

STRANGERS  
*at the*  
MANGER



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MANGER

ORDINARY PEOPLE WHO HELPED WITH AN EXTRAORDINARY BIRTH

A NOVEL

J.T. JONES



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# CONTENTS

Preface	ix
1. The Donkey Man	1
2. Strangers Along the Way	7
3. The Innkeeper's Wife	13
4. The Left-Behind Shepherds	17
5. Changed Shepherds	23
6. Benjamin the Stable Hand	31
7. Townsfolk	37
8. The House Owner	43
9. The Reluctant Centurion	49
10. Refugees	61
11. How Much Longer, Lord?	67
12. Home at Last!	75





## PREFACE

**T**HESE STORIES ARE fiction—pure and simple, imaginary tales. These stories are purely speculative ventures that are extensions of Scripture. Do not mistake the poetic license the author has taken as anything other than fiction of the kindest and most reverent order. Such creative meandering is not ever to be taken as any degree of disrespect for Scripture. Neither are these stories to be considered an improvement on the beginning of the greatest story ever told. Rather, this fiction comes from a deep love for God’s Word mixed with creative imagination.

This is a collection of what might have been. Hopefully, they point out the potentiality for any one of us to use our mundane coming and going in our daily living to help bring about the wonder of God’s will.

Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted. Though the wonderfully familiar King James Version of Luke's account of Jesus' birth still rings in the ears of the author's youth, the inclusive language of the NRSV adds the voice of sensitivity to the text. At the same time, the inclusiveness of the NRSV does not detract from the accuracy or the intent of other familiar translations.

The story of Christ's birth is not fiction. However, the following vignettes are merely musings of the author's imagination added to the Gospel accounts of Matthew and Luke. All of them are based soundly on God's Holy Word but tiptoe along the edges of the story and peek into the realm of possibility. Who knows? Maybe Mary walked or maybe she rode a donkey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Does it matter? Yes, it matters to the extent that a generous soul might have taken pity on the young, expectant mother and lent his donkey to a poor carpenter who could not afford a beast of burden. Thus, the story is not about the donkey. It is about kindness making a difference.

Each of these short stories delves into how human nature and God's grand concert of Incarnation together may have made sweet harmony. Some might cause the reader to wonder if it had not been for the acts of a few simple folks, the story of Christ's birth could have turned out much different. Some of these stories may open new possibilities for the reader's understanding of a God who paints in the canvas of

life with a big brush and then allows us to fill in the corners. Some are just a fun look at what might have been. Others stand as evidence that the success of God's plan is never dependent upon human action or reaction. God will always find a way. Sometimes that way is obvious, and sometimes that mystery is disguised.

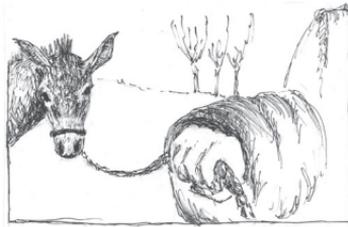
Every one of us knows the story of Christ's birth. We have heard it as many times as we can number each Christmas. Christmas is an appropriate time to consider the array of possibilities and to play the game of *What if?* What if Rome had paid the tax collectors a travel stipend instead of demanding that all the citizens go to the city of their origin to pay their taxes? What if the tax collector had traveled to Nazareth instead of Joseph and Mary having to trudge off to Bethlehem? What if there had been room in the inn? What if the shepherds had said, "I can't leave the sheep alone at night?" What if all of Bethlehem knew the circumstances of Christ's unique birth? If they had known who this child really was, the townsfolk might have held a lottery or a bidding war for who would host God's own Son. What if the magi had said, "It's just another star?" What if Herod had not been so insanely jealous? *What ifs?* surround this story. These pages contain but a few.

Two separate and quite different accounts piece together the story of Christ's birth. Only Matthew includes the story of the magi. Luke's account is more familiar and offers us more detail. Mark and

John remain silent about Christ's birth. Even Jesus never mentioned his birth or what life was like during his family's exile in Egypt. Scripture has many silent places. These stories help give those silent places a new voice of possibility. Perhaps they may even provide answers to a few of those *What ifs?*

## Chapter 1

# THE DONKEY MAN



*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered.*

—Luke 2:1-3 NRSV

“**J**OSEPH, I KNOW what I’m talking about. My wife has given birth to seven children. I know something about women and babies. I’m telling you, Joseph, take my donkey.”

“Sid, it is mighty kind of you, but I just can’t. I don’t feel right about taking your donkey. Who knows how long we will be gone? There is no telling when I can get your donkey back to you. What if something happens along the way? I’d feel sick if I

brought back a lame donkey. I just can't," Joseph replied.

"Look, my friend, I'm not taking 'no' for an answer. It is nearly seventy miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem."

"Somehow we will manage, Sid. Thanks anyway."

"Now Joseph, Mary is due any day, and she is in no condition to walk. Besides, have you given any thought to what you are going to do if the baby is born before you get back home? You will surely need the donkey to carry Mary and the baby if the baby comes while you are gone. I know that carpentry is a noble trade, but not one that pays enough for you to own your own donkey. Joseph, stop being so hard headed. If I did not want you to take my donkey, I would not have offered. Please, be a man of reason. I'm begging you to take my donkey."

"Sid, you are a true friend. I will take the donkey, and I will care for it as if it were my own. But when we get home, I'll repay you with a fine piece of furniture from my carpentry shop."

"If that makes you feel better, Joseph, have it your way. Just so you know that I'm not lending you the donkey to get anything in return. I just want the best for you, Mary, and the baby. I'll bring the donkey over to your house in the morning. She is a good, gentle soul who is an easy keeper."

For centuries, artists have routinely painted a placid donkey standing in the stable's background. Wood carvers whittle out little burros by the gross

for crèche scenes. However, no one really knows if Mary rode a donkey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Scripture is silent about the couple's method of travel. Their choices were few. A horse and cart would probably have been as unaffordable for a poor, Galilean carpenter and his young wife as a Bentley would be for most of us. It is not impossible for a first-century woman like Mary to have walked the distance. Yet, for a woman in her last weeks of pregnancy, such an arduous trek would have been an unspeakable hardship.

I like to think that there was a kindhearted soul who said, "Joseph, take my donkey." That is not to say that the donkey owner had any idea of Mary's miraculous conception. There is no need to believe he was trying to make history or to gain favor with God. No, compassion is what drove the donkey's owner. He saw a need, and he stepped forward to be a difference-maker. His gift was neither small nor insignificant. Beasts of burden in Jesus' time were essential to making a living for some. Lending your donkey was not like lending a used snowmobile you are no longer riding, or your bass boat in the middle of January.

Suppose a neighbor who lived in Nazareth many centuries ago was moved to make life easier for a young woman. How does that impact the story of Jesus' birth? Does it even matter? Yes, it does matter, and it affects the story of Jesus' birth. It means that long before anyone knew this child's future, there was a spark of kindness, a nugget of compassion,

and a desire to comfort others. It means that Jesus was not born into a world that was wholly void of caring. It means that this child would multiply the good that was already present.

Suppose Joseph and Mary began their seventy-mile trudge on foot. Given her condition, it would have taken them days to complete their journey. Mary's time of delivery might have come in another place on another night. Instead of a stable in Bethlehem, Jesus could have been born somewhere in the wilderness along the way to Bethlehem. Had Mary delivered her son in the wilderness along the road, baby Jesus would have entered this world in a far different way than he did. If you think a stable is a lowly place of birth, just imagine a thorn apple thicket as a maternity ward. The kindly man who lent a carpenter his donkey may well have been part of God's grand plan for the time and place Jesus was born. We just do not know.

No one could have imagined how long Joseph and Mary would be gone—not Joseph or the kindly donkey owner. Just how long would the donkey's owner be donkey-less? No one could have guessed the journey from Bethlehem to Nazareth would have an extension through Egypt, but that is exactly what happened.

Joseph had no choice but to gather up his wife and son and head for Egypt to escape Herod's insane wrath. What began as a ten-day jaunt to Bethlehem and back, turned into a three-year tour to Egypt and back. You have to wonder what

went through the donkey owner's mind when Joseph did not return as expected. Did God advise him in a dream not to worry because his donkey would be returned in due time, or was the donkey owner ripe with worry? For all we know, he may have walked to the edge of town every morning, searching the road, and wondering if this might be the day his donkey would come home. We will never know.

We can only guess if a kindly soul may have stepped forward to ease a young woman's misery. We can only speculate how this simple act of compassion may have changed the story of Jesus' birth. We will never know for sure.

I like to think that the first step toward Christ's birth was an act of kindness with no expectation of something in return. I like to think that it was a heartfelt concern for another's plight that helped shape the story. I especially like to think that the true spirit of Christmas began at the journey's start and not at its end. How different the story might have been had there not been a spark of kindness and compassion in the very beginning. Just maybe, the caring heart of the donkey man gave Jesus' birth a chance to change this world.

I like to think the Christmas story began when a neighbor said, "Joseph, take my donkey."