

### cultural context

#### BETROTHALS:

- Jewish marriages were arranged by the elders of a family. The betrothal, where two individuals were 'set apart for each other', was the first step in the marriage process.
- The young man and woman were considered 'husband and wife' from the time of the betrothal, even though they each remained living in their parents' homes.
- The wedding ceremony was completed when the groom took the bride to his family's house.

#### ADULTERY:

- If a marriage had not been consummated and a woman was found to be with child, the woman would be returned to her father (a source of great family dishonour) and found guilty of adultery.
- In the book of Deuteronomy (Deut 22:23) it states that if a betrothed virgin meets another man and 'lies with him', the two of them are to be stoned.

#### RESPONSE OF JOSEPH:

- Joseph would have felt angry and demoralised by the news of Mary's pregnancy. When Joseph became aware that Mary was with child, being a righteous man, he would have been very conscious of the dictates of an honour and shame society and the precepts of Mosaic Law.
- Joseph's act to dismiss Mary quietly instead of accusing her publicly of infidelity involved making a decision that, in essence, ignored the Law of Moses.
- Joseph's sense of justice was not in accord with the Jewish law of the time (retributive justice - 'you hurt me so I will hurt you') but rather a deeper reflection of the more compassionate 'prophetic justice' as proclaimed by Isaiah (42:1-6).
- The decision to divorce Mary quietly would not only have avoided personally shaming Mary but would also have spared her immediate and extended family from being exposed to a shameful family situation.
- Notwithstanding Joseph's action, as time went on the entire, small community of Nazareth (a village of only about 800-1,000 people) would have become aware of the nature and timing of the pregnancy.
- Middle Eastern men usually represented their families in official and legal matters such as registering for the census. The unnecessary decision of Joseph to take Mary with him to Bethlehem may have been made in order to protect her from the potential hostility of the community.

#### TIMING OF JESUS' BIRTH:

- The specific date of Christ's birth was unrecorded in the Scriptures. The date of Christmas was dictated by the pagan feast of the 'unconquered sun' that occurred at the time of the northern hemisphere's winter solstice. 25 December represents the day when there is a notable lengthening of the period of sunlight following the shortest day of the day on the 21-22 December.
- Similarly, the specific year of Christ's birth is subject to debate. Whilst the Christian calendars record the birth in 0 AD, other historical records indicate that the census and Herod the Great's death occurred in 4 BC, suggesting an error was made in the calculation of the initial calendars.

Related Cultural Sources: *Wedding Rituals (5.9) and Role of Women (2.9)*



# THE BIRTH OF JESUS

## Lk 2:1-7

### cultural context

#### BETHLEHEM:

- Bethlehem was a well-known city in Palestine. It was the birthplace of King David approximately 1000 years before the birth of Jesus.
- In order to control the manner in which taxes were collected, the Emperor of Rome, Caesar Augustus, organised a census of the whole population across the empire. Men had to return to their ancestral village in order to register.

#### EXPECTATIONS OF JEWISH HOSPITALITY:

- Joseph was returning to his family village of origin. In an honour and shame society memories are long and connections with the extended family are important. Once family connections were articulated most Jewish homes in Bethlehem would have welcomed his family.
- Furthermore Joseph was connected with the royal family of David. Links to such a revered family would have ensured the extension of hospitality.
- In all cultures throughout history, every woman preparing to give birth is given special consideration. It would have been unthinkable that the entire village community of Bethlehem would have turned away a woman about to give birth.
- Whilst the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was long and arduous (a journey of at least five days on a donkey), Mary did have relatives in the immediate area. Only a few months earlier Mary had visited her cousin Elizabeth in the region of Judea (only a few kilometres from Bethlehem) – so alternative accommodation and support may have been available.

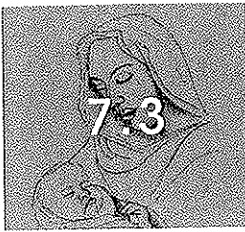
#### LOCATION OF THE BIRTH:

- Houses in biblical times were simple in design and often contained areas to accommodate the family unit, visitors and animals. The family compound incorporated an area for the animals, potential visitors and the core family unit as one integrated building. In particular, the valuable family livestock were housed inside the family compound in the evening, both for reasons of security and to provide warmth to the whole household.
- Commercial inns were the exception to the rule: the tradition of family hospitality was such that most travellers found food and lodging within the local community. Inns were generally built to accommodate Gentile visitors to a community.
- It has been suggested that the use of the term 'inn' was a mistranslation of the word for 'visitor's room'.
- The inference that the inn was full suggests that the visitors' room was already occupied, possibly by older family members. Mary and Joseph were lodged towards the back of the house, directly adjacent to the stable area.
- The linking of the family compound with the space preserved for the animals suggests that a manger would have been a reasonable and accessible crib for a newborn child.



Related Cultural Sources: *Key Towns (4.2) and Homes & Buildings (3.4)*

**postscript** Whilst seeking accommodation ahead of the impending birth of Jesus, traditionally this story has been interpreted as the Holy Family being rejected by the innkeeper and by inference by the entire Jewish people. From a cultural perspective the opposite could have occurred, with a Jewish family making a substantive effort to accommodate Joseph and Mary into an already overcrowded household.



7:3

# THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN

## Mt 2: 1-12

### cultural context

#### THE MAGI:

- One explanation of the magi or wise men suggests they were a caste of priests (as distinct from kings) from ancient Iran (Persia) who, through their study of astronomy and astrology, had discerned the rising of a new star.
- Ancient mythology suggested that the identification of new celestial object was a precursor for a major earth-changing event, such as the birth of a new king or significant leader.
- Some Bible translations had the star rising in the 'east'. However, if this was the case the magi would have travelled to India, instead of west to Palestine. The NRSV Bible more correctly translates the phrase, 'we observed his star at its rising'.
- The exact number of magi was not actually recorded. In the fifth century the three kinds of gifts gave rise to the tradition of there having been only three wise men.
- By the eighth century the wise men had been proclaimed kings and had been given names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar.
- The significance of the Gentile background of the magi was explicit. The honour given to the child Jesus by the Gentiles is contrasted with his rejection by Herod and the chief priests.



#### PRESENTATION OF THE GIFTS:

- The presentation of gifts to a child – as distinct from their father – was unusual, thereby symbolising the honour and status of the new-born child.
- The gifts brought by the magi were symbolic of the cultural norms of the time. The gold signifies kingship; frankincense, priesthood; and myrrh, the spices and ointment which were used to anoint bodies at death.
- The healing of those who are afflicted was one of the signs the Jews identified in the Hebrew Scriptures that the Messiah had arrived.
- The bringing of peace was also one of the distinguishing marks of the time of the Messiah.

#### ROLE OF HEROD:

- King Herod the Great, with the support of the Romans, ruled all of Palestine from 37 BC until his death in 4 BC, not long after the birth of Jesus\*
- Herod, whose family grouping, the Idumeans, was forcibly converted to Judaism, was aware that his legitimate claim to the Jewish throne of Kingship was tenuous. He naturally feared all Jewish messianic movements as threats to his political power.
- The journey from the capital of Judea, Jerusalem, where Herod was based to Bethlehem was relatively short – only about 8km to the south, less than a half day's journey.

\*see 'Timing of Jesus' Birth (7.1)

Related Cultural Sources: *Promotion of Honour (1.2) and Political Context (4.5)*

# THE ESCAPE TO EGYPT

## Mt 2: 13-23

### cultural context

#### CONNECTION TO MOSES:

- From the outset of Matthew's Gospel it is clear that the evangelist is endeavouring to draw explicit links between Moses and the 'New Moses' in the form of Jesus Christ. To a Jewish audience the slaughter of the innocents paralleled the order of Pharaoh to kill all male Hebrew babies (Ex 1:8-22).
- Similarly, the survival of the baby Jesus by being taken to Egypt and returning at a later date echoed the Exodus experience.

#### ROLE OF HEROD:

- Herod the Great was the Roman - appointed ruler of Palestine at the time of the birth of Jesus. However his claims to the throne were seen as tenuous.
- Herod had come from a family line that was racially Arab based in the southern region of Palestine called Idumea. In about 135 BC, the Jewish ruler Hyrcanus had conquered this region and forced the local population to become Jews under pain of death. Herod's grandfather, now a Jew, was appointed governor of the province. Herod ultimately inherited the crown. For this reason the local Jewish community in Jerusalem did not perceive in their king a commitment to the Jewish faith and the welfare of the people, and hence were antagonistic towards his leadership.
- In his early years Herod had sided with Antony and Cleopatra against Octavian (who was later proclaimed as Caesar Augustus) in the struggle for control of the Roman Empire. After Octavian's victory Herod had to quickly seek an audience in Rhodes in order to convince the new Caesar that he was trustworthy and loyal to Rome. Throughout Herod's reign he built many cities and monuments in honour of the Roman authorities so as to constantly reassure the Romans of his loyalty to Caesar.
- Herod was known for his brutality and regard for self-preservation. He was known to have ordered the execution of a number of his sons and his favourite wife (Mariamne) because of his suspicions about their loyalty.
- The slaughter of infant children around Bethlehem, to ensure that there would be no threat to his claims to the throne, was consistent with Herod's mode of operation.



#### RETURN TO NAZARETH:

- After Herod the Great's death in 4 BC, his kingdom was sub-divided and passed to his three sons. The southern area of Judea was given to Archelaus, who was perceived to be an incompetent and desperate ruler (later replaced by a Roman prefect in 6 BC.) Joseph was wise to have avoided resettling in that area.
- The return to the area of Nazareth brought Joseph and Mary back to their original area of residence (close to their extended families) and into an almost entirely Jewish community.
- It was also a region where the skills of a tradesman were in high demand, with considerable building and construction work being undertaken in the nearby cities along the Sea of Galilee.
- The return to Nazareth fulfilled a prophecy that the saviour would be called a Nazarean.

Related Cultural Sources: *Historical Context (4.4) and Political Context (4.5)*