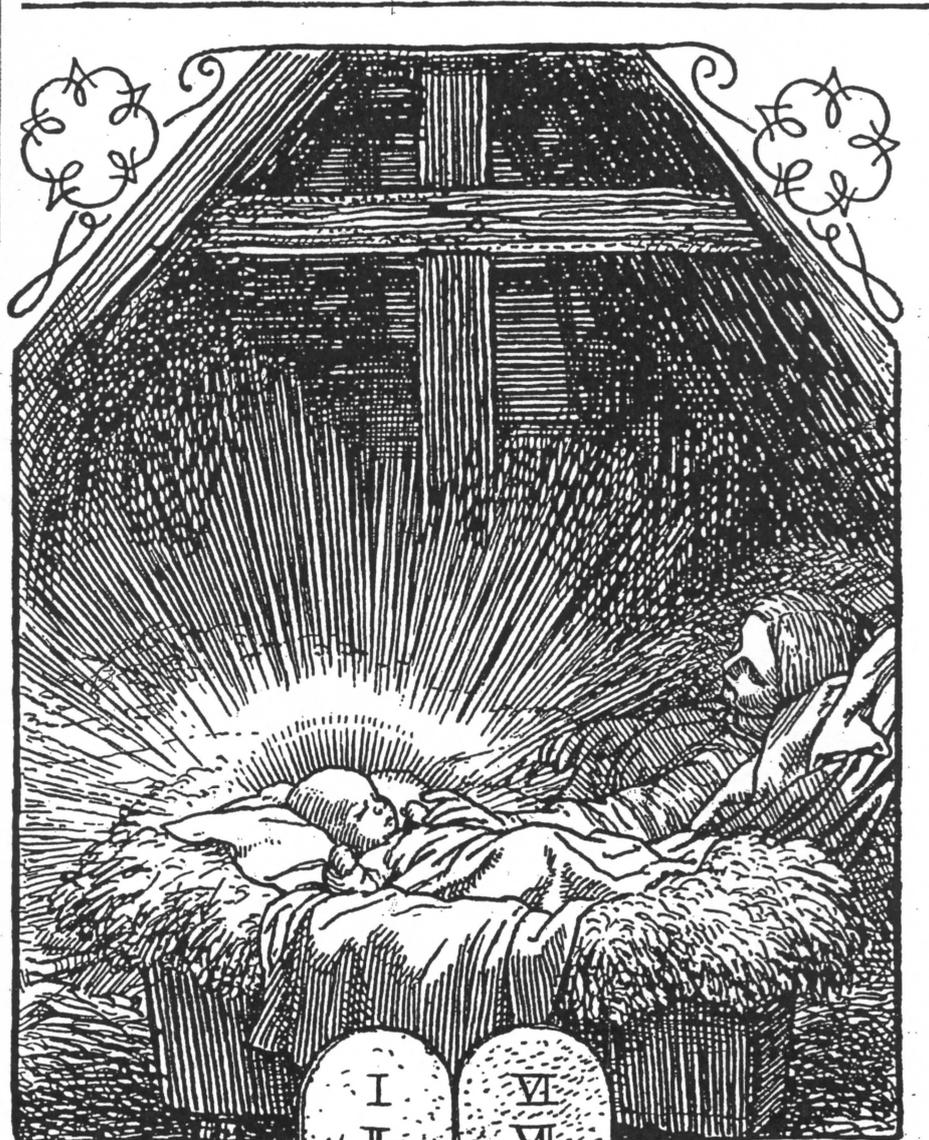


The Apostle Paul and the Birth of Jesus

Galatians 4:4

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CHRISTMAS ACCORDING TO THE APOSTLE PAUL

WHAT CHILD IS THIS

What child is this, who, laid to rest,
 On Mary's lap is sleeping?
 Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
 While shepherds watch are keeping?
 This, this is Christ the King,
 Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:
 Haste, haste to bring Him laud,
 The babe, the son of Mary.

Why lies He in such mean estate,
 Where ox and donkeys are feeding?
 Good Christians, fear, for sinners here
 The silent Word is pleading.
 Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,
 the cross be borne for me, for you.
 Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
 the Babe, the Son of Mary.

So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh,
 Come, peasant, king, to own him.
 The King of kings salvation brings,
 Let loving hearts enthrone him.
 Raise, raise a song on high,
 The virgin sings her lullaby
 Joy, joy for Christ is born,
 The babe, the Son of Mary.

One of the most beloved and beautiful carols that Christians sing during the Christmas season is that of William C. Dix, "What Child is This?" As few of the carols do, the lyrics of this song prompt us to contemplate the identity, the person and work of the Babe in the manger. In fact, the carol politely but persistently presses the believer to answer the question: Is this Child truly an holy infant or a mere holiday infant? When we think about the Christmas story, we mostly focus on the birth announcements in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke. Those passages certainly are important and contain the most information about the birth of the Savior Himself. As we have seen in this series, there are other passages relating to the birth of Christ and one of the most interesting ones is found in Paul's Epistle to the Galatians. *It would be well*

to consider for once Christmas according to the Apostle Paul. Yes, he does reflect on the wonders of the birth of Christ. While critics have suggested that Paul knew nothing about the virgin birth because he makes no specific reference to it, nonetheless he was very familiar with that blessed truth. After all, Dr. Luke was his companion for 15 years and undoubtedly they would have talked about the information that Luke received from Mary, the mother of Jesus.

In Galatians 4:4-5 the Apostle Paul speaks of six extraordinary things about Christ as he answers the question that the carol poses to us, What Child is This? Before commenting on the various purposes that Paul gives for the appearance of Christ at this point in history, it would be well to comment on the predictions of His coming and preparation for His coming.

1A. The Predictions for His Coming:

Paul says that “when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth his son.” The term “fullness of time” is an interesting expression. The word “fullness” comes from *pleroo*, to fill. Here the reference is to the complement of the preceding time as in “the dispensation of the fullness of time,” in Ephesians 1:10, a clear reference to the millennial kingdom. A. T. Robertson’s comment is right to the point: “God sent forth his pre-existing son (Phil. 2:6) when the time for his purpose had come.” He observes that:

There is, of course, no direct reference here to the Virgin Birth of Jesus, but his deity had just been affirmed by the words “his son”. . .so that both his deity and humanity are here stated as in Romans 1:3. Whatever view one holds about Paul’s knowledge of the Virgin Birth of Christ, one must admit that Paul believed in his actual personal pre-existence with God (2 Cor. 8:9; Phil 2:5-7), not a mere existence in idea. The fact of the Virgin Birth agrees perfectly with the language here (*Word Pictures of the New Testament*, Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1931, 301).

It is clear that the incarnation of the Savior was no idle whim or last-minute effort to salvage a lost creation. The only alternative to planning is to respond to circumstances. Our God is the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the One who alone knows all things, the perpetual contemporary. Everything is part of His plan (Eph. 1:11). His plan is eternal. His timing is always perfect. He is never caught off-guard or unprepared.

And so it was, in the “fullness of time,” God sent His Son into the world. Thousands of years earlier the promise of the Seed was given to Adam and Eve in the Garden. Fourteen hundred forty years earlier, Moses penned the many promises made through the patriarchs and in subsequent ages the promises became more and more focused on the person who Himself is the climax and consummation of history.

1b. The time of His coming was prophesied:

“Know therefore and understand that from his going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem [445 B.C.] unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, threescore and two weeks [483 years]; the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times. And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off [April A.D. 32]” (Daniel 9:25-26).

- 2b. The place of His coming was proclaimed:

Micah 5:2 But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.

- 3b. The way of His coming was described:

Isa. 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

- 4b. The purpose of His coming was revealed:

Isa. 49:6 And he said, It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth.

- 5b. His position at His coming was designated:

Isa. 9:6 For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

In the seven yearly feasts that God gave to Israel (Lev. 23) the Messiah's redemptive ministry was chronicled, from His death (Passover) unto His second coming to dwell among men (Tabernacles) and in the priesthood and sacrificial system, His work was typified and illustrated.

Rosenthal is correct when he said, "Not without reason, therefore, the collective hopes and dreams of the ages met in that stable in the little village of Bethlehem in the Judean hills, in the obscure land of Israel. It was the noon hour of human history—it was *the* fullness of time. The infinite, eternal Creator was now walking among His creation

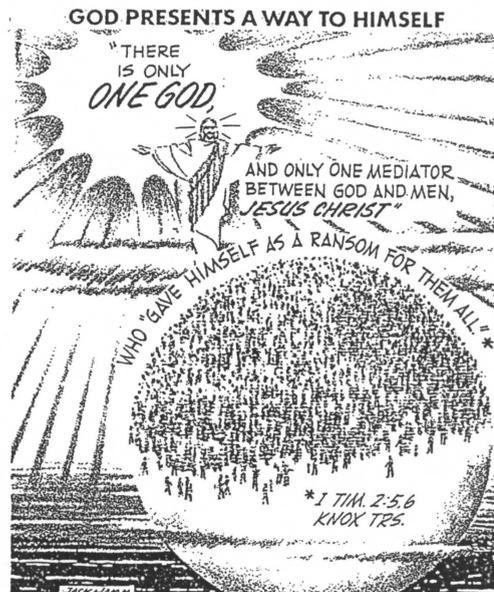
(http://www.Zionshope.org/Zionsfire/article/fullness_of_time.html)

In the OT, the signs of His coming multiplied. Numerous passages predicted aspects of that glorious event and yet when Christ appeared on the scene, the Pharisees and Sadducees in Jerusalem demanded that He show them an indisputable sign that He was the Messiah (Mt. 16:1-4). Why were they so blind? While Simeon and Anna in the temple and the shepherds in the fields and a few faithful saints such as Zechariah and Elizabeth expected the consolation and salvation of Israel, most people were ignorant of the fact that the signs of the times had now been realized and the long-promised Redeemer had arrived.

As the time went on in OT history, the predictions were more and more specific. It might be well to list some of these specifics concerning the person of the Savior Himself:

Here are some of the predictions:

- (1) His **race**: He would be of the human race—"the seed of the woman" (Gen. 3:15).
- (2) His **nation**: the nation of Israel--"the seed of Abraham" (Gen. 22:18).
- (3) His **tribe**: the tribe of Judah—"The scepter will not depart from Judah" (Gen. 49:10).
- (4) His **family**: the family of David--"And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever" (2 Sam. 7:16).
- (5) His **mother**: a virgin—"Behold a virgin shall conceive" (Isa. 7:14).
- (6) His **birthplace**: Bethlehem—"But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting" (Micah 5:2).

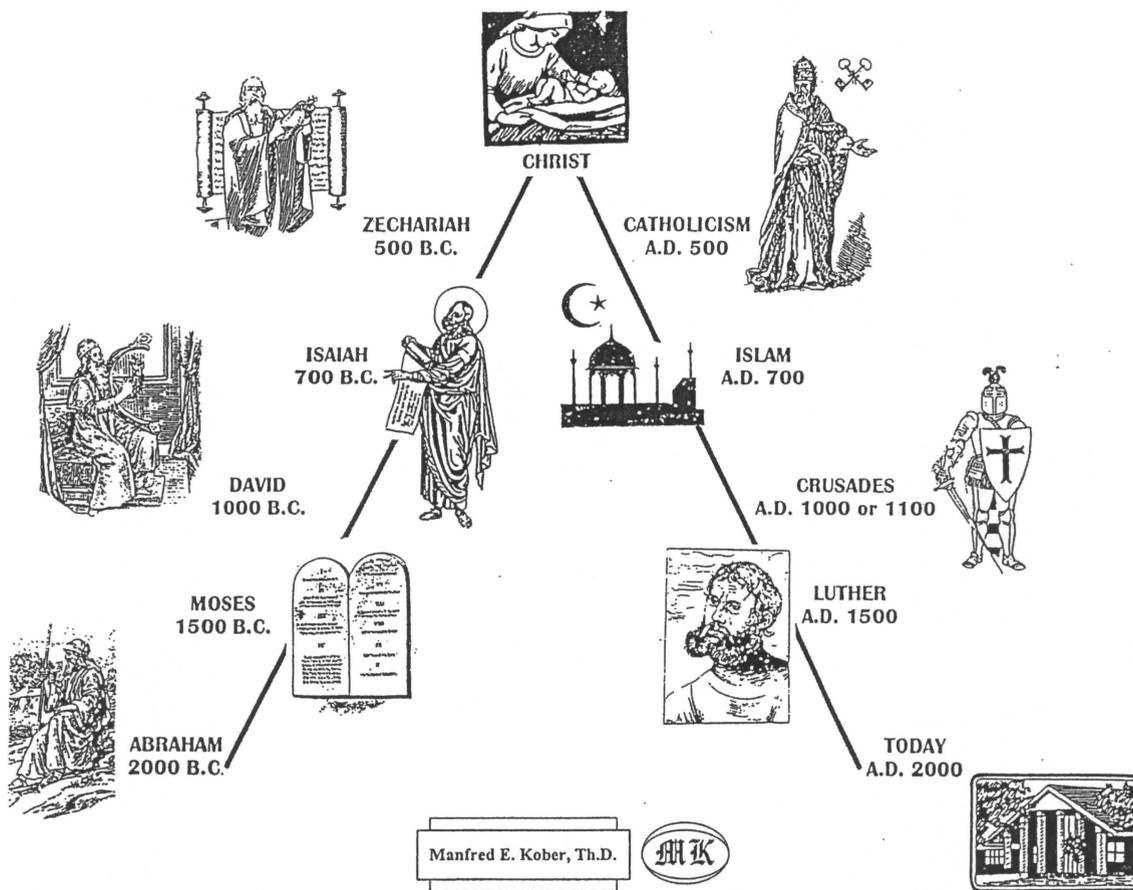


2A. The Preparation for His Coming:

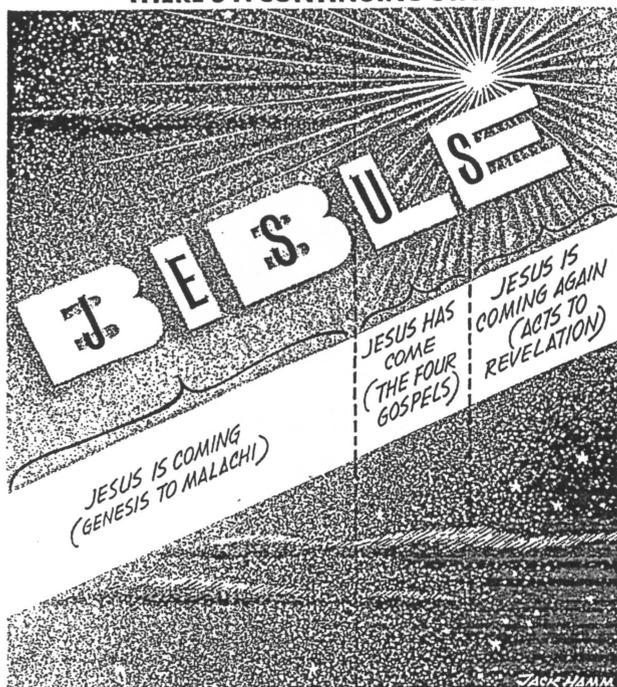
From the early Christian centuries on believers have claimed that the world was uniquely prepared for the coming of Jesus Christ and the birth of Christianity. It may well have been the phenomenal spread of the new faith that sparked these claims. Indeed, it has been estimated that by A. D. 312 one in ten people in the Roman world called themselves Christians. Michael Green makes an interesting observation: "Probably no period in the history of the world was better suited to receive the infant church than the first century A. D....By the second century...church fathers began to argue that it was divine providence which had prepared the world for the advent of Christianity" (*Evangelism and the Early Church*, Guildford, UK: Eagle, 1995, 13).

Paul said Christ arrived in the fullness of time. It was the fullness of time because of **Roman** influence, **Greek** influence and **Jewish** influence. World conditions were ripe for the arrival of the Son of God in human form.

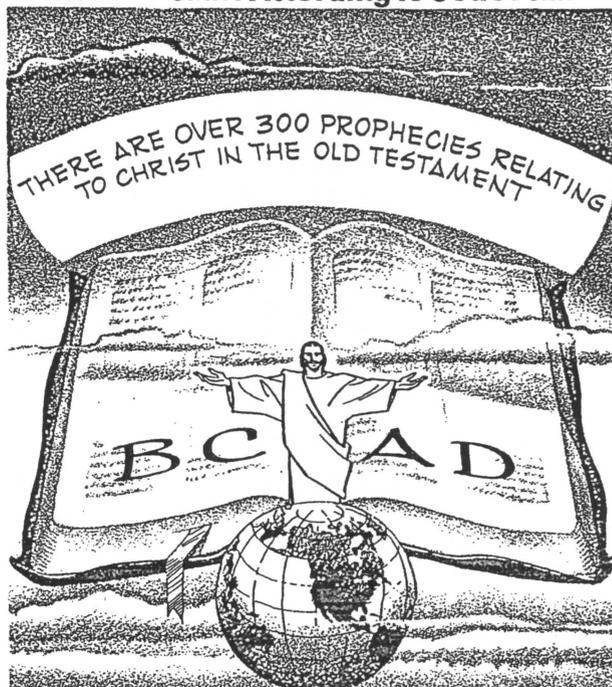
CHRIST THE CENTER OF CHRONOLOGY



THERE'S A CONTINUING STAR



Messiah Came According To God's Plan



1b. The Roman influence: political

1c. Unity and diversity:

Under Roman rule the conquered people retained their cultural identity even while they were politically united under the rule of Rome. By the early third century, all freemen in the empire had been granted Roman citizenship. This provided a common point of reference, a kind of unity.

2c. Roman peace:

The reign of Caesar Augustus inaugurated the *Pax Romana*, or "Roman peace," two centuries of economic and cultural growth and stability, generally marked by the absence of military conflict within the empire. People were able to travel widely in relative safety.

3c. Roman roads:

The quality and extent of roads in the Roman Empire is legendary. Even the most outlying areas of the Roman Empire were inter-connected. Even today, when one travels throughout the Near East in countries like Jordan and Israel, one can see the large pavement stones marking the ancient Roman road system.

4c. Roman army:

The Roman army was the instrument of maintaining peace within the empire but it also became a major venue for spreading ideas. The ranks of the Roman Legions were increasingly filled by recruiting provincials from distant regions of the Empire. By the fourth century there were increasing numbers of Christians among the Roman soldiers, and they carried their beliefs and convictions wherever they were stationed. For example, when one visits the ruins of the Roman colony in Augsburg, Germany, one still can see the foundation of a Christian church in that Roman city and the baptistery and staircase leading into it. (Apparently around A.D. 182 they still practiced biblical baptism by immersion!)

2b. The Greek influence: intellectual and cultural

1c. Language:

Before the emergence of Rome as a world power, between 356 B.C. and 323 B.C., Alexander the Great conquered much of the known world.

Wherever his soldiers went, Alexander's philosophers, educators and artisans were soon to be found. He propagated the Greek language and culture. Koine, the vernacular Greek, was the common tongue of the East. It was the language of the conquered, not the conquerors. Because of this one-language world with a one-world view, the empire was much easier to penetrate with the glorious Gospel. For the travelers throughout the Roman Empire there was generally no need for language study or taking courses in cross-cultural communication!

ΕΝ ΑΡΧΗ ΗΝ Ὁ ΛΟΓΟΣ ΚΑΙ ἸΟΛΟΓΟΨΗ
 ΠΡΟΣ ΤΟΝ ΘΕΟΝ· ΚΑΙ ἸΘΗΝ ὈΛΟΓΟΣ·
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 ΤΕCΤΙC ΤΕΥCΩC ἸΝ ΔΙΑΥΤΟΥ



2c. Philosophy:

The development of Greek philosophy over the preceding centuries led to a rejection of polytheism. Philosophers like Plato ridiculed the gods of the Greeks and attacked the "crude anthropomorphic polytheism of the masses." Plato further advocated that the highest ideal, that of goodness, was to be identified with a personal, creator-God. Aristotle identified that God as a single Prime mover who is elevated above change and decay, an immaterial First Cause. Plato further held that the visible world is only a shadow of the real world, thus reality is not temporal but spiritual and eternal, an idea that would adapt well to Christian teachings.

3b. The Jewish influence: religious

The contribution of Jews in the early years of Christianity was more profound than that of the Romans and Greek together. The Jewish faith had proved influential by the first century to attract a significant number of Gentile followers, some of whom adopted the Jewish religion completely.

1c. Monotheism:

In striking contrast to other religions of the Roman world, the Jews confidently worshiped what they believed to be the one true God of the universe, with whom they had a unique covenant relationship.

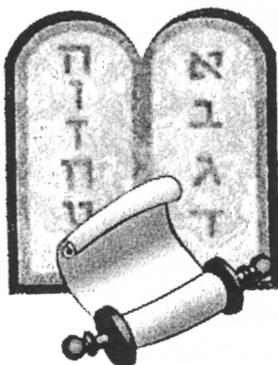
2c. Messianic hope:

A central feature of the Jewish faith was the idea that the arrival of a Messiah was imminent. It was therefore possible for the disciples and for the Apostles to point at this Jewish hope and identify its fulfillment with the coming of Jesus Christ.

3c. Ethics:

The Jewish faith was founded on a strict moral code based on the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Torah. Discerning Jews should have understood the Levitical ritual to be anticipatory of the final sacrifice that would come to atone for human sin.

4c. Jewish Scriptures:



The God of Israel had not left his people to search aimlessly for the truth but had revealed Himself to them through the words of Scripture. These holy writings were available to one and all, not just in Hebrew but by 250 B.C. in Greek as well.

It is in that sense that the time was right and ripe for the coming of Jesus Christ. There was a providential combination of circumstances tending to prepare the world for the Gospel. The utter failure of pagan religion and pagan philosophy to cure the immorality and misery which accompanied it

called for divine interposition. Thus, in the fullness of time God sent forth His Son.

The Purpose of His Coming:

In the Galatians 4 passage the Apostle Paul speaks of six extraordinary things about Christ as he gives his answers to the questions that the carol poses to us, "What Child is This?"

1b. According to the Apostle, Jesus is the child for whom all time had waited. As has already been suggested, the time at which Jesus came is said to have been time at its fullest point, a unique occasion when history was prepared for the arrival of God's Son. The Father's plan from eternity was to send Jesus Christ (Acts 2:24; Rev. 13:8) and now that eternal purpose was being realized.

2b. The Child was "born of a woman."
With these words, Paul begins to reflect on the circumstances of His birth which in turn directs the reader's attention to the humiliation of the glorious Son of God. Christ was fully human as well as fully divine, the one and only God-Man. The Son of God was sent to be one with us in our humanity. Fowler White has an important observation:

But there is more to this expression, "born of a woman." The Apostle knows the history of Jesus' nativity. At that time, it was customary to speak of being "born of a man," a custom to which the genealogies of the period bear witness - genealogies other than the one of Jesus. He was born of a woman, indeed of a virgin, as foretold by the prophet Isaiah. This Child was born without a man, born of a woman, the son of God the Father (<http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/christmas-according-to-the-apostle--paul-gal-44-5-part-1/>).

3b. Jesus was "born under the law."
Jesus was born a Jew under Moses, the Son of the Father was born a servant of the Lord His God, to whom He owed a perfect, personal and perpetual obedience, both active and passive. Jesus in His lifetime obeyed all the strictures of the commandments of the Law but it is important to note that while in His lifetime He **adhered** to the Law, when He died on the cross he **abrogated** the Law (2 Cor. 3:7-11; Col. 2:14).

4b. The child came to redeem mankind.
By the term "redeem" Paul uses the term from the Roman slave market. The idea is that of rescuing, releasing, delivering from slavery by the payment of a price. In His death Christ paid the ransom for our sin, removed us from the slave market, and released us, set us free. Now the believer is a voluntary bond slave to the Savior.

5b. The goal of the Son's coming:
He is the Child Who is born to make us heirs of God, "so that we might receive adoption as sons." The term adoption is a very significant term in Paul's theology and Roman law, as White says:

We need again to appreciate the significance of Paul's term here. Adoption was defined by Roman law and widely practiced in Roman life.



Roman emperors had adopted men not related to them by blood in order to give them their office and authority. More broadly speaking, when a son was adopted, he was in all legal respects equal with those born into his new family. The adopted son had the same name, the same inheritance, the same standing, and the same rights as the natural-born sons (<http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/christmas-according-to-the-apostle--paul-gal-44-5-part-3/>, page 1).

- 6b. The Son pre-existed before He became man: He existed before He was sent and He existed as a person distinct from the Father. He has always been the Son of the Father, the only begotten of the Father, of the same essence and equal with the Father (and the Spirit). His pre-existence is thus implied by the Apostle Paul and consistent with the rest of the Scriptures. The child in the manger was the pre-existent Son of God, miraculously conceived as to his human nature by the Holy Spirit and miraculously preserved from defilement from the womb of Mary He is one person with two natures.

According to Paul, then, the Babe in the manger is God with God, the Son with the Father, who has permanently taken to Himself human nature and flesh. He was not always man; He has always been God. Jesus Christ was not first a man upon whom divinity descended. He was first God who took upon Himself humanity. After the Incarnation He is now and will forever be one person with two natures, human and divine.

What Child is this in the manger, then? He is the Child who is the Son sent forth by His Father, the Son who is now and will henceforth always be both God and man.

