

Jesus in a '87 Chevy

LUKE 2:1-7 (KJV) *And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. ²(And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) ³And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. ⁴And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he* *was of the house and lineage of David) ⁵To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. ⁶And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. ⁷And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.*

"...no room for them in the inn." How many sermons have been launched from those seven words? This month you'll probably see at least one TV special or old movie—maybe even hear a sermon—about the Innkeeper of Bethlehem. Literature isn't always kind to him. He's usually portrayed as insensitive and preoccupied with exploiting the tax season for huge profits.

At the other extreme he's a kindly old man, overworked by the crowds, yet patient and gentle in manner. Moved to compassion by this young woman, obviously exhausted from her journey, he lets the Holy Couple stay in his private, nice, clean, warm, comfortable stable. And the stable is so romanticized I'm ready to check in for a weekend of R&R, myself. Have you ever been in a stable?

Neither version is biblical. The major character isn't even mentioned in the biblical story. For all we know, Joseph never saw an innkeeper. He may have heard talk on the street that the inn was full, and on his own found a cave for shelter. We don't know.

Still, tradition says the innkeeper should have made special allowances because the Son of God was about to be born. Why didn't he give them his room? I've heard that. But behind the traditions are assumptions based on our memories—our understanding. We know he was the Son of God; why can't they see it? The clear implication is, "we'd have done it better!"

I wonder. What might have happened had God waited until 2015 to send Christ? How *would* we receive Him?

I see a neat little shed on the lawn of the "Beth Israel" synagogue (chosen because it's next to the Interstate. Traffic can flow smoothly, with easy access). I can see the preparations now: neon angels hung from a tall superstructure... risers built behind the shed... the Mormon Tabernacle Choir arriving by charter jet from Salt Lake City, and the Philharmonic from New York.

Then the big night comes: huge crowds; traffic backed up for miles down the Interstate; traffic cops with long, red traffic-wands; searchlights sweeping the clouds; the Goodyear blimp overhead...

All three networks plus CNN and FOX: Katie Couric, Tom Brokaw (brought out of retirement).

And headlines the next day: The New York Times: "A Savior is Born!" The Wall Street Journal would report the Dow up.

And a well-known psychic would post of Facebook:

"He shall be great, and shall be called
the Son of the Most High;
and the Lord God will give to him
the chair of the Oval Office,
and he shall reign over the house of Washington forever;
And of his kingdom there shall be no end."

It's not really as ridiculous as it may sound. In every culture, in every age, there's *some* kind of Messianic expectation. Isn't that what we're looking for in our President and in our military leadership in the aftermath of every crisis: a Messiah—some heroic savior to overthrow the evil reign of terrorism or corruption—for us?

Victims of tyrants and dictators hope for a savior—a charismatic, military hero—who will overthrow the bonds of their captivity.

Victims of unemployment hope for a savior in the form of an employer or a strong labor leader.

Victims of spiraling economic collapse look for a savior who will write tax reforms favoring their particular socio/economic level.

And in each case, over time, expectations become dramatic and spectacular. And in every case the key words are, "for us." We are the center of the universe. It always has been that way. It was that way with Jewish expectations after Babylonian exile; and it's been that way throughout Christian history whenever the focus has been the book of Revelations or any other apocalyptic writing in the Bible.

Into those same kinds of expectations Jesus was born. Israel was a nation in chains. Rome had a chokehold on their politics and economy, and even though Jews sat in seats of government, they were, either paid-off defectors, or scared-stiff figureheads. Nothing was more important than the overthrow of the "Roman dogs."

The American colonists had similar feelings toward King George's "taxation-without-representation." It's a very familiar outlook.

But Israel's longing for Messiah was deepened by a memory. There was a time when David and Solomon sat on the throne and every nation in the world tipped its hat when it walked by. And at the center of Israel's life was the Temple—that great edifice: gold-plated, cedar-lined, draped with rich, exotic tapestries.

That memory had fueled hope for fifteen generations; and that hope carried

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images of polished armor, flashing sword, and the thundering hoof beats of a great white horse. WHEN MESSIAH COMES! A hero. And the prophets fueled the fire.

A beggar clutches his rags in some dark alley. "When Messiah comes" there'll be no more hunger; no more homelessness.

A young woman sobs in her pillow. "When Messiah comes" there'll be no more Roman soldiers raping and pillaging.

"When Messiah comes."

And he came. And it wasn't as they expected. And so *"he was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief,"* (ISAIAH 53:3 KJV) no hero, at all; because Messiah was not about their expectations. Nor is He about ours.

I think it might happen more like this, if God had waited until 2015: Picture a middle-aged desk clerk in a small motel in a county-seat town (the "NO-TELL" motel. The "c" is burned out in the flashing "No Va ancy" sign.)

It's about 10:45 in the evening, and the desk clerk is watching Jimmy Kimmel. He hears gravel crunching on the driveway, and a 1987 Chevy Pickup stops outside. The truck has some bumps and bruises, and a little rust. It's obviously a work truck.

A man in overalls gets out to inquire about a room. He speaks with a heavy Spanish accent (a refugee from El Salvador). He's found work in a nearby town, and has come to the county seat to check in with immigration and register his new address.

His wife stays in the car. She's obviously close to delivering a child. Dressed in a clean, plain, faded dress, she's exhausted from the day's trip, and the drive back would be just too much for her; so they've decide to get a room for the night.

There are no rooms available; but the clerk says they can sleep on a rollaway bed in the linen storage closet. It's small, but clean and warm, and there's a sink where they can wash up. They can use the toilet in the lobby.

He quotes a price, and the young refugee pulls out a worn wallet and counts out several bills, figuring the unfamiliar currency in his head.

That night her baby is born. She wraps him in a motel towel, and lays him in a laundry hamper.

Early the next morning, the clerk notices a bunch of kids around the linen room door—delivery boys for the morning paper, all excited about something. He runs them off, and looks in to find Maria, José, and el niño, Jesus.

The clerk asks them to leave; afraid the health department might hear about this and close him down. So, José fashions a bed in the back seat of the '87 Chevy, and they drive off.

I don't know. Maybe this image gives you problems, too. Mary and Joseph should be more "middle class"—more like us. They'd drive at least a 2014 SUV, and stay at the Holiday Inn. And they'd call an ambulance and check-in to the hospital, using their "Blue Cross" card.

And what about the shepherds and the angels and the star? Who'd ever notice something as obscure as that?

But, maybe that's the point. You see, the story's not about our expectations; it's about the power of God: the power that can take what, by our standards and expectations is nothing, and make out of it the salvation of the world!

I don't find it at all curious that the innkeeper of Bethlehem didn't pay special attention to Joseph and Mary. What amazes me—amazes me—is that ANYBODY EVER recognized this refugee baby as the Son of God. And yet, for two millennia he has been declared "Savior of the World;" "Lord of the Church." For two thousand years he has reigned in the hearts of people everywhere.

If you need a miracle, if you need a sign, if you need a reason to follow him, what more can you ask than that?