

S I L E N T
N I G H T ?

*How you can experience the
true wonder of the first Christmas*

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INTRODUCTION

Our family lived in the Middle East for twenty years, traveling throughout the region and residing in the United Arab Emirates and Iraq. It was a great privilege and a treasure trove of experiences that enriched our lives. In many ways, the Middle East provided us with a perspective that would have been impossible to gain had we remained in the warm confines of our home country. For this book, I have drawn on just a few of the countless situations we experienced.

The West, in its headlong rush to become a secular society, sheds any vestige of its Christian heritage. In contrast, the Middle East remains deeply religious.

Yet, at least to me, one of the most fascinating aspects of Christmas in the Arabian Peninsula is that the most famous man on the planet, Jesus, is not celebrated. Oh, sure, the malls are filled with

tinsel, blow-up Santas, and Christmas trees—much like a mall in the West. They even play the Christmas carol “Silent Night” on Muzak. But they have no connection to the man who started it all: Jesus. This reality made Christmas in the Arabian Peninsula feel like just another ordinary day of the week. On our first Christmas Day in Dubai, much to our amusement, Ansari, our landlord, even dropped off our rental contract complete with a rent increase—a reverse gift exchange. For Ansari, it was just another workday—as it is for most people in the UAE, who go to work, eat regular meals, and shop on Christmas Day.

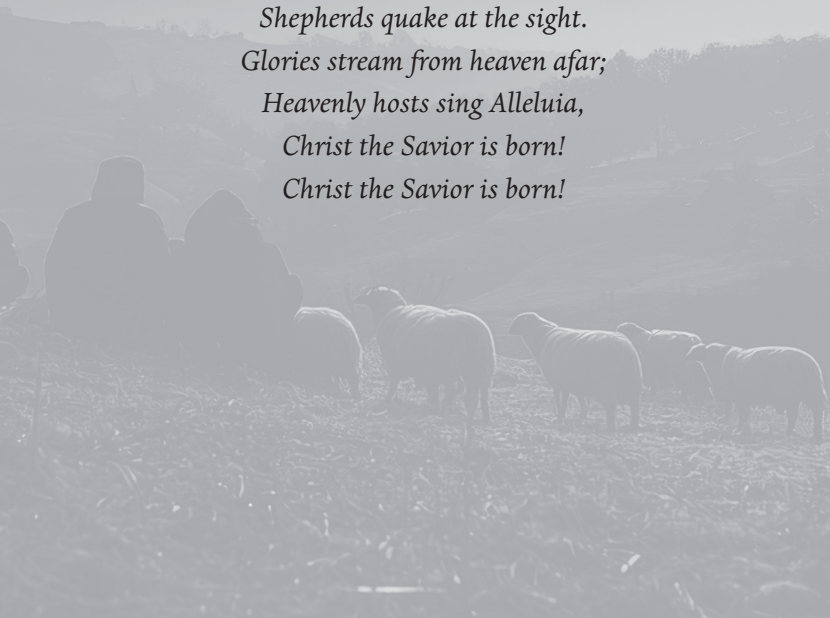
I suppose that it was much the same when Jesus was born.



Silent Night, Holy Night

*Silent night, holy night!
All is calm, all is bright.
Round yon virgin, mother and child.
Holy Infant so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.*

*Silent night, holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight.
Glories stream from heaven afar;
Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia,
Christ the Savior is born!
Christ the Savior is born!*



*Silent night, holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light.
Radiant beams from Thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord at Thy birth,
Jesus, Lord at Thy birth.*

*Silent night, holy night!
Wondrous star, lend thy light;
With the angels let us sing,
Alleluia to our King;
Christ the Savior is born!
Christ the Savior is born!*

(Lyrics by Mohr; melody by Gruber)



CHAPTER 1

SILENT NIGHT?

“ALL IS CALM, ALL IS BRIGHT”

Not long after arriving in Iraq, our new home, my wife, Leeann, and I saw fireworks from our fifteenth-floor apartment. We popped some popcorn and pulled out some lawn chairs to watch from our dusty balcony. It was an amazing display; I had never seen such powerful explosions, and so low to the ground! Oddly, all the blasts were one color—orange.

While enjoying the display, we received a phone call.

“Mack, this is Betsy.”

“Hi Betsy!” Betsy was a member of our small, local expat church, which I led. She directed an aid and relief organization and regularly navigated war zones.

“I’m calling to tell you that an ammo depot near your home has taken a hit.”

“Oh,” I said, with sudden realization. “We were watching it from the balcony.” I didn’t mention that we thought it was fireworks.

“Mack,” Betsy said with a firm and serious tone, “those munitions can travel for miles. I want you to get off your balcony, now!”

“Right,” I said, quickly grabbing Leeann’s elbow to guide her to safer quarters.

“Oh, and Mack, Merry Christmas.”

“Yeah, Merry Christmas.”

Not exactly a “silent night.”

The words to the well-known German Christmas carol, “Silent Night, Holy Night,” start with the refrain: “Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright.”

Well, in our case, it was certainly bright. Silent? Not so much.

Yet, in some ways, I wonder if that night on the balcony was more like the arrival of Jesus than the hymn portrays. Loud, more powerful than we knew, a bit dangerous, and unexpected.

“Silent Night, Holy Night” shapes many people’s perspectives about the birth of Jesus and the land to which he came. Both the lyrics

and the melody have endured over time—they are memorable and soothing. As a child, I have fond memories of candles being lit from person to person as we sang this hymn to conclude our yearly Christmas service. Perhaps you have affectionate feelings for the hymn—you're not alone; it's a global favorite. I remember hearing this very hymn play at Christmas time while walking through one of Dubai's many malls, amid dishdashas and burkas.

Some, however, find the hymn overly sentimental and slightly odd, mixing speculation with truth. I understand. I hate to be a wet blanket, but the speculation that all was calm is a stretch. After all, the arrival of Jesus came in the same way all babies are born: with cries of anguish. Jesus was a real baby, who cried just like any newborn. The line that “radiant beams” stream from his face contradicts the biblical record, which emphasizes Jesus' plain and ordinary appearance. Jesus did not attract us to him by his looks, even as a baby. It is hard to imagine the animal stall where Jesus was born being well-lit. I have been in the tent homes of refugees in Iraq who, after fleeing brutal wars waged by cruel dictatorships, were crammed together with their animals. Their

homes are dirty and dark, not much different from the conditions of the Christ child. Behind the scenes in Bethlehem, King Herod nurtured his murderous heart and plotted death for any kingly threat to his reign.

All to say, the night Jesus came, and the night on our balcony, was more typical of the Middle East than this sweet hymn.

The two composers of “Silent Night”, Gruber and Mohr, were not sentimental people. Gruber, a simple school teacher, wrote the melody. Mohr, who ministered to the poor as a young assistant priest in his parish, wrote the lyrics. We can forgive a young celibate priest for not knowing much about newborn babies.

On the other hand, what Gruber and Mohr did know was hardship. As citizens of Austria, they had lived through years of war and devastation that started with the French Revolution of 1792, continued throughout the Napoleonic Wars that followed, and didn’t end until 1815. After twenty-five years of brutal war that claimed millions of lives, it’s hard to blame them for yearning for peace and calm.

What is surprising is how much the hymn gets right.

Let's compare and contrast the passage of Scripture—chapter two of the book of Luke—that shaped Mohr and Gruber's understanding of Jesus' arrival. Luke tells us that Jesus' parents, Joseph and Mary, traveled to Bethlehem, their ancestral town, to be counted in a census. It was not a joyful visit; they were forced to go by Caesar Augustus, in faraway Rome, so that he could levy taxes on them. Little did Caesar know he was merely a pawn in a divine global plan to bring a young couple to that very city so that the prophecies of the Messiah would be fulfilled.

Travel was difficult for Mary since she was in the later stages of her pregnancy. Joseph and Mary were humble and of modest means. To make matters worse, upon their arrival in town, they found no place to stay. Joseph certainly did his best, but they ended up staying in an animal shed.

It was there that Mary gave birth to her firstborn Son. She wrapped him in simple strips of cloth, called swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. We love rags-to-riches stories. Inexplicably, to the human mind, this is a riches-to-rags story; more about that later.

Though “Silent Night” revolves around Jesus, nearly half is about the encounter of the angels with the shepherds. Here’s the Bible passage about those angels from which Mohr drew the text for his hymn:

“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

‘Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with
whom he is pleased!’”

(Luke 2:8–14)

This is where the hymn sparkles since it tells the Bible story. A lone angel announces an astonishing story: a baby is born in a room for animals.

The angel's message was one of comfort and joy: "Fear not," the angel said, "for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." Forget the image of chubby, cherubic figures with tiny wings; this powerful being is more like God's warrior, and he was not flapping about in the air but was directly in the fields with the shepherds; his presence was awe-inspiring and terrifying.

The carol gets this right! "Shepherds quake at the sight."

Then the angel revealed astonishing news: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." If the statement is true, this marks the pivotal point in human history. The long-awaited Savior, the Messiah, has arrived.

The birth of Jesus was filled with meaning. Some might say that the fulfilment of old prophecies in the Bible are "coincidences," but there are too many coincidences to be random. For instance, consider the place where Jesus was born: Bethlehem. As the angels say, it's

the city of David, a location foretold in the Old Testament as the birthplace of the Messiah. In his book in the Old Testament, the prophet Micah predicted that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem hundreds of years before this event (Micah 5:2).

Furthermore, Jesus' birth fulfilled ancient prophecy, directly connecting him to the promise God made with King David that the Messiah would be one of his descendants. Both Mary and Joseph came from the line of King David. We see prophecies of both place and lineage perfectly fulfilled: the Messiah, from the line of David, was born in Bethlehem.

Consider next the shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem. No author of that era trying to concoct a story would have selected shepherds as the initial recipients of the news. People viewed shepherds as rough individuals on the fringes of society. They were often dirty and they smelled like sheep. Frequently, people perceived them as thieves.

Nevertheless, these men embodied the role Jesus was destined to play. Many centuries earlier, David, once a shepherd boy, had led his people as their ruler. He foreshadowed