

## THE FIRST CHRISTMAS

Christmas is a time known for goodwill, colorful lights on homes and trees, festive family gatherings with fine foods and sweets, merry music and generous gift giving. It's also a wonderful time of year to refocus our lives on the most significant person of history. To do that, we must go back to events and persons involved with the first Christmas, which occurred over 2000 years ago in the land of Israel.

**The reporter/historian: Luke** - He was a beloved physician who accompanied the apostle Paul on his missionary journeys. Unlike many journalists today, he was thorough and accurate in his reporting. Sir William Ramsay is regarded as one of the greatest archaeologists ever to have lived. He wrote about Luke:

*Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy; he is possessed of the true historic sense; he fixes his mind on the idea and plan that rules in the evolution of history, and proportions the scale of his treatment to the importance of each incident. He seizes the important and critical events and shows their true nature at greater length, while he touches lightly or omits entirely much that was valueless for his purpose. In short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians. - Sir William Ramsay*

Luke was accurate and detailed in his historical accounts from eyewitnesses about the Christmas story. Mary, the mother of Jesus would have been one of those sources.

**Mary / the mother of Jesus** - She was involved in many incidents in the life and ministry of Jesus: his conception, birth, dedication at the temple, his first miracle of water to wine, during his ministry, at his crucifixion, after his resurrection and at Pentecost in the upper room after his ascension to heaven. Mary had a special call by God to bear and raise God's unique son. God knew that she was the right person for the task. Early on in her life, Mary knew that God had something special for her. (Mary's parents Joachim and Anna had prayed for years to have a child and even pledged to God that if they ever had a child, they would dedicate it to Him for His special purpose. God answered their prayer and they dedicated Mary to God. - Source: Apocrypha writings of James ) She would be their only child, but God would use her to effect all of history.

### Sepphoris — The ornament of the Galilee

Columnists Apr 29, 2016, Daniel Peterson, Bill Hamblin, For the Deseret News

The Galilean city of Sepphoris isn't mentioned in the New Testament, or in the Bible at all. And yet, located slightly less than 4 miles (6 kilometers) from Nazareth, it may be important to our understanding of Jesus.

Although the site had already been occupied for centuries, Sepphoris' real blooming began when Herod Antipas succeeded his father, Herod the Great, around 4 B.C. Prior to being deposed and exiled in A.D. 29, Herod renamed it "Autocratoris" and set about to turn it into what the Jewish historian Josephus calls "the ornament of the Galilee."



Ancient traditions suggest that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was born in Sepphoris, and that her parents, Joachim and Anna, reared her there. In any event, during the time of Jesus, Sepphoris was probably a relatively large and bustling city that employed many construction workers. And that's precisely what Joseph, the adoptive father of Jesus, was. The Gospels call him a "tekton" (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3), which is traditionally translated as "carpenter" but can also mean "artisan" or "builder," and which, given Palestine's rocky and treeless character, very likely means that he was a stone mason. (Even today, almost all construction in Israel uses stone.)

By contrast, Nazareth was a tiny town in the Savior's lifetime, offering little work. It's easy, though, to imagine Jesus walking to and from Sepphoris every day with his father — about an hour each way — as he learned the family building craft. And traces of this background may appear in his teachings, where, for example, he describes a wise man who built his house upon a rock (Matthew 7:24), announces (with a pun on Peter's name) that his church will be built upon "rock" (Matthew 16:18), and refers to himself as a stone rejected by the builders (Mark 12:10; compare Romans 9:33 and 1 Corinthians 10:4).

Does Jesus' comment that "A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid" (Matthew 5:14) also recall youthful experiences with Sepphoris? We cannot know for certain. However, the city's name in

Hebrew is Tzippori, a variant of the word “tzippor” or “bird” — possibly, as a comment in the Jewish Talmud suggests, because it sits “perched atop a mountain, like a bird.”

It’s even possible that his references to the scribes and Pharisees of his day as “hypocrites” (e.g., at Matthew 23:13-14) reflect a connection with Sepphoris. In the first century, the city seems to have been fairly moderate, religiously speaking, steering a middle course between wholesale adoption of Gentile ways and complete rejection of them. By the second half of that century, or maybe slightly thereafter, it had a Roman theater. Did Sepphoris have a theater in Jesus’ day? Perhaps. Was he aware of the conventions of acting? Maybe. In Greek, the word “hypokrites” referred originally to a stage actor, a person obviously pretending to be someone he was not.

Following the Second Jewish Revolt of A.D. 132-135, many prominent Jewish families moved northward from the area around Jerusalem to Sepphoris. Among them were Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, chief editor of the foundational rabbinic text called the “Mishnah,” and the entire Sanhedrin. (Eventually, sometime before A.D. 150, they moved to Tiberias, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.)

Thereafter, Sepphoris enjoyed frequent periods of prosperity. More than 60 distinct mosaics have been discovered at the site, for instance, dating from the third century A.D. to the sixth. In one Roman villa, built around the year A.D. 200, a large 15-panel mosaic features images of Dionysus, god of wine and parties; Pan, the goat-footed god of shepherds and wild places; the demigod Hercules; and, most famously, a young woman (now commonly called “the Mona Lisa of the Galilee”) who may represent the Roman goddess Venus or the Greek Aphrodite.

True to the city’s hybrid Jewish/Gentile history, however, the ruins of Sepphoris also preserve a synagogue that likely dates to just after A.D. 400. It, too, features beautiful mosaics, depicting (among other things) the visit of the angels to Sarah, wife of the patriarch Abraham (Genesis 18), and the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:1-18). It also features a large zodiac, in which the Hebrew names of the months surround the Greek sun god, Helios, sitting in his solar chariot.

Sepphoris illustrates wonderfully the religious complexity of the ancient Near East. Ultimately, though, its greatest importance may reside in the potential light that its archaeology sheds on the early life of Jesus. (See also "Archaeology and the boyhood of Jesus in Nazareth," published March 12, 2015.)

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Herod wanted a showcase city in Galilee and chose Sepphoris. It was home to much wealth and became a financial center for the entire region.

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*Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a city named Nazareth to a virgin **betrothed** to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The **virgins** name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her,*

***‘Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women.  
- Luke 1 (read the whole chapter)***

**Betrothal:** A pledge made by a man and woman to be married. The Jewish bride and husband to be would have one year to prepare for marriage, which included to remain sexually pure.

**Virgin:** The angel told Mary that she would become pregnant through the Holy Spirit. The Holy one who is to be born will be called the Son of God. She did not deny the possibility, but did ask 'How shall this be? The angel tells her that ‘with God **nothing** will be impossible.’ (Vines expository dictionary directs us to the Greek word rhema in reference to the word nothing. The passage can be translated: 'with God, **no rhema** will be impossible.’ A rhema word from God is a specific word for a specific person in a specific situation as opposed to the word logos, which is a more general word. (see a fuller explanation and contrast of logos and rhema at the end of this message)

**Bondservant:** Mary responded to God’s Word from an angel with humility and faith.

***I am the Lord’s handmaiden/servant (doulos in Greek language).  
May it be to me as you have said. - Luke 1:38***

**Doulos** - from deo, to bind, a slave, originally the lowest term in the scale of servitude, came also to mean one who gives himself up to the will of another. After this Mary went to stay with her cousin Elizabeth for several months and received this prophetic encouragement from her.

***Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her  
will be accomplished! - Luke 1:45***

**Highly Favored** - God showed great grace and favor upon Mary because she could not carry out this momentous role without divine help. God gives grace to the humble and to those who know they are weak without God. Just as water seeks the lowest places, so is God’s grace and favor that flow to the lowly and humble.

**Joseph** He also exhibited faith and trust in God’s unusual plans and purposes for him and Mary. He was kind and supportive of Mary. It took courage to make the arduous 70 to 90 mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to register for the census at the decree of the Roman emperor. Joseph could not phone ahead to make reservations and they arrived later than others due to Mary’s nearly full term pregnancy, thus there were no more rooms available for them. The only available options were to find a cave. God had guided them to Bethlehem, and he would make provision for them. It had been a silent night for some shepherds, but that would soon change. It had been just another mundane menial job in obscurity on a starlit night. Little did they know that their lives and experiences that one night would be remembered for centuries to come. Songs would even be played on the radio and TV in homes around the world for generations to come in memory of that momentous evening when God intervened. Ancient prophecies from hundreds of years before would be fulfilled.

**History** was being revealed as **His story**. (next page Logos and Rhema)

## TWO GREEK WORDS FOR **WORD** CONTRASTED

### LOGOS

1. The whole universal word
2. A general statement
3. Sum total of God's utterances
4. True everywhere and under all circumstances
5. The Word (objective truth)
6. The message
7. The content of the message
8. The entire Bible
9. God's complete revelation
10. Jesus is the Logos  
He is God's final and complete revelation of God to mankind.  
He is God's divine word to end all words.  
John 1:1, Hebrews 1:1-2

### RHEMA

1. Specific individual words
2. Precise specific statement
3. Word spoken for a specific occasion
4. Contemporary, for that occasion only and not for everybody
5. A Word to us (subjective)
6. The message spoken
7. The communication of the message
8. A word, verse or passage from the Bible
9. One revelation needed now
10. Jesus has different rhema words for his disciples.  
Peter tries to compare his rhema from Jesus with the one that Jesus gave John - John 21:18-23.  
God has a rhema word for each believer at different chapters and experiences in their life.  
Three decades ago I was reading a passage in Romans 12 about spiritual gifts when verse 12:7 jumped off the page. ....  
'If it is teaching, **let him teach.**'  
Soon after this God opened many doors for me to teach in various countries and at a Bible School in London, England!  
June 2014 'Write and Disciple'  
August 2014 SPAM (Special Prayer Agent Messages began  
I will share more rhema words as we continue writing these regular messages.

Thanks be to God for speaking to all of us in different ways. May we follow the Holy Spirit and his words to us on our spiritual journey. Our life lived for God is our gift back to Him.

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