

9. The Life of Jesus Christ—The Untold Story

Part One: The Childhood Years (Birth to Age 12)

Much has been written about the life of Jesus Christ, the historical person whose name is attached to the many different denominations of Christianity which exist today. In fact, so much has been written that one might wonder whether anything truly new could be written about this one life. As the reader will see, new information about the life of Jesus Christ can be ascertained by combining biblical and secular historical accounts and traditions about the time in which he lived. This chapter is not intended to be a complete history of the life of Jesus Christ. It will cover those aspects of his life and times which have not been generally known.

The prior chapter dealing with the Parthian Empire discussed historical events which shaped the world into which Jesus Christ was born. When some surprising information about his life is added to the history contained in the previous chapter, it can be seen that Jesus Christ actually played a role in the great power politics which occurred between the empires of Parthia and Rome. If he had chosen to do so, he could have had a **much larger** role in the political affairs of that era, and the Bible hints at such a possibility.

This chapter will begin by offering firm evidence that Jesus Christ was a real, historical person. Josephus, a Jewish historian of the first century A.D., regarded the life of Jesus Christ as an established fact. In *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus wrote:

"there was about this time [Josephus here refers to matters concerning Pontius Pilate, Roman procurator of Judea], Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, - a teacher of

such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principle men among us, had condemned him to the cross...he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day."¹

In this account, written shortly after Christ died, Josephus not only gave us a powerful witness that Jesus Christ truly lived, but also provided an independent corroboration of many of the biblically-discussed events of his life. Josephus refers to him as "a wise man," and wonders whether he was more than a mere man because of the "wonderful works" he did. That a non-Christian, Jewish historian of the apostolic era writes of the miracles of Jesus as actual facts offers proof of his miracles. Josephus agrees with the testamental writings that Jesus was indeed sentenced to be crucified by Pontius Pilate at the behest of the Jewish Sanhedrin ("the principle men among us"). Josephus acknowledges that Jesus Christ fulfilled the many prophecies of the Hebrew prophets about the Messiah, and **even refers to his resurrection as a historical fact!**

Josephus' reference to Jesus as "the Christ" acknowledges that Jesus was the Messiah ("the anointed"). Since a non-Christian source so close to the actual time of Christ has confirmed these facts of his life, the musings of modern skeptics questioning Christ's existence are without merit. Josephus could speak with eye-witnesses of Jesus' life; modern skeptics are almost two millennia removed from the events, and their writings are merely

speculative.

Roman secular sources also agree with Josephus. Celsus, an anti-Christian writer of the Roman Empire in the second century A.D., wrote: "It was by magic that he [Jesus] was able to do the miracles which he appeared to have done."² In this statement, an antagonist of Christianity grudgingly acknowledges the reality of Christ's "miracles." However, Quadratus, writing in approximately 117-134 A.D. "urged people to believe in Jesus because the effect of his miracles continued up to the present - people had been cured and raised from the dead, and 'some of them...have survived even to our own day.'"³ Tacitus, the famous Roman historian, writing about the Christians several decades after the death of Christ, stated: "their originator, Christ, had been executed in Tiberius' reign by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate."⁴

Clearly, Roman records confirm that Jesus Christ lived, and that he was executed in Judea during the administration of Pontius Pilate. Even his detractors and non-Christian writers acknowledged that he performed supernatural deeds, and one writer recorded that some previously dead persons were known to be alive as a result of being resurrected by Jesus Christ. Whatever one thinks about Jesus Christ, we begin with the fact that he indeed lived and died when the Bible states that he lived and died, that he performed marvelous deeds, and that he made a major impression on the civilization of his day.

Let us now review the historical setting into which Jesus Christ was born. The Roman and Parthian Empires were both powerful, well-established "superpower" rivals at the time Jesus was born. Rome ruled the Mediterranean region, and Parthia ruled Asian lands from modern Syria to India. Palestine was located within the Roman Empire, but was close to the Parthian border (the Euphrates River).

In the decades previous to the birth of Jesus, Rome and Parthia fought several battles with one being fought near Antioch of Syria (very close to Palestine).⁵ In about 40 B.C., the Parthians launched a major assault which swept the Romans out of Asia for a short time. For three years (40-37 B.C.) Palestine was within the Parthian Empire and was ruled by a Jewish vassal king of the Parthians named Antigonus. At that time King Herod (the Roman king of Judea) fled from the Parthians in fear of his life. While the Parthian-sponsored rule of Antigonus was brief, it was apparently popular with the Jews. When the Parthians withdrew across the Euphrates, Antigonus, with Jewish support, attempted to maintain himself as king of the Jews, but was defeated by Herod. Mark Antony (the Roman leader famous for his dalliance with Cleopatra) ordered Antigonus beheaded, and Josephus records that this was done to compel the Jews to reaccept the hated Herod as their king.⁶ Mark Antony then led an massive invasion of Parthia in 37-36 B.C., but his army was utterly defeated by the Parthians.⁷

To help modern readers gain a frame of reference for these ancient events, these Roman-Parthian wars were more recent events for the people in the period when Jesus was born than World War II and the Korean War are to modern readers. Parthian rule over Palestine was, therefore, vividly remembered by many in Jewish society as being preferable to Roman rule. Mark Antony's defeat led to a long period of "detente" between the two empires, with the Euphrates River serving as the border between their two vast empires. This prolonged period of peaceful relations lasted from 36 B.C. until 58 A.D.,⁸ including not only all of Jesus Christ's life, but also the early period of the Apostolic church as well. Rawlinson records that it was an established Roman policy not to provoke a Parthian war during that period of time so long as both empires agreed to coexist on

separate banks of the Euphrates River. Rawlinson comments on this peaceful interlude as follows:

"It is a well-known fact that Augustus left it as a principle of policy to his successors that the Roman Empire had reached its proper limits, and could not with advantage be extended further. This principle, followed with the utmost strictness by Tiberius, was accepted as a rule by all the earlier Caesars..."⁹

Obviously, as long as the Caesars wanted peace with Parthia, Roman officials along Parthia's border (such as King Herod and Pontius Pilate) knew they would risk their positions and lives if they entangled Rome in an unwanted war with Parthia.

Without this period of Parthian-Roman detente, it would have been well-nigh impossible for some of the events of Jesus Christ's life to have occurred, as we shall see. The first such event was the coming of the Magi, or "Wise Men" to pay homage to Jesus. We read of this event in Matthew 2:1-12, which becomes more important when considered in the overall context of Roman-Parthian relations.

The Magi were powerful members of one of the two assemblies which elected Parthian monarchs and wielded great influence within the empire. One assembly was composed of members of the royal family (the Arsacids), and the other consisted of the priests (the "Magi") and influential Parthians of non-royal blood (the "Wise Men"). The Magi and Wise Men were jointly known as the Megistanes.¹⁰ The *King James Version* of the Bible states in Matthew 2:1 that "wise men from the east" came to worship Jesus. The term "Wise Men," can be seen as the proper title of Parthian Megistanes. The Greek word translated "wise men" is "magian," literally meaning "Persian astronomer or priest."¹¹ Parthia had long governed all Persian territory at the time of

Christ, and the "Wise Men" cited in the Bible were clearly members of the Megistanes, very high Parthian officials. While traditional Christian accounts of this episode celebrate the coming of "the three wise men," the Bible does not limit the number of visiting Magi/Wise Men to three men. **Indeed, Biblical events and the realities of that time argue for a much larger contingent of Parthian Magi.**

Since we saw in previous chapters that the Parthians were descended from the ten tribes of Israel and that their priests were likely descended from the tribe of Levi, this delegation of Magi consisted of leading members of the ten tribes of Israel. Since there were numerous members of the tribe of Judah in Parthia's empire, they may have been represented as well. Consequently, the delegation of Magi could easily have consisted of at least ten or twelve men representing the various tribes of Israel.

Also, the Bible shows that the Magi did not visit the young Jesus in the manger at Bethlehem (as most nativity scenes depict), but rather visited Jesus in a house somewhat after his birth. Matthew 2:11 states that this visit of the Magi took place **in a house** (not at the manger) when Jesus was old enough to be called "**a young child** (no longer "an infant in swaddling clothes"). Luke's version of Christ's birth (Luke 2:8-40) mentions the shepherds' arrival at the manger, but makes no mention of any Magi visiting Christ at that time.

Matthew 2:8 adds that Herod sent the Magi "to Bethlehem" after conferring with the Jewish hierarchy about the prophesied location of the Messiah's birth. They cited Micah 5:2 that the Messiah would originate in Bethlehem, and they were likely familiar with Daniel 9:25-26 which predicted that the arrival of the Messiah was due at that time. Armed with this information, Herod then privately met with the Parthian delegation, and

enquired when "the star" which they followed had first appeared. He apparently learned that this period of time was almost two years because he killed all male children in Bethlehem under two years of age in an attempt to kill the Messiah (whom he regarded as a competitor for his position as king of the Jews).

Although the Bible tells us that "the star" appeared to the Wise Men almost two years prior to his birth, this offers inexact information in determining how old Jesus was when the Wise Men came to him. Since the Wise Men were prominent people in Parthia at the time of the arrival of "the star," they had to make a very time-consuming journey to reach Judea. Also, it took time to prepare the costly gifts to present to the Messiah, set their affairs in order for a long absence, organize a caravan (and likely obtain an armed escort for protection) and make the lengthy journey to Judea, a journey which moved at the speed of the slowest pack animal in the caravan. Since the "star" may have appeared to the Wise Men prior to Jesus' birth, Jesus may have been a few months (or up to two years) old at the time of the Magi's arrival. Consider also that Matthew 2:1-3 states:

*"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east **to Jerusalem**. Saying, where is he that is born King of the Jews? for **we have seen his star** in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king heard these things, **he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.**"*

This account does not indicate that three wise men from the east quietly visited Herod, then Jesus, and then just as quietly left Judea to return to Parthia. Their arrival in Jerusalem was a **very public affair** because "all Jerusalem" was "troubled" by their

arrival. This indicates that the Magi (a delegation of a dozen or more high Parthian officials) came to Jerusalem in a caravan loaded with costly treasures and escorted by a strong force of armed Parthian soldiers! Since the Magi were high officials of the Parthian government, they would customarily travel with a substantial escort of Parthian soldiers to guarantee their protection. Since they were traveling with many costly treasures to present to the new-born Messiah, their escort may have been unusually large.

Also, these high officials would have traveled with a large entourage of servants, animal-handlers, cooks, etc. on such a long journey. The entourage in this Parthian caravan may have constituted many hundreds of people! Given the fact that many high Parthian officials and very expensive treasures were in the caravan, there may have been many thousands of Parthian soldiers escorting the caravan. This is not an overstatement. Josephus records that treasure caravans bringing expensive offerings to Jerusalem from Jews living in Parthian territory did so with "many ten thousand men" as escorts.¹² In ancient times, traveling with expensive items was dangerous. There was danger not only from brigands, but also from local satraps who might use their armies to conquer a treasure train passing through their territories. If Jewish commoners from Parthia were allowed to travel to Jerusalem with the equivalent of several infantry divisions as escorts, would an important delegation of Parthia's ruling class and a treasure train of gifts have been accompanied by fewer armed escorts?

The Wise Men who came to Jesus were not bringing just a few samples of gold and other precious things that they carried in their personal saddlebags. They were coming to worship he who was born "king" of the Jews. This Parthian delegation was offering tribute money to a "king," and therefore would more

likely have brought a whole train of pack-animals loaded with "gold, frankincense and myrrh."

Their caravan was so big that their arrival quickly became a "cause celebre" in Jerusalem. The whole city was in an uproar over their arrival, and that argues for **a very visible and impressive** Parthian caravan arriving in Jerusalem not long after Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. **The sheer size of the caravan, its treasures and its escorts awed King Herod and the whole city to the point they were all "troubled."** This indicates that the Parthian caravan had so many armed escorts that many feared it was an invasion force coming to besiege Jerusalem. However, their announced reason for coming to visit the Messiah stunned a city of Jews which intensely wanted the Messiah to come and free them from Roman rule! It is clear that the Jewish hierarchy understood the Parthians were looking for the Messiah as they quickly looked for Messianic prophecies to locate the city of his birth.

After their consultations with Herod and high Jewish officials, the Parthian delegation traveled to worship Jesus and present their gifts to him (by this time, Matthew 2:11 states Jesus and Mary were living in "a house," so they were no longer in the manger). Their journey would have been closely followed by Herod's spies. Joseph was then warned by God in a dream to flee into Egypt (Matthew 2:13) to avoid Herod's impending slaughter of Bethlehem's young male children. Since Herod's edict applied only to Bethlehem, there would have been no need for Joseph, Mary and Jesus to flee unless they were still in Bethlehem. Going to Egypt took them completely out of Herod's area of jurisdiction. Herod made the mistake of assuming the Messiah would be born to a family native to the Bethlehem area. However, Luke 2:4 shows that although the family into which Jesus was born resided in Galilee, they had to journey to Bethlehem at that time

to comply with a taxing edict because they were direct descendants of King David. Since Luke 2:39 states that Joseph, Mary and Jesus returned to Galilee not long after Jesus was born, and doesn't even mention the Egyptian trip, it seems apparent that the stay of Joseph, Mary and Jesus in Egypt was brief. Indeed, since history records that Herod ("Herod the Great") died in 4 B.C.,¹³ and Matthew 2:14-19 states that Jesus and his parents returned from Egypt as soon as Herod was dead (4 B.C.), Herod must have died soon after he gave the order to slay the male children in Bethlehem.

Since Herod died in 4 B.C. and the date of Jesus' birth is accepted to be around 4 B.C. by many historians, the events of his birth, the arrival of the caravan of the Parthian Magi, the flight to Egypt, the death of Herod and the return of Jesus' family from Egypt occurred within a short time. Since Luke 2:39 indicates that Joseph, Mary and Jesus returned to Galilee soon after Jesus' birth, the above events had to occur in a short period of time.

It is significant that Jesus' parents were faithful to God's law requiring circumcision on the eighth day (Leviticus 12:2-3), and to Jewish custom by making an offering to God at the Temple in Jerusalem to consecrate their firstborn male child (Luke 2:21-24). This is an important observation as it shows Jesus was raised and shaped in a family environment that obeyed God and devoutly observed Jewish customs.

History records that Roman-Parthian relations were peaceful at the time that Jesus was born. The Bible confirms this was the case as the Parthian Magi did not sneak into Roman territory to look for the Messiah, but rather came directly to King Herod, quite open about their reasons for being in Roman-occupied Palestine. They informed Herod that they had come to worship "he that is born king of the Jews."

It is a tribute to the power of Caesar's policy that the Roman-Parthian peace be maintained that war did not result from this statement, for Herod could easily have flown into a rage, and yelled "How dare you ask to see another 'king of the Jews' besides me; I am king of the Jews!" That Herod swallowed his pride, and meekly answered the Parthians is quite noteworthy. This is a tribute not only to Caesar's policy to maintain the peace, but also to Herod's memory that the Parthians had militarily controlled the throne of Judea a few decades earlier. Herod's very meek response to the highly provocative question of the Parthian officials may also indicate that he was intimidated by the many Parthian soldiers who accompanied the Magi. Indeed, since the whole city was "troubled" by the Parthians' arrival, the presence of many Parthian soldiers may have sparked rumors that a new Parthian-Roman war was imminent. Herod may even have suspected that the Parthians' question was designed to provoke an incident which would lead to an outbreak of hostilities and his removal from the throne.

A comment must be made concerning the "star" which led the Magi to Jesus. Some have proposed that this star was a comet or a celestial phenomenon although the context shows that this was not possible. The biblically-described star led the Magi over a long east-to-west route from Parthia to Judea, and Matthew 2:9 states that it finally **"stood over where the young child was."** No comet or celestial phenomenon could pinpoint a single city, much less an individual child within a particular house. The Bible periodically uses the word "star" to represent an angel (Job 38:7, Rev. 1:20), and there is every reason to believe that this "star" which led a delegation of Parthian nobles to a specific child in a specific house in Judea was an angel of God. Nothing else makes sense. Only an angel (a spirit being) could literally "stand over" the baby Jesus to designate one specific child to the Parthian nobles.

Also, there is nothing in the biblical account which indicates that this "star" was visible to anyone other than the Magi (Wise Men)! Matthew 2:2 states that the Magi saw "the star," but the context indicates no one else ever saw it. Verse 7 shows Herod asking the Magi when "the star" appeared to them, indicating no one in Judea was aware of any such "star." If there had been some unusual celestial object in the sky, Herod and his astrologers would already have known the exact date on which it had appeared.

After leading the Parthians to Judea, the angel ("star") disappeared, forcing the Parthians to ask Herod for directions.

After the Magi left Herod, the "star" again appeared to them, led them directly (Mathew 2:9), and "stood over" the young child, Jesus, to set him apart from all others. Verse 10 states the Magi rejoiced that the star was again showing them the way they should follow. Obviously, a "star" which appeared, disappeared and reappeared for the Magi (but which was apparently not seen by any other humans) was an angel. Supporting this fact is that Luke 2:8-15 records that the birth of Jesus was announced to shepherds by angels speaking to them out of a heavenly light which accompanied their appearance. Since God used angels to bring the shepherds to Jesus' manger, it follows he also used an angel to lead the Magi to Jesus.

Having found Jesus, the Magi worshipped him, offering rich gifts of gold, myrrh and frankincense. They then were warned by God in a dream (Matthew 2:12) not to return to Herod, resulting in the prompt exit of the Magi and their escorts from Judea. When Herod realized that he had been fooled, he wrathfully killed all the young male children of Bethlehem in a vain effort to kill the Messiah. However, there is no record that he made any attempt to overtake or punish the Magi. As high Parthian nobles, they had "diplomatic immunity," and Herod dared not anger Caesar by

provoking the Parthians. Also, the size of the Magi's armed escort apparently dissuaded Herod from attempting to pursue them.

There is another important aspect of this remarkable episode. While it is not surprising that Jewish leaders during Herod's reign were sufficiently familiar with the prophetic writings to pinpoint for Herod where the Messiah would be born, **it is surprising that God was working more closely with members of the Parthian ruling class than he was with the Jewish priests! This makes no biblical sense unless (A) the Parthians were descended from the exiled tribes of the House of Israel and (B) the Magi (Parthian priests) were Levites.**

During his ministry Jesus Christ himself asserted that he was not sent to the gentiles, but only to the descendants of the Israelites (Matthew 15:24-28 shows the reluctance of Jesus to assist a gentile). Throughout the Old Testament God worked almost exclusively with the House of Israel and the House of Judah; his involvement with other nations was incidental (i.e. using them to punish his people when they sinned). It was not until after the death of Christ that gentiles were permitted unrestricted access to the God of Israel. The fact that God was working intimately with the Parthian nobility confirms that the Parthians were the House of Israel in Asia, and supports the conclusion that the Parthian Magi (their priests) were Levites.

The fact that some of the Parthian ruling classes were worshippers of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is most revealing. That God himself sent an angel to lead them to Jesus, and gave instructions to the Magi via dreams is further revealing. God obviously considered these Parthians to be "righteous" men under the terms of his laws or he would not have been dealing with them so personally. That educated Parthians were ready to visit and worship the Messiah at the time of Christ's birth

indicates they were also familiar with the prophecies of the Old Testament. Who but transplanted Israelites would have been looking for the Messiah at that time?

Although we are jumping ahead in the narrative, consider the events of Acts 2 which state Parthians (verse 9) were among those who made pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks (known to Christians as Pentecost Sunday). Verse 9 also mentions "Medes, Elamites, and dwellers in Mesopotamia" as being present at this feast, and all these regions were provinces of the Parthian Empire. We know that portions of the ten tribes had been relocated to "the cities of the Medes," so the presence of devout visitors from Media could easily designate people from the ten tribes of Israel. Interestingly, verse 9 also mentions "dwellers...in Asia" were present. The word "Asia" has clouded origins, but the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* states that "It is probable that it ["Asia"] has an Assyrian or Hebrew root, and was used first... with a specific or restricted local application, a more extended signification having eventually been given it..."¹⁴

One of the Scythian tribes was called the "Asii" (or "Asiani").¹⁵ Since the "Asiani" were one of the Scythian tribes bearing the name of Isaac (the Sacae or Saka), the Bible's reference to "Asians" attending the Feast of Weeks could indicate that Scythians were also present in Jerusalem at that time. This further indicates that the Parthians and Scythians were the displaced members of the "lost ten tribes of Israel." The gentile populations of Asia had no cultural interest in the worship of the God of Israel; only the ten tribes of Israel would retain such a custom.

It was not unusual for large pilgrimages originating in Parthia to travel to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel. We noted that Josephus wrote of caravans (of offerings to the God of Israel) from Parthian Mesopotamian arrived in Jerusalem under the

protection of "many ten thousand men." These must have been magnificent treasure trains to have warranted the protection of a sizeable army. Such huge "offerings" going to Jerusalem from Parthia indicates that many people within the Parthian Empire worshipped the God of Israel. This meant that, at the time of Jesus and Herod, there was a great deal of travel and trade between Judea and many regions of the Parthian Empire.

In an earlier chapter it was shown that the Magi were loyal to one dynasty (the Arsacids), whose members continuously ruled Parthia. It was shown that many rulers of Parthian (Saka) kingdoms had names incorporating the word "Phares" or the consonants of the Hebrew root word for that name (PH-R-S). This indicates that the Arsacids were descended from the seed of David, who was the first king of the Phares family (Matthew 1:2-6). I Chronicles 3:17-24 reveals that the royal lineage continued to flourish after Judah's captivity. Indeed, this dynasty was given high status in the Babylonian Empire (II Kings 25:27-30). This post-exilic elevation of the Davidic dynasty in Asia likely led to their serving as vassal kings (over captive Israelites) under Babylonian and Persian masters. Their later elevation to the throne of Parthia fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah 33:17 that David's descendants would always rule over the descendants of the ten tribes of Israel. This may explain the unshakable loyalty of the Parthians to the Arsacids. With the Parthians being Israelites, and the Arsacids being descended from King David, the Arsacids were the only dynasty in Asia that was racially, historically and culturally related to the Parthian people.

Since Matthew 1:3-17 tells us that Jesus Christ was also a descendant of Phares and King David, Jesus was a blood relative of the Parthian ruling dynasty, which also descended from Phares. The relationship of Jesus to the Parthian Arsacids serves as a further explanation for the homage paid to Jesus by the

Parthian nobility. It was customary for the Parthian Megistanes (the Magi and Wise Men) to keep track of Arsacid relatives in foreign nations. In some cases the Megistanes sent to foreign nations (Scythia and Rome) to summon various relatives of the Arsacids to come to Parthia to serve as their king. As mentioned in chapter eight, some Parthian rulers killed every male relative they could find in an effort to eliminate potential rivals to their throne. This compelled the Magi to look for distant individuals who had the bloodline of the Arsacids (the lineage of Phares and King David). At the time of the birth of Jesus, the recent Parthian emperor, Phraates IV (who reigned 37-2 B.C.), had killed many male relatives, including his own father and many of his brothers.¹⁶ Male Arsacids at the time of Jesus' birth were in short supply.

When the Magi were led by an angel of God to pay homage to the young Jesus, they doubtless asked Joseph and Mary everything they could think of concerning Jesus' background. They must have learned that Jesus was a blood descendant of Phares and King David. **This relationship made Jesus an Arsacid, a blood relative of Parthia's kings.** In fact, since Parthia could offer the kingship to any Arsacid, not just the oldest son or closest relative of the previous king, **Jesus Christ was technically eligible for the Parthian throne.** While the Bible does mention Jesus' royal lineage (of the seed of David), it does not mention his relationship to Parthia's dynasty. However, as we shall see later in this chapter, the Bible twice implies that this relationship existed.

Since the Magi who worshipped Jesus were members of the body which selected the kings of Parthia and kept track of male Arsacids, they must have been ecstatic to learn that the young Jesus was an Arsacid. While the Bible is silent on their future contacts, Parthian Magi likely would have stayed in contact with Jesus in

future years and monitored the events of his life.

We will now examine the possibility that the visit of influential Parthians to the young Jesus Christ almost led to a Parthian-Roman war. Recall that from 40-37 B.C., Parthia had ruled Palestine and Syria before the Romans drove them back across the Euphrates River. That war ushered in a long period of Parthian-Roman detente which included the entire lifetime of Jesus Christ. However, a great Parthian-Roman war was barely averted in 1 A.D. when (as discussed in chapter eight) a "summit conference" was held between the Parthian emperor, Phraataces, and Caius Caesar, the grandson of Augustus Caesar on an island in the Euphrates River (i.e. neutral territory). Roman sources record that:

"The armies of the two chiefs were drawn up on the opposite banks of the river [the Euphrates], facing one another; and the chiefs themselves, accompanied by an equal number of attendants, proceeded to deliberate in the sight of both hosts."¹⁷

This "summit conference" averted war, but how could the Magi's visit have had a role in this crisis?

Scholarship has documented that Jesus Christ was apparently born in approximately 4 B.C. Bible accounts of the Magi visiting Jesus cease when the Magi left Judea and returned to Parthia, leaving the impression that the issue was concluded. However, if we consider the geopolitical realities of that time, there is no way that the Magi's exit from Judea ended the matter.

Matthew 2:3 records that Herod and "all Jerusalem" were troubled by the arrival of the Magi. Jerusalem was a commercial city at the nexus of major trade routes, and it commonly received caravans of many hundreds or thousands of people.

Three tired Magi arriving from the east wouldn't have made a ripple in the city's calm. For that matter, caravans from Parthian territory (as discussed in chapter eight) could arrive in Jerusalem with many thousands of armed escorts, and such events did not trouble the city. What was singularly different about the caravan that brought the Magi? The Magi (perhaps ten, twelve, or more of them) were Parthian nobility who selected the rulers of Parthia's empire. Such a visit was unprecedented and unrepeated in the history of the city of Jerusalem. Such prominent people did not "sneak into town," but came with many attendants and perhaps thousands of regular Parthian soldiers as escorts. This occurred at a time when Parthia and Rome had a peace treaty, and no major Roman or Parthian military forces had crossed the Euphrates River in decades. The arrival of a significant Parthian military force in Jerusalem escorting high Parthian officials was militarily provocative and could justifiably be seen by Herod and the Romans as a treaty violation.

When Parthia had occupied Palestine, it had crowned its own vassal king, Antigonus, as ruler of Judea. When the Magi (Parthia's official king-makers) came to Jerusalem looking for "a new king of the Jews," it must have sounded to Herod and the Romans that the Parthians were there to reassert their claim to Judea and dethrone Herod. Their speaking directly to Herod (who was Rome's king of the Jews) about wanting to find a "new king of the Jews" could be seen by the Romans as close to a declaration of war, given the region's history. The fact that King Herod "bit his tongue" and made no rash statement to the Magi and treated them with deference argues that the Parthians must have had an intimidating number of troops at Jerusalem to compel Herod to be so uncharacteristically meek. Since a major Roman-Parthian treaty had been in effect for over three decades, Rome felt unthreatened in the region, and would, consequently, have had a small garrison in Jerusalem.

Caesar's decree that no Parthian war be provoked also put Herod in an awkward position. While the Magi and Parthians were in Judea with no harmful intent, there is no way the Romans could be sure this "visit" was benign in nature. After the Parthians left, reports had to be filed with Caesar about this highly unusual event.

Herod was justifiably fearful of Parthian intentions in the area. Hadn't they come to anoint a replacement for him as "king of the Jews?" Hadn't they also deceived him by leaving the area without his knowledge or permission? Herod's murderous act in Bethlehem would also have inflamed Jewish opinion, and rumors of revolt against the hated Romans would have intensified. Faced with a possible Parthian invasion and/or a Jewish revolt, Herod needed more Roman soldiers in the region. In his reports to Caesar, Herod undoubtedly put himself in a favorable light, and warned Caesar that the Parthians had crossed the Euphrates, made a military reconnaissance to Jerusalem to spy out the city's weakness and were openly talking about crowning a "new king of the Jews." Because the Parthians' arrival in Jerusalem had scared the whole city, news of this extraordinary event would have spread quickly along the trade routes connected to Jerusalem.

Also, in 2 B.C., Rome and Parthia were facing a possible conflict in Armenia over succession to the throne of Armenia. In both Armenia and Judea, the issue was whether Rome or Parthia would choose the kings of those nations. While Parthia had not forced the crisis in Armenia, Parthia's actions in Judea (the Magi's visit) were provocative. Rome's response was to send a large army "to the east" to prepare for a possible Parthian-Roman war. Rawlinson records that the Roman army arrived in 1 B.C., delayed by the retirement of Augustus Caesar's preferred commander, and that the situation was further muddled by the death of Phraates IV, Parthia's emperor during the visit of the

Magi to Jerusalem.¹⁸ Herod the Great had also died by the time Roman reinforcements arrived, so all the major principals had a fresh viewpoint by the time Rome and Parthia had their "summit conference" at the Euphrates River.

Historical accounts do not mention the Parthian visit to Jerusalem as a factor in this near confrontation, but its occurrence can now be seen as adding to Roman fears of a Parthian invasion of its empire. Although the historical accounts mention only the Armenian dispute, it is worth noting that the Parthian and Roman armies did not confront each other in the mountains of Armenia but rather along the Euphrates River (the invasion route to Syria and Palestine). Since the Roman army arrived in 1 B.C., and the Roman-Parthian peace conference did not defuse the situation until 1 A.D., there was a twoyear period of "war fever" in the Mideast. Everyone in the region breathed a huge sigh of relief when war was averted. As we shall soon see, if a war had been fought (ending the Parthian-Roman detente), much of Jesus Christ's ministry in Judea could not have occurred.

Very little else is said in the Bible concerning the early years of Jesus Christ. Luke 2:40 states that Jesus grew up strong and healthy, and that he was filled with wisdom and favored by God. Luke 2:41-50 tells us that Jesus, at age twelve, amazed the teachers in the Temple with his wisdom. This passage shows that he was still being raised by his parents according to the Laws of God, as his family annually attended the Passover in Jerusalem (the location of the Temple). Jesus would have been seen by others as a devout, brilliant son of a traditional Jewish family.

Luke's account mentions that Jesus was absent from his family for a full day before they realized he was missing, and initiated a search which located him in the Temple. How could Jesus, a twelve-year-old youth, be apart from his parents, and his parents not know about it for a full day? **How did a mere**

twelve year old lad even come into the presence of the teachers of the Temple, the religious hierarchy of the Jewish religion? There is more here than meets the eye.

It would have been inappropriate for Joseph and Mary to have allowed Jesus to be wandering around Jerusalem unescorted by an adult. It seems apparent that Jesus was being escorted by an adult relative. That they were unconcerned about Jesus' absence for a full day before searching for him indicates that such absences were commonplace. It is recorded in the Jewish Talmud and in other sources that Joseph of Arimathea was the great-uncle of Jesus Christ.¹⁹ It is likely that Joseph of Arimathea was the adult relative who was serving as Jesus' mentor and escort.

Joseph of Arimathea was a powerful figure in Jewish society, and was apparently a member of the Sanhedrin itself. Years later, when the Sanhedrin plotted the death of Jesus, Luke 23:50-51 asserts that Joseph of Arimathea **had not consented** to the deed that was done to Jesus. That Joseph had not consented to the Sanhedrin's murderous plot indicates that Joseph was a member of the body with the inherent right to consent to (or dissent from) the actions of the Sanhedrin.

It is now clear how the young Jesus came to be involved in a discourse with the Temple hierarchy. Since Jesus' great-uncle, Joseph of Arimathea, had easy access to the highest echelons of Jewish society, it is likely that Jesus simply accompanied Joseph of Arimathea to the Temple, and eventually participated in a discussion between his great-uncle and the Temple teachers. Apparently, Jesus was with his great-uncle often enough that Jesus' prolonged absence from Joseph and Mary at that time was not a unique experience.

The remainder of Jesus' life until age thirty is a mystery. While the Bible is silent on the subject, it does give us a clue. The fact that Jesus was, by the age of twelve, spending more time in the

care of Joseph of Arimathea and less time in the care of Joseph and Mary is significant. It appears that a major transition was occurring in Jesus' life. When Joseph and Mary found Jesus in the Temple after a three-day search, (Luke 2:46) Mary reproved him with the words: "Why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously. "(RSV) Jesus replied: "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Jesus, at the age of twelve, essentially told them: "Why were you even bothering to look for me?" The phrase "I must be in my Father's house" indicates that the Spirit of God was now leading him away from the household of his human family and into the work of his heavenly Father. The Bible adds that Jesus went back to Nazareth with Joseph and Mary, so Jesus did not yet make a "clean break" from his childhood home. However, the event at the Temple and Jesus' own words indicated his departure was imminent.

Endnotes: Chapter Nine

1. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XVIII, III, 3
2. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, p. 98
3. *Ibid*, 99-100
4. *Ibid*, p. 49
5. Rawlinson, *The Sixth Oriental Monarchy*, pp. 178-181
6. Josephus, *Antiquities*, XV, I, 2
7. Rawlinson, *The Sixth Oriental Monarchy*, pp. 199-205
8. Rawlinson, *The Sixth Oriental Monarchy*, p. 216
9. *Ibid*, p. 210
10. *Ibid*, p. 85
11. Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible, see word "Wise," subhead 8, p. 1060
12. Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII, IX, 1
13. Harper's Bible Dictionary, "Herod," p. 385
14. Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Asia," Vol. 2, p. 512
15. Rawlinson, *The Sixth Oriental Monarchy*, pp. 117-118
16. *Ibid*, pp. 195-198
17. *Ibid*, pp. 218-219
18. *Ibid*, pp. 213-215
19. Capt, *The Traditions of Glastonbury*, p. 19