

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

by Don Davidson

A drop of sweat rolled down Hannah's forehead as she finished cleaning the animal pen that occupied one-quarter of her tiny house's lower floor. The pen protected the most vulnerable of her animals at night, and they in turn provided needed heat on cold nights. This time of year Hannah always cleaned the pen in the cool early morning hours, but on this day her duties toward her seven houseguests had kept her busy until almost mid-morning.

With the job at last finished, she sat down to rest, only to be disturbed by a loud knocking. Muttering, she dragged herself up and opened the door. A tall man with a dark beard filled the doorway. He wore a brown cloak over a beige wool tunic. A cloth held in place by a leather cord covered his head. She recognized him immediately.

"Joseph!" She jumped upon him and threw her arms around his neck, which left her feet dangling a couple of inches off the floor. "Dear brother, where have you been?"

He wrapped his arms around his older sister's waist and effortlessly lifted her further off the ground, but said nothing. Then he gently set her down.

She cupped his face in her hands. "We were so worried! Daniel and Rachel arrived several days ago and said you were no more than a day's journey behind them!"

"We're fine, Sis. Is Daniel here? I'd like to talk to him."

"No, he and Samuel went into town to ask if anyone had seen you."

The man moved aside to reveal a petite young woman standing behind him. "Hannah, this is my wife, Mary."

A huge grin burst across Hannah's face. "Mary," she squealed, and she hugged her sister-in-law like a long-lost friend, even though they had never met. Finally letting go, Hannah seized the young woman's hands and said, "Oh, let me look at you." Mary seemed more girl than woman, perhaps about 15 or 16 years old, with some teenage acne and long, straight black hair emerging from underneath her head scarf. Her dark brown eyes revealed a maturity and intelligence that belied her youth. Although she wore a long, loose-fitting wool tunic that concealed most of the contours of her body, the large bulge near her stomach left no doubt that she would soon deliver her first child.

"Mary, Mary," Hannah began again, "you are as beautiful as Daniel said you are." The flattery elicited a shy smile from the girl. "But you must be exhausted, you poor dear. A curse be upon the Emperor for making you travel in your condition. Are you hungry? I have bread and some pomegranates."

The girl gently shook her head. “No, please, I just need to lie down for awhile.”

“Of course you do, my dear. Come, come, let’s find you a place to lie down. Can you climb a ladder?”

The girl nodded. “I think so.”

The two of them walked over to a wooden ladder leaning against the house’s upper floor, which was only half the size of the ground level. As Mary started to climb, Hannah looked back at Joseph. “Where are your belongings?”

He motioned toward the front door. “Still on our donkey. I left him outside.”

“Well, unburden the poor beast and tie him up under one of the large shade trees while I take your wife upstairs. You can bring him inside tonight if you like.”

He turned and walked outside.

Mary climbed slowly, with Hannah following close behind to help her maintain her balance. Once they were upstairs, Hannah unrolled a mat for the girl to lie on. She was asleep before her sister-in-law had climbed back down.

Joseph returned and set two large sacks in a corner. Hannah gave him some bread, which he devoured. After he finished, she handed him a large pouch made of sheepskin. “Come, Joseph,” she said, “you can help me draw water and tell me all about your trip.” She picked up a large earthenware pitcher and placed it on her left shoulder, holding it steady with one hand.

“We left Nazareth almost two weeks ago,” he began, opening the door for her, “a few days after we heard about the Emperor’s edict. At first we traveled south with a group of pilgrims from Cana.”

Hannah stopped in the doorway. “You didn’t go through Samaria, I hope.”

“No, of course not,” he said. “We went east through the Valley of Jezreel to the Jordan River valley.”

As they walked the quarter mile to one of the community wells, he described their journey south along the road that parallels the Jordan River until they were overtaken by Daniel and Rachel near Alexandrium.

“Where is Alexandrium?,” she inquired.

“Near Mount Sartaba.”

His sister gave him a playful slap on the arm with her free hand. “That’s not helpful. You know I’ve never traveled far from Bethlehem.”

Joseph suppressed a chuckle. “Of course. I’m sorry. Alexandrium is about a day’s journey north of Jericho. Do you know where Jericho is?”

She gently slapped his arm again. “Of course I do. Don’t be so mean.”

“Then again,” he went on, “it took us almost two days because Mary needed to stop and rest so much.”

As they drew water from the well—filling up the pouch, the pitcher, and themselves—he recounted the trip from Alexandria to Jericho. They had traveled there with Daniel, Rachel, and their five children.

“What I don’t understand,” said Hannah as they started back to the house, “is why Daniel would leave you in Jericho, especially with your wife in her condition. I thought our cousin had more sense than that. Doesn’t he know how dangerous that trip from Jericho to Jerusalem can be? There are robbers everywhere!”

“Actually, we insisted that they go on. We had already slowed them down enough. They had an opportunity to go with a group of pilgrims that were leaving that same day, and Mary was too tired to tackle that climb up to Jerusalem. We decided to wait and go with a group of merchants the next day. The merchants even offered to let Mary ride in one of their carts.”

Hannah was confused. “Then how did you fall so far behind?”

“A terrible dust storm struck Jericho the next morning and we had to wait until the weather cleared. Then a big thunderstorm blew in—”

“Yes,” she said, “it struck here, too.”

“After that, the roads were so muddy we ended up staying in Jericho two more days,” he continued. “We reached Jerusalem yesterday evening, and walked to Bethlehem this morning.”

When they got back to the house, Hannah set the pitcher down, then took the sheepskin pouch from Joseph and hung it from a nail in the wall. They both sat down on the floor, and she said, “We’ll be out of the sun in here, but we’ll need to talk quietly. Mary is resting.”

He nodded his assent. “Of course.”

Then she asked, “So what are your plans after you’ve registered for the census?”

He shook his head. “I’m not sure. I might like to stay through the winter. Anyway, we want to wait long enough to present Jesus to God in Jerusalem—”

“Jesus?” she interrupted him, with a puzzled look on her face. “You mean the baby? What if it’s a girl?”

“He’s not a girl.”

“You don’t *know* that, Joseph.”

“Yes, I *do*. The baby will be a boy, and we will name him Jesus.” His voice had grown loud and insistent.

“Quiet!” she scolded him, her voice barely above a whisper. “Mary is trying to rest.”

The tone of his voice immediately dropped as he said, “Oh yes, sorry.”

Still speaking quietly, she said, “That sounds like wishful thinking, Joseph. How can you be so sure?”

He paused and looked up, as if he were contemplating the tiny house's flat ceiling. Hannah wondered if he was afraid to answer her question. Then he took one of her hands in his as he said, "I know this may be hard to believe, but an angel told us."

She looked at him as if he had suddenly sprouted a camel hump, then covered her mouth with her free hand and laughed loudly.

"Quiet!" he scolded her, but with an amused look on his face, apparently enjoying the fact that he was able to return her earlier rebuke.

Stifling her laughter, she said, "An angel? My dear brother, you have either lost your mind or you are joking with me!"

"No, no, this is no joke," he insisted. Hannah saw from his stern expression that he was entirely serious. "An angel visited Mary and told her she was going to get pregnant and have a son, which she was to name Jesus."

"And you were there? You *saw* this angel?"

"Well, no," he admitted, "but after I found out she was pregnant, I was going to send her away. Then an angel appeared to me in a dream and told me the same thing. So I—"

She held up her hand to stop him. "Wait. Why were you going to send her away? She's your wife."

"Well, she wasn't then. We were only betrothed. But the angel told me to go ahead and marry her, assuring me that she had not been unfaithful. The angel said the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and I was to name him Jesus."

"What, are you saying Mary was a *virgin* when she got pregnant?"

"Yes. Actually, she still is."

Hannah sat in stunned silence for a few moments before she said, "People are going to think you're crazy, Joseph." Then she shrugged her shoulders, got to her feet, and picked up a bowl filled with pomegranates. "But no matter, you're family. You're welcome to stay as long as you need to. Would you like a pomegranate?"

"Thanks, Sis," he said, taking one of the bright red fruits. "By the way, do you know anyone who needs a carpenter? If I'm going to stay for awhile, I'll need work."

She thought a moment, and said, "Go see Aryeh. His family's rich and his wife just had twins. He wants to add another room to his house. You could help him with that, couldn't you?"

"Sure."

"Terrific. Samuel can take you there tomorrow."

"I would be very grateful. I'll talk to him when he returns. By the way, where is Rachel? I would like to let her know we arrived safely."

Hannah pointed toward the back of the house. “She and the children went out to the orchard to pick figs and olives. Anything we don’t eat tonight Samuel can sell in town tomorrow after he takes you to see Aryeh.”

Standing up, Joseph said, “Then I’d better go help them.”

A few minutes later, Hannah heard a sigh from the upper level of the house, followed by a soft voice that said, “Did Joseph leave?”

Hannah stood and walked over to where she could see Mary leaning over the edge of the upper floor, looking down at her. “Yes, dear. He went out to pick fruit in the orchard. What do you need?”

Mary answered, “I would like to come down, but I’m not sure I can do it alone.”

“That’s all right, dear. I’ll come help you.”

She met the girl at the ladder and helped her climb down. As they both sat on the floor, Hannah asked, “Would you like some bread now?”

“Yes, please.”

Hannah handed her a piece of bread. Then she poured some water from the pitcher into a cup and gave it to the pregnant girl.

Between bites, and in a soft voice that Hannah could barely hear, Mary said, “Thank you. You are very kind.”

“Not at all, dear. You’re family now. I only wish we could offer you better sleeping quarters. Unfortunately, there’s not much room upstairs, especially with Daniel and his family in the guest room. You and Joseph would never fit in there. Samuel and I could try to make room for you with us, or you can sleep down here—but I warn you, Samuel is quite a snorer.”

“Oh, down here will be fine. I’d prefer not to climb that ladder again, anyway.”

“Of course.” Hannah paused, gathering her courage to ask the question that was now dominating her thoughts. “Mary, Joseph told me a pretty wild story, about you being visited by an angel. Is that true?”

“Oh yes. He told me that I would become pregnant and have a baby boy, and that I was to name him Jesus.”

Hannah sighed. “I think you and Joseph better keep that to yourselves.”

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A few days later, Mary woke up in the middle of the night. By the light of a nearly full moon shining through a window, she saw her husband sleeping on his back next to her, making noises that reminded her of a thunderstorm over the Sea of Galilee. She rolled toward him and touched his shoulder. “Joseph,” she whispered.

He continued to snore. So she shook him, and her voice became louder and more insistent. “Joseph!”

He suddenly sat up and looked around. Seeing her, he said, “What’s wrong?”

“The baby is coming.”

Joseph rubbed his eyes. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure, you silly man. A woman knows these things.”

Joseph stood up and called out, “Hannah!”

A woman’s sleepy voice responded, “What’s the matter, Joseph?”

“Mary is having the baby!”

With sudden urgency, the voice responded, “I’ll be right down.” Then the same voice called out, “Rachel! Get up! Mary is having her baby. I’m going to need your help. Samuel, wake up! Go get Anna, the midwife.”

Soon the whole house was roused. Rachel lit two oil lamps, while Daniel and their children led the animals outside. Joseph started a fire to heat water, and then joined Daniel. Samuel returned with Anna and several neighbors; the women went inside to help with the birth, while the men talked with Joseph.

Shortly before noon Hannah walked out to the orchard, where the men were sitting under some olive trees. The children were playing nearby.

“Joseph!,” she called out as she came near.

He stood up and ran to her.

She beamed a radiant smile and let out a giggle of joy. “It’s a boy, Joseph, just as you said. A fine, healthy boy.”

“And Mary?”

“Also fine. You can go in now.”

He ran to the house, stopping just before entering to try to catch his breath and calm his racing heart. Hannah followed as quickly as she could. When she got inside, she sat down next to Mary, who was lying on a mat. Rachel was standing nearby, holding the boy as she and Joseph cooed over him. The large man took the tiny child in his arms and kissed him. “Little Jesus,” he whispered, remembering the words of the angel, “who will save his people from their sins.”

Hannah looked up and said, “I’m sorry, what was that?”

Joseph winked at Mary and then smiled at the babe. “I just said he looks sleepy. Do you have a place where he can sleep? We have no cradle.”

Mary sat up on her elbows and pointed toward a corner of the animal pen. “What about over there? That would make a fine cradle.”

Hannah looked to where Mary had pointed and cried out in disbelief, “The manger? You want to put him in a feeding trough?”

With some help from Rachel, Mary struggled to her feet and took the child from Joseph. “Yes, I think it would be perfect. He’ll be quite comfortable, and we’ll be close by if he needs us.”

“Before you put him in there—,” Rachel began, then looked at Joseph. “Do you have some clean cloths?”

“Of course,” he said. He went to one of the sacks he had brought in and pulled out two small linen blankets.

Rachel took the blankets from him and handed them to Mary. “Wrap him up in these, nice and tight. He’ll be a lot more comfortable.”

She did so, and then laid him gently in the manger.

Suddenly Samuel and Daniel rushed in.

“What is it?” Hannah growled at them, as if they had intruded on a secret meeting.

“Some shepherds,” Samuel stammered. “Some shepherds are outside. They want to see the baby.”

Standing up, she motioned him away with her hand. “Tell them to go away. They’ve no business here.”

“But they say an angel sent them,” Samuel insisted.

“Hannah,” Mary said, “I think it’ll be all right.”

“Yes,” Joseph echoed, “please send them in.”

Samuel signaled for the shepherds to enter. All were quite young, with the oldest perhaps nineteen or twenty, and the youngest no more than thirteen. They immediately walked over to the manger, where they stared at the child.

Wrinkling her nose, Hannah whispered to her husband, “They stink, Samuel. Why did you let them in here?”

He only said, “Hush, wife.”

The oldest shepherd turned toward Mary. “Are you his mother?,” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “Did you *really* see an angel?”

He nodded, and said, “We were tending our sheep when the angel came and stood among us. We were scared to death, but he said, ‘Don’t be afraid. I bring you good news. Today in Bethlehem a Savior has been born, who is Christ the Lord.’ And the angel told us what to look for—a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. We went to the house of Anna, the midwife, and her family told us we might find him here.” Glancing back at the babe, he added, “And here he is.”

Mary thanked him, and they soon left. But they could not contain their excitement, and by nightfall almost everyone in Bethlehem had heard the shepherds’ tale.

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Author's Note: Of course, this is not the traditional story of Jesus' birth, but I have tried to craft it to be consistent with what scholars believe truly happened, given what we know about first century Israel and what the Gospels actually say. For example:

Time of Year. Although somewhat controversial, most scholars believe Jesus was born sometime in the fall, not in December.

“No room at the inn.” Luke 2:7 uses the Greek word, *kataluma*, which means “guest room.” Inns—as in Luke 10:34—were usually along trading routes and located in large towns. Bethlehem was neither. In addition, Eastern hospitality traditions would have precluded turning away a relative, or even a stranger, and especially one with a pregnant wife. Since Joseph's ancestors were from Bethlehem, he and Mary probably stayed with relatives there, at least until sometime after Jesus' birth.

Timing of the birth. Luke 2:6 implies that Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem at least a few days before Jesus was born: “While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth.” (NASB)

Born in a Stable? The Bible does not actually say Jesus was born in a stable. It merely says he was laid in a manger, which is a feeding trough for animals. In first century Israel people often brought animals inside their homes at night for the safety of the animals and for the added warmth from their body heat. Thus, many first century Jewish homes had mangers inside.