

# THE SCOOP on CHRISTMAS



Regardless of beliefs about God, religion, the Bible, or Christianity, almost everyone will acknowledge that Jesus of Nazareth is the most widely recognized person to ever live. He is the most famous person in all of history, His life having the greatest impact on the world. He influenced everything from art to politics to literature to medicine, and everything in between. Even our calendar is based around the birth and life of Christ—BC being a reference to “before Christ” and AD being a reference to “anno domini,” Latin for “the year of our Lord.” Type the name “Jesus” into your search browser and you’ll come up with billions of results. And billions of people are celebrating His birth around the world right now, and they have been anticipating it all month! No sensible historian would ever question the fact that Jesus really existed. Dr. Craig Evans, in his book *Fabricating Jesus*, writes, “Almost no serious academic—of any ideological, religious or nonreligious stripe—doubts that Jesus of Nazareth actually lived some time in the first century and was crucified by order of Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea. The evidence for the existence of Jesus—literary, archaeological, and circumstantial—is overwhelming.”<sup>1</sup>

However, even though many serious academics would admit that Jesus existed, many critics and scholars or pseudo-scholars are incessant in their attempts to fabricate or come up with a Jesus that doesn’t match the Jesus of the Bible. Every year during Christmas and Easter, wild documentaries and theories come out depicting Jesus as something other than He really was. They say He was just a myth, a moral teacher, a philosopher, a charismatic holy man,

a magician, a hippie, or an ancient Cynic. Ancient Cynics were these ragged, unkempt homeless that people called dogs, or “doglike” or “doggish.”<sup>2</sup> That’s what Cynic means. They called them “doggish” because they walked around barefoot, used the streets as a bathroom and avoided the complexities of human life and materialism. They lived like dogs. The idea that Jesus is just another moral teacher doesn’t make sense since He made Himself out to be God and accepted worship. If He is just another moral teacher, but isn’t God (isn’t **Lord**), then He is a **liar** or a **lunatic** that we shouldn’t give any heed too. Some theories portray Jesus as a mythological character or fictitious being whose story accrued over time. These theorists/mythicists often portray the New Testament as unreliable religious books with little basis in factual history.

That’s why I think Christmas and Easter—these holidays that celebrate the birth and the victorious death of Christ—are so important for Christians to take advantage of. I often see these holidays as great opportunities for Christians to share and defend the faith. Many people come to church during these holidays who don’t come to church the rest of the year and so I like to help and challenge people to think more critically about these most important events in human history that we celebrate and show them, “Hey, these are real events, with real people, in real places, and they are intellectually and spiritually satisfying. We can trust that these events really did happen and because of them—because of God’s real, personally involved intervention in human history—we can have hope. Real hope that doesn’t disappoint.”

But here's the other thing. Sometimes as Christians, our own depictions of the events in the Bible—like the movies and stories and plays about the birth of Christ (God bless them and use them)—can sometimes make Christmas seem more like a fairy tale. A lot of people approach the Christmas story like the story of old saint Nic. They treat it like it's a legend with more myth than truth. Yeah, sure, there's some kernels of truth in there but it's more myth than truth. So, this morning I just want to help us think a little more clearly about the Christmas story. And I don't want to be a grinch or a scrooge when it comes to nativity scenes—I like them and God knows I do. We have one in my home and one outside our church. But our nativity scenes and images usually don't line up with the biblical text: Mary riding on a donkey, knocking on the doors of the Motel 6 in Bethlehem and the angry innkeeper turns them away, saying, “No vacancy!”; they end up staying in a barn outside of town with angels and shepherds and magi all there at the same time to celebrate. How much of this is in the biblical text though? Is that an accurate depiction of the biblical text? What really happened and what is implied? What's myth and what's fact in the birth narrative of Luke 2:1-7? That's what we're talking about this morning and archaeology is going to help us do that. This Easter we got “the scoop” on Easter. Now we're getting “the scoop” on Christmas.

Dr. Titus Kennedy in his book *Excavating the Evidence for Jesus* writes, “Archaeology over the last 150 years has not only contributed to our understanding of the historical context of Jesus, the Gospels, and the 1<sup>st</sup>-century world, but many discoveries have directly confirmed the accuracy of the Gospel accounts about his life and historical existence—and new discoveries continue to be uncovered and mysteries untangled.” When we pay close attention to the archaeology (ancient ruins and documents uncovered), it adds a lot to our understanding of Christ's birth and the biblical text. That's the **primary goal of biblical archaeology: to illuminate our understanding of the Bible.**<sup>3</sup> That's why I love it so much. So many times a passage of Scripture finally makes sense or the implication of

the text is more fully brought to bear when we understand the ancient world of the biblical writer.<sup>4</sup> It makes the story even more interesting and appreciative and personal.

## Setting 01: The Provenance (LUKE 1:1-4)

When you watch something like the DaVinci code and they come up with all these crazy ideas about Jesus from ancient documents, you need to know that they are relying on late, apocryphal, pseudepigraphal sources from the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century or even later. These writings do not harmonize with the Bible and the people who wrote them lived long after the fact. They didn't know Jesus or the apostles. Sometimes they didn't know the geography of Israel.<sup>5</sup> A cursory reading reveals they shouldn't be taken seriously. Archaeologists don't use these writings to know where to dig. The New Testament, however, is written in the first century and Luke through *years of careful, eyewitness investigation*. He traveled with Paul. He interviewed eyewitnesses. He interviewed Mary. He was a witness at times to biblical events.

There was a brilliant, atheistic individual named William Ramsay who decided that he would trace the missionary journeys of Paul in the book of Acts (written by Luke) to try to disprove the historicity of the New Testament. He looked for evidence in landscape, ruins, and in titles of local rulers and magistrates used by Luke. He visited the cities Paul visited. At the end of the day, Ramsay became overwhelmed with the evidence that the book of Acts was spot on and factual. He came to the conclusion that Luke was a historian of the first rank—that Luke's history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness. He also became a believer!

We shouldn't be surprised by this accuracy. Luke introduces his two-volume set of Luke & Acts with this statement in **Luke 1:1-4**: “*Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were*

*eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; 4 so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.”* So Luke isn’t messing around. He’s a doctor. He’s an intelligent man hired to investigate the events related to Christ and the Church. It’s a historical document. Remember that as we dive into this Christmas account in Luke 2.

## Setting 02: The Situation (LUKE 2:1-7)

*2:1 Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. 2 This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. 4 Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, 5 in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. 6 While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*

So, the situation is that there was a **census** ordered by **Caesar Augustus**. A census is an official count or survey of the population, in this case the Roman Empire. He doesn’t say it was the first census taken by Caesar Augustus because it isn’t. It seems like there was a census around every 20 years during this time period. It is, however, the first census while **Quirinius** was governing in some capacity in Syria.<sup>6</sup> Quirinius was a real person who lived from circa 51 BC – AD 21 and rose up through the ranks because of his skill as a military commander.<sup>7</sup> There is a lot of literary and material evidence for Quirinius and the documentation of censuses—even empire-wide censuses, taking place.<sup>8</sup>

During these censuses, everyone was forced to go back to where they were from. Everyone who resided away from their home or the land they owned was summoned back for registration. For example, a census edict from Egypt Province circa AD 104 (British Museum papyrus 904) reads, “Gaius Vibius Maximus, Prefect of Egypt: Seeing that the time has come for the house to house census, it is necessary to compel all those who for any cause whatsoever are residing out of their provinces to return to their own homes, that they may both carry out the regular order of the census and may also attend diligently to the cultivation of their allotments.”<sup>9</sup> How frustrating would that be! Talk about government overreach? Mary and Joseph have to return to their ancestral home just so Caesar can have his head inflated by the size of his empire and tax them more accurately. So they make this 100-mile trek from **Nazareth** in northern Israel in Galilee, to **Bethlehem** of Judah. And let’s talk about these two major sites for a bit.

## Setting 03: The Sites (LUKE 2:4)

Many times, because we trust our Bibles, we just assume these places existed. Anti-Christian critics assume they don’t. They try to prove these places either didn’t exist or weren’t inhabited during Jesus’ time. They try to find anything that will say otherwise. There’s even a book out there called *The Myth of Nazareth*. And for many years there was no definitive archaeological evidence for its existence during the time of Jesus. But for many years there wasn’t any evidence for a lot of biblical places. That’s because many times these places are covered by modern cities and you can’t dig. Second, the discipline of archaeology is only 150 years old and the land was closed to excavation for the longest time. We’re living in the golden age of archaeology right now as we speak and a lot has been uncovered but we’ve still only scratched the surface. Only about 1% of Israel has been excavated. But just as

archaeologist Kenneth Kitchen used to say, “absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence.”<sup>10</sup> If something has yet to be found relating to the Bible, you just need to give it more time. People used to think Sargon and David weren’t real people either, but in time we dig up the truth.



With **Nazareth**, structures (like houses and olive presses) and material culture (pottery, coins, tombs, ritual baths called miqvaot, etc.) have been dug up that indicates it was a small village in the first century just like the Bible records. It was a small, 10-acre agricultural community with an estimated 400 people.<sup>11</sup> The comment, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” may testify to its insignificance (Jn. 1:46).<sup>12</sup> Nazareth is where the first annunciation took place by the angel Gabriel and a large church called the Church of the Annunciation sits on that claimed site. Believe it or not, there’s actually good historical credence for it. You might get your hands on Joel Kramer’s book *Where God Came Down* if you want to learn more about that.

As for **Bethlehem**, there are two of them in Israel: one in Galilee near Nazareth and another way down south in Judah. Matthew’s account clearly says it is Bethlehem *in Judea* (Matt. 2:1), which would be 6 miles south of Jerusalem. Some people, especially those who live in cities, have a hard time imaging a pregnant woman travelling 100 miles like this but this was the first century and it was normal. Jews in



Galilee made this trip 3 times a year for the appointed festivals in Jerusalem. Besides that, the census required it. They don’t care how far away you are or if you’re pregnant. In reality, there was probably more than one pregnant woman who made a significant journey like they did.

Luke also calls Bethlehem the **city of David**. In the Old Testament, the city of David is a title for Jerusalem/Jebus in that he conquered it. But Bethlehem is also the city of David in that it’s where David is from. Bethlehem is the ancestral home of David, and Josph is from the lineage of David so that’s where he returns. My guess is he still owned land in Bethlehem with his family. **1 Samuel 17:12** says, “*Now David was the son of the Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, whose name was Jesse, and he had eight sons.*” “Ephrathite” should remind us of **Micah 5:2** that specifically predicts the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem of Judah. It says, “*But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.*” **Jesus’ birth in this town fulfills a 700-year-old prophecy.** Many would naturally doubt such a prophecy, except that it was confirmed in the Dead Sea Scrolls on a scroll from 125 BC. How amazing that God would know about and/or providentially orchestrate this census so that Jesus is born right where Micah said He would be born.

As the prophet Micah states, this was another insignificant town known for shepherding and farming—my kind of place. I like to think Jesus was a small-town kid. He grew up near bustling cosmopolitan areas, but the Bible never mentions Him going to them, other than Jerusalem. Excavations in 2015-2016 next to the Church of the Nativity, the claimed site of the birth of Jesus (again

with great credence) discovered evidence of a first-century village in Bethlehem.



The 2015-2016 excavations near the Church of the Nativity discovered evidence of a first century village.

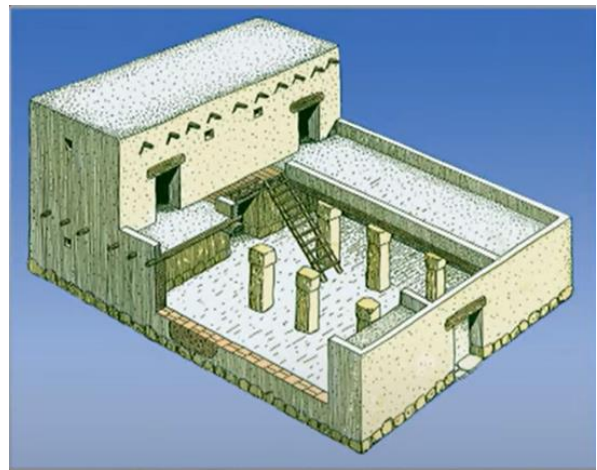
The non-Christian archaeologist Dr. Shimon Gibson, who dug at the site, said, “What we’ve been able to prove up until now is the existence of a village from the time of Jesus.”<sup>13</sup> Beneath the Church of the Nativity, are caves where it is believed that Jesus was born. You might think caves? I thought He was born in a stable? Well, yes and no. Let’s talk about that, but first we have to talk about the famous “inn.”

#### Setting 04: The Inn (Luke 2:7)

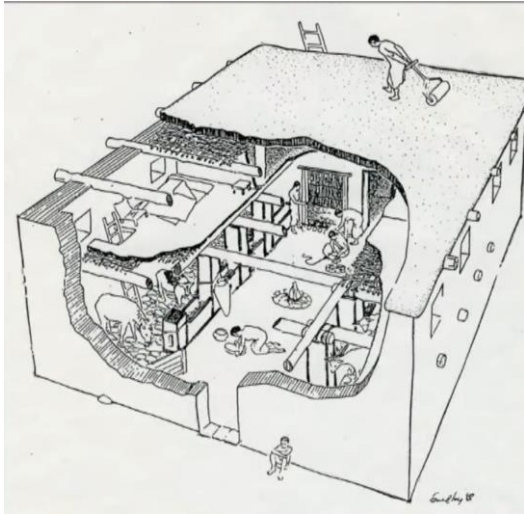
**Luke 2:7** says, “*she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.*” The Greek word for “inn” here is *kataluma*. Most translate it as “inn,” which makes us think of a Holiday Inn or Motel 6. But the word can just mean “room” or “lodging” or “guest room.” You might say there was no place or space (*topos*) for them in the guest room (*kataluma*). Modern translations are recognizing that (LSB, CSB, NIV). This is the same word used in **Luke 22:11-12** (cf. Mark 14:14) where Jesus says, “*Where is the guest room [kataluma], where I may eat the Passover with My disciples?’ And he will show you a large upper room furnished; prepare it there.*” Here, *kataluma* clearly refers to the upper room where Jesus spent the last night of His life. So there is a *kataluma* involved at the beginning and end of His earthly life. The LXX (Septuagint; Greek translation of the OT) also uses the word *kataluma* to refer simply to a room, not a hotel.<sup>14</sup>

What’s interesting is that if Luke wanted to say there was no room for them in a hotel, he could’ve used that term like he did in **Luke 10:34**. In the story of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan takes the beaten man to an inn—in the Greek, *pandoxeion*. He even mentions an innkeeper (*pandoxeus*). But those aren’t words Luke used in the Christmas event which means that he more likely means something different. It’s also means there probably was no anxious search for a hotel or an angry innkeeper turning them away and saying, “No vacancy!” Archaeologist Titus Kennedy said, “It’s unlikely that Bethlehem even had an inn, since it was only a small Judean village at that time and inns were more common in Hellenistic areas, major roadways, and larger cities.”<sup>15</sup> Does this mean I’m going to burn my nativity and give the kid who plays the innkeeper a hard time? Not at all (2 Tim. 2:14).

The idea that the inn was actually an upper room fits with first century Jewish style homes. Israelite houses frequently had upstairs rooms and guest rooms. Family was an important part of the culture



and the most essential of all relationships. Not to take care of family is to be worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim. 5:8).<sup>16</sup> So they typically had living quarters upstairs and working quarters downstairs. They would eat and sleep upstairs and cook, work, and store things or keep certain animals downstairs. In the picture below, you’ll notice mangers/feeding troughs downstairs separating the stables from the work places. They were part of the housing complex.



This is the way a lot of people/small villagers have lived for a long time, even up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the western world. People would keep their pregnant, young, nursing, or sick animals—maybe their milking animals or the fattened calf close to the house or in a room connected to the house for ease of access. Honestly, sometimes they used the dung to burn in dung ovens in places where there isn't a lot of wood. It's kind of gross but it's still a thing today in some places like the Middle East. This reminds me of some of the benefits of studying history: it makes you grateful for what you have (gas appliances) and reminds you that you don't need it all.

But essentially what I'm saying is that Mary and Joseph went back home to where their family was in Bethlehem. They expected to stay with family in the family's AirBNB. However, there were so many relatives in town for the census that "there was no place for them in the guest room guest room" (Legacy Standard Bible). And so Mary might've said, "You know, Joe, I don't really feel like climbing that ladder and there's not much room anyway. Also, this baby could come tonight and I'd like some more space and privacy if that baby comes. Why don't we just stay down here. You clean out that manger and we'll be okay."<sup>17</sup>

If this is the case, then why is the Church of the Nativity<sup>18</sup> built over a rock cave and why do so many early records (second, third, and fourth) say that Jesus was born in a cave?<sup>19</sup> Because Bethlehem is an

area known for its limestone quarries and caves and people often integrated these caves or quarries into their housing complex. Actually, it's possible that Jesus' family were stonemasons. He was a *tekton*—a craftsman of some kind—but we don't exactly. We usually think He was a carpenter but the geological evidence could point to a stonemason, maybe even being involved in constructing some of Herod's great building projects like nearby Herodium.<sup>20</sup> Dr. Kennedy wrote, "caves were often next to, under, or integrated into the house," and "were often used as storage areas for homes in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Animals could have been kept in a cave or in a stone pen near the house."<sup>21</sup> Archaeologist Joel Kramer writes, "Caves made ideal stables and therefore were common places to find mangers. Shepherd caves, as they are often called, provide sheep a place of refuge from heat and threat of predators. Since they remain cool in the summer, warm in winter, and dry during the rainy season, sheep caves are often found beneath or besides ancient houses."<sup>22</sup> Shepherds still use caves today for stables. They're a natural shelter.

As for the manger, we often picture Jesus laying in a wooden box of some kind. Not that it's not possible, but it is worth noting that we find many stone mangers today, cut from a single stone or cut directly into the cave wall and coated with plaster. Stone was abundant while wood that can be used in construction was relatively scarce.<sup>23</sup> These kinds of troughs are often found on the ground floor of houses.



Time fails us but it's also worth noting that **angels** appear to **shepherds in the fields** outside of

Bethlehem. And it may be that these shepherds around Bethlehem who came to see baby Jesus might not have been your ordinary shepherds. The Mishnah, a Jewish document, talks about shepherds near Bethlehem in Migdal Eder, which means “Watchtower of the Flock”. These shepherds watched over sheep that were destined for temple sacrifices, such as the Passover lambs—the lambs without blemish (Ex. 12:5).

If that’s the case, this is a powerful symbolism reminding us that Jesus is our ultimate Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7). It reminds us that because of this sinless child—born not of Adam with Adam’s sin nature but born of God through divine miracle—we can be set free from the penalty for our sins through His death. The wages of sin is death, and we all deserve to die and be separated from God forever for our sins. However, how amazing to think God Himself came into this world as a man to die for you and me, and there wasn’t even any room for Him. The most significant Person in the universe, became insignificant, because He thought we were significant enough to die for. He is the most famous person to ever live, yes. But more so, He is greatest gift ever, and I would invite you to receive Him as your Lord and Savior this morning.

### **Setting 05: The Gift**

(John 3:16; 1 Jn. 1:14)

The story of Christmas is real. It involved real people, real places, and real events. It’s just as real as us sitting here today. And Jesus came into this world to save us from the very real problem of sin, offering the gift of eternal life to everyone who will receive that free gift through faith in Him. John 3:16 says, *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life.”*

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Craig Evans, *Fabricating Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 220.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 100-109.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Scott Stripling, *The Trowel and the Truth* (2017), 14, writes, “Illumination of the Bible serves as the primary goal of ancient Near Eastern Archaeology. By drawing out the cultural clues that are embedded in the remains of material culture, the text is set in its proper context.”

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Scott Stripling, “Four Examples Which Illuminate the Background of the Biblical Text,” Associates for Biblical Research: n.p. [cited 5 December 2023] Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-JjxKPxJRo>

<sup>5</sup> “17 Did Jesus Exist? (Guest: Dr. Craig Evans), Digging for Truth Podcast, Feb. 11, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent podcast on Quirinius and other aspects of the birth narrative, visit: Digging For Truth: Episode 39, *The Archaeology of Christmas* (Guest: Bryan Windle)

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Bryan Windle, “Quirinius: An Archaeological Biography,” [www.BibleArchaeologyReport.com](http://www.BibleArchaeologyReport.com)

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Titus Kennedy, 22-28.

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy, 23-24.

<sup>10</sup> Stripling, *The Trowel and the Truth*, 46.

<sup>11</sup> Kennedy, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Kennedy, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Joel P. Kramer, “Unearthing the Prophecy of Jesus’ Birthplace,” *Expedition Bible* YouTube channel.

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Peter Goeman, “The Nasty Innkeeper Who Turned Away Mary and Joseph—Did He Exist?” *The Bible Sojourner*, accessed December 22, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Kennedy, Jesus, 30-31.

<sup>16</sup> Dr. Peter Goeman, “The Nasty Innkeeper Who Turned Away Mary and Joseph—Did He Exist?” *The Bible Sojourner*, accessed December 22, 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Dr. Gary Beyers, “The Christmas Story: How Well Do You Know It?” with Rev. Gary Byers, Associates for Biblical Research YouTube channel.

<sup>18</sup> After the Jewish revolts, Emperor Hadrian attempted to rebuild Jerusalem as Aelia Capitolina. In doing so, covered up all the sites connected with Jesus and instead built pagan shrines over them trying to syncretize them. He built a shrine to Adonis over the location of Jesus’ birth circa AD 135. However, instead of erasing the association with Jesus, he ended up preserving the site. Emperor Constantine would eventually order the building of the Church of the Nativity to commemorate the site in AD 327.

<sup>19</sup> Eusebius wrote around AD 313, “Now all agree that Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, and a cave is shewn there by the inhabitants to those who come from abroad to see it.”

Origen wrote in AD 248, “With in conformity with the narrative in the Gospel regarding His birth, there is shown at Bethlehem the cave where He was born, and the manger in the cave where He was wrapped in swaddling-clothes. Nd this sight is greatly talked of in surrounding places, even among the enemies of the faith, it being said that in this cave was born that Jesus who is worshiped and revered by the Christians.”

Jerome moved to Bethlehem in order to learn Hebrew so he could translate the OT into Latin. He wrote in AD 395, “From the time of Hadrian.... The original persecutors, indeed, supposed that by polluting our holy places they would deprive us of our faith.... Even my own Bethlehem... that most venerable spot in the whole world was overshadowed by a grove of Tammuz, that is of Adonis; and in the very cave where the infant Christ uttered His earliest cry lamentations was made for the paramour [lover] of Venus.”

<sup>20</sup> Christ McKinny, Kyle Keimer, “The History and Archaeology of Christmas,” (Parts 1 & 2), *On Script Biblical World* podcast.

<sup>21</sup> Kennedy, *Excavating*, 31.

<sup>22</sup> Kramer, *Where God Came Down* (Brigham City, UT: Expedition Bible, 2020), 94

<sup>23</sup> Kennedy, *Excavating*, 31.