

Part One Background

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Once, in Royal David's City

Why study the Christmas story?

On Christmas Eve each year, in Cambridge, England, the world famous King's College Chapel Choir provide a 'festival of lessons and carols' which is broadcast live by radio across the UK. The choir traditionally begins this *very* traditional service by processing into the chapel, led by a young soloist who sings unaccompanied the beautiful carol 'Once, in Royal David's City' by Cecil Alexander¹. The words of the first verse, sung so hauntingly, are:

Once, in royal David's city,
 Stood a lowly cattle-shed
Where a mother laid her baby
 In a manger for his bed.
Mary was that mother mild,
 Jesus Christ her little child.

For many people, in the English-speaking world at least, these words are familiar and often arouse warm and cosy emotions about the story of the nativity of the baby Jesus. Christmas has become, for many outside the Christian church, simply an occasion for feasting and merriment. It is fair to say that the account of the

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nativity of Jesus is, for some people within the church, the cause of embarrassment. True, it is a lovely story and ‘wonderful for children’ as it tells, in the words of another Christmas carol, how ‘Love came down at Christmas, Love all lovely, Love Divine’. But it is difficult in a hard-bitten and cynical world to draw out the awesome message of Christmas and to understand the complicated history of which it is a part. So much easier to relegate Christmas to ‘a time for children’ —a time when the church can be uncontroversial and engage easily with the world at large; all things to all men.

Encapsulated in Cecil Alexander’s carol, however, are a number of key words and phrases, each loaded with significance and which the writer wanted to impart not only to children, for whom the carol was principally written, but for adults, too:

‘**Once**’ – a definite event took place at a definite time in the history of the world;

‘**Royal David’s city**’ – the event took place at a location of great importance;

‘**Mary**’ – for good or ill, the historical figure of Mary has had a great significance on the history of the western church;

‘**Jesus**’ – a name chosen by God before the child was born; a name of supreme theological significance;

‘**Christ**’ – the Greek title (not a proper name!) otherwise rendered as Messiah; the long promised Saviour of the Jewish people and, as the Bible makes clear, of the whole world.

It is true that many, both inside and even outside the Christian church, regret the loss of a ‘meaning’ of Christmas and look back, perhaps with nostalgia, to a fabled golden age of Christmas celebrations —feelings encouraged by an avalanche of Christmas greetings cards with images of fat, jolly, red-clad Santas, chirpy robins and rosy-cheeked children pulling the first presents from gorging Christmas stockings. Perhaps, all too often, it is simply a case of looking back to happier years in one’s own childhood or youth when Christmas seemed so magical.

Not so romantic is the reality of Christmas for so many in the world today. In the western hemisphere the enforced jollity of

the Christmas period can leave all too many feeling the bitter emptiness of loneliness. For families, brought together dutifully for a 'family celebration', Christmas can mean heightened tensions with less room for manoeuvre to escape, whilst for the poor and homeless Christmas can in reality be a crisis. No wonder that in the UK there is a charity which mobilises over the Christmas period each year to offer decent food and safe lodging for large numbers of down-and-outs, a charity called *Crisis at Christmas*. In the eastern and southern hemisphere, even in countries where Christmas is celebrated (or tolerated) the season represents no respite from grinding poverty and a very real fear of the future.

Rather than a crisis at Christmas, many yearn to discover Christ at Christmas, to experience a reality in the words of Cecil Alexander's famous carol:

And our eyes at last shall see Him,
Through His own redeeming love
For that child, so dear and gentle,
Is our Lord in heaven above;
And He leads His children on
To the place where He is gone.

The first Christmas was certainly a crisis for the newly married couple which travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem. As Bishop Paul Barnett points out in his excellent book *Bethlehem to Patmos*² there really is nothing romantic about a pre-marital pregnancy, followed by a hastily arranged marriage and then the birth of a child near farm animals! We do capture something of that pain in the Gospel narratives, but it is seldom expressed in Christmas celebrations in church.

So, why study in detail the Christmas theme —after all, everyone knows the story, don't they? In fact, most people do not know the events *as they are recorded in the Bible*. Even many church-attending Christians are unclear about the precise details. Very little has been written, certainly in recent years, on the *biblical* account of the nativity of Jesus. The subject has

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been given a passing treatment in many excellent Bible study books and a number of these have been referred to and quoted in the preparation of this book. A number of written works on the life of the Lord Jesus have only a passing interest in the account of His birth. Others, sadly, have been written from a standpoint that seeks to discredit rather than evaluate the biblical narrative. Often the very people who one would expect to have an interest in defending the biblical account of the birth of Jesus have remained conspicuously silent or have simply not been granted the ‘air time’ that headline-grabbing biblical critics have secured. Perhaps this is because there is a certain reluctance to commit to the biblical account when so often it, along with the rest of the Bible, is denigrated. There is every temptation to keep one’s head down and avoid being identified with what some see as being, in any case, a subject of only secondary importance to the Christian faith. Perhaps it is because the narrative is complex, the unknowns many and the geo-political background fiendishly difficult to summarise.

This book seeks to analyse the biblical narrative, to compare what happened with what was expected to happen by the people at the time, and to draw out the broader theological context in which the events are to be viewed. It perhaps goes without saying that this is not simply an academic exercise. The infant who was born in Bethlehem between the year 6 and 5 BC, into a poor family in a backwater of the Roman Empire, has had, beyond any reasonable contradiction, a greater influence in this world than any human before or since. His countless millions of followers, two thousand years after his birth, yield their total allegiance to Him, sometimes at the cost of their lives. The events traced out in these studies are not just history. They continue to demand a response —of belief or disbelief, of faith or of rejection. Whilst the Nativity is far from the whole story of Jesus, the account given in the Bible’s Gospel narratives demonstrate a number of key truths about God:

- He cares intimately about the people of this world;
- His plan of salvation was foreshadowed by God-inspired prophets from the earliest of times;

- He identifies first and foremost with the dispossessed of this world;
- The cost of salvation was enormously high — God gave His own Son to pay the price.

The core of this book is the biblical narrative concerning the birth in Bethlehem.³ As this narrative is split between three of the four written accounts of the life of Jesus (which are commonly called ‘the Gospels’), the three separate strands have been segregated into chronological order and re-assembled into a single narrative. The author recognises that each separate narrative is integral to what each Gospel writer was reporting to his own readers, but believes that this re-packaging of the narrative does no injustice either to the narrative or to the full Gospels of which they are a part. The source and verse numbers are, in any case, all clearly stated. Only the section headings have been devised by this author, for ease of identification.

The title of Jesus principally used in these studies is *not* that most commonly found in the four Gospels, where Jesus is normally referred to simply as Jesus. William Barclay, in his important book *Jesus As They Saw Him*,⁴ makes the point that, “In the Gospels [Jesus] is by far the commonest name of our Lord, for in them he is called by this simple name almost six hundred times. It is at first sight an astonishing fact that in the four Gospels the expression *Jesus Christ* occurs only four times, in Mark 1:1; Matt 1:1; John 1:17; 17:3; and the expression the *Lord Jesus* only twice, and in both cases there is doubt about it. In Luke 24:3 the reading is doubtful and Mark 16:19 is not part of the original Gospel. When the Gospel writers thought of their Lord, it was the name Jesus which came automatically to their minds and to their lips, and this is a very significant fact.” It should be added that Barclay was in no way questioning the lordship of Jesus – indeed his book contains a full account of the use of the title *Lord* – he simply addressed the fact that the title is seldom used in the Gospels themselves.

In spite of this useful clarification given by William Barclay, the title used for Jesus in this series of studies is, wherever appropriate, *Lord Jesus*. This title is chosen to reflect the fact that Jesus is seen

throughout the New Testament writings very much as Lord, even if the title is seldom used in the four Gospels. Sadly, the name *Jesus*, and the term *Jesus Christ*, are often misused in common parlance, sometimes even being used as swear words. We should never allow that misuse to prevent us from using His name in the proper manner. It is true to say that the phrase *Lord Jesus*, used appropriately, is a two-word theological statement of supreme importance. As the apostle Paul wrote, “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3).

Stages in God’s plan of salvation

It is impossible to appreciate the full meaning of the birth of the Lord Jesus without recognising that His entry into the world, His subsequent life, death and resurrection from death, are part of an overall scheme devised by God to remedy humankind’s state of enmity with and rebellion against God. The relationship of humans to their God is ‘fallen’ from the intended state of close friendship and spiritual intimacy so clearly described in the early chapters of Genesis. This condition is usually described by theologians as ‘the Fall’. The Bible explains that a state of sin separates us from God and spoils our relationship with Him. Hopefully, readers will not be too disheartened to take a short excursion from our focus on the Nativity to look briefly into some weighty theology which sets the Incarnation of God (i.e. His birth into the world as a human) into a context. As this theology is an essential backdrop to the historical narrative of the Nativity, the effort will prove to be well worthwhile!

The Bible teaches that the fall of Satan, an archangel, with certain other angels, took place before the world was created. Jesus himself referred to this fall Luke 10:18, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” A fascinating glimpse of the battle in heaven that preceded Satan’s expulsion is found in Revelation 12:7-12. Jesus referred to Satan’s character in John 8:44, “He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him.” It seems that Satan and other rebel angels, thrown out of heaven, sought to obtain possession of the world

shortly after its creation, and similar possession of mankind which had been created for special and intimate fellowship with God. In order to hurt God and to gain a measure of temporary control over His world, Satan induced mankind to rebel against God (or 'sin'), as set out in Genesis chapter 3, which led to humans becoming *spiritually fallen* beings, their previous intimate and loving relationship with God being replaced by fear and shame.

Whether Genesis chapter 3 is accepted as literal or allegorical, the essential reality portrayed in the Bible remains: humans are alienated from a God of love. Mankind's 'natural' spiritual state is dead, rather than alive. Man's innermost being (or soul) is blinded and perverted from what it was intended to be, and our physical body liable to disease and death. Most importantly, the moral disease of sin (or rebellion against God) is ever-present in the very bloodstream of the human race. So it was that mankind passed under the usurped and limited control of Satan (e.g. see Acts 26:18; Col 1:13; Heb 2:14). Certainly our broken and often disastrously flawed human relationships, whether they are between individuals, groups or nations, seem to confirm that there is something badly wrong with mankind.

Living, as we do, in an age where self-promotion and self-fulfilment are considered to represent the highest expression of human life, some readers may complain that sin – falling short of God's standards, even rebellion against God – cannot be so serious as to make a full relationship with Him impossible. Among the world's religions only Christianity teaches that sin is so serious that we cannot remedy it ourselves and need to be saved from its power and its effects. It is fair to say that most religions teach that people work and earn their way to a 'right' relationship with God by observing religious ceremonies and by doing things to appease God. This, emphatically, is not the Christian message. The Bible teaches that sin is so bad that God will not tolerate it at all. He is completely holy and completely righteous. That is how we need to be if we are to have a right relationship with Him. Since we cannot make ourselves holy and righteous, a complete and effective remedy to our condition as *spiritually fallen beings*

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is necessary. Two things need to be kept in mind:

1. We are all sinful (Rom 3:23).
2. Sin is not just the awful things we easily recognise as sin (e.g. murder, robbery, violence). It is, equally, all the rebellions we have against God's right to be God in our lives. Sin, then, can be simply ignoring God.

Isn't it completely overbearing of God to be so hard on sin? To answer that question we might consider that if sin is not as serious as the Bible tells us it is, God would have found a simpler and less costly way of dealing with it than the way the Bible tells us He decided upon. This way ultimately involved the sacrifice of His Son on a cross of execution—a humiliating, disgraceful, torturous form of death, borne by the one person in history who was without sin.

In order to rescue humans from the power, grip and guilt of sin, to fully restore us to our former position which was lost in the Garden of Eden, and indeed to elevate us to a yet higher position (that of being adopted as children of God⁵), God determined on a plan of salvation. But this plan would be immensely costly because, as the apostle Paul wrote, “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:23). It was the Lord Jesus who was to pay the price. As the apostle Paul again wrote, “For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (Rom 5:10). The baby born in Bethlehem in 6 to 5 B.C. was born to achieve God's plan of salvation.

Did God make a mistake in allowing the fall of mankind to occur? Did He know it was going to happen and if He did, is He not at least partly responsible for the effects of sin in His world? The Bible does not give us a clear answer as to why God allowed sin to enter His world, but He certainly went to extraordinarily costly lengths to provide for all people an escape route *from* the power and consequences of sin *to* the safety of kinship with His Son. A former Principal of the Birmingham Bible Institute in the UK, H. Brash Bonsall, examined this difficult question in his

excellent study book *The Person of Christ*:

“While it is plain from Scripture that God *foreknew* that the Fall of Man would occur, it must never be thought that he *foreordained* it. This would be to regard God as the author of sin, and as morally responsible for the effects of it. He *foreknew* the Fall; but He *foreordained* Redemption. The difference between the two words may be made clear by an illustration. Some years ago the Perth to London Express was travelling near the Boxmoor Tunnel at 70 m.p.h. just before the diversion from the fast to the slow line. These points should have been taken at 15 m.p.h. The train consequently left the rails and plunged over the embankment. As a result over forty people lost their lives. At the enquiry the signalman stated that he observed the train running too rapidly for safety and testified “*I saw it would happen.*” He *foreknew* there would be a train-wreck but he did not foreordain it, indeed he did all in his power to avert it. It was so with God in relation to the Fall of Man. Why He did not prevent it is a problem which the Bible does not explain. We can only take the facts as we find them and as the Bible states them to be—that is, that God’s creature, Man, has fallen and that he has been redeemed. Until we have clearer light we must trust where we cannot trace”.⁶

God’s plan of salvation is also referred to as a plan of redemption. When the word ‘redemption’ or ‘redeemed’ is used in everyday life, it indicates that something has been bought back, or regained by payment of money or by effort. In the theological context, the word ‘redeem’ refers to God ‘buying back’ mankind, by paying the price necessitated by sin in order to return mankind to a right relationship with Himself. The Bible is certain about the fact, the process and the extent of redemption, as the following four quotations make clear:

“But now he [Christ] has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he

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will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:26-28).

“For he rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13).

“He [Jesus Christ] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

“..... if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9).

Christ, then, swapped places with us and paid on our behalf the price of our rebellion against God. We have something to do in response —to confess that Jesus is Lord. This action has as much to do with genuine belief in Him and full acceptance of His right to be Lord of every aspect of our lives as it does with using a particular form of ‘prayer of belief’. Upon our confession God then guarantees that Christ’s death in our place is *the* necessary atoning sacrifice, sufficient for the needs of the whole world. The various stages in God’s redemptive plan can be described as:

- Christ’s Incarnation;
- Christ’s redeeming death;
- Christ’s Resurrection from death;
- Christ’s ascension and His ministry from heaven on behalf of His people;
- Christ’s future return in glory.

The latter four stages are beyond the scope of this series of studies, but need to be referred to from time to time to put the first stage into context. The Incarnation, it will be seen, was an event in history which began when a baby was born in humble circumstances in Bethlehem some two thousand years ago. The baby grew quite normally to become a man who lived in the world for a total of around thirty-three years. But what of this idea of ‘Incarnation’? What exactly does it convey?

The term *Incarnation* comes from two Latin words *in*, “in” and

caro, “flesh” and means the doctrine that at a given point in time God took upon Himself human flesh and, with it, human nature. What makes the Lord Jesus distinct from all other human beings, both before and since, is that He was without sin. He never sinned or in any way rebelled against God. He only is good enough to pay the ‘wages’ of sin —death. How do we know that Jesus was without sin and that therefore His death is completely adequate payment for our sins? Two answers help us here: first, there is nothing in the accounts that we have of the life of Jesus that looks remotely like rebellion against God. Everywhere the opposite is evident —that the Lord Jesus submitted Himself entirely to His Father’s will. “Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39) was more than simply a statement of His priorities, it was in every sense the reality at the centre of His being. Second, the Bible itself makes clear that He was without sin: “But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin” (1 John 3:5-6).

Who paid the price? The baby born to die

Staying with the theological aspects of Christ’s Incarnation a little longer, we see that the Incarnation – God becoming flesh – is an essential factor in order for God to secure the redemption of mankind. Whilst there are many facets to this doctrine of the Incarnation, in relation to the birth of the Lord Jesus, three are particularly important:

Firstly, **Christ was born to die**. Redemption involves a substitutionary death —someone dying in the place of the guilty one. God cannot die, but Man can. Only if the Son became a man could he die. In this sense the Lord Jesus was ‘born to die’ as is emphasised in Hebrews 2:9, “..... we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”

It should be noted that there is something in the death of the Lord Jesus which will never be experienced by His children (i.e. those adopted into His family as made clear in Hebrews 2:9-13).

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When we die, even if we think or feel we are forsaken, God will be there, having promised never to leave or forsake us. But when Christ died, the Father's presence was withdrawn from the Son because He who was without sin was made sin for us (2 Cor 5:21). And this separation from God is the ultimate penalty for sin. No wonder Jesus called out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46).

Secondly, **God cannot represent man in sacrifice**, only a man can do that. The Lord Jesus became a man so that He could, on behalf of all mankind, offer His life. In Romans 5:12-21 Paul writes about the representative nature of Adam's and Christ's acts, the first in bringing sin into the world, the second in providing the gift of righteousness. "If, by the trespass of the one man [Adam] death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ." Because only a man could represent mankind, so it was necessary for a baby to be born into the world, who would become that representative.

Thirdly, **Christ's redemption covers all mankind** – everyone who ever lived – not just those who are saved by accepting His free gift of salvation. This means that the price is paid, but that the free gift of salvation still has to be accepted by each individual. To underline that Christ's redemption is *for all*, John the baptist said "Look, the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!" (John 1:29). Reference to 'the world' in Scripture, and especially in the apostle John's writings, means the whole mass of mankind, loved by God (see John 3:16) and able to be saved, but at present under the domination of the 'prince of this world' —the devil (John 14:30). The Lord Jesus, as God's sacrificial Lamb, is, in John's words, "the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." (1 John 2:2).

On this latter point of Christ's redemption covering all mankind, for clarity and to avoid any misunderstanding it should also be noted that this redemption is not automatic —in other words not everyone is saved. Such a belief is mistakenly taught by some

both within the umbrella of the Christian church and also beyond the church. The idea is that everyone will be saved and made right with God —a superficially attractive idea, but one which is dangerous in the sense that it denies the very nature of God in that He is perfectly just, and one which runs counter to the clear teaching of the Bible on this issue. H. Brash Bonsall in *The Person of Christ* casts some light on this:

“The Bible says “Return to me; for I have redeemed thee” (Isa 44:22). One may be redeemed, but if the conditions of repentance and faith are not fulfilled, if the offer is not closed with, the redemption is without effect. Thus a cancer remedy might be discovered and offered free to all, but not all would thereby be saved. Some would never hear, some would hear and not believe, some would hear and believe but not actually take the remedy; all would die. Only those who, hearing, believed and by an *act* of faith actually took the remedy, would live. James 2:14-16 defines faith as more than an intellectual assent; it is a belief which acts.....)”⁷

The prophet Isaiah provides a clue that it will be a person who would be needed to pay the price. And this person would go willingly to be the substitute for the sin-offering.

Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
But a body you have prepared for me,
burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.
Then I said, “Here am I, I have come –
it is written about me in the scroll.
I desire to do your will, O my God;
your law is within my heart.

Isaiah 40:6-8

No longer would God be satisfied with symbolic sacrifices of animals in the temple. The days of the Jerusalem temple were numbered, in any case. In a few years it would no longer be possible for the priests to sacrifice animals on behalf of the people⁸. Now a permanent and all-sufficient sacrifice was needed, and so

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God prepared a body of flesh for his Son. The sacrifice was to be made by God Himself, through the person of His Son.

The birth in Bethlehem twenty centuries ago is as relevant today as it was when those events happened. In this series of studies we look at the events themselves and at the historical and theological background in which they are set. Since for many the Bible is a little understood collection of books, we will look at how God's plan of salvation is revealed within and across these books. It is hoped that something of God's yearning love for His world, His efforts to reach His creation and to establish a right relationship with it, and of the immense cost of that redemption which began in Bethlehem, will emerge as we look deeply into the Christmas story.

This series of studies looks at the basic biblical account of the Nativity of the Lord Jesus and demonstrates that we have good grounds for believing that the accounts we have been given are complete and trustworthy. There is a real poignancy in the Christmas story. God willingly surrendered His beloved Son to be the seal of salvation, completed on the cross at Calvary—once for all. The birth in Bethlehem some two thousand years ago was the beginning of a life like no other. Perhaps this is what we need to reflect upon each Christmas time. We can take real joy and mightily celebrate the fact of the birth of the Lord Jesus! But His birth was only the beginning of the most wonderful story ever told! And the story will not be completed until Jesus returns again in glory!

We began this chapter with the opening verse of H. J. Gauntlett's famous carol *Once in Royal David's City*. Hopefully, by the end of our journey through the biblical account of Christ's birth, we will have a clearer grasp of the 'Christmas story' and where it fits in God's great plan of salvation. It is possible to intellectualise and theorise about the Christian faith, but ultimately, if it is to be accepted at all, it must be accepted with the simple faith of a child, as Jesus Himself taught (Luke 18:16-17). Perhaps, then, we will be able to make the last verse of Gauntlett's famous carol our own prayer:

ONCE, IN ROYAL DAVID'S CITY

Not in that poor lowly stable,
With the oxen standing by,
We shall see Him; but in heaven,
Set at God's right hand on high;
When like stars His children crowned.
All in white shall wait around.

Notes

¹ Cecil Alexander, wife of Archbishop William Alexander, Anglican Primate for Ireland, wrote the lyric in 1848 and the carol was put to music in 1849 by Henry J. Gauntlett (1805-1876)

² Paul Barnett, *Bethlehem to Patmos* The New Testament Story (Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), p. 28.

³ See Chapter 5.

⁴ William Barclay, *Jesus as They Saw Him* (SCM Press Ltd, 1962), p. 9.

⁵ There are a number of references in the Bible to our adoption as children, e.g. see Ephesians 1:5-7 and Romans 8:15-17.

⁶ H. Brash Bonsall, *The Person of Christ* (Christian Literature Crusade, 1967), p. 22.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 56.

⁸ The Jerusalem temple (known to historians as the second temple) was destroyed by the Romans in AD70 during the 'Jewish War'.

