The Nativity of the Lord

Adoration of the Shepherds by Matthias Stom (c. 1650).
Palazzo Madama and Casaforte degli Acaj, Turin, Italy

Each Christmas Eve, regardless of the liturgical year, the "Midnight Mass" gospel is taken from Luke 2 - and in case you were wondering the official title is "The Nativity of the Lord - Mass during the Night."

> *[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. [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."*

The gospel for the "Midnight Mass" ends and leaves us midway in the Nativity story. The good news has been announced to the shepherds, but how about "*the infant lying in the manger"*? That is for the gospel of the "Nativity of the Lord - Mass at Dawn":

> *[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.

In the Lukan gospel describes itself as being thorough: "*after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence*." (Lk 1:3). The gospel narrative begins with a long chapter describing the annunciations of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, the meeting of the respective mothers, Elizabeth and Mary, and the events surrounding the birth and naming of John. Then the birth of Jesus is reported with a minimum of detail: "*While they were there* [Bethlehem], *the time came for her to have her child, 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*." (Lk 2:6-7) One can argue that not much more need be written, but Luke seems to spend as much effort to locate the event in the history of the moment with the references to Caesar and Quirinius. Then again, this reflects his desire to capture things in perspective and in an orderly fashion.

Historian of Salvation. Luke's reference to Caesar Augustus, Quirinius, and the census has caused no end of difficulty for those who have sought to verify the chronology from other ancient sources. The difficulty is evident even in the dates of the principal figures. Augustus reigned in various capacities from 44/42 BCE until his death in 14 CE. Luke 1:5 dates the annunciations "*In the days of Herod, King of Judea*" (40/37 BCE—4 CE). Quirinius, however, became governor or legate of Syria only in 6 CE, at which time he conducted a census of Judea. Other considerations add to the difficulties. There is no record of a registration of "all the world" (or even the Roman Empire) under Augustus, and Josephus (late 1st century Jewish historian) does not record an earlier census of Judea. Such a census for tax purposes would not have occurred during the time that Judea was under the charge of Herod, because the collection of taxes was delegated to him. Moreover, the Roman system of registration did not require one to return to one's place of birth or family origin. Property was registered at its location. Neither would Mary have been required to accompany Joseph.

So it raises the question of what information Luke (who wrote 70 AD or later) had available for his gospel. Historical evidence aside, one must ask why Luke might have recorded the story of Jesus' birth in this way. One suggestion is that he knew of the census, which is also referred to in Acts 5:37, but was confused about its date. While this suggestion is entirely plausible, it does not explain why the census was linked to Jesus' birth. If one assumes Luke was a physician (for which there is little evidence) then we are left to wonder.

But many scholars believe Luke was a rhetorical historian. Their work was to explain past events in the context of a large meta-narrative so as to give meaning to the event in its own time and the implications for the future. Luke's pattern of writing matches the style and work of contemporary rhetorical historians. Thus, the purpose and meaning of Luke's nativity account serves several purposes:

> First, it continues the pattern Luke established in the first chapter of relating the gospel story to significant events and rulers of the time (1:5). Luke returns to this pattern again in 3:1–2.
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> Second, Augustus was widely acclaimed as a bringer of peace. By relating Jesus' birth—and the accompanying angelic announcement of "peace on earth" (2:14)—to Augustus's decree, Luke is able subtly to proclaim that the true bringer of peace was not Caesar Augustus but Jesus the Savior.
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> Third, the census enrollment casts the family as complying with Roman law (cf. 20:20–26; 23:2, 47).

> Fourth, the census, with the assumed requirement that Joseph had to return to Bethlehem for it, allows Luke to explain how it was that Jesus was born in Bethlehem but grew up in Nazareth. Matthew resolves this difficulty by means of the dream warnings that Joseph should take the family from Bethlehem and flee to Egypt, and later that he should return not to Bethlehem but to Nazareth after the death of Herod the Great.

The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem in Luke (and in Matthew) and the lineage of Joseph establish his claim to the title "son of David." References to David are prominent in the birth account in Luke (1:27, 32, 69; and the title "Son of David" occurs three times in Luke: 18:38, 39; 20:41).

The context of Jesus' birth, therefore, has thematic and theological significance. Jesus, the son of David, the bringer of peace, was born in Bethlehem, the city of David. The Savior of all people was born under the reign of Caesar Augustus, whose peace paled before that announced by the angels. The Messiah born under Roman oppression, which was so evident in the forced registration, would overthrow the powerful and raise up the oppressed. In yet another respect, therefore, the context of Jesus' birth—like the annunciations—serves as commentary on his future role. It is a sign to things to come in the plan of God.

The Nativity. As has been noted, Luke describes the birth itself with surprising brevity. All we are told is that while they were in Bethlehem, Mary "*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.*" (2:7). The narrator gives no other details. We are not told where they were or what time of the year it was. The innkeeper is never mentioned, and there is no reference to a cave, the traditional site of Jesus' birth. The spare description leaves the manger as the focal point. This detail may emphasize the humble origins of Jesus, but interpreters have also read it as foreshadowing the failure of humanity to receive the Lord. In this regard, it has been connected with Isaiah 1:3: "*An ox knows its owner, and an ass, its master's manger; But Israel does not know, my people has not understood.*"

Angles on High. The next scene describes the angelic announcement to the shepherds and their visit to the Christ child. Luke and Matthew tell different stories at this point also. Whereas in Matthew the magi follow a star to Bethlehem sometime after the birth of the child, in Luke it is the humble shepherds from the local area to whom a sign of the birth is given. The first two verses set the scene for the announcement; v.8 describes the shepherds, and v.9 the appearance of the angel. The announcement and the heavenly chorus follow in vv. 10–14.

Although the reference to shepherds evokes a positive, pastoral image for the modern reader and underscores Jesus' association with the line of David (1 Sam 16:11; 17:15; Ps 78:70), in the first century, shepherds were a mixed lot. If they were family members, the perception was positive. If they were hired hands, they were often scorned as shiftless, dishonest people. In either case there was often the assertion that the shepherd grazed their flocks on others' lands. Against this background, it is possible that Luke gets double duty from the shepherds—first, developing further Jesus' connection with David and Bethlehem, and, second, graphically picturing Jesus as one sent to the lowly and outcast. It is to some of their number, shepherds, that the birth is announced. The story which begins with a reference to Caesar Augustus, ends with the shepherds' visit to the birth scene in Bethlehem.

Luke describes the appearance of the angel in three statements: The angel stood before them; the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were greatly afraid. These descriptions carry us again to the angelophanies of the OT and to the two angelic annunciations in Luke 1. The words that will be spoken will provide a divine interpretation of the events just described. The darkness is showered with brilliance as the people who wait in darkness see a great light (Isa 9:2). The contrast between the humble setting of the birth and the glory of the angelic announcement could hardly be more dramatic.

The angels announce good news. The verb here is the same one that is used for the proclamation of the gospel. The effect of the good news, as is typical in Luke, will be joy for all the people. The familiarity of

these words should not prevent us from overhearing that, first and foremost, the birth of Jesus was a sign of God's abundant grace. Joy and celebration are the only appropriate responses. The birth of Jesus, however, is a sign for all the people—all Israel, all God's people. The occasion for celebration is described in formal language familiar to everyone who has ever heard the Christmas story. The declaration emphasizes the fulfillment of Israel's messianic expectations "today"; the long-awaited child has been born (cf. Isa 9:6). The titles all define Jesus' role: a savior (a deliverer; Judg 3:9, 15), "Christ the Lord," in the city of David. The title "Christ the Lord," however, occurs nowhere else in the NT. Next, a sign is given, just as signs accompanied each of the previous angelic announcements in Luke. The sign this time is no more than the humble surroundings of the birth that were described in the previous verses: a child wrapped in cloth bands and lying in a manger. Before the shepherds can respond to the announcement, however, a great army of angels (cf. Isaiah 6) appears in the heavens. From the heavenly host a song rises in praise to God (as in Rev 5:9–10; 12:10–12).

The song of the angels is a couplet with three parallel members in each line: (1) glory—peace; (2) in the highest (heaven)—on earth; and (3) to God—among people of goodwill. No verbs or articles clutter this joyful song. Praise for peace is again implicitly directed not to Caesar Augustus but to God. Later in Luke, the disciples entering Jerusalem will provide an antiphonal response: "*Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest!*" (19:38)

The response of the shepherds is described in three stages: their conversations with each other (v. 15); finding Mary, Joseph, and the child (v. 16); and their report of the angelic appearance (vv. 17–18). Mary's response (v. 19) and the shepherds' return (v. 20) conclude the scene. Throughout, the emphasis falls on the confirmation of the things that had been spoken to them—the angelic announcement. The center of the entire birth scene (2:1–20), therefore, is the christological affirmation of the angel (vv. 10–12) and the response from the heavenly chorus (v. 14). The child is the Messiah. The words of the prophet Isaiah had been fulfilled in an even more wonderful fashion than he could have imagined. The Lord, the savior of God's people, had been born. The whole creation would celebrate, but at first only the shepherds knew what had happened in Bethlehem.

The departure of the angels leaves the spotlight on the shepherds. They immediately resolve to go to Bethlehem. The key point is the way the purpose of their journey is described: to *"Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."* (v. 15). The angelic announcement was a revelation from the Lord. The reader's interest is implicitly focused on the confirmation of that revelation. The child in the manger was a sign to them that they had found the child of whom that angel had spoken. The manger, therefore, is mentioned in each part of Luke's birth story (vv. 7, 12, 16).

When the shepherds saw the child in the manger, the sign they had been given, they reported to all who were there the things they had been told about the child. Even without a detailed summary, the reader's attention is drawn back to the angelic announcement. A double response follows—from all who heard the shepherds' report (v. 18) and from Mary (v. 19). All were amazed, but Mary kept the words in her heart (cf. 1:66; 2:51; cf. Gen 37:11; Dan 7:28). Another stroke is added to the characterization of Mary with this report from the narrator. Mary is not only the servant of the Lord, but also she quietly considers the meaning of these wonderful events. Luke repeatedly emphasizes the theme of faithful witness to the gospel. The shepherds now join the chorus of witnesses, for they have seen and heard. The result of the whole episode is the response that should arise from all God's people: The shepherds returned to their flocks glorifying and praising God. The focus of the birth scene is underscored one last time, "*as it had been told them*" (v. 20).

Some Final Thoughts

Alan Culpepper offers this reflection [1]:

Each year during the Advent and Christmas seasons, we worry about how we are going to get to Bethlehem this year. Bethlehem is the place where God came to us through the birth of a child. It is a place of mystery and wonder, far removed from the ordinary world in which we live. Angels populate the skies and may appear at any time to shepherds in the fields. Although there is a foreign king and an oppressive tax structure, all is well in that tranquil rural setting. Far from the problems of the world, the mother and father hover over their firstborn child lying in a manger. This child will be the Messiah, the Savior for all the earth.

How will we get to Bethlehem? In Matthew, the magi are directed by great learning, by their ability to interpret the movements of stars and planets in the heavens, and by the learning of the sages in Jerusalem. In Luke, however, Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem as a family going about the business of life. The shepherds go to Bethlehem by dramatic, heavenly revelation. By all these roads travelers can reach Bethlehem. Not all will follow the road of scholarship or historical investigation. Many will come as families surprised to hear God's Word in the midst of life. Others will come as the result of dramatic, moving experiences of the immediacy of the spiritual and the wondrous in the fabric of ordinary existence. By whatever road we take, the story invites us all to Bethlehem.

At Bethlehem, we also witness the scandal of the Christmas story. Neither the familiarity nor the season's festivities should prevent us from realizing the scandal that God came into human history completely helpless, as a newborn, and was laid in a feeding trough. Consider in what splendor God might have come, but instead God slipped unobtrusively into a small province far from the seat of earthly power, born to a young couple, unwed or only recently married. No elaborate preparations were made for the birth. God was born on the road. The crib was a feed trough, and those who came to visit were shepherds, not kings. By entering human history in this way, God identified with the powerless, the oppressed, the poor, and the homeless. Among them, God could do the divine new work. A humility born of need may be the prerequisite for entry into this new kingdom.

The Christmas story tells of the birth of a new king. This child would be given the throne of his father, David. The world was moving according to the orders of Caesar Augustus, but although he was hailed as the great bringer of peace, real peace on earth would be realized only through the sovereignty of the child born in Bethlehem. This is the story of the birth of a new kind of king. The birth reveals a new world order, a world not under Caesar but under the direction of God's design for the redemption of all peoples. In this world, God's Word is heard by the humble. There is a place even for shepherds. There is hope for the oppressed, and those who heard what God is doing were filled with joy. God has not forgotten us or abandoned us to the brokenness we have created. The story of Christmas is both an announcement of hope and a call to humility.

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[1] Culpepper, R. Alan. "The Gospel of Luke." *New Interpreter's Bible, v*ol. 9. Editor: Leander E. Keck. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004) 62-67.