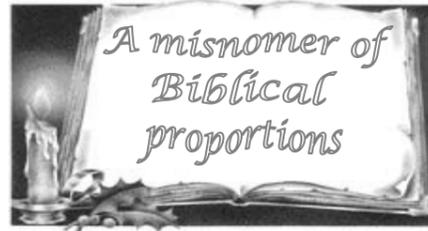


# The greatest story (n)ever told



## Once in Royal David's City....

Joseph ushered his heavily-pregnant wife Mary into the Travel Supermarket.

"We want to go to Bethlehem," he announced.

"As soon as possible," added Mary.

The agent sucked air through his teeth and started tapping keys on his computer.

"Ooooh, tricky, tricky. It's this Census, see? All these people moving about. Could do you a nice weekend break in Jericho, squire?" he asked hopefully.

"No, it has to be Bethlehem. Is there nothing available?"

The agent continued tapping away. Finally, he sat back and grinned. Their hopes rose.

"Computer says no," he beamed at them.

"Nothing at all?" pressed Joseph. "As you can see, my wife is with child. We will need shelter. Please look again."

The agent waved the mouse around, sighing loudly.

"Nothing...nothing...oh, hang on a mo..."

Mary clutched Joseph's arm.

"No, false alarm, squire, they're full too. Let's try the inns." He whistled tunelessly as he searched. Finally, he paused. "Ok-ay, here's one. Bit basic though. Nothing in the inn itself, but they've got a bit of an outbuilding. Says it's got "rustic charm". He snorted. "Hah! You'll probably be bedding down with the cows." He looked at their expressions. "Only kidding folks, only kidding. Looks like it's that or nothing though mate."

Joseph looked at Mary. She shrugged.

"We'll take it," said Joseph.

"Okey-dokey. Got your credit card on you?"

"I have none. Might we not pay with money?"

"Money? You mean cash? Whoooo. Thought that went out with the Ark. All right, but there'll be a handling fee."

"But why?"

"For handling it, of course. Totting up. Carrying it to the counting house. H-a-n-d-l-i-n-g, you know?"

Joseph reached inside his cloak and withdrew a bag of coins.

"How much good sir?"

"Eighty shekels, squire."

Joseph reeled back.

"*Eighty!* So much?"

"Told you squire - it's the Census. Everyone's put their prices up. It's daylight robbery I grant you, but what can you do?"

Sighing, Joseph counted out their hard-earned silver.

"Pleasure doing business with you squire."

He followed them to the door and waved as Joseph helped Mary up onto their donkey and led it away.

## Little Town of Bethlehem....

After many arduous days journey, they approached Bethlehem. A customs post had been set up on the outskirts of town. As they made to pass, a fat little man emerged from the hut and waddled rapidly over, shooing them backwards with flapping hands.

"Passports!" he demanded.

Joseph reached into his cloak and pulled out their passports. He handed them over.

"But what are these things?" protested the little man.

"These are not passports. Once, hah! maybe, these would have been called passports. Phew, yes. But not now." He wagged his finger at them. "Where are your biometrics?"

Mary looked worriedly at Joseph.

"Our what?" she whispered.

"I do not know," he murmured.

"Your biometrics. Biometrics! Fingerprints, iris scans, those things. Do you know nothing?" He squared up to them and folded his arms. "You cannot pass."

Mary wailed in despair.

"But the baby is coming! We must seek shelter! *Please* kind sir."

She looked at him imploringly. Joseph looked at him pleadingly. The donkey looked at him tiredly.

Worn down by adverbs, the customs official took pity.

"Oh very well, but you must get new passports," he scolded. "And one for the child when it comes."

Gratefully, Mary and Joseph continued into Bethlehem and found their way to the inn they had booked. The innkeeper tried to turn them away, but Joseph produced their booking slip from the Travel Supermarket.

"Ah," nodded the innkeeper, "you're in the annexe. Come with me."

He led them around the side of the building and into what appeared at first glance to be a stable. A second glance spotted the straw on the floor and a third the cows in the corner. Yep, it was a stable all right.

Mary leaned against the wall for support.

"It will have to do," she gasped. "There's no time."

The innkeeper took one look, turned tail and fled.

Joseph gently lowered Mary to the straw and held her hand.

Meanwhile, somewhere in the desert.....

## We Three Kings....



The three Magi crested the hill and saw a bright star in the distance. Melchior breathed reverently.

"We must follow this star for surely it signifies the coming of the Messiah. Camel-herd!" he cried, leaning down and cuffing the man around the ear, "prepare a course for us!"

The camel-herd pulled his Sat-Nav from an inner pocket and scowled at it. He pressed a few buttons disconsolately and then looked up at the King.

"Postcode?" he asked.

"What?"

"Wot's the postcode?"

Melchior leaned down again.

"Why do you ask such a thing? (*smack*) You foolish man! (*smack*) It is a star! Put away your gadgets. You must navigate as our ancestors did, using.... using....," he stammered to a stop. "How did our ancestors navigate?" he asked.

The camel-herd rammed the Sat-Nav back into his pocket. Wise men? Says who? he thought.

"By the stars, your Majesty." He crossed his arms. This was going to be fun. "So basic'ly you wants me to use them stars up there - which are blessed hard to see right now because of that thing over there shining like a new sun - you wants me to use *them*" he pointed upwards, "to find *that*," he jabbed a finger at the huge star.

Balthazar leaned over to Melchior.

"I say old chap, you know...it looks vaguely Bethlehem-ish sort of direction, wouldn't you say?"

Melchior glared at him. He looked to Caspar for help, but he simply shrugged. Melchior threw his hands up in despair.

"Fine! Whatever. We will head for Bethlehem."

The camel-herd pulled his Sat-Nav out again.

"B...B...right, Bethlehem, there we are. O-kaay gentlemen, we go..." he glanced down at the screen "east!"

From the Sat-Nav came a tinny voice:

"At the next sand dune, bear...straight ahead for the next ...eleven thousand ... two hundred ... and ... forty-three ... yards."

## While Shepherds Watched....



High in the hills above Bethlehem, three shepherds sat watching their flocks. The second shepherd raised a finger.

"I spy, with my little eye, something beginning with 'S'."

The first shepherd lobbed a stone at him.

"It's a sheep, for crying out loud. It's always a blasted sheep."

There was a rumbling from the shadows. It was the sound of the third shepherd gearing up to speak.

"Uh, I got one."

The others were dumbstruck. The third shepherd was known to have a room temperature IQ and this was uncharted territory.

"I spy, wit' my li'l eye, sumt'ing beginning with 'U'."

They gazed around, bewildered. After ten minutes of silence, one of them offered "Undergrowth?"

"Nuh-unh."

"Oh for heaven's sake. We give up, all right?"

"Har-har, I win then. It's a ewe."

The first shepherd was forcibly restraining the second from strangling him when they were suddenly bathed in an unearthly light. An angel appeared.

"Fear not, for I bring thee word of a miracle which hath occurred this night."

The first shepherd looked spitefully at the second.

"Wolves won then, heh-heh-heh." (*we put that in specially for Julian*)

The angel held up a hand to dispel further

squabbling.

"This night a King is born in Bethlehem - journey there forthwith and bow down before him. Be the first to acknowledge his coming. Never fear, thy flocks shall not stray. God's blessings be upon thee this night."

With that, the angel vanished.

The first shepherd rose and stretched.

"Good," he said emphatically. "If I spent another night playing 'I Spy' with you pair, I'd go mad. Come on lads."

## Away in a Manger....

In the stable, the baby Jesus was sleeping. He stirred slightly as voices drew closer.

"Because I know it's going to be 'Star', all right? Stars and blinking sheep, I ask you. You wouldn't credit the number of things that don't begin with 'S'."

"(Mumble)."

The three shepherds stepped up to the stable door and gazed in awe. Mary smiled and beckoned them in.

The first shepherd nudged the second.

"Did you bring anything?" he muttered between clenched teeth.

"Like what?"

"A present you twit."

"Oh? Oh? I'm the twit am I? I'm *second* shepherd, me. You're the ideas man."

The third shepherd tapped him on the shoulder.

"Got my iPod Nano. D'you think he'd like that? 'S got some really cool tunes on it."

While two of them hoped no-one would be recording this moment for posterity, the third knelt and proudly offered his iPod to Mary.

"Gosh," she breathed, "have you got Simeon and the Zealots on here?"

"No m'm, but I got the latest from the Wailing Pharisees. 'S called 'Smoke Upon The Waters'. 'S mega brilliant. It goes *dang-dang-DANG, dang-dang-de-DAANG!!*

While the other two shepherds burned with sufficient embarrassment to set the straw alight, the three Kings and their entourage arrived. The camel-herd caught a brief glimpse of a baby in a cattle stall staring goggle-eyed at a scruffy individual playing air harp before he was swept aside by Melchior. The Magi made an entrance as only Kings can.

The third shepherd clammed up mid *dang*.

"Hail Messiah!" Melchior intoned. "We bring gifts to honour the new king." He knelt. "I bring gold."

Balthazar knelt. "I bring frankincense."

Caspar knelt. "I put you on Facebook, and there's hundreds of people signed up as friends already. Neat, huh?"

And there we shall leave them, in happy contemplation of their myriad gifts.

# Merry Christmas!