

# Questions about Jesus' Birth

Dr. John Ankerberg and Mrs. Claire Pfann

[Mrs. Claire Pfann is Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs, University of the Holy Land, and author and an expert on Jewish birth practices and the culture of Bethlehem during the time of Jesus. She was interviewed in connection with our series entitled ***Jesus: The Search Continues***. Check the online catalog to order this series.]

**Dr. John Ankerberg:** Was Jesus born in Bethlehem or wasn't He?

**Mrs. Claire Pfann:** I think based on the Gospel accounts we can be sure of the fact that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. This is evidenced in Matthew, in Luke, and also by implication in the Gospel of John. The opponents of Jesus in John, in their smug attitude, say, "How can this possibly be the Messiah? Jesus is from Nazareth in the Galilee. We know that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem." And within John's Gospel, rather than answering that argument, he remains silent because his readers already know the fact that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a fact that his opponents, for all their smugness, are unaware.

**Ankerberg:** Marcus Borg (of the Jesus Seminar) says, "In all likelihood Jesus was born in Nazareth, not in Bethlehem. The fact that Jesus is known as 'Jesus of Nazareth' points very, very heavily to Nazareth being his birthplace." What would you say to that?

**Pfann:** The fact that Jesus was called "Jesus of Nazareth" tells us less about where he was born than about where he came from as a young adult when he started his ministry. It tells us that he was known as "Jesus of Nazareth" because that's where he lived during his adolescence. It doesn't tell us where he was born. He was born in Bethlehem.

**Ankerberg:** Does Matthew contradict Luke by saying that the family was living in Bethlehem and having Jesus born at home?

**Pfann:** We sometimes read Luke and we picture Joseph and Mary traveling in the rain on a cold December night. And Mary is in labor, in pain, about to deliver this baby and Joseph frantically walks from door to door knocking on the Motel 6's of Bethlehem—which there weren't any, of course—trying to find accommodations. But actually, if we really read what Luke has to say, he says they went to Bethlehem, which was Joseph's ancestral home. That means they had extended family there. They were going to a place where they were known and loved, and where they would receive hospitality. It also says in the Gospel of Luke, "While they were there the time came for her to be delivered." Now, that's a non-specific amount of time. How long were they there before the baby was born? Two days? Two weeks? Two months? It could have been three or four or five months. We really don't know. So the picture of them being in a familial setting, surrounded by people that they might know, and that might help with the delivery, is actually supported by both Luke and Matthew.

**Ankerberg:** Is the Church of the Nativity the actual place of Jesus' birth?

**Pfann:** The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem has strong evidence to support it as being the place of the birth of Jesus. Tradition has held it as the birthplace of Jesus for all these centuries, a tradition that was probably kept alive by the Jewish Christians in the land

from the time of the Resurrection of Jesus as they searched back into His origins.

Certainly, the church lies on the heart of ancient first century Bethlehem, that small Jewish village of extended patriarchal homes. And if we look at the archaeology of that type hillside, we would see, if we could just lift that church off, the kind of archaeological pattern that would characterize Bethlehem in the first century.

We could see, for example, the caves built into the cliffs and how the homes were built on a multi-level type of terrace plan. We could understand how the people lived in courtyard homes where they would walk into the courtyard. There could be an oven. People could bake. Going off of the courtyard would be a cave or a basement in which olive oil could be stored and grains and animals could be tied up overnight for protection against the weather and bandits. The family rooms would be extending off another doorway off the courtyard. There would be a common room where eating would take place and children might sleep. There might be another room or two for the grownups and for guests. It was in such a patriarchal home that Mary and Joseph probably came shortly before the birth of Jesus and in which they were embraced by an extended family as they waited for the birth of this child.

**Ankerberg:** Talk about the genealogies in Mathew and Luke. What is going on?

**Pfann:** The genealogies of Matthew and Luke are really quite an interesting subject for study, even if on the surface they seem quite boring. Both Matthew and Luke have quite different purposes to accomplish. Luke wants to show us through his genealogy that Jesus goes back past Abraham, to Adam, to God and that Jesus therefore is a suitable Savior for all of humanity, Jew and Gentile alike. Matthew, on the other hand, has a very Jewish purpose to serve with his genealogy and focuses on the Jewish ancestors of Jesus, showing that He is both the Son of Abraham, and the Son of David. He also throws in four women in his genealogy: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, all of whom had some sexual impropriety associated with their role in the messianic line, and this is to comfort the community of Jesus and His followers who have been accused of sexual impropriety in His conception.

**Ankerberg:** If only Luke has the shepherds and the angels, and only Matthew has the kings and the star, can we trust any of what they say as historical information?

**Pfann:** I think, again, we have to remember that Luke and Matthew are each choosing what they want to tell about Jesus. Very important in Luke's Gospel is the fact that Jesus is coming to be the shepherd of the sheep, and he is coming, in particular, to call people who are poor and outcast and marginalized in society. And in his day, shepherds were looked down upon. They were marginalized people. So how significant in the Gospel of Luke that the first people who should hear the good news of the birth of the Lamb of God, happened to be shepherds, sitting in their fields by night. It's such an important moment in the Gospel of Luke that there's an angelic announcement. What is happening is so important for salvation history that, for a brief moment, heaven breaks forth into the earthly sphere and we get to see a glimpse of this ladder between heaven and earth, of the angels announcing the good news of the Lamb of God, who will one day be the shepherd of the sheep. It's a beautiful, poetic, way of depicting a theme that will run through Luke in terms of Jesus' care

for the poor and downcast.

**Ankerberg:** Is it historically probable or improbable that Jesus was born of a virgin?

**Pfann:** It's historically probable that Jesus was born of a virgin, and both Matthew and Luke, working independently decades after His birth as they searched for the data that they can put together on His birth, come up with that as one of the 12 points that they share in common—a virgin birth, a divine conception. There have been many slurs and innuendos about Jesus, but in this they both agreed.

**Ankerberg:** What do you say to those who say Jesus was actually an illegitimate child? Why is that historically improbable?

**Pfann:** The testimony of Scripture about His conception is a clear testimony. And again, both Matthew and Luke share the fact that this was not a child born out of immorality but a child born under unique and divine circumstances. In the Dead Sea Scrolls we actually find the expectation that the Messiah would also be called the Son of the Most High and the Son of God, just as we see in the Gospel of Luke. And in the Gospel of John, we again get that type of innuendo, that sarcasm, as the enemies of Jesus say to Him in John chapter 7, "We were not born of fornication. We know who our father is," implying that He was. Once again, the Gospel of John does not give any type of rebuttal because the Gospel of John assumes that its readers know the true circumstances of Jesus' birth.

**Ankerberg:** In the ABC program *The Search for Jesus* Peter Jennings said there's not a whole lot of things we can say with certainty about the birth of Jesus. What are the things that you are certain about concerning the birth of Jesus?

**Pfann:** Well, I think I would say the things I'm certain about concerning the birth of Jesus are certainly the things that both Matthew and Luke share in common and tell us. He was born of the family of David. He was born to a woman named Mary who was a virgin, betrothed (or engaged) to a man named Joseph, and yet who had not yet come to live with him. His birth was announced through an angelic visitation. His conception was unique and divine in human history. His birth took place in Bethlehem. It was accompanied by unique signs. And the family later moved to Nazareth and made their home there.

**Ankerberg:** Roman tax records do show that a man is to be taxed where he lives, they said. And Joseph lived and worked in Nazareth. Tax records also show they didn't count women. So why would Joseph have brought Mary on this very difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, through the desert, especially when she was "very, very pregnant"?

**Pfann:** Well, there are just so many things wrong with that question, aren't there? Starting off with the fact that maybe she wasn't "very, very pregnant" at the time they made the journey. We pointed out in Luke 2 that it doesn't say that she was in labor when she was traveling to Bethlehem, it says, "while she was in Bethlehem she went into labor: "the time came for her to be delivered" number one. Number two: it's not that dangerous of a journey to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and we see that probably the practice was to travel in groups of people. It would be a three or four day journey. They would camp out under the stars. They would bring food with them. And there were not bandits on every side waiting to attack every traveler. So I think that we find a few basic presuppositions that are

just our own modern skepticism and really don't deal with the reality of the fact that, if Joseph and Mary had come to live together as a married couple at this point, why on earth would he leave her at home when he faced a prolonged absence, waiting for the census to be accomplished?

**Ankerberg:** Did the early Christian church just bring Greek and Roman mythologies into Christianity to come up with the story of Jesus' birth?

**Pfann:** I think the last thing in the world that early Christians wanted to do was to import anything from Greek and Roman mythology into Christianity. If anything, they had turned their backs on paganism and polytheism and mythology, and what they wanted to do was to preserve as much as possible, the truth about the historical Jesus. When they talked about the virgin birth, it was because they believed that, in Jesus, for a unique moment in all of history, the divine and the human combined in one Son of God, who became the son of man so that he might cause the children of men to become sons of God.