

Birth of Jesus

2:1 Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.

2:2 This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

2:3 And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city.

Just as the announcement of John's birth was followed by a parallel account of the announcement to Jesus' birth, so the birth of John is now followed by the birth of Jesus.

"In those days" refers to the time period spoken of in Luke 1 (Marshall, 98). In those days, Caesar decided to take a census, creating a list, or inventory of the people and where they lived which often preceded the collection of taxes (Marshall, 98).

Although no record outside of the Bible exists that refers to this census per se, there were censuses recorded in neighboring countries. Egypt, for example, took a census every fourteen years and actual documents have survived which show every census from 20-270 A.D. It is likely that Syria (of which Judea was a part) followed the same custom. When Augustus died, he did leave a summary of collected information, including taxes, which would naturally have been derived from a census (Morris, 90). Josephus (the ancient Jewish historian) tells us that about this time "the whole Jewish population" swore an oath to Caesar: this also possibly reflects a census (Morris, 91).

Only Luke mentions this background information, for it seems to be part of his plan to place the story of Christ in its historical secular setting. Luke viewed God as the Lord of world history, so Augustus' decree was not simply a worldly ruler enacting his tax program; it was the method God used in fulfilling His divine purpose and plan (Morris, 90). In other words, God wields an empire to bless His children. As Proverbs 21:1 says: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will." Mention of the historical setting also hints of the cosmic significance of Jesus' birth (Lk. 2:32 - Marshall, 96).

2:4 And 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,

2:5 in order to register, along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child.

Luke says that at that time Joseph and Mary were pledged to be married, but according to Matthew 1:24, Joseph had already taken Mary to be his wife. It seems that since the marriage had not been consummated (Matt. 1:25), Luke still prefers to refer to them as "engaged" (Morris, 92; Marshall, 105; Edersheim, 183).

Edersheim describes the feeling of the journey with beautiful clarity:

Although passing through one of the warmest parts of the country, the season of the year must, even in the most favorable circumstances, have greatly increased the difficulties of the journey. A sense of rest and peace must, almost unconsciously, have crept over the travelers when at last

they reached the rich fields that surrounded the ancient “House of Bread,” and passing through the valley, which like an amphitheater, sweeps up to the twin heights along which Bethlehem stretches, ascended through the terraced vineyards and gardens. Winter though it was, the green and silvery foliage of the olive might, even at that season, mingle with the pale pink of the almond – nature’s early waker - and with the darker coloring of the opening peach buds (Edersheim, *The Life & Times of Jesus the Messiah*; vol. II, 184).

Because people had to return to their home cities to register, Mary and Joseph found themselves traveling a three-day journey from Galilee to Bethlehem, the “House of Bread”. It was no doubt called this because of the fruitfulness of the fields that surrounded it (Broadus, *Matthew*, 15). Bethlehem was in the general locality of where Jacob buried Rachel and where Ruth gleaned the rich wheat fields (Broadus, *Matthew*, 15). But most importantly, Bethlehem is the place where King David was born and raised, and where he was anointed as king.

Although we may not know why people were required to register in their hometowns instead of their place of residence, what is important is that Bethlehem had prophetic significance in the OT regarding the birth of Messiah, and as a city tied to David and the Davidic line. Matthew 2:5-6 clearly states that the Jews believed that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem based on the prophecy in Micah 5:2: “Bethlehem . . . 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.” Parallels between Jesus and David would be hard to overlook. In Luke 1:27, Luke already mentioned that Mary was engaged to Joseph who was “of the descendants of David.” The angel then told Mary that her son would rule on the throne of *His father David* and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end (Lk. 1:32-33). In Luke 1:68-69, Zacharias praised God saying, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us *in the house of David* His servant.” Now in 2:4, Luke refers to Bethlehem as the “*city of David*” and mentions a second time that Joseph “was of *the house and family of David*.” Later, shepherds will hear an angelic proclamation, “today in *the city of David* there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Lk.2:11).

“The old kingdom of David had been dismembered, conquered, and devastated. The people had been led away into a captivity from which few, comparatively speaking, ever returned. All that the house of David had preserved were its bare family records” (Pulpit Commentary). And yet God had not forgotten His people. God had promised “a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse [King David’s father], and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. . . . with righteousness He will judge the poor, And decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; and He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked” (Isaiah 11:1-2, 4).

How fitting for He who is the great heir of the throne of David to be born where David was born, and for the Bread of Life who comes down out of heaven (Jn. 6:33ff.) to appear in a city that means “the House of Bread.”

2:6 And it came about that while they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth.

2:7 And she gave birth to her first-born son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Joseph and Mary were poor and this is reflected in the circumstances surrounding the Savior's birth. The Lord used a manger (an animal's feeding trough) for a crib, rather than a bed in a palatial home as one might expect of a King. He was wrapped in swaddling cloths which were long strips of cloth used to wrap a child and keep their limbs straight (Marshall, 106). The fact that Mary wrapped the child shows that it was a lonely birth with no one else present to help.

Traditionally, it is assumed that Jesus was born in a stable because He was placed in a manger, but this is not certain. His birth may also have taken place in a poor home where animals shared the same roof as the family (though the presence of animals is not even specifically mentioned). Tradition (2nd century A.D.) says that He was born in a cave which also could have been true (Morris, 92). It is even possible that a cave was owned by the shepherds, which accounts for them knowing where the child was (Lk. 2:15-16) (Marshall, 107).

The reason Mary and Joseph had to find other accommodations was because there was no room for them in the inn. Joseph may have arrived late; the census may have made lodging difficult for travelers who went to places not usually accustomed to receiving so many people at once; or the innkeeper may have not wanted them to stay.

Some have pointed out that the word translated as "inn" may also refer to "a room in a house" or "a guest room" as it does in Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11. It may have been intended for Joseph, but was filled by the time he had arrived (Morris, 92; Marshall, 107).

Witness of the shepherds

2:8 And in the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields, and keeping watch over their flock by night.

Shepherds lived nearby, that is, on the outskirts of Bethlehem since flocks were kept outside in the open from April to November, or longer if weather permitted. Because Bethlehem is sheltered it could have very well been possible that the climate was milder than some other places (Marshall, 108). Constant care had to be implemented to protect the sheep from predators or thieves. The flocks could well have been those used for temple sacrifices. A rabbinic rule stated that sheep were to be kept in the wilderness, and any animal found between Jerusalem and a spot near Bethlehem was assumed to be used for sacrificial purposes (Morris, 93; Edersheim, II, 186). The deep symbolic significance is instantly apparent; the first to visit Jesus, the Lamb of God, are those who tend the sheep destined for sacrifice.

A number of scholars have pointed out that as a class of people, shepherds had a bad reputation. The nature of their work kept them from observing the ceremonial law which was so important to the Jews. They were thought to be thieves and their testimony was not considered reliable in a court of law

(Morris, 93). However, this cannot be absolute since both the Father and the Son chose “shepherd” to describe their relationship to us (Psa. 23:1; Jn. 10:11). Likewise, King David was seen in a positive light as a shepherd (Psa. 78:70-72).

2:9 And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened.

2:10 And the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people;

2:11 for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

2:12 "And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger."

As Edersheim puts it, “heaven and earth seemed to mingle, as suddenly an angel stood before their dazzled eyes, while the outstreaming glory of the Lord seemed to enwrap them, as in a mantle of light. Surprise, awe, fear would be hushed into calm and expectancy, as from the angel they heard, that what they saw boded not judgment, but ushered into waiting Israel the great joy of those good tidings which he brought: that of the long-promised Savior, Messiah.” (Edersheim, II, 187-188; Lk 2:9-11)

The angel was surrounded with the glory of God which indicated God’s presence (Acts 7:55; Tit. 2:13; Rev. 15:8; 21:23). The “good news” the angel brought was characteristically a word used to describe the gospel, but was also used in the OT for the deliverance of God’s people (Isa. 40:9; 52:7; Morris, 94). There was no reason to fear, but to celebrate because God was going to inaugurate His kingdom, for the King, Christ the Lord, had at long last come to His people.

The angel gives the shepherds a sign of the truth of the message that they may follow: “You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger” (Lk. 2:12). The purpose of the sign was not as much to identify the child as to authenticate the proclamation. That night one or two other babies might have been wrapped in swaddling cloths, but only one was lying in a manger (Morris, 94).

Once more, note the historical emphasis. “For unto you is born *this day* . . .” (verse 11). Christ’s birth happened on a day in history, a day when “Caesar Augustus was the emperor of Rome and Quirinius was governor of Syria.” In Galatians 4:4 it says, “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law”. Christ was born in the perfect timetable of God. Secondly, Christ was born in a real city - Bethlehem, a city about six miles from Jerusalem that still exists today. This was not a mythological, imaginary story, but an event firmly placed in time and space.

2:13 And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

2:14 "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

The angel is joined by a great number of the heavenly host (army) who proclaim that the birth of the Savior has two great outcomes: (1) God is glorified and (2) peace on earth to men comes to pass (Lk. 2:14).

God is glorified because Christ is born. Earlier in verse 9, the glory of God was mentioned. There it spoke of the bright appearance of the glorious light which surrounds God's presence. Here it speaks of the visible majesty of God reflected in His character and seen in His actions. God has acted on behalf of His people; "in the city of David there has been born *for you* a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Men and angels glorify God by recognizing the character He possesses and worshipping Him for it (Marshall, 112).

Paradoxically, this heavenly *army* ("host" –NASB) proclaims a message of *peace* (Morris, 94). If the glory of God in heaven is revealed in the coming of His Son, the effect for men on earth is summed up in "peace." Here, peace means much more than the cessation of strife; it is the full sum of all the blessings associated with Messiah (Isa. 9:5 ff; Mic. 5:4 - Marshall, 112), and such is the blessing upon men whom God's favor rests. The emphasis is on God, not men. Men are blessed because God chooses them; they do not choose Him.

"The hymn had ceased; the light faded out of the sky; and the shepherds were alone. But the angelic message remained with them; and the sign, which was to guide them to the infant Christ, lighted their rapid way up the terraced height, to where, at the entering of Bethlehem. . . they were directed to the strangers from the house of David" (Edersheim, II, 189).

Three reactions ensue; that of those who hear, Mary, and the shepherds. The people in general were amazed. Mary treasured these things in her heart and the shepherds praised God.

2:15 And it came about when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us."

2:16 And they came in haste and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger.

The first visitors of the messianic king are shepherds who represent the lowly and possibly even the despised in the land. Christ is accepted by the humble, but is rejected by the world.

2:17 And when they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child.

2:18 And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds.

2:19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

2:20 And the shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

Joy permeates chapters 1 and 2. The angel told Zacharias, "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at John's birth" (Lk. 1:14). John rejoiced in Jesus even while in his mother's womb. Luke 1:44 says, "Mary, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy." Mary sang, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Lk. 1:46–47). When Jesus was born the angelic announcement came: "Behold, I bring you good news of great joy" (Lk. 2:10). The conception and birth of Christ was surrounded with supernatural and unspeakable joy.

NOTE:

The question often comes up as to why Mary, whose motherhood was so supernatural, and who had received special angelic revelation, could be so ignorant of the life and ministry of her son. We wouldn't expect Mary to *ponder* the words of the shepherds (Lk. 2:19), *wonder* why Jesus lingered in the temple among the teachers of Israel (Lk. 2:51), or be gently *rebuked* by Jesus at the wedding in Cana for presuming on His course of action (Jn. 2:4). Shouldn't we have expected that from the point of the virgin conception she would have understood that Jesus was the Son of God?

One suggestion is that if Jesus' parents had known that He was fully Divine, Christ could not, in any true sense, have been subject to them. "Such knowledge would have broken the bond of His humanity to ours, by severing that which bound Him as a child to His mother. We could not have become His brethren, had He not been truly the virgin's Son. The mystery of the incarnation would have been needless and fruitless, had His humanity not been subject to all its right and ordinary conditions. And, applying the same principle more widely, we can thus, in some measure, understand why the mystery of His Divinity had to be kept while He was on earth. Had it been otherwise, the thought of His Divinity would have proved so all-absorbing, as to render impossible that of His humanity, with all its lessons. The Son of God Most High, Whom they worshipped, could never have been the loving man, with whom they could hold such close converse. The bond which bound the Master to His disciples - the Son of Man to humanity - would have been dissolved; His teaching as a man, the Incarnation, and the tabernacling among men, in place of the former Old Testament Revelation from heaven, would have become wholly impossible. In short, one, and that the distinctive New Testament, element in our salvation would have been taken away."

"Thus it was that every event connected with the Messianic manifestation of Jesus would come to the Virgin-Mother as a fresh discovery and a new surprise. Each event, as it took place, stood isolated in her mind, not as part of a whole which she would anticipate, nor as only one link in a chain, but as something quite by itself. She knew the beginning, and she knew the end; but she knew not the path which led from the one to the other; and each step in it was a new revelation. Hence it was, that she so carefully treasured in her heart every new fact, piecing each to the other, till she could read from it the great mystery that He, Whom Incarnate she had borne, was, indeed, the Son of the living God. And as it was natural, so it was well that it should be so. For, thus only could she truly, because self-consciously, as a Jewish woman and mother, fulfill all the requirements of the Law, alike as regarded herself and her Child" (*The Life & Times of Jesus the Messiah*; vol. I; 191,192).

NOTE: The two natures of Christ (His humanity and divinity) are subliminally taught in chapters 1 and 2.

The word "Lord" is used 26 times in chapters 1 and 2 Luke 1-2. All of them refer to God. When Mary visits Elizabeth she exclaims "why this is granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43). In the same breath she also says, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Luke 1:45). She uses the word "Lord" for the God who spoke through Gabriel and for the child in Mary's womb.

Similarly, in Luke 2:26, Luke says that it had been revealed to Simeon “that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.” Then in Luke 2:11, the angels say, “Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who *is* Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). Jesus is both the Lord’s Christ and Christ the Lord,