

Looking at the Nativity from Three Centuries

Hook (1005-1007) – Solomon wrote that there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9-10).

The Pre-Modern View (to 1650 AD)
The Post-Modern View (1950 AD to present)

How Do We Read the Nativity

The Modern View (1650-1950 AD)

Book (1007-1010) – Matthew 2:1-12, Luke 2:1-20

Look (1010-1040)

The Pre-Modern View (to 1650 AD)

The Problem – Sin against God leading to suffering and death in the world.

The Solution – In this era of little technological change relative to modern times, the character of man needed to be improved.

The Source of Knowledge – Revealed knowledge from authoritative sources. These sources were above the reader and he was a student, not a judge. Because truth included more than just what could be demonstrated experientially, God was a valid topic of discussion, and the “supernatural” was not only accepted, but expected.

Please note that on the table below, “non-truth” is not the same as “untruth”. “Untruth” is a falsehood, but “non-truth” is anything not in the category of truth. For example, the sun rising in every morning is a truth, as is the beauty of a rose and the goodness of selfless giving. A taste for chocolate ice cream, while true for the individual, is a “non-truth” in this paradigm.

Truth			Non-Truth	
Facts (empirically determined)	Beauty (objective standard)	Goodness (virtue, righteousness)	Opinions (individual preferences)	Other

The Outcome – The conduct of man never seemed to improve, and by the end of the pre-modern era technology had started to solve some of man’s most vexing problems.

Illustration

Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Clement of Rome (fl. c. 95) to John of Damascus (c. 645-c. 749)) – focus on learning about God and devotion to Him. The ancient fathers said very little about the historicity of events or lack thereof. They did not question the text, but their goal was to help their readers worship God.

Discussion Questions/Application

What parts of your reading or teaching of the Nativity are pre-modern? What parts should be pre-modern?

The Modern View (1650-1950 AD)

The Problem – Physical need leading to suffering and death in the world.

The Solution – Science and technology will provide peace, plenty and long life to everyone, who then will not need to harm others.

The Source of Knowledge – Schools such as universities did the experiments and other research to gain knowledge and benevolent Governments used the latest information to arrange society equitably for all.

Because God is not empirically verifiable, His existence and everything else about Him (such as the “supernatural”) were relegated to the category of non-truth.

Truth	Non-Truth			
Facts (empirically determined)	Beauty (objective standard)	Goodness (virtue, righteousness)	Opinions (individual preferences)	Other

The Outcome – Science and technology solved many problems, but created horrific suffering throughout the world (including two world wars). For the first time in history, it also gave mankind the ability to destroy itself (nuclear weapons).

Illustration – Early in the modern era, before teachings of Descartes, Locke, Hume and Kant had enough time to diffuse to all levels of society, the Matthew Henry Commentary was written.

Matthew Henry Commentary (1706-1721) – similar focus on worship, not on history. He did not question the text.

Discussion Questions/Application

What parts of your reading or teaching of the Nativity are modern? What parts should be modern?

The Post-Modern View (1950 AD to present)

The Problem – Physical, psychological, and societal need leading to suffering and death in the world.

The Solution – Revealed truth has failed to solve man’s problems. Science and technology have also fallen short. While technology can provide tremendous benefits and institutions such as Church, State and Public Sector can help arrange society, the individual is the final arbiter of his or her beliefs and his or her life.

The Source of Knowledge – The Church (or other religious authorities), the State (government) and the Schools (universities, etc.) each have something to offer but since they are sources of power they cannot be trusted. Each person, therefore, determines her or his own truth, except for the few bits of science on which we can base technological advance.

Truth	Truth as determined by each individual			
Facts (empirically determined)	Beauty (objective standard)	Goodness (virtue, righteousness)	Opinions (individual preferences)	Other

The Outcome – Each individual is the judge over all things in her or his life. The problem is that if truth is relative to each individual, then there is no objective truth, and the very concept of truth is defunct. If value has no mooring in something outside each man, then there is no value, because each man dies.

Illustration

Expositor’s Bible Commentary (1984) – Heavily influenced by all types of criticism, and takes pains to address questions and answer problems.

Discussion Questions/Application

Are you the final arbiter of everything in your own life? Should you be? Is our ultimate goal knowledge or worship?

Took (1040-1045)

The Pre-Modern View (to 1650 AD)	<h1>How Do We Read the Nativity</h1>	The Modern View (1650-1950 AD)
The Post-Modern View (1950 AD to present)		

Verdict – What do you want them to DO as a result of the truths they have just received?

1. Ponder the lesson and the questions that the Spirit has asked you today. Think about what you need to change in your life as a result.
2. Reread the Scripture that we discussed three times, and then take these questions before God in prayer. Ask Him to reveal the special message that He has for you, and what you must do about it.
3. Go to a trusted friend and spiritual mentor with these questions. Tell him or her what you think about them, and what you believe the Lord has shared with you. Get his or her feedback.
4. Make the changes that God has led you to make. Tell your Christian friends so that they can help hold you accountable.

Closing prayer

Annex

My (post)modern commentary on Luke and Matthew is below. Note that much of it is geared towards apologetics, not worship.

Luke 2

V1 – Rome had been an ascending power for centuries, and it was a republic led by a senate. After the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC, a power struggle ensued between Mark Antony and Caius Octavius, grandnephew, adopted son and primary heir to Julius Caesar. In 31 BC, Antony's forces were crushed by Octavian's at the Battle of Actium, and Octavian reigned supreme. In 29 BC, the Senate was compelled to abolish the republic and declare him Emperor. He was awarded the title Caesar Augustus and lifted to religious veneration. Augustus reigned until 14 AD when he died at the age of 76.

This registration was not a onetime event but instituted a census every 14 years. Its purpose was to count the number of Roman citizens and to register young men for military service. The information was used to levy the poll tax, a flat tax levied on all adults comprising a population or those within a jurisdiction of the taxing authority (Matthew 22:17-21). Property and income were not recorded.

V2 – Publius Sulpicius Quirinius was the governor of Syria from 6-9 AD, and a widely known census occurred in Palestine in 6 AD. This is too late for the nativity, however, because Herod the Great was alive when Jesus was born and died in 4 BC. Further, this census caused a great revolt in Judea, which had to be forcibly suppressed. No evidence of such a revolt exists in the Biblical accounts, and the presence of such a major event would make the events described in Scripture difficult.

A fragment found in Rome in 1794 indicates that Quirinius probably governed Syria twice, the first being around 6-4 BC. Ancient Egyptian records relate that another census was ordered in 8 BC, and it is plausible that, due to logistical and political difficulties in administering it, the census was not completed until 6 BC or later.

This dating difficulty neither proves nor disproves the Biblical account. Luke's readers, knowing the political events of their recent history far better than we can from a distance of 2,000 years, would have been able to date Jesus' birth precisely.

V3 – The Jews were still a tribal people, as were most cultures at the time, and Rome used each man's hometown and tribe to identify and classify him for the census.

V4 – Galilee was more populous than Judea and Joseph’s family may have gone there generations before for the economic opportunities. Still, he was from the tribe of Judah, which meant he had to return to Judea, and from the house of David, which meant he had to return to Bethlehem, for the census.

VV 5-6 – Mary, late in pregnancy, traveled the dangerous and mountainous 70+ mile trek with Joseph. They were betrothed and had not yet consummated the marriage (Matthew 1:25). Traveling seems to have contributed to her labor, and she arrived in Bethlehem ready to give birth.

V7 – Jesus was Mary’s firstborn, not her only child (Matthew 12:46). There is no Biblical support for the doctrine of her perpetual virginity. Swaddling clothes had been used for centuries (Ezekiel 16:4) to tight wrap the baby, comforting him, protecting him and keeping him warm. Jesus was placed in an animal feedbox, probably in a cave near the city. We do not know if animals were actually present for His birth. The census probably resulted in large numbers of visitors in Bethlehem who were taking up the available housing.

Mary had no attendants to her first delivery except Joseph, who probably had no training in childbirth. She undoubtedly had seen and helped with several so she probably coached him in what to do.

V8 – From the time of Abraham through the 21st century, the area near Bethlehem has been prime sheep grazing land throughout the year. Shepherds were on the lowest rung of Jewish society and Judea was on the lowest rung of the Roman Empire. How like our gracious God that the greatest birth in history was in the lowest country in the lowest of dwelling places, a cave, and to the lowliest of people.

VV 9-10 – Throughout the Scriptures, man is terrified at the appearance of angels (Daniel 10:8) or the glorified Christ (Revelation 1:17). The wicked revile “angelic majesties” (Jude 1:8-10) but would be unable to do so if they actually encountered them. In each case the angels reply first by comforting them.

The advent of Christ is good news for all people, not just Jews. All of human history had been rumbling inexorably toward this moment, the coming of the King. God’s plan of salvation was never exclusively for the Jews, but was always through the Jews. Finally, at the perfect time, our Lord’s final answer to the problem of sin had come.

V11 – David was born and raised in Bethlehem (1 Samuel 16:1-12). There is another area called the “City of David”, which was a stronghold on Mt. Zion (2 Samuel 5:6-9), probably Jerusalem. Savior (σωτήρ *sōtēr*) was a term commonly applied to gods, rulers, and others who greatly helped their people. Christ (Χριστός *Christos*) refers to the anointed one, the Hebrew messiah. Lord (Κύριος *kyrios*) is the person to whom a servant owes fealty.

V12 – Finding a baby in swaddling clothes would not have been remarkable, but finding one in a manger would have been. Knowing that such feed boxes would have been with animals and that animals around Bethlehem were general kept in caves, they would have known approximately where to go.

VV 13-14 – The angelic host (στρατιά *stratia* – *army or band of soldiers*) must have been an amazing and glorious sight (cf. 2 Kings 6:14-17, Matthew 26:53). Unlike war, however, this army’s purpose was to proclaim the Coming of God to earth.

The angels’ promise of peace was not to all the earth but to those with whom God was pleased...those in relationship with Him.

VV 15-16 – The shepherds went immediately to find the Messiah, undoubtedly leading the flock of sheep with them. They did not find excuses not to go, and they did not wait for a “better time”, such as daybreak. They hustled to see their Savior.

VV 17-18 – Once someone sees the Lord, the Incarnate God, he cannot be silent. The shepherds told their story for days and perhaps weeks after the event, and their listeners were amazed (θαυμάζω *thaumazō* – *to marvel in adoration, not questioning*).

V19 – As mothers are so prone to do for their beloved children, Mary pondered these events surrounding the birth of her Son.

V20 – The shepherds went back to their lives, glorifying God for what He had done.

Matthew 2

VV 1-2 – Jesus was born in Bethlehem and Herod the Great (lived 74 BC – 4 BC, reigned 37 BC – 4 BC) was the puppet king of Palestine under the Roman Caesar Augustus (lived 63 BC – 14 AD, reigned 31 BC – 14 AD).

“Magi” (μάγος *magos*) was the name given to priests, astrologers, dream interpreters, seers, and magicians among near Eastern empires such as Babylon, Assyria and Persia. Their purpose was to advise the emperor about what was going on in the world and what was likely to happen in the near future. Various groups of magi did this by examining all available evidence; some reviewed important documents such as the Hebrew Scriptures, others the movements of celestial bodies, and still others various articles of divination such as animal entrails and sheep livers (cf. Balaam – Numbers 22). Once they had told the emperor their conclusions, he would give them orders intended to shape events to his will.

These magi were readers of the stars, and they had seen some astronomical phenomenon (“his star”) which foretold the coming of a mighty personage. In this case the emperor told the army to prepare a caravan, led by a senior officer, and told these magi to go with the caravan to Judea to honor the new king.

Why would the emperor of Parthia care about the birth of a king in Judea?

1. Because Rome was Parthia’s enemy and Herod was Rome’s puppet. Herod was probably near 70 and Augustus, emperor of Rome, was also near 60. The Parthians would have loved to see someone more sympathetic to their cause as heirs to these thrones.
2. Because anyone whose birth was hailed by a star was obviously a big deal, and since the 5th century there had been a large Jewish community in Babylon, so the emperor’s advisors probably knew about the prophecy of a Jewish Messiah.
3. Because the Parthian emperor at the time, Phraates IV (reigned 37-2 BC), was cruel, unpopular and aging. He had six sons but no clear successor. He was persuaded by his wife Musa to send five of his sons to exile in Rome for their protection. She then murdered him and her son, Phraates V, ascended the Parthian throne.

Coming from the region of Rome’s bitter rival, Parthia, this was essentially a diplomatic mission. Therefore they would have gone through normal diplomatic channels. Traveling in a caravan and following the standard trade routes, a group of them, including their slaves, guards, guides, and the rest of their retinue, arrived in Jerusalem to witness this great event. The wise men would have no reason to suspect that this birth would be in such obscurity, wholly unknown to the rulers in Judea. They probably expected to find the child in the palace in Jerusalem. When he was not there, they inquired about where they could find Him.

VV 3-4 – Jesus was born between 6 and 4 BC, and Herod and all Jerusalem were troubled (ταράσσω *tarassō* – *worried, distressed, perplexed*). The death of one king and ascension of another was always a time of great uncertainty in autocratic governments.

1. There were usually many claimants to the throne.
2. The heir apparent usually lacked the experience and political backing of the incumbent.
3. If the king prepared the prince too soon or even made him a co-regent, the prince might depose (and usually execute) his predecessor (usually father) early. If he prepared the prince too late, the king would die before his heir was fully trained and established, thus leaving him vulnerable to the machinations of others.
4. Herod's reign was unpopular, so he was especially prone to losing his dynasty if a suitable ruler could be found.

There were other dangers. As recently as 42 BC, Herod's nephew Antigonus, backed by Parthia, controlled Jerusalem and much of Palestine. It was only in 40 BC that Herod, backed by the Romans, overthrew his nephew and conquered the city. From Herod's perspective this mission, obviously a high level entourage from his mortal enemy, could as easily have been a pretext for a new war as a search for a new king. Either way, he would lose.

It was also embarrassing. How could Herod, supposedly a great king, have missed the momentous event of a change in the stars? Even though the Jews were skeptical about astrology, did not Greece and Rome have astrologers just as Persia did? Did Herod leave such an important advisor off of his staff? What would Rome do to him for this oversight? They would never care about the birth of such a baby, but would care a lot about how this looked to Parthia, and what threats might come out of it.

Further, this was not just any king, but the Messiah, the chosen one of Israel who would usher in the kingdom of God. Even if Herod did not believe in the Messiah, the people did, and that could destroy his kingdom, his dynasty, and his life.

These realities explain Herod's terror at the word of a new king. The situation was tense, and Herod called together his closest allies to discuss how to handle these explosive developments. He handled the immediate issue at hand, the advent of the new king, while taking pains not to offend.

VV 5-6 – Here is the first appearance of the chief priests and scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees and lawyers, who were assembled in the Sanhedrin, the council of religious authority in Jerusalem. These men, power brokers and religious leaders, reported that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, and cited the Scriptures (Micah 5:2) as their authority. This was not a direct quote, as the exact words do not match the passage in Micah, but a summary.

How did Matthew know what was said? A caravan of this size and importance would have required several days to resupply and refit and would have done so in Jerusalem. The magi probably learned of what had happened from rumors during their stay and inferred it from talking to Herod. Once God warned them to leave by another route, they likely revealed to Joseph and Mary what had happened in Jerusalem. Years later when Matthew was gathering material for his book, he probably interviewed Mary.

VV 7-8 – It is difficult to imagine how Herod could have saved face in this situation. Therefore, he pretended to share their interest in finding and worshipping the child.

VV 9-10 – If it was actually a star or an astronomical phenomenon then it is extremely unlikely that the star actually moved. Certainly, however, the star seemed to move to the observers on the ground.

Bethlehem was only six miles southeast of Jerusalem, but it would have been difficult to know which Bethlehemite born in the preceding 1-2 years was the new king. The wise men couldn't have just shown up in town with their caravan, examined every male child of the right age, and somehow decided who was born the Messiah. Every parent in the village would have wanted the precious gifts the magi were bringing

and done whatever it took to get them. So the star needed to indicate exactly who the right child was. No wonder the wise men were thrilled when the star guided them precisely.

V11 – Jesus was in a house, not a manger. Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem on the very night that Jesus was born. If the star showed up on that same night and the magi saw it that same night, it would have taken them a month to assemble the caravan and several months to travel the 540 miles from Babylon. This assumes a maximum sustainable speed of 8 miles per day and multiple stops to rest and refit. Babylon was the primary observatory of the ancient near east. Therefore, Jesus would have been at least four months old when they arrived.

The neighbors must have been gawking when these important men with their impressive retinue showed up at the house of the newcomers in the village. After the magi had entered the house, they would have performed a Persian worship ceremony, part of which was opening gifts to present to the king. Psalm 72:10 and Isaiah 49:7 refer to kings bringing gifts to the Messiah.

Gold	Considered the most valuable of man's material possessions (Psalm 19:10, 1 Peter 1:7) and fit for kings. God's city itself would be made of gold (Revelation 21:18)
Frankincense (לבונה <i>lěbownah</i>)	Derived from the resin of the tree <i>Boswellia</i> , countries in the ancient Near East imported it from Sheba. It was used to provide a fragrant aroma for offerings to God. 1. Grain offering (Leviticus 2:1-2) – when a worshipper is thanking the Lord for His provision. 2. Guilt offering (Leviticus 5:11) – when a worshipper is asking forgiveness from the Lord for his sin. Blood must be shed for sin to be forgiven (Hebrews 9:22)
Myrrh	Derived from the Arabian <i>Balsamodendron</i> , myrrh was used 1. As a component in anointing oil (Exodus 30:22-33) which was used to anoint the Tabernacle, its contents, and the priests who were holy to the Lord. No one else was to make it for any purpose on pain of exile. 2. As perfume for the ladies at the king's wedding (Psalm 45:8) 3. By the harlot to seduce the foolish man (Proverbs 7:17) 4. Used by Mary to anoint Jesus before His death (John 11:2) 5. Used to embalm Jesus (John 19:39)

One has to wonder what the magi themselves thought. They had come hundreds of miles over many months to find a king, and were kneeling before an impoverished mother and her child in a little house in a little town. The father, a man of no obvious importance, was probably working in as a carpenter in town. There were no servants, no guards, no palace, and no outward indication that this child would turn out to be anything.

The magi may have had tremendous misgivings. What would they tell their king? How would they phrase their trip report so that their whole venture wouldn't sound like an expensive waste? What did the soldiers and others in the caravan think, with their leaders having presented gifts worth several lifetimes of wages to people in a lower state than them? How would Joseph protect his family and these gifts from robbers, or from Herod?

V12 – The wise men slept in their camp just outside the village during their visit to Bethlehem. They must have been suspicious of Herod from his actions when they arrived in Jerusalem, and this dream confirmed their fears.

The caravan probably came down the Via Maris to get to Jerusalem, and probably traveled from Bethlehem south and then east to the Transjordan on their way back to Babylon. The journey back to Babylon was even more perilous than the journey to Judea, because the local ruler, who had command of Roman troops in the area, had told them to return to Jerusalem, and they refused. Their ponderous

caravan was therefore trying to elude Roman forces and get back to Parthian controlled country, the nearest of which was probably 200 miles, nearly a month, away.