

The Gospel of Luke

Luke 2:1–7 : The Birth of Jesus

¹ *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled.*
² *This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria.* ³ *So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town.* ⁴ *And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David,* ⁵ *to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.* ⁶ *While they were there, the time came for her to have her child,* ⁷ *and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*

The scene shifts again, now from the lonely Judean wilderness and from small villages in the hills of Galilee and Judea to the vast arena of the Roman Empire. The mysterious events recounted in chapter 1, still hidden and local, will have significance for the whole world. Emperor Augustus orders that a census be taken. Joseph and Mary, law-abiding citizens, make the journey to Joseph's ancestral city.

Luke sets the birth in the days of Caesar Augustus who was remembered as the founder of the empire that brought peace to the world. There is an inscription at Halicarnassus that calls him "savior of the whole world". Brown (*The Birth of the Messiah*, p. 415) writes: "It can scarcely be accidental that Luke's description of the birth of Jesus presents an implicit challenge to this imperial propaganda, not by denying the imperial ideals, but by claiming that the real peace of the world was brought about by Jesus"

The census under Quirinius has caused much debate (see notes). In short, historically Jesus' birth was 6-10 years before Quirinius became governor. As mentioned in the introduction, Luke is a historian in the rhetorical sense and not in the sense of a modern historian. Thus it seems that Luke was associating a number of loosely related historical events around the time of Jesus' birth in order to fix its context in the minds of his readers, without intending ironclad accuracy. The precise dating of these remote Judean events cannot have been too important to Greeks of the Empire seventy or eighty years later. But the realization that Palestine was part of the Syrian province at the time of Jesus' birth might bring those events closer to Luke's readers in Antioch, the center of the church's missionary thrust in his time.

There is much discussion about when (or if) a census of "all the world" (*oikoumene*) occurred. There are no other records of such an event during the reign of Augustus, nor of any census that required people to be registered in their ancestral cities. There is a record of a Judean census (which did not include Galilee) in 6-7 A.D. when Quirinius became governor of Syria. This took place ten years after King Herod had died, who was reigning when the birth announcements took place (Luke 1:5). Within Luke's narrative, the census serves to move the holy family from Nazareth to Bethlehem. If it were known that Jesus grew up in Nazareth and that he was born in Bethlehem, there needs to be some connection between the two cities. Matthew's (ch. 2) approach is to have Jesus born in Bethlehem, presumably in the family's house, and then they are forced to flee to Egypt during the massacre of the children. When they return, they settle in Nazareth (to fulfill an unknown scriptural passage). Theologically, we see that the Roman emperor, the mightiest figure in the world is serving God's plan by issuing an edict for

the census of the whole world. Bethlehem will be the place where the savior of the whole world will be born.

Mary gives birth to her “first-born son” (*prototokos*). This does not mean, as the Fathers of the church commented from earliest times, that she had other children later. “First-born son” is a legal designation for the one who has special privileges and position under the Mosaic law (Deut 21:15–17). Christian faith understands Jesus to be the “first-born of many brothers” in a spiritual sense (Rom 8:29). There may another reason why Luke uses *prototokos* for Jesus. That became part of titles given to him: “the firstborn of all creation” (Col 1:15); “the firstborn of the dead” (Col 1:18; Rev 1:5); the firstborn (Rom 8:28; Heb 1:6).

The swaddling clothes and the manger illustrate the poverty and humility of Jesus’ birth, but the wrappings are also a subtle reminder of his royalty. Hidden here is a parallel with the birth of King Solomon: “In swaddling clothes and with constant care I was nurtured. For no king has any different origin or birth” (Wis 7:4–5).

NOTES

2:1 *Caesar Augustus.* His name was Octavian, the great-nephew of Julius Caesar. After the assassination of Julius in 44 BCE., he ruled with Lepidus and Mark Anthony. He became the sole ruler after defeating Lepidus in 36 BCE and Anthony in 31 BCE. He was given the title “Augustus” by the senate in 27 BCE. Before dying in 14 CE, he had designated his stepson, Tiberius, as his successor. It is in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar that Jesus began his ministry (Luke 3:1).

2:2 *when Quirinius was governor...*: Although universal registrations of Roman citizens are attested in 28 B.C., 8 B.C., and A.D. 14 and enrollments in individual provinces of those who are not Roman citizens are also attested, such a universal census of the Roman world under Caesar Augustus is unknown outside the New Testament. Moreover, there are notorious historical problems connected with Luke’s dating the census when Quirinius was governor of Syria, and the various attempts to resolve the difficulties have proved unsuccessful. P. Sulpicius Quirinius became legate of the province of Syria in A.D. 6-7 when Judea was annexed to the province of Syria. At that time, a provincial census of Judea was taken up. If Quirinius had been legate of Syria previously, it would have to have been before 10 B.C. because the various legates of Syria from 10 B.C. to 4 B.C. (the death of Herod) are known, and such a dating for an earlier census under Quirinius would create additional problems for dating the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (Luke 3:1, 23). A previous legateship after 4 B.C. (and before A.D. 6) would not fit with the dating of Jesus’ birth in the days of Herod (Luke 1:5; Matthew 2:1). Luke may simply be combining Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem with his vague recollection of a census under Quirinius (see also Acts 5:37) to underline the significance of this birth for the whole Roman world: through this child born in Bethlehem peace and salvation come to the empire.

2:7 *laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn:* We are told that the baby is laid in a *phatne*. This word only occurs in Luke (2:7, 12, 16; 13:15). Traditionally this has been translated “manger,” and the word does refer to a trough for feeding animals. Interestingly, in English, the word “crib” refers both to a type of container for animal feed and a place for infants. Both are structures with bars on the side. The word *phatne* can also refer to a “stall” for tying up animals. Such a stall may be indoors or outdoors. This seems to be the meaning in Luke 13:15 where an owner will untie an ox or donkey from the *phatne* to lead it to water.

In the birth narrative, *phatne* is in contrast to *katalyma*. Properly a *katalyma* was a place where a traveler “lays down” (*katalyein*) his baggage = a place of rest, lodging. The same word is used in Luke 22:11 (par. Mk 14:14) to refer to the “guest room” where Jesus will eat the Passover with his disciples. The verbal form is used in Luke 8:12 & 19:7 to refer to finding lodging or being a guest (i.e., where one puts down baggage). It is also used in Luke 21:6 with the more literal meaning of “to throw down”. The *phatne* becomes a sign for the shepherds (2:12, 16). It is how they recognize this baby as the one in the angel's declaration.

Luke 2:8–20 : The Shepherds Hear the Good News – The Birth of Jesus

⁸ Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. ⁹ The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. ¹⁰ The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” ¹⁵ When the angels went away from them to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. ¹⁸ All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹ And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. ²⁰ Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.

The humble King's birth is proclaimed first to the lowly. The shepherds were generally poor and to some extent outcasts, considered by the “respectable” to be ignorant, dirty, and lawless. Like the hated tax collectors, these outcasts are ready for the gospel. The appearance of God's messenger lights up the sky (Deut 33:2); there is fear and reassurance as at the annunciation to Mary. It is through these lowly ones that the message of salvation comes to the whole people of Israel. The titles “Messiah” and “Lord” will be the theme of the early preaching (Acts 2:36); though mentioned here in the prologue, these titles cannot be fully understood until the resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit.

In Matthew the Magi are led by a star, then by the scholars in Jerusalem who quote scriptures. In Luke, the holy family travels there in obedience to the government's decree. The shepherds see a dramatic, heavenly vision and are led to the manger. The story, by whatever means, invites all to Bethlehem.

Like infant Jesus, the shepherds have no where to sleep. They are describes as “*living in the fields*” (*agrauleo* 2:8 -- a word that occurs only here in the NT). It is there at night that the angel of the Lord stands before them and the glory of the Lord shines around them. The natural reaction to the appearance of angels is fear. They “they were struck with great fear”. The first words from the angel are “Do not be afraid.” This angel's message to the shepherds is similar to the angel's message to Zechariah. Both proclaim the gospel (*euaggelizomai*, 1:19; 2:10). What is the good news? It is described as “great joy” (*chará*) and “for all the people.”

Joy takes many forms in Luke. there is the shallow joy of those who quickly receive the word, but because it has no root, they fall away when testing comes (8:13). There is the misplaced joy of the 70 over demons submitting to them. They should rejoice that their names are written in heaven (10:17-20). There is joy in heaven when sinners repent (15:7, 10). There is joy and disbelief at seeing the risen Jesus (24:41). Finally, Luke ends the gospel with the disciples worshipping the ascending Jesus and then returning to Jerusalem with “great joy” (24:52). But here in the Lucan nativity narrative, it is a joy of immense proportions because, more than the other gospels, Jesus is presented as the savior for all people.

Notes

2:8 shepherds: The announcement of Jesus’ birth to the shepherds is in keeping with Luke’s theme that the lowly are singled out as the recipients of God’s favors and blessings. While there are positive images of shepherds in scriptures, at the time of Jesus’ birth shepherding was a despised occupation; shepherds were scorned as shiftless, dishonest people who grazed their flocks on others’ lands.” Brown (*The Birth of the Messiah*, 420) writes in a footnote: *TalBab Sanhedrin 25b* mentions that herdsmen were added by the early rabbis to the list of those ineligible to be judges or witnesses since frequently they grazed their flocks on other people’s lands. Thus, they were among the type of dishonest people who were excluded from court. Ironically, people who were not considered fit to be witnesses in court, are the first to witness the Christ child. Luke’s nativity story begins with Caesar Augustus, the most powerful man in the universe and it ends with lowly shepherds.

2:9 glory of God: Luke uses the Greek *doxa* (used to translate the Hebrew *kabod* – the word to describe the appearance of God as a burning bush, a cloud by day or a pillar of fire at night in Exodus. The general word in English to describe this is “theophany.” One also reads of “the glory of God” as the *shekinah* (Hebrew).

2:10 joy: *chará* shares a common linguistic root with the words *cháris* (grace), *chárisma* (gift), *eucharistéō* (to show favor, give thanks), *eucharistía* (gratitude, thanksgiving), *eucháristos* (grateful, thankful)

2:11 For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord: The basic message of the infancy narrative is contained in the angel’s announcement: this child is savior, Messiah, and Lord. Luke is the only synoptic gospel writer to use the title savior for Jesus (Luke 2:11; Acts 5:31; 13:23; see also Luke 1:69; 19:9; Acts 4:12). As savior, Jesus is looked upon by Luke as the one who rescues humanity from sin and delivers humanity from the condition of alienation from God. The title *christos*, “Christ,” is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *masiah*, “Messiah,” “anointed one.” Among certain groups in first-century Palestinian Judaism, the title was applied to an expected royal leader from the line of David who would restore the kingdom to Israel (see Acts 1:6). The political overtones of the title are played down in Luke and instead the Messiah of the Lord (Luke 2:26) or the Lord’s anointed is the one who now brings salvation to all humanity, Jew and Gentile (Luke 2:29-32). Lord is the most frequently used title for Jesus in Luke and Acts. In the New Testament it is also applied to Yahweh, as it is in the Old Testament. When used of Jesus it points to his transcendence and dominion over humanity.

Technically there is no conjunction “and” – in Greek the phrase is *Christos Kyrios* lit. “anointed one Lord. Here, Luke places *Christos* first; perhaps to place an emphasis on anointing as part of the infancy narrative. After the Resurrection, Luke reverses the order placing the emphasis on “Lord.”

2:14 on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests: the peace that results from the Christ event is for those whom God has favored with his grace. This reading is found in the oldest representatives of the Western and Alexandrian text traditions and is the preferred one; the Byzantine text tradition, on the other hand, reads: “on earth peace, good will toward men.” The word *eudokia* (“good will” or “favor”) refers not to a human quality, but its Scriptural use always refers to a disposition of God towards humanity that generates peace. The peace of which Luke's gospel speaks (Luke 2:14; 7:50; 8:48; 10:5-6; 19:38, 42; 24:36) is more than the absence of war of the pax Augusta; it also includes the security and well-being characteristic of peace in the Old Testament.

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