

THE INTRIGUING STORY OF THE FIRST CHRISTMAS

Mary was a beautiful, young girl who was engaged to Joseph, a carpenter. They lived in a village called Nazareth in northern Israel.

One night, not long before they were to get married, an angel appeared to Mary. This was not only an angel, but a very important angel—the archangel Gabriel. An archangel is an angel officer who is in charge of a large number of other angels, similar to how a general in the military is in charge of a large group of soldiers. (In Bible times, there are several instances when God had a very important announcement to make, and He would send His archangel Gabriel to deliver His message.)

Gabriel appeared to her and said, “Congratulations, favored lady! The Lord is with you!”¹

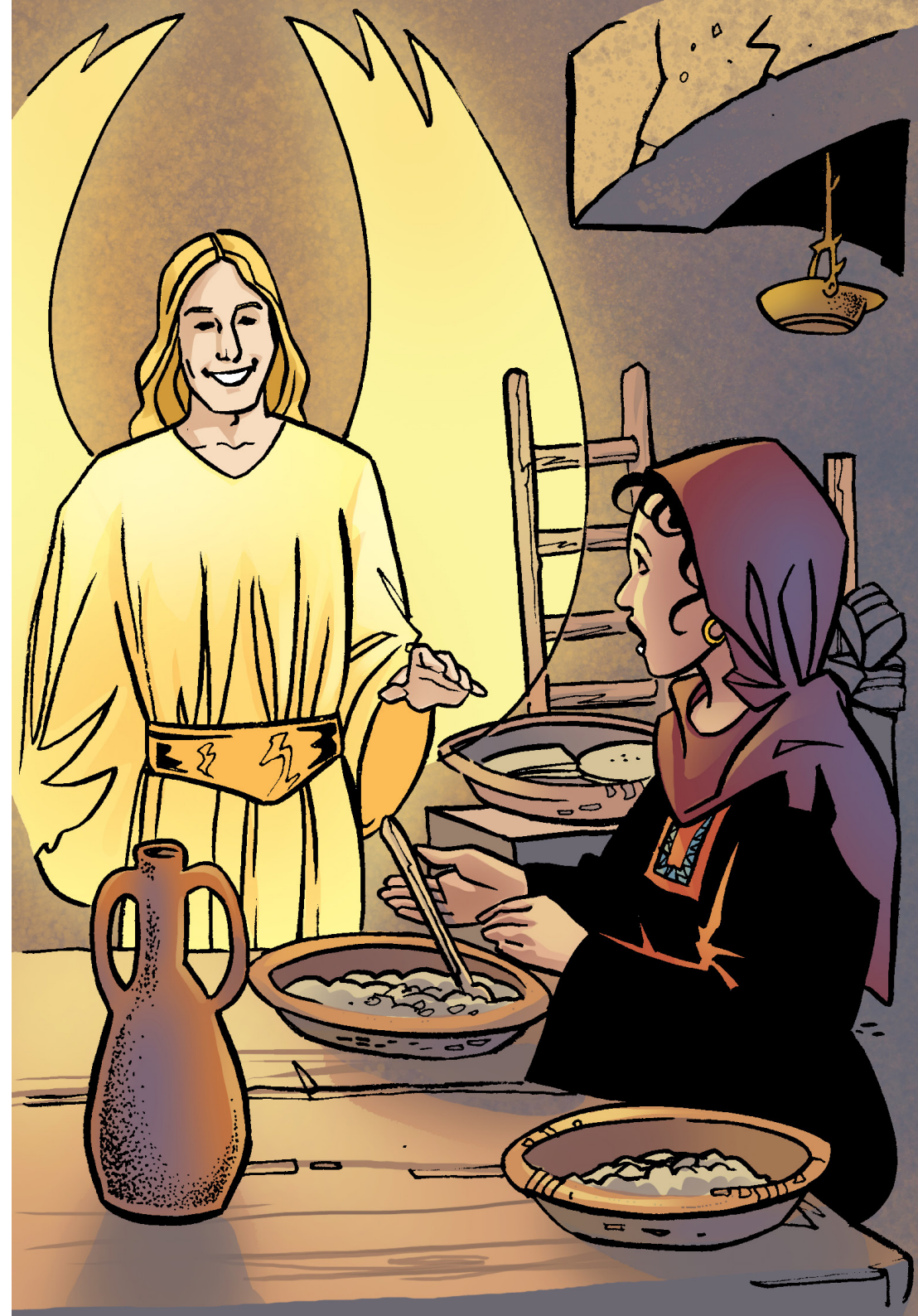
Who in the world is this? Mary wondered. What is he telling me? It isn't common to be visited by an angel, so you can imagine Mary's surprise.

“Don't be afraid, Mary,” Gabriel told Mary. “God wants to bless you. Soon you will become pregnant, and have a son. You will name Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of God. And he will reign over Israel forever; and His kingdom will be eternal.”²

The archangel, Gabriel, was referring to *spiritual* Israel, which consists of those who are part of God's Kingdom by *faith*. Jesus is King to those who believe in Him, the Son of God.

Mary asked the angel, “How can this happen, since I'm a virgin?”

“The Holy Ghost will cause the power of God to overshadow you,” the angel replied. “The baby you will have will be called the Son of God.”³



In Matthew, it tells us how God's angel appeared to Joseph to prepare him for the shocking news that his future wife was already pregnant! It can be quite distressing for a man to find out his fiancée is going to have someone else's baby. Many men would break off the engagement, and Joseph probably thought of breaking his engagement to Mary. But God gave Joseph a dream in which an angel of the Lord appeared to him.

"Joseph, son of David ... don't hesitate to take Mary as your wife! For the child within her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit.

"And she will have a Son, and you shall name him Jesus (meaning 'Savior'), for he will save his people from their sins."⁴



When the angel told Mary about how she would become pregnant with the baby Jesus, he delivered some other surprising news to her. "I also bring you good news about your cousin Elizabeth. Even though she is old, and was unable to have children, she too has become pregnant with a son. Nothing is impossible for God."⁵

Mary knew that Elizabeth was too old to have a baby. So when the angel told Mary that Elizabeth was expecting a baby, Mary was surprised.

After hearing this mysterious and awesome news, Mary told the angel: "I am God's servant; I believe all that you have told me."⁶

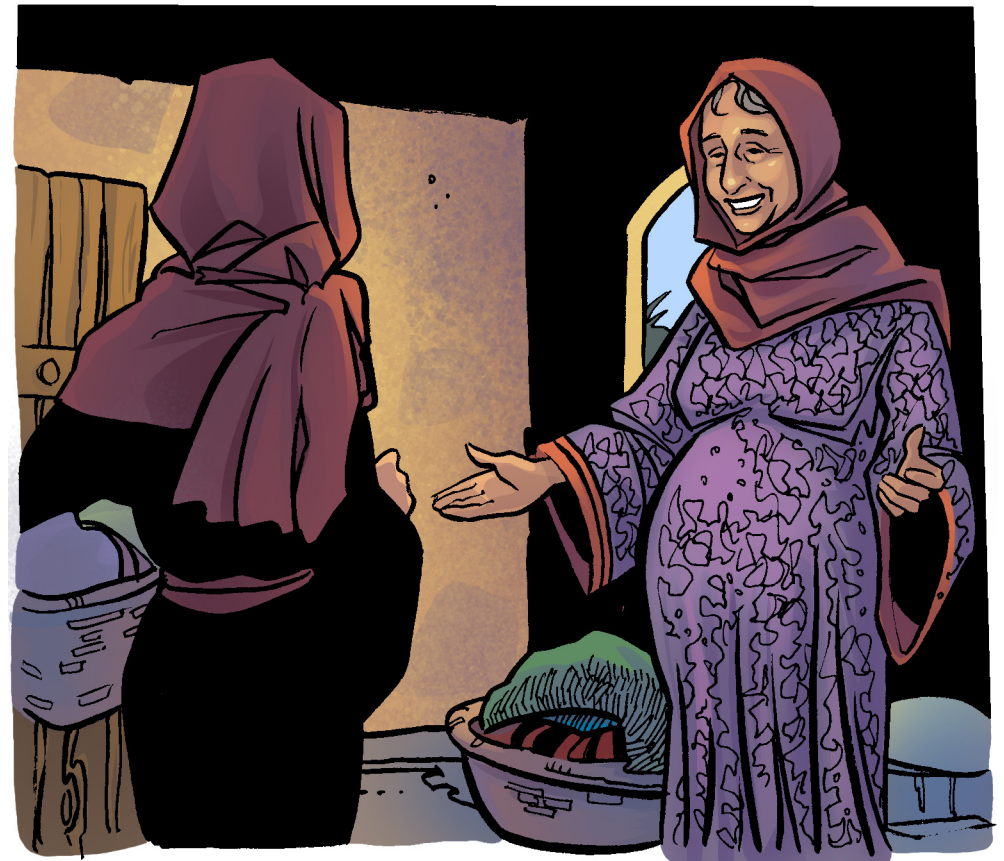


Soon afterwards Mary went to visit and stay with Elizabeth. When she arrived at Zacharias and Elizabeth's house, even before she had a chance to tell Elizabeth about what was taking place in her life, something amazing happened.

At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, "You are favored by God above all other women, and your child is destined for God's mightiest praise. What an honor this is, that the mother of my Lord should visit me! When you came in and greeted me, the instant I heard your voice, my baby moved in me for joy!"⁷

It was as if the baby, John, knew the voice of Jesus' mother.

Elizabeth encouraged Mary by telling her, "You are blessed because you believed God's message to you."⁸



This next passage is a beautiful expression of Mary's happiness in being the mother of God's Son, Jesus. It is known as the *Magnificat*, or the Song of Mary.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

For He has regarded the lowly state of his maidservant;

*For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed."*⁹



Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months, and then returned to her own home. When it was time for Elizabeth's baby to be born, she gave birth to a son.

The first book of Luke tells us a bit more about what took place before Elizabeth had her baby. Elizabeth and her husband, Zacharias, had been greatly disappointed and saddened that they had never had any children. One day while Zacharias had been performing his duties as a priest in the temple, an angel of the Lord had appeared to him and told him that his wife was going to have a baby.



Zacharias didn't believe it would happen, because Elizabeth was too old to have a baby. Because of his disbelief, the angel caused Zacharias to become mute, and told him:

"And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."¹⁰

Of course, once Elizabeth got pregnant, Zacharias believed what the angel had told him, because it had come true.

God had told Zacharias to name the baby "John." However, in those days, the children were named after the father. When the baby was born Elizabeth said, "He must be named John!" But the people listening said, "That's not right! Zacharias is his father's name, and the baby should be named after his father!"

But Zacharias wrote out, "His name is John!"

And at that point, because Zacharias showed he was firm in his faith through his obedience to God in what he named his baby, God opened his mouth, and he was able to speak again.

The Holy Spirit then inspired Zacharias, and he gave a beautiful prophecy that spoke of Jesus, the mighty savior, who God had promised would come to save His people. The prophecy also talked about how his baby, John, would grow up and later prepare the way for the Messiah by telling people how to find salvation through forgiveness of sins. And it spoke of Jesus' journey on earth to give life, light, and peace to those who were in spiritual darkness.





Mary and Joseph both lived in Nazareth, but God had said hundreds of years earlier, through the prophet Micah, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Though you are little among the thousands of Judah,
Yet out of you shall come forth to Me
The One to be Ruler in Israel,
Whose goings forth are from of old,
From everlasting."¹¹

Around the time Mary was due to give birth to Jesus, Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor, commanded that all of the people of the Roman world were to be counted. This required Mary and Joseph to return to Bethlehem, the home of Joseph's ancestors, for the census.

They had to travel a long, long ways south to Bethlehem. Usually the art portraying this shows a donkey carrying Mary. Even if Mary rode a donkey it was still a long ride. When you ride a donkey, you feel a jolt with every step it takes, but it was probably better than walking.

Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem just in time, because Mary began to have contractions. It was time for the baby to be born!





There was no hospital to have the baby, nor did they have a doctor or a midwife to help deliver the baby. They also didn't have a place to stay. Maybe Joseph's relatives no longer lived there, or maybe their relatives didn't have room for them. After all, there were many others returning to Bethlehem at the same time.

So Joseph knocked on the door of an inn and asked if there were any available rooms.

The innkeeper laughed incredulously. "No, of course not! People have come to Bethlehem from all over the place and everything is full. I'm running over with people! I have no space at all!"

"But, look, my wife is about to have a baby. We need a place for her!" entreated Joseph.

The innkeeper took pity on Mary. "I guess you could stay in my stable for tonight!" At least that would get them out of the cold, and they would be protected from wind and rain, even if it meant staying where the barn animals slept.

So that evening Mary gave birth to the baby right there in the stable. She wrapped Him in cloths and laid Him in the manger. Do you know what a manger is? It's a feeding trough that is often made out of wood, where hay or grain is put for the livestock to eat.¹²



Just at the time of the birth, out on a nearby hillside shepherds were watching their sheep. An angel appeared to them and said, "I bring you the most joyful news ever announced, and it is for everyone! The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem! How will you recognize him? You will find a baby wrapped in a blanket, lying in a manger!"¹³

After that astonishing proclamation, a big, bright light burst across the sky, and a group of angels appeared, singing: "Glory to God in the highest! Peace on Earth to men of good will!"

The shepherds were very excited by this news. When the angels disappeared they said, "Let's go see the Messiah!"

So they went into Bethlehem, and somehow they found Baby Jesus! God must have led them, because the shepherds found Jesus

in a manger
in the stable.
Mary and
Joseph must
have been
very happy
and quite
excited when
they heard
the news that
angels had
appeared
to these
shepherds
and told them
that Jesus, the
Messiah, had
been born!¹⁴



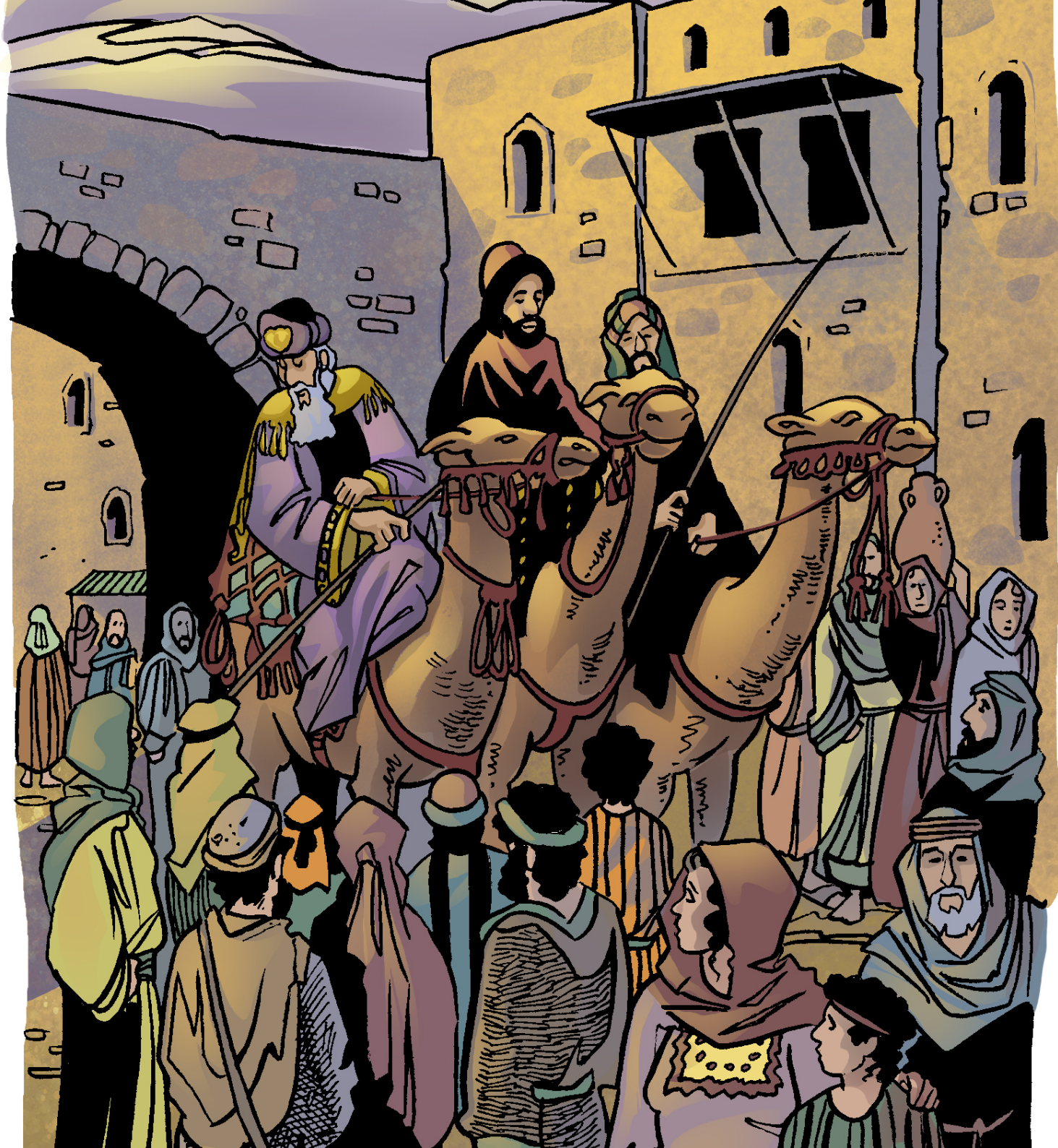
After Jesus was born, Joseph, Mary, and Baby Jesus stayed in Bethlehem for some time.

Joseph was a talented, hard-working carpenter, and he probably found work to do to support his family. Maybe at first he did some work for the innkeeper. Hotels and inns are always in need of repairs from being used so much, so he might have done some work for him. Maybe the innkeeper gave Joseph a job so he could stay in the stable for a while until he found a house.

It was about two years after Jesus' birth that the wise men came from Mesopotamia in search of Jesus. These wise men were astrologers who studied the stars, and while they were studying the stars, God had revealed to them that a great king had been born in Judea, although they didn't really understand who He was.

God had been guiding these wise men by the star, but then they apparently used their natural reasoning and decided, "We'll ask the king in Jerusalem where we can find this King of the Jews the star is leading us to! Of course, King Herod will know where this great king has been born." So they asked the king instead of just continuing to follow the star.

King Herod thought, *Oh dear! What other king besides me has been born in this country? I'm the king!*



And then crafty, wicked Herod thought, *I'd like to know where this king is too!* So he told the wise men, "When you find the King of the Jews, return and let me know where He is so that I too can go to worship Him!"



But King Herod wasn't planning to worship this King of the Jews at all! He wanted to kill Him!

King Herod called in his wise men and asked them, "Where is this 'Messiah of the Jews' supposed to be born, anyway?"

They answered, "According to the prophecies in our scriptures, He's supposed to be born in Bethlehem."

'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Art not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.'¹⁵

So the wise men continued to follow the star to Bethlehem, and there they found Jesus and offered Him the three gifts they had brought Him.

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.¹⁶



The gift of frankincense was a lovely perfume or incense that was given to priests. Gold was a symbol of kingship. These gifts signified that He was the Son of God—royal and divine!

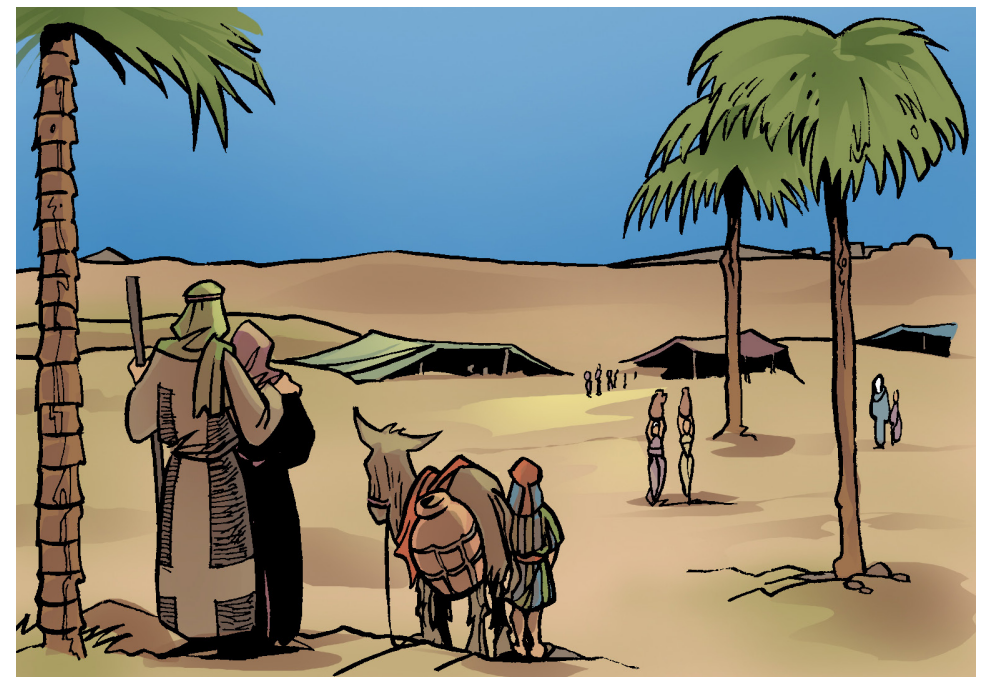
Myrrh was a fragrant sap used in incense or perfume for burial ceremonies. This gift made reference to Jesus' death for mankind to save us from our sins.

God then spoke to the wise men in a dream. "Don't go back to King Herod. King Herod doesn't want to worship Jesus. He is afraid and jealous that if Jesus is going to be such a great king that He might take his kingdom!"

So the wise men went back another route and bypassed wicked King Herod. King Herod waited and waited and waited for the kings to come back, but they never returned.

After they were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up and flee to Egypt with the baby and his mother," the angel said, "and stay there until I tell you to return, for King Herod is going to try to kill the child."

That same night he left for Egypt with Mary and the baby, and stayed there until King Herod's death."¹⁷





Egypt was about 300 kilometers (about 200 miles) away from Bethlehem, which was a very long distance to travel in those days. But God knew that this was where Jesus would be safe as long as Herod was alive.

Now how do you suppose they could afford a trip like that when Joseph was just a carpenter? It cost money to travel! He didn't have to buy a ticket on the donkey, but they needed food and other necessities for their travels. Maybe they carried a tent with them and other equipment for camping.

They also had to live in a foreign country amongst foreigners for several years, possibly without a job, and probably without knowing the language at first. But they had to have some money to live on.

Remember, one of the wise men had given Jesus a gift of gold? That would've given them plenty of money to live on. Wasn't God wonderful? He took care of them and provided their every need.

After Joseph and Mary left Bethlehem with Jesus, King Herod ordered his soldiers to go to Bethlehem to find and kill Jesus. But due to God having warned Joseph, King Herod's plan failed.

Several years later God told Joseph, "You can go home to Nazareth because the danger has passed, King Herod is dead." So they traveled back home to Nazareth.

They had been gone for quite a long time, and their family and friends must have wondered what had happened to them. They had gone away to Bethlehem as a young couple with Mary pregnant, and they returned with a growing boy!

Jesus probably learned a lot from the people in Egypt. That was a very technologically and culturally advanced country in those days. It's where God sent Moses to get his education too.

This also fulfilled a prophecy about the Son of God coming from Egypt. "And out of Egypt have I called My son."¹⁸



And that's the story of the very first Christmas, over 2,000 years ago. And the wonderful thing is Jesus is still here with us today!

God bless and keep you and make you a blessing. And like the song says, "May all your Christmases be bright."

Footnotes:

¹ Luke 1:28 TLB

² See Luke 1:30–33.

³ See Luke 1:34–35.

⁴ Matthew 1:20–21 TLB

⁵ See Luke 1:36–37.

⁶ See Luke 1:38.

⁷ Luke 1:42–44 TLB

⁸ See Luke 1:45.

⁹ Luke 1:46–48 NKJV

¹⁰ Luke 1:20 NIV

¹¹ Micah 5:2 NKJV

¹² Read Luke 2:1–7.

¹³ Luke 2:10–12 TLB

¹⁴ Read Luke 2:14–19.

¹⁵ Matthew 2:6 NKJV

¹⁶ Matthew 2:11 NIV

¹⁷ Matthew 2:13–15 TLB

¹⁸ Hosea 11:1 NKJV