

Facts & the First Christmas, part 2

DAVE BAST

For most of us, Christmas is one of the happiest times of the year; and despite all the commercialism that has crept in, we have not yet quite managed to destroy the wonder and joy of this season when we celebrate the birth of God's greatest gift of all; but did it really happen? Stay tuned as acclaimed historian Dr. Paul Maier joins me to separate fact from fantasy as we explore the story of the first Christmas.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, and joining me for this special Christmas program is Dr. Paul Maier. Dr. Maier is Emeritus Professor of Ancient History from Western Michigan University. He is the author of many books, and most notably for this program and for a couple of earlier programs that we did together is the book, *In the Fullness of Time: A Historian Looks at Christmas, Easter, and The Early Church* *. I bought that and read it; it is great. I highly recommend it to you. So, Paul, welcome back; thanks.

PAUL MAIER

I am delighted to be with you again, Dave.

DAVE BAST

And I am happy to plug your book – your books. There are a lot of them, and they are great. In our first program, we looked at Luke; especially Luke 2, the traditional story of the first Christmas when Caesar Augustus declared that all the world should be taxed, and Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem and there the baby Jesus is born. Today I would like to turn to Matthew. Matthew tells the Christmas story – his version of it – at the end of Chapter 1, and through Chapter 2; and in many ways, it is strikingly different.

PAUL MAIER

It is; and I am glad it is different. I mean, what if Matthew would have copied from Luke, or vice-versa; then we would have only one version of the Christmas account, and it would be somewhat limited; but it is very important to see that they were independently researching, and Luke is the one who gives us the shepherds, but in Matthew we have the Magi and King Herod with more detail there, which is fascinating.

DAVE BAST

A friend of mine used to say: I reject the tyranny of the or for the glory of the and. It does not have to be...

PAUL MAIER

That is a great statement.

DAVE BAST

Isn't it? It does not have to be either/or, it can be both/and. That does not mean they are contradicting one another; it means they are fleshing each other out with more detail; and one of the details... Of course, Luke mentions it even more fully, but Matthew starts with it, and that is the bald statement that Mary was found to be with child before she was married to Joseph. Problem, right, in that culture?

PAUL MAIER

Well, the Christians, of course, have always explained this as the virgin birth, indeed.

DAVE BAST

It is an article of our faith. We believe, as the Creed says, he was conceived through the Holy Spirit or by the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary – that Mary – and Matthew says it explicitly – did not know her husband Joseph – have relations with him, that is – before her son Jesus was born. So, many people who don't believe in Christ – who are not Christians – reject this. Interestingly enough, Muslims affirm it.

PAUL MAIER

They do, indeed, yes.

DAVE BAST

The virgin birth occurs in the Qur'an; but it has always struck me that the real miracle is the incarnation; God taking human flesh.

PAUL MAIER

Of course; if God is going to take on human flesh, it would almost have to happen this way, wouldn't it? Because if Jesus had a natural father, well then anyone would doubt from that point out that God was involved at all; so it almost had to happen this way.

DAVE BAST

And somebody says somewhere that if you believe in the incarnation, why would you stumble over the virgin birth? I mean, the incarnation is the harder thing. If you don't believe in the incarnation, then it does not matter what you think about the virgin birth.

PAUL MAIER

Exactly; I have even found some Christians who believe in the resurrection, but they doubt the virgin birth. Go figure that one out...

DAVE BAST

Yes, figure that one out, right. But now, tell us a little bit about the culture of the time, because Joseph when he first hears is deeply troubled, and this would have been a problem given the fact that they were betrothed, right? How did that work?

PAUL MAIER

In effect, because of engagement, if indeed Mary had been unfaithful to him, as Joseph first suspected, he could have decried or denounced her publicly and she could have been stoned to death. It was very, very serious; and so Joseph did, I think, the very gallant thing. He wanted to simply privately divorce her so that she would not be stoned to death; and so he did the right thing until, of course, Joseph was finally told what a special kind of conception this was.

DAVE BAST

So, he had different choices – he had options that he could have followed given the problematic situation; one of which would have been perhaps resulting in Mary's death.

PAUL MAIER

Indeed; and to prevent that a private divorce is what he had in mind. You know, Joseph is kind of the unsung hero of the nativity, I think, in many ways. We kind of overlook him, but what a provider he was; what incredible courage he had, and the trust that the angelic message was correct, that this was a very special baby and it was okay.

DAVE BAST

It seems like dreams play a major role in Matthew's story, in particular...

PAUL MAIER

Well, also the Old Testament.

DAVE BAST

That was the way that God often chose to disclose his special purpose in history.

PAUL MAIER

I think it was an easier way, indeed, to avoid scaring people. All of a sudden, if you had an angelic vision, you know, anybody would be pretty concerned; but in a dream it is more natural.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you think of even Joseph's namesake, right? Joseph in the Old Testament was a great dreamer – maybe the greatest one of all; so there is that connection as well. So, as part of this dream, though, Joseph is not only told about Mary's condition and the source of it, and reassured about her purity, her chastity; he is also given the name that the child is to bear, and that is an incredibly significant name. In Greek, Iesous, which is a form of the Hebrew name, Joshua or Yeshua – the Lord saves.

PAUL MAIER

Yes, his real name was Yeshua, indeed. Yeshua ha-Notzri would be the name on Jesus' driver's license if he had one, okay? It would be in his own language. It would be Yeshua, which is Joshua. The only reason we call him Jesus today is because we go through the Greek, of course. The Greeks could not say Yeshua, so they said Iesous, which is as close as they got, and that is Jesus; but his real name should be Joshua of Nazareth; but I have always said he is a very forgiving Lord. He will understand if you call him Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Whatever you call him, yes; and then the title: Christos or Christ or Mashiah – Messiah in Hebrew, which is not a second name, of course, as most of us know, but it is a title.

PAUL MAIER

It is a confessional statement. If you say, "Iesous Christos," you are saying, "Jesus the Christ." Jesus is the Messiah predicted in the Old Testament.

DAVE BAST

The Anointed One, yes.

PAUL MAIER

The Anointed One. That is why a Jew who does not believe in Christ will never use the term Christ.

DAVE BAST

He will perhaps refer to him as Jesus of Nazareth...

PAUL MAIER

That is right.

DAVE BAST

But not Jesus the Christ – Jesus the Messiah. And then this wonderful quotation from Isaiah 7:14: Behold, the virgin...

PAUL MAIER

Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son. You shall call his name Immanuel – God with us.

DAVE BAST

That wonderful, wonderful one word that is actually a phrase – summary of the Gospel: God is with us in the person of Jesus. God has actually come. There is a wonderful story years ago, I think I was in seminary. Actually, I heard the letter being read; it was from a group of Chinese Christians, and it was in the days when they could not really communicate with the West, and so they sent this letter to some contacts that they had in the West, and these Chinese Christians said: Leave us alone. We don't need you. We are happy. We no longer follow your ways, etc, etc, etc; all to get past the censor; and then there was a one-word post script: Immanuel – Immanuel – God is still with us. That was the real message; don't worry, we are still faithful, we still love the Lord and God is still with us.

That, then, sets up Matthew Chapter 2, where we have a whole new cast of characters come on stage. Let's turn there after a short break.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Hi. Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture for the foundation of our lives. I am Dave Bast, and joining me again on this program is Dr. Paul Maier, Professor of Ancient History. He has become a good friend of *Groundwork*, and an expert especially in the details – the historical background of the Christmas story. So, that is what we are looking at, and we have worked our way through Luke last time and through Matthew Chapter 1. Now we turn to Matthew 2, which begins this way. It is a familiar picture, I think, for most of us.

¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the East came to Jerusalem ²and asked, "Where is the One who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose, and have come to worship him." A little bit different translation there from the one we are maybe most familiar with from the old Sunday school days with the King James.

PAUL MAIER

It is accurate enough.

DAVE BAST

Wise men from the East – we saw his star in the East – we three kings of orient are.

PAUL MAIER

That is a very familiar American carol, of course, but I think it has made three mistakes in the first line. First of all, we don't know if there were three, there may have been more; and they were not kings, they were magi; and they did not come from the Far East – the Orient; but otherwise, it is a lovely carol.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. Bearing gifts we traverse afar. They did carry gifts, and probably it is the three gifts that gave rise to the three wise men. In fact, legend goes much further than that, doesn't it, with them. It gives them names and assigns them ages and races and all that.

PAUL MAIER

Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthazar, yes; all traditional names.

DAVE BAST

Yes, one is black, one is brown, and one is white, yes; but in a way, accurate, it seems to me because they do function as a symbol, don't they, of the Gentiles – the nations. Isaiah 60: Kings shall come to your light at the brightness of your rising.

PAUL MAIER

Exactly. You know, this is where critics love to dig in because they say: Come on, don't tell me that three or more supposedly wise men are going to traipse across the desert following a star when they knew nothing about the significance of the star; and they come to Jerusalem with that perfect question: Where is the newborn King of the Jews? We have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him; you know, almost as if they are being coached in a Christmas pageant behind the curtain by a well-meaning teacher. At first, this one stung me. I really had trouble with this one because...

DAVE BAST

Yes, because they will say: This is obviously Jewish tradition. It is the embroidering of the old...

PAUL MAIER

Midrash, they call it, yes.

DAVE BAST

Exactly. They saw it in Isaiah 60, and so Matthew just makes it into a story.

PAUL MAIER

And so many claims: The star was not big among the Jews at the time for the Messiah. They could not have been in touch with any Jewish prophecies regarding the star and the Messiah, and so on. Those are the arguments they used until I decided to do some further research exactly on the Magi, and what do you know; every particular objection can easily be answered. For example, the Magi were very well known among both the Babylonians and the Persians as kind of walking university people. They did not have universities at the time. They had these people who were able and skilled in many different languages and many different traditions and histories. They knew about astronomy, astrology, and so forth.

DAVE BAST

So, they really were wise men.

PAUL MAIER

They were indeed wise men.

DAVE BAST

They were the public intellectuals of their day.

PAUL MAIER

Right; and the idea that they could not have been in touch with any Jewish prophecies – hold it... I had forgotten all about Nebuchadnezzar. Now, what does he have to do with the picture? Well, Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem in 586 [BC] as you well know, and he took into Babylonian captivity, not the farmers and the laborers and the common people, but the scholars – the leaders in religion and industry. Those were the people who were transported into Babylon.

DAVE BAST

People like Daniel...

PAUL MAIER

Indeed, who would know their scriptures and bring their scriptures along; and so, it would have been part of the bread and butter type of information for these magi to know from their colleagues across the street what the Hebrew Scriptures said about the Numbers prediction: A star rising out of Jacob, and so forth; but you may say: Wait a minute. They all returned under Ezra, didn't they? No, they did not. Probably the majority stayed on in Babylon because these people were doing well. They were making lemonade out of a lemon

situation; and indeed, we can prove that there were Jews in Babylon for a thousand years after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity. How do we know? Where was the Babylonian Talmud, the great collection of Jewish writings written? Well, who is buried in Grant's tomb? Obviously...

DAVE BAST

In Babylon, right.

PAUL MAIER

Babylon, yes; in 400 AD.

DAVE BAST

And then the Persians, of course, came and conquered Babylon; so there was Persian intermixing with Jew and with...

PAUL MAIER

Sure.

DAVE BAST

So the Magi – the wise men – could have been Persian, they could have been Babylonian, but from somewhere in that area of Iraq/Iran today?

PAUL MAIER

Absolutely. They could easily have known all of these prophecies; and by the way, the fact that there was a star involved, of course, is not to be doubted because look at the Israeli flag today...

DAVE BAST

Look at the Israeli flag, exactly. Right; what is the symbol?

PAUL MAIER

A blue star of David against a white background – you know, give me a break. This is very clearly...

DAVE BAST

The star stands for the Messiah – that is the hope.

PAUL MAIER

Absolutely, absolutely.

DAVE BAST

Let's talk about this star a little bit more. What do we know from science – from astronomy? We know that the Magi were probably astrologers/astronomers; I mean, they believed in science – what we would consider science, but also in some of the symbolism involved in astrology.

PAUL MAIER

There are two explanations, David, to the present day yet on the Star of Bethlehem. One is, don't try to explain it. It is a supernatural sign sent by God and has no natural explanation; or the other is God could have used a natural astral event of some kind, and I think Christians should accept either explanation; but if you want a natural explanation for the Star of Bethlehem, well, just look in your newspapers a week before Christmas every year. Some astronomer is going to have a new idea, isn't he? And they are all wrong because they are all trying to get Jesus born in the year 1 or 2 BC or something like that, and we know that would be wrong in terms of the historical evidence. Now, if somebody discovers an astral phenomenon that happened in 6 or 5 BC, then my antennae goes up; and it has been done.

DAVE BAST

It turns out that that is true; that there was such a thing.

PAUL MAIER

There was such a thing. The great Kepler – Johannes Kepler – the tremendous astronomer in the court in Prague in the 1600s saw the triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. He calculated – and correctly – that it happened only every eight centuries. It happened at the birth of Christ. It happened in 800; it happened in 1600 when Kepler saw it. It will not come again until three centuries from now, so don't try to wait around for it. In any case, this thing would have a tremendous astrological message. Now, I don't believe in astrology; I hope your hearers don't believe in astrology; but the Magi did. Don't underestimate God's ability to use whatever he wishes; and in this case, the astrological message is kind of interesting. Jupiter being the largest planet, rules the night sky. That is the king's planet...

DAVE BAST

Exactly.

PAUL MAIER

And it approaches the ring planet, Saturn, three times between 7 and 5 BC; and that is the shield or defender of Palestine, Saturn is, according to the book of Amos. So translate: Jupiter approaches Saturn three times: A king is coming to Palestine.

DAVE BAST

And that could very well have gotten them going.

PAUL MAIER

Gotten them going indeed.

DAVE BAST

They saddle up and they head west, and naturally go to Jerusalem; and then Matthew says...

PAUL MAIER

It is important, by the way. I am glad they made the natural mistake of going to Jerusalem. If they would have come to Bethlehem, that would have been almost too perfect, wouldn't it?

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; Matthew then says that the star went before them until it came over the place where the child was; probably a house by this time. They are not still in the cave or the cavern.

PAUL MAIER

Well, it is interesting, Dave, every night anything in the east is going to move west, and it is going to be south of Jerusalem because that is where the ecliptic is. This is the band in which the sun and the moon and the planets go, see? So it would have looked exactly like that. It would keep going west and Bethlehem is south southwest of Jerusalem. It kind of works out.

DAVE BAST

So, it could very well be that God did exactly this thing. He wanted to communicate to people outside the covenant – outside the history of Israel as a symbol of broadening his love to the ends of the earth, and he uses something they could understand in nature to bring them to the feet of himself – of his Son. What a great thought that is, and that is the story Matthew tells; but now, there is a kicker in Matthew Chapter 2. It is the dark ending of the story that we usually skip over. It is the part that does not make it into our Christmas pageants as a rule. Let's look at that in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Welcome back. This is *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast, along with Paul Maier, and we are talking about Matthew's version of the Christmas story – the Magi following the star – they finally come to Bethlehem; but meanwhile, we have left Herod back there in Jerusalem, and he is not at all happy, is he?

PAUL MAIER

He is not at all happy, especially when the Magi come with their questions. You know, it shows they had not really enrolled in Psychology 101, because listen to what they say: Where is the newborn King of the Jews, you lame duck?

DAVE BAST

Right; yes, they are talking to the current King of the Jews.

PAUL MAIER

Exactly; and Herod by this time is paranoid. He is afflicted with a medical encyclopedia worth of diseases, and so he does not need this as well. He is so suspicious that somebody may take over his throne that he executed three of his own sons on suspicion of treason; and now to hear the Magi say something like this?! Where is the Prince who is going to succeed you any day now, you has-been? And that is why he puts on his best hypocritical mask and says: Oh, tell me where he is so that I may come and worship him.

DAVE BAST

So that I may worship him also, yes.

PAUL MAIER

And then kill him, of course, he says under his breath.

DAVE BAST

Yes, he is like the wolf in grandmother's bed with her bonnet on: Oh, my dear, come closer.

PAUL MAIER

Good parallel.

DAVE BAST

This historical figure, again, is rooted to real history – people we know from ancient history.

PAUL MAIER

Oh, yes; we know all about Herod the Great primarily through the writings of Flavius Josephus, the First Century Jewish historian. Here he has a cameo role in Matthew Chapter 2, but in Josephus he has two whole books: Court History and Herod the Great.

DAVE BAST

About Herod...

PAUL MAIER

That shows us the kind of guy who could have done what he did in Bethlehem...

DAVE BAST

Exactly the point.

PAUL MAIER

in terms of murdering the innocents.

DAVE BAST

Right; he murders all these male babies under the age of 2; so this could even be a year or so after Christ's birth given that timeframe.

PAUL MAIER

I tend to think it was not much later than Jesus' birth. I think a lot of people get hung up on this idea that they stayed in Bethlehem two years and then they went to Egypt, and so forth. I don't think that is possible. Here you have the holy family with not many resources. Look, is it more expensive to live away from home or back home?

DAVE BAST

On the road, yes, right.

PAUL MAIER

On the road.

DAVE BAST

Not on the road.

PAUL MAIER

Clearly, they would not have been able to afford it.

DAVE BAST

So, shortly after Jesus' birth.

PAUL MAIER

At least 40 days after Jesus was born. You have to have 40 days elapse. Why do we say that? Simply because on day 40 they presented Jesus at the Temple according to Luke, right? So, they are not going to bring the baby to Bethlehem when there is an all-points bulletin out for babies from Bethlehem in Herod's Jerusalem – no way! And so the Magi could not have arrived until day 41. At that time, the holy family is no longer living in the grotto, they are living in a house, Matthew tells us; and so, I really think it was shortly after that. The film, *The Nativity Story* that came out several years ago was very accurate except they had the Magi visiting the same night the shepherds did...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. That is a little bit off.

PAUL MAIER

That's impossible.

DAVE BAST

We do that with our manger scenes, too, don't we?

PAUL MAIER

Our crèches under the Christmas tree, you bet.

DAVE BAST

There are the shepherds on one side and the wise men on the other; but they came later, and then as they leave, Joseph is warned once more in a dream – there is the dream again – and they flee to Egypt, which is so ironic. I mean, if you think about biblical history, Egypt was the house of bondage – the place of slavery for the people of Israel – but it is turned into a place of refuge for the Son of God, the true Israel, when this

murderous king comes breathing threats against him.

PAUL MAIER

That is a great insight, David. That is exactly right.

DAVE BAST

But let's step back and let me just ask you a personal question if I can. You have studied all this history; we have good reason to believe, yes, it happened – it happened the way the evangelists say it did. What does that do for your own faith as a Christian?

PAUL MAIER

Well, you know, as a Christian my faith should be based on faith alone, no question about that; but when faith is supported by fact, that only helps it, doesn't it? At least it does for me. Now, a lot of people misunderstand my approach, but when I compare sacred and secular and I see how beautifully they correlate, hey, this removes doubts, and that way, my faith, I think, is strengthened. I don't go into my research to try to prove what I am believing, no; but when I find the evidence overpoweringly supporting what I believe, then I realize the Christian faith is based, not on fantasy, but on fact.

DAVE BAST

I'm glad of that. Thanks, Paul, for joining us; and thank you, too, for listening. Remember, it is folks like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing, and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

***Correction:** The audio of this program misstates the title of Paul Maier's book as: *In the Fullness of Time: An Ancient Historian Looks at Christmas, Easter, and the Story of the First Christians*. The correct title is: *In the Fullness of Time: A Historian Looks at Christmas, Easter, and The Early Church*.

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