namely Joseph's angel-dreams and his obedience to the Lord.

Reading about Joseph's experience helps us make sense of Mary's. In particular, it's commonly believed that Mary, the unwed mother-to-be, faced scorn and shame from her own family and others in Nazareth when her pregnancy was discovered. But Matthew tells us Joseph "resolved to divorce her quietly" (1:19). In other words, no one save the angel Gabriel, Mary, and Joseph knew that she was expecting; otherwise, the divorce could hardly have taken place quietly.

Since Luke doesn't include Joseph's plan to divorce Mary or the visitation of an angel in Joseph's dreams, we can't be sure whether Mary told Joseph about her pregnancy and then went to stay with her cousin Elizabeth or if she shared the big news once she came back. It seems more likely, however, that Mary broke the news to Joseph after she returned from her trip, since Luke tells us Mary "went with haste" to see Elizabeth in Judah.

Coming back home to Nazareth at about three months along (LUKE 1:56), Mary would have successfully avoided her family and neighbors during the worst of her morning sickness, but her body may have begun to show signs of pregnancy. Joseph's decision concerning divorce would have needed to be made quickly, and that is the sense we gain from Matthew, who tells us that Joseph "did as the angel of the Lord commanded him" when he "woke from sleep" (1:24).

Once Joseph resolved to believe God's messenger—and his beloved—the couple began living together as husband and wife, though they did not consummate their marriage until after Jesus was born.▀ Any rumors circulating about Mary's supposed impropriety would have lost traction. Even though Mary's baby bump may have begun to show just as she started her married life with Joseph, there's little reason to believe it would have given her early pregnancy away. Mary would not have worn the types of tight-fitting clothes we wear

today, and at the end of her first trimester, there would be little to notice anyway. And besides, once Joseph took Mary into his home as his wife, there would be no need to keep the secret. She could be pregnant (though, publicly, not quite as far along) without fear of humiliation.

🔗 *“According to Luke 2:5, Mary and Joseph are still **“betrothed,”** rather than married, when they head to Bethlehem. In first-century Israel, betrothal was a much deeper commitment than modern [western] engagement. Once a couple was betrothed, they were, for all intents and purposes, legally married. This is why Joseph was pondering divorce, not just breaking off the engagement. But Luke notes their status as betrothed because their marriage has not yet been consummated. Even though Joseph has taken Mary into his home, she is still a virgin.”*

—JOHN GRECO, MANGER KING

There’s another reason to believe that Mary’s pregnancy was never considered scandalous. If the gossips in Nazareth had thought that Jesus was conceived in sin, such a rumor would have been prime ammunition for Jesus’s enemies to use during his preaching and healing ministry. Jesus’s opposition brought up other details from his background to “prove” he wasn’t even a prophet, let alone the Messiah (SEE JOHN 7:52), yet we don’t hear an allegation of illegitimate birth[■] leveled against Jesus. The closest we get to such an insinuation is in Mark’s gospel,

when Jesus is preaching in the synagogue at Nazareth. Those gathered there are astonished at his teaching and say, “Is not this the carpenter, *the son of Mary* and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?” (6:3, EMPHASIS ADDED). But the people who ask these questions are not Pharisees or scribes or priests—the ones who would plot against Jesus years later. These are just regular folks, members of the community who had known Jesus most of his life. Most likely, they refer to him as “the son of Mary,” rather than of Joseph, because Joseph had already passed away.

➤ Some scholars understand the Pharisees’ response to Jesus as recorded in John 8:41, “We were not born of sexual immorality . . .” as a slanderous accusation against Jesus’s parentage. “But the context there specifically concerns the Jews’ connection to Abraham, and not Jesus’ family line. And since John makes no mention of the **virgin birth** in his gospel, it seems unlikely that he intends for his readers to see something there between the lines.” —JOHN GRECO, MANGER KING

➤ There is no indication in Scripture that **Mary** was publicly viewed as an adulteress. Because Scripture is not shy about recording the negative public comments made about Jesus and his followers, it is a reasonable assumption that Mary was not regarded in this way.

These nativity accounts in Matthew and Luke are not primarily about Joseph and Mary, though both

of their lives provide us with beautiful examples of unfettered submission to the Lord. Joseph, it appears, never bore the public embarrassment of marrying a young woman whom everyone thought unfaithful, and Mary was not considered the town harlot, suffering shame for a sin she didn't commit. Instead, God provided for the couple and made a way through a seemingly impossible situation. After all, it would be Jesus who would marry a truly unfaithful bride, and it would be Jesus who would suffer for sins he never committed. Those burdens were his to bear, and all the glory for doing so belongs to him alone.

The Journey to Bethlehem and Jesus's Birth

Only Luke tells us about the Roman census that brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, but he doesn't tell us precisely when, on Mary's pregnancy timetable, the trip took place. All he says is that "while they were there, the time came for her to give birth" (2:6). It's often assumed that registering for the census would take only a few days, so it must have been that Mary was full-term when Joseph got the call to go to Bethlehem and that Mary came along because of the very real possibility she could give birth at any moment. Alternatively, it's been supposed that Mary went with Joseph because the people of Nazareth had turned against her when

they discovered she was pregnant. But neither of these scenarios seems likely, in my opinion.

If Mary were about to have her baby, traveling would be a strange thing to do. It would make more sense, even if Joseph had been called out of town, for Mary to stay at home, surrounded by her family, perhaps being helped by her own mother. And as we've already seen, it doesn't appear that Mary ever faced public shame over her pregnancy. If Mary went to Bethlehem with Joseph because her parents and her neighbors ostracized her so severely, then, again, why didn't such a scandal (not a small thing in conservative Jewish circles of the first century) follow Jesus into his ministry?

I'd like to suggest that it was by choice that Mary went with Joseph to Bethlehem, that the couple may have been there for some time before Jesus was born, and that they may have even planned to stay in Bethlehem for good. I realize these suggestions may sound absurd given the Christmas plays we've all seen, but I think it makes the best sense of the details included in the two gospels.

Concerning Jesus, the angel Gabriel told Mary, "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (LUKE 1:32-33). Similarly, the angel who appeared to Joseph in a dream said, "That which is conceived

in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (MATTHEW 1:20–21). Mary and Joseph knew that Jesus would be the Messiah—and as faithful Jews, they would have known the Messiah was supposed to come from Bethlehem, David’s hometown. I imagine there was a smile across Joseph’s face when he was ordered to Bethlehem for the census. *So that’s how God is going to get us to Bethlehem so the baby can be born there*, he must have thought.

The prophecy linking the Messiah to Bethlehem says, “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days” (MICAH 5:2). It seems that Mary and Joseph saw this verse not only as an indication of the coming King’s birthplace but also of His hometown. So Mary and Joseph may have planned to relocate to Bethlehem for good—to raise Jesus there, in the same place where their ancestor David had grown up.



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The family, of course, does return to Nazareth, and Jesus grows up there in Galilee. But there is a mention of other intentions in Matthew's gospel. Sometime after Jesus is born in Bethlehem, an angel warns Joseph of Herod's intention to kill the child and instructs him to escape to Egypt with Mary and Jesus. When Herod dies, the angel once again appears to Joseph and tells him it's safe to return to Israel, so they make arrangements to head back. "But when [Joseph] heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee" (2:22). Did you catch that? Joseph and Mary had planned to go back to Judea—not to Nazareth—when they returned home from Egypt. Their original trip to the City of David for the census, it seems, was supposed to have been a permanent move.

Mary and Joseph's arrival in Bethlehem is often portrayed as frantic, rather than as part of a plan. The scene usually plays out like this: They reach town late at night, only to search unsuccessfully for a comfortable place to stay; there's "no place for them in the inn" (LUKE 2:7). But at last the couple finds someone willing to let them hunker down in a stable, or perhaps a cave, so that Mary, now well into her labor, can give birth to the Son of God and place him in a manger.

But if the couple were planning on staying in Bethlehem for the duration, it only seems right that they would have made better travel arrangements. And

even if moving to Bethlehem was only an afterthought dreamed up by Joseph while in Egypt, nowhere does the Bible suggest that Mary went into labor the night she and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem. Again, Luke simply tells us “while they were there, the time came for her to give birth” (2:6). They may have arrived a day, a week—or even several months—before it was time for Mary to have her baby. There’s simply no reason to believe that Mary and Joseph were in a panic or that God’s provision for the couple was meager in any way. I’m sure there were a few surprises for Mary and Joseph the night Jesus was born but something more in line with what other expectant parents go through.

Some will object that since the couple tries to find lodging at an inn, they must have just arrived in Bethlehem as Mary started to feel contractions—and the use of a manger for a makeshift cradle shows that Jesus was born in a stable or a cave, surrounded by animals. But the word that has been traditionally translated “inn” in Luke’s gospel is probably better understood as “guest room.” It’s the same word used later in Luke to describe the upper room where Jesus and his disciples share a Passover meal on the night he was arrested and tried (22:11).

Mary and Joseph were not hoping to make last-minute hotel reservations. Rather, they were likely staying in the home of some of Joseph’s relatives—after all, his family was from Bethlehem. But because so many people were in town for the census[■] and the

guest room was otherwise occupied, Mary was given the lower room in the small house in which to labor. It would have been the place where animals bedded down on cold nights (though there is no mention of animals being housed there that night) but also the most comfortable and private room in an otherwise crowded house. Such a room would have been a common feature for houses in Israel during the first century. This version of events may also be supported by Matthew's gospel, which tells us the family was staying in a "house" in Bethlehem (2:11).

👉 *"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all **the world should be registered**. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child." LUKE 2:1-5*

The night Jesus entered this world, God provided abundantly—in ways we may not have previously realized. Despite being far from home in a strange, new city, Mary had a place to stay, a husband to care for her, and a healthy birth. When God calls us, he equips us. But the greatest way he rescued Mary that night was not by giving her a roof over her head or safety during childbirth. God gave Mary that which we all desperately need: a Savior. That first Christmas

night he was given to all who would receive him, but Mary alone was afforded the honor of laying his head down to rest inside a straw-filled manger.

The Shepherds and the Wise Men

The gospel accounts keep the shepherds and the wise men far apart—just like a classic crèche with herdsmen on one side of the manger and magi on the other. The wise men follow a star in the east and travel to Bethlehem to find the King of the Jews, but they make an appearance only in Matthew. Angels burst through the nighttime sky to tell shepherds in the fields about the birth of the Messiah, but their scene plays out only in Luke. The two groups of unexpected worshippers never meet.

The shepherds, according to Luke, seek out Jesus on the night He was born (2:11, 15). The wise men, unlike their counterparts in our nativity scenes, don't arrive until sometime later. It's been suggested that they came to Bethlehem some two years after Jesus was born. This may be the case, as it fits the timeline the wise men gave to Herod concerning the star that appeared in the sky; they said it showed up two years prior to their coming (MATTHEW 2:16). And as we've already seen, it seems Mary and Joseph had planned to settle in Bethlehem following the birth of Jesus (2:22). If the wise men really did arrive when the Lord was a toddler, then we should not be surprised to find the family still living in Judea.

But what are we to do with Luke, who seems to have Joseph, Mary, and Jesus leaving the region much sooner? He tells us, “And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth” (2:39). This statement comes immediately following Jesus’s dedication in the temple—when He’s only a few weeks old.

Because an isolated reading of Luke makes it appear that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were only very short-term residents of Bethlehem, some have argued that maybe our nativity scenes aren’t too far off after all—that the wise men must have shown up when Jesus was still a newborn. But this can’t be the case. When Joseph and Mary bring Jesus to the temple, they offer the sacrifice for Mary’s purification prescribed for the poor—“a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons” (2:24; cf. LEVITICUS 12:8). For those who could afford to do so, the law commanded a lamb to be sacrificed, but Mary and Joseph could opt only for the birds. This means that when Jesus was forty days old—the number of days required for Mary’s purification (SEE LEVITICUS 12:2–4)—the magi had not yet come. We know this because if these men had arrived, bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, Mary and Joseph would have no longer qualified to give the offering of the poor. They would have had the money to purchase and sacrifice a lamb.

Luke doesn’t mention Herod’s massacre of babies

or the holy family's sojourn in Egypt. His narrative simply jumps from the temple scene where Jesus is dedicated and words of prophecy are spoken over him to the family's return to Nazareth. That Luke leaves out such a large chunk of the story can be problematic for readers today, but we must remember that Matthew and Luke wrote with different purposes in mind and to distinct audiences.

In this particular instance, we should note that Luke addresses his gospel to a man he calls "most excellent Theophilus" and writes expressly for the purpose that he "may have certainty concerning the things [he had] been taught" (1:3-4). His Greek name is a clue that Theophilus is a Gentile or a Greek-speaking Jew, and the descriptor "most excellent" implies that he is a high-ranking official of some sort. Perhaps he is a recent convert to Christianity but someone with the means to support Luke in the writing of his gospel narrative. It makes sense, then, that Luke would leave out Herod's murder of innocent children in his Christmas account, since he wants to stress that Christ's coming kingdom is a good thing for the world. Though we may not always be able to determine why certain episodes are included in one nativity account and not in the other, we'll want to remember that the Gospels are not modern biographies. Neither Matthew nor Luke wrote with the intention of capturing every consequential detail of Jesus's life.

While the gospel writers are selective in the material

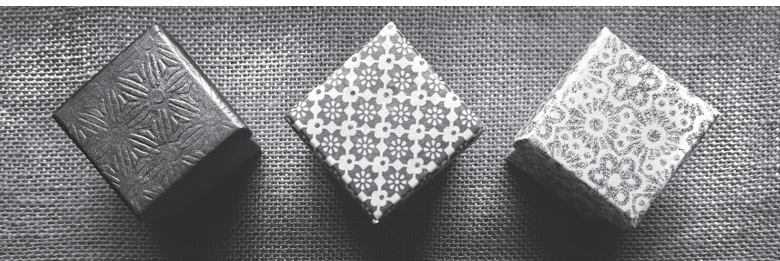
they present, they do not distort the basic facts. So if Matthew says the star that the wise men followed had been lighting up the sky for a full two years, we should be in no hurry to usher Joseph, Mary, and Jesus back to Nazareth anytime sooner. Both gospel writers are correct: The family returned to Galilee after fulfilling all the requirements of the law (Luke) but also after a time in Egypt to escape Herod's sword (Matthew). The manger scenes we set out on our tables at Christmastime may not be historically accurate—the shepherds and wise men never gathered together around Jesus—but that isn't really the point anyway. Jesus is King at every moment in time, and those who can recognize him as such bow down in worship.

Our Father's timing is always perfect, and so are his plans. Though it appears Mary and Joseph headed to Bethlehem with thoughts of making a new life there, God knew their sojourn would be short-lived—at least in Judea. So to prepare the young family for an extended trip to Egypt, he sent wise men from the east with gifts—valuable gifts that would become their means of support for the journey. And when God called them home to Israel, he brought the family back to Nazareth—to friends, family, and neighbors they had given up years earlier. If there had ever been a suspicion about Mary's early pregnancy, there would be none now; enough time had passed, and Jesus had become a small boy. When the Son came to earth, the world was turned upside

down for Mary and Joseph, but God was there to put things right side up.



The Lord has given us two narratives of his Son's birth. One on its own would be a great gift, but giving two indicates abundant love. Each is worthy of a mountain of books dedicated to plumbing the depths of God's amazing grace. But when we bring the two stories together, the treasures they contain are multiplied. As I sat down to write this, I wondered if perhaps I shouldn't. I love the traditional manger scene—the stable, the star, the wise men, and the shepherds. And I can recall wonderful Christmas sermons about the sacrifices of Mary and Joseph—how they bore undue scorn in order to obey the Lord. The last thing in the world I want to do is to chip away at those cherished traditions—to tear down the stable, so to speak. Rather, my goal has been to show that God's Word is a reliable guide, even when some of the details seem difficult to put together. But mostly, it is my hope that seeing the Bible's wonderfully rich account of the first Christmas in a new light will bring comfort to those who need it most. God is our great provider and a loving Father who can be trusted. Always.



three

Three Boxes for Christmas

know of parents who, in an attempt to stave off greed and materialism in the hearts of their children, limit the number of Christmas presents each child receives to three. Why three? The thinking goes like this: If three gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—were enough for Jesus, then three wrapped packages under the tree should be enough for any child.

There is a part of me that loves the thought of keeping Christmas simple, of making sure it's about

more than the gifts. But there is also a part of me that sees Christmas as a time to be extravagant with the people we love because our heavenly Father was extravagant with his love for the world on the night Jesus was born. Christmas should always be about more than getting gifts, but it should also certainly be a day unlike any other—a day to love one another with reckless abandon. Then again, it may be that having three boxes under the tree will serve as the greatest reminder of God’s amazing grace after all—because, as it turns out, the story of redemption, wrapped up at Christmas, is the story of three boxes too.

The manger is one of these boxes. Though we tend to think of the Christmas manger as a wooden stand filled with hay, feeding troughs in the ancient Near East were typically made of stone. The trough that exists in our imaginations comes from Renaissance art, where a typical Western European manger was often pictured. The makeshift crib where Mary placed the baby Jesus was likely a hollowed out, rectangular block of stone—a simple container designed to last a lifetime and withstand the abuses of hungry animals coming to feed. In the incarnation, we have the most extraordinary of miracles: the infinite God of the universe placed inside such a box.

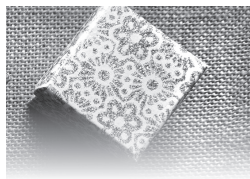
But the manger is really the second box to cradle the presence of God. In the Old Testament, God had instructed the Israelites to build another box. This

one—the ark of the covenant—arrived early for the first Christmas by about 1,500 years. It was a wooden chest wrapped in gold, and it was the place where God’s presence dwelt among his people, the place where heaven and earth met.

Of course, God cannot really be contained in any box. He is everywhere. As David writes,

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me (PSALM 139:7–10).

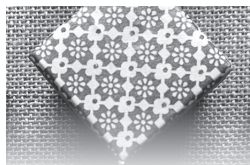
But in a special and mysterious way—a way that even the world’s greatest theologians cannot quite wrap their heads around—God allowed his presence to be with the ark. He did this so that his people would have a visible, tangible reminder of his love for them and of his holiness.



In a special and mysterious way God allowed his presence to be with the ark. He did this so that his people would have a visible, tangible reminder of his love for them and of his holiness.

The ark was a symbol of the covenant God had made with his people—a covenant of law and sacrifice, of blessings and curses; it was a covenant based on God’s perfection. Since God is utterly holy—thoroughly good, true, and beautiful—nothing sinful can enter into his presence without being destroyed. The law God gave to Israel contained prescriptions for dealing with sin and brokenness, sacrifices that would cover over sins so that corrupt and wicked people might continue to walk with him. But the ark was like the God it represented: holy. No ordinary Israelite could come near—and certainly no one could touch it. The ark was always to remain at a distance, representing the distance between God and his people that had been imposed by sin.

Only through blood could one man, the high priest, approach the first box—the ark—and then, only one day a year. But the second box—the manger—invites all to draw near. Luke records that the shepherds on that first Christmas night “went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and



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But the second box
—the manger—
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the baby lying in a manger” (2:16). No one in the Old Testament would have dreamed of approaching the ark in such a hurry. Just compare the shepherds’ experience with that of Uzzah, one of the men who helped transport the ark to Jerusalem under King David:

And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God (2 SAMUEL 6:6–7; CF. 1 CHRONICLES 13:9–10).

By all accounts, Uzzah’s intentions were good; he was trying to keep the ark from falling off its cart and smashing to the ground. And he still died. But that’s the point: No matter how good our intentions are, because of sin, we will never be able to draw near to God’s holiness. That’s what the manger—the second box—is all about. We can’t come to him, so he came to us. Jesus left his heavenly home to come to earth. Wrapped in flesh, he laid aside his glory so he could be close to the people he created. All are welcome to gather around the manger-crib—filthy shepherds straight from the fields, Gentile astronomers bearing lavish gifts, those who are looking for the Messiah, and those who are not. There is no danger of an Uzzah-event happening

at the manger; our invitation is borne out of God's grace and not our own righteousness.

But God is not content with merely joining us in our broken world; he wants us to live with him forever. And that's why there's a third box in this grand story.

In Jesus's day, the people of Israel had a unique burial tradition. When someone died, his or her body would be placed in an aboveground tomb, wrapped up in strips of linen but laid out on a bench. Over the course of the following year, the person's body would decompose, and on the anniversary of the death, the family of the deceased would return to the tomb for a "second burial." The bones would be collected and placed in a small limestone box called an ossuary. The ossuary would then normally be placed on a shelf inside the tomb alongside the bone-boxes of family members who had previously died.

After Jesus breathed his last and was taken down from the cross, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (both secret disciples of the Lord) retrieved his body and placed it in an aboveground tomb—wrapping it in cloth strips and preparing it with burial spices (JOHN 19:38–42). But no one returned a year later for the "second burial" part of the tradition. That's because Jesus didn't stay dead. His sacrifice on the cross was payment for our sins, and God raised his Son up on that first Easter morning to show the world that the way had been made for us to be with him forever.

When Jesus died, the Bible tells us, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom” (MATTHEW 27:51). This curtain, or veil, guarded the Most Holy Place in the Jewish temple, the room that had once housed the ark of the covenant. The curtain was 60 feet high, 30 feet wide, and about 4 inches thick; the only one who could tear it in two was God himself. But because he did so, those of us who know Jesus Christ—who have given our lives to him and have accepted his sacrifice on our behalf—are now free to enter into God’s holy presence. Nothing can ever separate us from his love, not even our own sin. Because the third box of Christmas—Jesus’s ossuary—never existed, we can rest knowing that we have eternal life, the greatest Christmas present of all.

Jesus said, “This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (JOHN 17:3). And that’s what Christmas is all about: God creating a way, through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus, for us to have eternal life. We can spend our time on earth walking closely with him and all the days afterward in his eternal embrace. We were created to know the goodness, truth, and beauty that come from the hand of the Father. At Christmas we celebrate the moment when Goodness, Truth, and Beauty himself was born of a virgin and placed in a manger.

God cannot be contained within a box. If we look around, we can see rays of his goodness peeking

through the clouds, glimmers of his truth sparkling in the rain, and echoes of his beauty drowning out the noise that surrounds us. There will come a time when the earth will be overtaken; heaven will come down, and God's glory will cover every square inch of this world. On that glorious day, we will, perhaps, pause for a moment while being overwhelmed with wonder to remember that this whole thing started with the first outpost of his goodness—a manger in the small town of Bethlehem. ☸



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