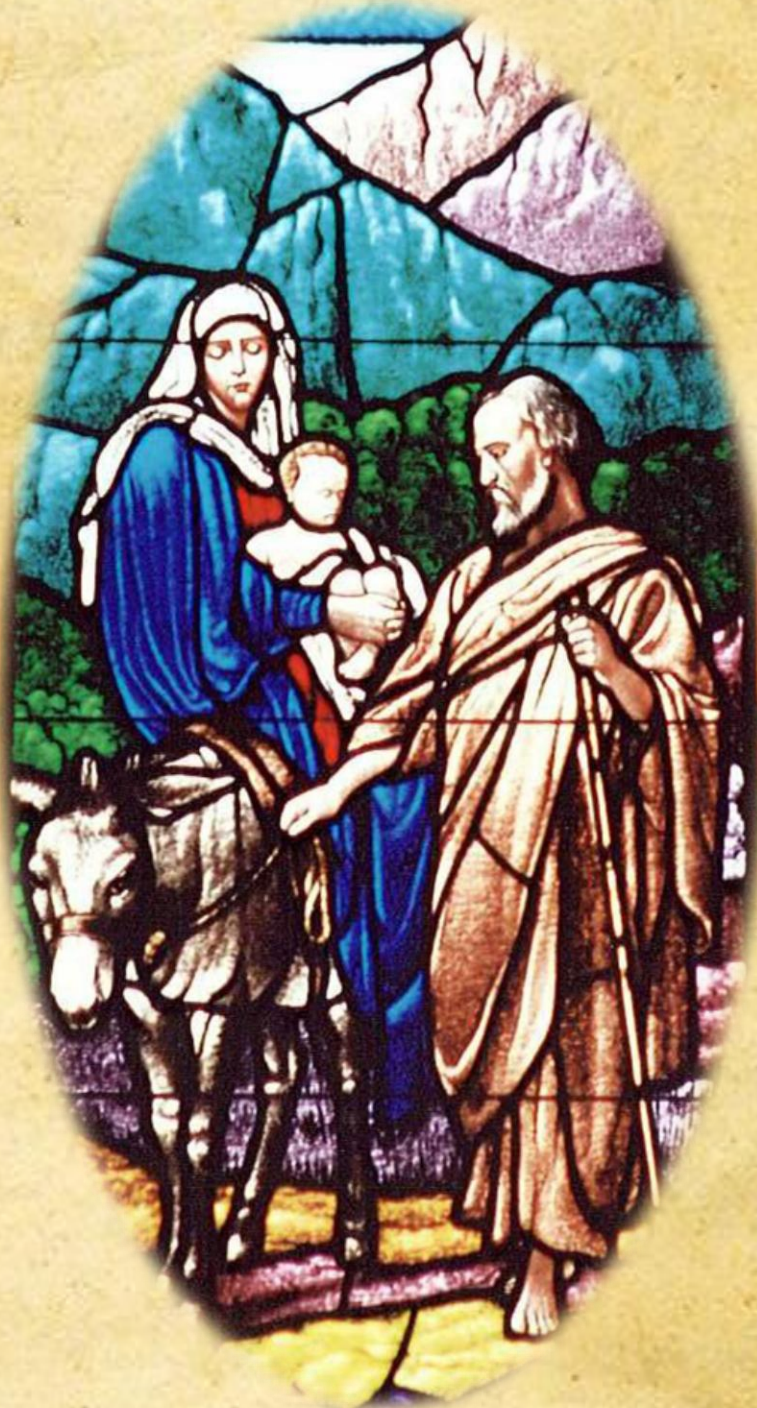


Chapter 2

FAMILY LIFE BEGINS



"OUT OF EGYPT" from Austin Avenue United Methodist Church, Waco, TX.

ROMAN PRESENCE IN PALESTINE

Since the life of Christ would be profoundly affected by the control of the Roman Empire in Palestine, it is important to set the stage with their demands, as well as the struggles of the Jewish people to comply; especially regarding taxes. One fact that appears repeatedly in the documents regarding this time period is the depth of the corruption existing under their reign. The rich became richer and the poor became poorer. No matter the situation, the Jews had to pay taxes that weighed heavily upon their shoulders; so extreme they had to borrow from the enemy just to survive; a situation that engulfed them even deeper into the dark valley of no return.

Thus, it was during this time that we read in Scripture that Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world demanding that everyone report to his own town to register. Apparently, this was the method used for making certain the tax collectors were not skimming off monies for their own personal accounts. It was through an accurate count of the people that Caesar could apply a mathematical formulation of expected funds to arrive into his coffers. Also, since Rome believed strongly in the principle: "Divide, and it was easier to rule", even a closer tabulation would be possible. Any tax collector not passing on proper funds, or anyone taking issue with the rulers, as well as those causing a disturbance was simply "eliminated".

Therefore, according to **Luke 2: 4-5**, "So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child," they had immediately set out on the long and tiring journey together.



(Map of journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem is about 70 miles as the crow flies but walking it through winding mountain trails is more like 90 miles and probably took about a week. Map to left.)

Recalling the beautiful but treacherous terrain as described in the previous introduction, one can only marvel at the fact that a young woman with child actually was able to endure this type of a journey. Certainly it would be reasonable to conclude that divine providence was at work in this situation.

Josephus in “Antiquities Jiuves” stated that since Herod spent far beyond his means, heavy taxes were constantly being imposed on his subjects; making this a common occurrence.

Given the prophecies that the Messiah would be born in David’s royal line, God’s timing for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem was perfect as usual. **Jeremiah 33: 15** substantiates this by stating, **“In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land.”**

Consequently, our Jewish Messiah’s fate was to be born in the harshest of conditions away from family, and under Roman jurisdiction; all before he uttered one earthly cry.



The Birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ “-- by James Tissot

At this point, the writer would like to pause and add some personal thoughts as to the birth of Christ. First, it is necessary for an individual to make a decision to believe that God

came into this world to draw man back to him in the form of a male child that was born to a virgin girl named Mary. One either believes or not! Since the birth of a child is truly a spectacular miracle in itself, the writer feels literally ANYTHING is possible for God.

Also, the writer is thrilled that not only was Jesus born into the family with a poor background materialistically, but also that lowly shepherds, thought of by society at the time as being unclean and outcasts, were the first to receive the birth announcement. It automatically was a sign to all of us ordinary individuals that we matter and are loved by God.

Additionally, the writer also feels the conditions surrounding the miraculous birth of our Savior sent a message to mankind that God was getting ready to let everyone know that the Second Covenant meant enormous changes in our thinking process. Not only were our sins going to be forgiven, but in bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to earth, we were going to be asked, through actions, to truly love our neighbors as ourselves. We were actually going to be directed to humbly follow in the footsteps of Jesus and minister to **all** people; especially the downtrodden in society. An individual believing the Messiah was to be a King on a throne, riding a white horse with special privileges far above society, must have been understandably disappointed in every aspect of Christ's arrival. As for me and my family, without slight hesitation, believe Jesus is our Messiah and Savior! How about you?

JEWISH LIFE AND CIRCUMCISION

In spite of all the regulations imposed by the Roman government, scholars agree that what kept the Jewish people as a cohesive group was their religious practices; weekly worship in the synagogues, dietary restrictions, and the pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Therefore, from the beginning of Jesus' childhood, being born to devout Jewish parents, he was taught to live life in strict adherence to the Law. Thus, according to the Jewish Law, eight days after a male child was born, he was to be circumcised. **Genesis 17: 12** "For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner---those who are not your offspring," states this clearly. Scripture indicates the consequence for non compliance in detail from **Genesis 17: 14** by stating, "Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

Since circumcision was the physical sign of the covenant, an order that Abraham received at age 99, at eight days old, our Lord was under the same Law. Later tradition placed the circumcision of Abraham on the Day of Yon Kippur.

Rabbis in the time of Jesus had been taught that the "desert" generation had neglected this commandment, prompting Joshua to have all the Hebrews circumcised before they entered the Promise Land. (Jos. 5: 2) If this was not fulfilled, the Passover lamb could not be consumed. Since Prophet Elijah intervened to re-establish it, at the ceremonies of circumcision, it was believed that God was present.



At the ceremony, Joseph would have recited the prayer handed down to him through tradition by saying, "Blessed by the One who sanctified Abraham, as friend, from his mother's womb. He established a law within his flesh. He created this sign to be the mark of His Holy Covenant for all his descendants. This is why the Living God, our Rock, has ordained in turn to save those He loves of our nation. Blessed be He Who made this covenant." (by Fr. Frederick Manns, O.F.M. Professor at Franciscan Biblicum Studium-Jerusalem. Translations by Fr. A Parent O.F.M., and Fr. James Heinsch, O.F.M.)

Luca Signorelli's Circumcision of Christ, c. 1491, commissioned by the Confraternity of the Holy Name of Jesus in Volterra, with Simeon at the rear

Traditionally, the ceremony created an occasion for a family feast at which they

drank and danced, clapping hands. This ceremony was completed in the presence of the father, Joseph in this case, as the head of the family. Even on the Sabbath, if a child was eight days old, the Law allowed the circumcision to take place.

Another ceremony Joseph and Mary completed was the "Redemption of the First Born"; a time when the male first born was redeemed back from God through an offering. **Luke 2: 22-24** states, "When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every first born male is to be consecrated to the Lord", and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." The foundation regarding this particular ceremony was first described in Leviticus 12: 1-8. The words in Scripture describing a pair of doves or two young pigeons as the payment presented by Mary and Joseph for their son's redemption signified they were not wealthy enough to afford the usual number of shekels. It was at this ceremony Scripture states that Simeon, a devout and righteous man who was waiting for the consolation of Israel, proclaimed that Jesus was the Lord's Christ. His proclamation in **Luke 2: 34** when speaking to Mary, causes your heart to skip a beat as he says, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be

spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” In addition to this prophecy, Anna, the widow who never left the temple gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. How did Jesus’ parents feel at this moment in time? Scripture states they marveled at what was said. Do you suppose they grasp the meaning? How is it possible for two mere human beings to understand what the future held for their son? After all, they had been through so many challenges already in their short marriage.



[Presentation in the Temple](#), the biblical account upon which the churching of women is based. (**[Hans Memling](#)**, c. 1470, **[Museo del Prado](#)**. **[Madrid](#)**)

Let us now pause for a moment and recognize the fact that after only 40 days of taking on the form of a human being, how deeply our Lord had already been immersed into the religious traditions as taught in the Torah; the first 5 books of the Hebrew Scriptures.

MORE ON KING HEROD



Although many people think of King Herod as a Jew, he was of Arab descent, and ashamed of his origins. Thus, he attempted to invent a Jewish genealogy for himself.

It has been reported that after having his wife put to death, he wandered around his palace calling for her and ordering his servants to bring her to him.

Then, unfortunately, as he grew older his paranoia only worsened, causing him to be an absolute monster; this period occurring at the time of the birth of Christ.

Thus, it was at this time, having seen the star in the east, the Magi journeyed to Jerusalem from the East asking to **see the one who had been born king of the Jews**. Upon hearing this news, according to Scripture, Herod became extremely disturbed and tried to convince them to report back to him after finding the new born child. Matthew also wrote that, due to Herod's deteriorating mental state, the news came as an enormous threat to his throne.



tissot-the-magi-in-the-house-of-herod-

*****It is important to note that Matthew is the only one who included in his writing information about the wise men and Jesus' family fleeing to Egypt. In fact, literature is filled with many writings stating the wise men did not appear, nor did Mary and Joseph make the journey into Egypt. Actually, Luke has the family going to Nazareth, instead. Apparently these conclusions were drawn because of discrepancies in dates of the death of Herod and other facts. (Many times there is a debate among scholars over happenings due to dates not matching events.) The writer will, once again, let the scholars deal with these issues, but will include the happening in this chapter because it appears in the Bible. Another part of the debate is the identity of the wise men, how many arrived, when they arrived, and the light (star) they followed.**

In addition, it has been concluded by some scholars the Scripture in the Old Testament from **Numbers 24: 17, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel," as the motivation for following the bright moving light in the sky. This would indicate the wise men's knowledge of the Scripture.**



Also, another point of discussion among scholars was regarding the number of wise men as being identified as three. The reason for stating three wise men traveled from the east in search of the birth of a king came from the mention of the number of gifts they presented, which were gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Thus, as stated in Scripture, after being warned in a dream, the wise men made the decision to travel another route, rather than inform Herod of their findings.

Adoration of the Magi by [Bartolomé Esteban Murillo](#), 17th century

FLIGHT INTO EGYPT

Mengs 18th century

After the wise men had departed, the Lord then appeared to Joseph in a dream warning him that Herod would be searching for his child to kill him.

Once again, in spite of the wise men obeying God and going home by another route, Herod, suffering from chronic paranoia and realizing he had been outwitted, gave orders to kill all boys in Bethlehem and vicinity who were two years old and under.

Thus, this horrific event caused Matthew to write that the prophecy proclaimed from old by the prophet Jeremiah was being fulfilled that read, **“A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachael weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because her children are no more.”** (Jeremiah 31: 15) This scripture is using Rachel, Jacob’s favorite wife, as the symbolic mother of northern tribes, when exiles

were taken into captivity by the Assyrians. It is used at this time in the book of Matthew to describe the feelings of loss by the mothers in the Bethlehem area. This quote in Matthew from the Old Testament teachings demonstrates, once again, how closely the Old and New Testaments are linked.

Consequently, the act of complete obedience to God by Joseph, who was not the biological father of the infant Jesus, shows vividly his character and great reverence for the Almighty. He did not question or hesitate but instead took the mother and child during the night and left for Egypt.



Jesus' flight into Egypt

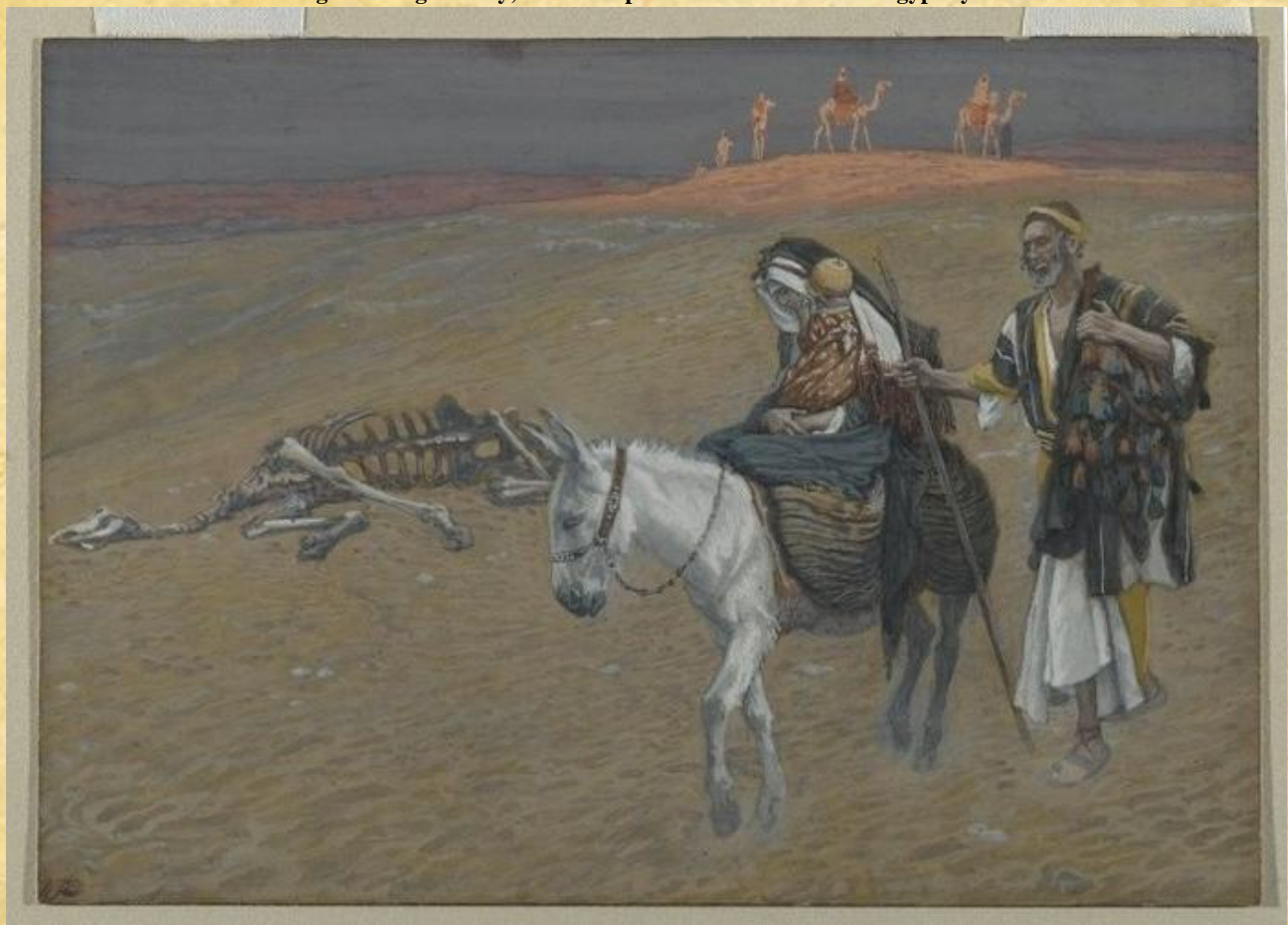


It is important to note by using the map to the left a possible route the Holy family might have taken on their flight to Egypt. Another point is to focus on the extent of Herod the Great's rule in the region. Without the divine intervention of God, it would have been impossible to know what was happening and how to escape from the imminent danger.

Once again, it is critical to keep in mind the varying climates of the Near East and Egypt as it related to the safety of Joseph's family. The Sinai area of Egypt has a very arid desert climate with two main seasons, both of which are dry. The winter months are between November to March and still have very warm daytime temperatures. However, the night time temperature can drop to about 12 degrees Celsius.

Therefore, given this climate, proper clothing, food and fluid intake must have been at the forefront of Joseph's mind. This trip was not like a vacation that is planned in advance. After being warned by an angel, Joseph had to leave in haste during the dark of night. Although we don't know for sure the age of Jesus at the time, he must have been an infant, which made the concern of his parents for his welfare even that of greater worry. View the painting below with this in mind.

The flight of Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph and Infant Jesus Into Egypt by Tissot



Scripture then states that after Herod died in 4 B.C., Joseph had his third dream where an angel told him that it was now safe to bring Jesus back to the land of Israel.

TIME FOR CONTEMPLATION

Let us now take a moment to contemplate the happenings in the lives of Christ's parents and how it relates to human emotions. First think of the myriad of feelings that flowed in the hearts and minds of his newly married parents; Mary and Joseph. Not only a wide range of feelings occurred, but at an extremely rapid rate, as well. Upon arrival to Bethlehem, they both must have felt some relief in having reached their destination; although suffering from a good bit of fatigue and physical discomfort. This would especially apply to Mary, given the fact she was due to deliver at any point in time. One must also wonder about the conversation the two carried on as they made their journey toward Bethlehem. Were they well enough acquainted that conversing was easy? Could they anticipate the needs of one another easily? Certainly, due to Mary's condition, it was necessary to quickly depart in an effort to protect her from accusations and judgment from the people in the village.

Next, let us center on Joseph's desperation to find lodgings for his young wife about to deliver. Who would be there to assist her? What would she have to endure by giving birth surrounded by the smells and sounds of animals? As he trudged around on bruised and blistered feet from door to door, what the dictionary defines as agony must have broken all records.

Then, bring the young girl Mary into sharp focus. How afraid was she of having her first child without her mother nearby? Would her new husband have to be the one to help her since no family member was around? Remember how modest she must have been? Did she cry out in pain as she endured the contractions of child birth? So..... many questions?

Finally, after the birth of Jesus, both parents must have been feeling elated that their son, **THE SON OF GOD**, had been safely delivered and was healthy. Thus, as the shepherds arrived because of being first to receive the good tidings of joy straight from heaven, Mary and Joseph must truly have been pondering all this in their hearts! They surely experienced an all time high as they looked into the face of God, in the form of their new born child!

Furthermore, being devout Jews, these feelings of joy must have continued as the circumcision and redemption of the first born ceremonies occurred. After all, this was a religious practice that called for celebration and clapping.

Their feelings of exaltation would have continued as the wise men followed the star to their home and identified Jesus as the King of the Jews that had been born. How honored they must have felt when accepting the gold, frankincense and myrrh on behalf of the Son of God. Scripture states they pondered all this in their hearts.

Although they both realized the excitement they felt would level off at some point, one can assume they did not expect it to abruptly end as it did with the warning about Herod's intentions in the middle of the night. Recalling how human beings respond to a shocking announcement or happening in life, the dream that Joseph had that revealed this imminent danger must have arrived like a ton of bricks into his heart and mind. He must have been in a defensive mode as he launched himself up off his pallet. Can you picture in your mind how he quietly scurried around getting everything and everyone ready to travel the long dangerous journey to Egypt? Shhh!---Don't wake the sleeping baby! Are you able to visualize all this in your mind? Does that say anything to you about Joseph and Mary as the earthly parents God chose for himself? One basic truism we can state clearly is that surely our Lord knows us better than we know ourselves. He knew in advance the courage and wisdom Mary and Joseph possessed! Aren't you thrilled that your Lord knows you better than you know yourself?

SOURCES:

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GROWING IN THE WORD



- 1) Go to www.devotionalembbers.com and open the hymnal and play "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" as a way of centering the group.
- 2) It is the writer's hope that all that read or listen to this chapter will be fully cognizant that God has also chosen you to be here on earth at this time and in this place. Your mission, like Joseph's, is critically important to spreading the good news of the Kingdom of God. Have you chosen to accept this responsibility? My prayer is that you, like Mary and Joseph, choose to allow our Father to lead you through the Holy Spirit in this effort by listening and following with complete obedience. Have you discerned the manner in which God is calling you to spread the good news of the kingdom? Share if you are willing.
- 3) Discerning your mission is sometimes very difficult. Talk together as a group on ways in which this can be accomplished.
- 4) Compare the dangers you face in today's world to those navigated by Jesus' family members. Certainly, we can't sit back and think there are none in our lives. Make a list of life threatening issues people today face.

5) How can Believers support one another in dealing with these issues? How can you as an individual assist others? Your church?

Prayer

We praise you that your mighty hand was present in every aspect of our Savior's life. Scripture shares with us as far back as the Old Testament the course our Lord's life would take; all according to your plan designed from the beginning of time. Then, as danger reared its ugly head, nothing outsmarted your wisdom and changed the course of history. Your choice of Mary and Joseph as the parents for your Son was truly magnificent; perfect in every way.

Then, as we observed the manner in which they listened and obeyed your commands, it served as a model for us to follow in our lives today. No matter the short time we reside as your creation on earth, we are not here without purpose. Help each person realize that life is not about self, but about the plan you have for our lives. We pray for eyes that stay focused on you, ears that listen for your still small voice, and feet that follow with complete obedience.

All these things we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen!