

# BETHLEHEM QUESTIONS

Joel Graves

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## TWO QUESTIONS

In the time of Jesus, Israel was divided into two states: Galilee in the north made up of ten tribes, and Judea in the south—the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. There are two Bethlehems in Israel that have been there since the time of Jesus: one in Judea outside Jerusalem, and one up north in Galilee just west of Nazareth. In the television program, *Expeditions Unknown* (Mysteries of Jesus: Season 6, Episode 3), Josh Gates explores Bethlehem of Galilee and floats the idea that Jesus was born there.

Was Jesus actually born in Galilee, as some archeologists speculate? And why didn't Herod follow the Magi when they left him to be sure he found Jesus right away?

## BETHLEHEM OF GALILEE

The main argument for Bethlehem of Galilee as the birth place of Jesus is that it is close to Nazareth and a more likely destination for a very pregnant Mary. Nazareth to Bethlehem of Galilee is about seven miles—one day's travel.

But the scriptures specifically says, Bethlehem of Judea. The distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem in Judea is over 70 miles. At a brisk walk, maybe three to four days travel. Riding a slow donkey at a walk, more like seven or eight.

In Luke 2, after Caesar Augustus makes his decree, Luke writes: "So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David..." (Luke 2:4). From Nazareth to Bethlehem of Galilee is a relatively flat road from one town to the next. But from Nazareth to Jerusalem—and Bethlehem a few miles beyond—it is uphill all the way. People, when traveling there from Nazareth would always say, "I am going up to Jerusalem." This is further proof that the young family made the longer, more arduous trip rather than the short one. Everything happens in accordance with God's plans, even a family's journey and the destination, whatever the hardships.



"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea..." (Matthew 2:1). Whatever the archeological evidence, Luke and Matthew make it clear that if there are two towns called Bethlehem, Jesus was born in the one outside Jerusalem in Judea.

*“On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child...Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord” (Luke 2:21-22).*

In this passage we learn that Bethlehem must not be far from Jerusalem, because on the eighth day, they seem to just go over there, like to the next town, no long journey involved—a good stretch of the legs. It would not be possible to complete this necessary ritual from Bethlehem of Galilee, because it would mean Mary would have to start for Jerusalem the day after the baby was born.



Even the circumcision was a fulfillment of prophecy, because God had promised Simeon *“that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah”* (Luke 2: 25-26). And the old man spoke to Mary and prophesied over the boy.

Then Anna came in and *“spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem”* (Luke 2:38). To fulfill these prophetic events, Jesus—the baby and the Messiah—had to be in Jerusalem, because by his life and death, he would bring about the redemption of Jerusalem and the world. We might call the temple Ground Zero.

Before Herod sent his soldiers to kill the children, the angel warned Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt. From Bethlehem, Egypt is due south, away from the brutality. As Herod’s troops attack, the family is already moving away, something I don’t see working well if they were in Galilee in the north.

Also, if they were in Bethlehem of Galilee, they would not have stayed there for two years, until the Magi came. Logic tells us that after Jesus was born, they would have gone back home to Nazareth only seven miles away.

In the *Expeditions Unknown* piece, an archeologist implies that because the gospels were written centuries after the time of Jesus, they were not to be trusted and Bethlehem of Galilee was a good town for the birthplace of Jesus.

First, in his gospel, Luke gives us intimate details of Mary’s experiences that he could only have learned by interviewing her (Luke 1:1-3, 51). Luke explains that his historical account is first-person, taken from people who experienced the events themselves or were eye witnesses.

Second, the subject called Textual Criticism is designed to throw doubt and suspicion on the scriptures, so they are not considered holy and infallible but the flawed work of zealous followers with no divine inspiration. It is Textual Criticism that tells people the gospels were fabricated by people two and three hundred years after the time of Jesus. It is heresy wearing the scholarly cloak of respectability.

Finally, after hearing the scriptural proofs, if someone persists in the Galilee Bethlehem birthplace idea, they are denying the prophecy of Bethlehem of Judea as the birthplace which throws into conflict the prophecies proclaimed by Simeon, Anna, Micah and Jeremiah. I would have to call that person a heretic, because they are denying important scriptures to fit their notion of what is right. And if Jesus did not fulfill every scripture, he could not be the Messiah, which means he is a liar, not the Son of God, and the bible is essentially mythology. By denying this, the incarnation and Christianity become irrelevant.

## HEROD AND THE MAGI

In the Gospel of Luke, chapter two, Caesar Augustus wanted to do an empire-wide census, which caused Joseph to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem. He did this because "...he belonged to the house and line of David" (Luke 2:4). "While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son" (Luke 2:6-7).

"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and 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'" (Matt 2:1-2). King Herod called the chief priests and teachers and asked about this disturbing information. They refer to Micah 5:2, 4: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

I was twelve. Father Holland taught the confirmation classes at Saint Luke's, and he told us to read certain parts of the bible. When I read Matthew 2, I thought something must be wrong. "Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him'" (Matt 2:7-8).



The problem develops, because if Bethlehem is just a few miles away down the hill from Jerusalem, then any number of officials, guards, soldiers, and spies, could have followed overtly or covertly to see what developed. As a twelve-year-old, I read this passage and scratched my head. I thought, why didn't Herod just send someone down the hill with the Magi to see what happened next? Too easy. I would have done it that way. An escort for the Magi would have ensured that he knew what they discovered.

To solve this dilemma, some people have suggested that Bethlehem of Galilee, just west of Nazareth, must have been the true birthplace.

When the Israelite scholars came into the throne room and told how the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, there must have been a discussion and debate about what that really meant for the Magi searchers (Matthew 2:4-6). Did it mean Bethlehem proper or did the prophecy include the surrounding area? Because although the prophecy specified Bethlehem, the Magi would only go where the star led them. And they must have explained their purpose and logic authoritatively, despite the prophecy.

Bethlehem would be nice and convenient, but their mission was dependent on the star—period, wherever it took them. The Magi would say, "We don't know specifically where we are going, but we might guess that it



is within five miles or so from here in Jerusalem. We might be searching for some time, you know, sir Herod, it depends on the star, after all, not what the scriptures say.”

In fact, we do not know how long it was from their audience with Herod until they found the Christ child. In Matthew, it sounds like the Magi found Jesus the next day, but we don't know that. I think the star led them around the area for two to six weeks or more to throw off Herod's spies. I can hear the spy saying, “Herod, sir, we followed those crazy guys for two weeks and they are just wandering around the countryside, as if lost.”



Ramah is five miles north of Jerusalem and Bethlehem is about 6 miles south. And Ramah is in the tribe of Benjamin. Why would the prophet Micah say that Rachel wept in Ramah, if the innocents were destroyed in Bethlehem of Judea? Is this a biblical error to be swept under the rug and shrugged off as too hard to explain?

Apparently, Herod discovered that the Magi found the Messiah, but not where. If the Magi spent weeks or longer looking all around Jerusalem, the slaughter would not have been confined to Bethlehem, but to the surrounding territory, which would include Ramah, fulfilling the prophecy. Because the scripture says, “*When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under...*” (Matt 2:16). In the literal Greek, it says, “*in all the vicinity of it.*” I'm just saying, the scope of *vicinity* does not limit the area to the immediate suburbs of Bethlehem but must have been much larger. Maybe the Magi were last seen in Ramah. Because Micah tells us that a town ten miles away from Bethlehem felt Herod's wrath, maybe more so than some others, because the suffering stood out and was accounted for in Jeremiah's prophecy.

Although Bethlehem fulfilled the prophecy, the Magi were only following the star—not the prophecy. Bethlehem is very close to Jerusalem, but it appears that the Magi did not walk down the hill and encounter Jesus the next day. Some indeterminate amount of time passed and they eventually ended up there.

Plus, something quite interesting was going on from an astrophysics perspective: the star they were following had the ability to identify a single dwelling. “*...they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was*” (Matthew 2:9). I have not heard a satisfying explanation for this phenomenon. The star sounds more like a drone with a narrow-focus beam that shined downward. After seeing Herod, how long they followed the star is not indicated, only that they were overjoyed when they found the child with his mother Mary. It seems that as soon as they finished visiting Jesus, they left for home by a different route, because they had a dream before they found Jesus, telling them to depart hastily. And Herod had no idea.

## RECAP

1. From Nazareth, Joseph and Mary went up to Jerusalem and Bethlehem over seventy miles away.
2. Jesus was circumcised in the Jerusalem temple on the eighth day, which means they were lodged close by.
3. The Magi did not go directly from Herod to Bethlehem but must have wandered the immediate area for some time before the star stopped at the Messiah's dwelling, thus throwing off an spies and thwarting Herod's plans to murder Jesus.

## END NOTES

Many Christmas movies, plays and nativity creches show the shepherds standing in awe of the child with the Magi offering their gifts. But Jesus was probably closer to two years old when those eastern wise men found him with no shepherds around.

How many wise men were there? The bible does not tell us. But we have always thought there were at least three, because they bore three gifts.

