

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS AND THE FIRST FAMILY – PART II

THE BIRTH OF JESUS AND ANNUNCIATION TO THE SHEPHERDS IN LUKE

I. In contrast to the birth of John the Baptist, the Nativity of Jesus was in humble circumstances that would surprise the world. God speaks some messages in language the world understands (e.g., miracles, the overthrow of tyrants), but the most important events generally occur in subtle, mysterious ways.

A. Jesus was probably born in 5 or 6 B.C. This time comes from the Gospel according to Matthew, and in particular the reference to Herod being king, but dying within 2 years of Jesus' birth. Herod reigned as king of Judea and the surrounding from 37 to 4 B.C. Thus Jesus would have been born towards the end of that time.

- Our current calendar reflects a slight miscalculation by pseudo- Dionysus.

B. The background is the census that Augustus Caesar (or Octavian) had taken for the whole Roman, empire.

1. The universal census that the Gospel refers may have been a shorthand for a series of orders that the Emperor Augustine (27 B.C. - 14 A.D.) to the kings and governors under him, to get a count of their nations. See Zondervan Handbook to the Bible (1999) 600; Warren Carrol, The Founding of Christendom (1999) 302-303.

2. Augustus did have two censuses of Roman citizens in 8 B.C. and 14 A.D. However, Joseph was presumably not a Roman citizen. It is possible that the governor of Judea took the occasion to enroll all of the people, as well as Roman citizens.

3. Luke describes the census to the time when Quirius was governor of Syria. Quirius became governor a little later, about 6 A.D., although he may also have been the governor before 8 B.C. Luke feels no need to distinguish between his time as governor and earlier times in lesser offices. For it appears that he was a dominant influence in the area throughout the entire period, and thus may have been referred to as governor even when he was not strictly speaking holding that office.

4. In any case, by referring to the census under Augustus and the governorship of Quirius, Luke is drawing a dramatic

contrast between the powers of the world, and the power of God, who became man in the small town of Bethlehem.

- At the time of Augustus, he was hailed as "a Savior who made war to cease" and considered the worldly messiah. See Fr. Robert Kairs, "The Gospel According to Luke," ch. 43 in The New Jerome Biblical Commentary para. 29:1. However, by the time Luke was writing his Gospel, the imperial cult had become badly damaged due to the infighting and civil wars of corrupt emperors such as Nero and Caligula and assassinations of Emperors. Luke is pointing to the true path to peace.

- Censuses were also usually, although not always, taken to increase one's power over the people, as with the Domesday Book, the record of a census taken by William the Conqueror in the eleventh century. See The Founding of Christendom 302. King David had taken a census of the people, probably for this reason, and later realized that it was a sin. See 2 Sam. 24; 1 Chron. 21. Here again there is the dramatic contrast between the powers of the world and the power Jesus will have to welcome people to himself.

B. Bethlehem was a minor town of about 500 people about 6 miles south of Jerusalem. But it was also David's hometown, and thus the family town of St. Joseph.

1. The prophet Micah had spoken of a king coming from Bethlehem to establish the great kingdom of God. Micah 5:1 ff. Its name means "house of bread," which would be fitted for one who would bring to us the bread of life.

2. Although Bethlehem is about 70 south of Nazareth, the journey would have been about a hundred miles because the land in between Galilee and Judea was Samaria, and thus hostile to Jews. The way they travelled from Galilee to Judea was to cross the Jordan travel south east of the Jordan, and then recross in the area near Jericho. The journey, which was similar to the one that families would make to Jerusalem, would take several days.

3. When they arrive in Bethlehem, Joseph cannot find proper housing, and indication that even the best of people (and perhaps especially the best) suffer disappointments and seeming failures.

- There would probably have been only one inn at Bethlehem. That sort of building typically had two floors and housing of differing sizes and comfort. The animals were typically kept either in a cave next to the inn, or in a manger in its courtyard.

- This difficulty in finding housing reflects the fact that his own people were turning him down, very possibly because he took the pregnant Mary as his wife.

C. By being born in a manger, Jesus was taking on what the world would consider the least likely circumstances for rising to be the Savior. But He thus fulfills the example of David, who also seemed to be overlooked until Samuel anointed him. See 1 Samuel 16.

- The common images of a donkey and a cow in the stable are both from early Christian art and from the beginning of the prophesy of Isaiah, who said that the donkey and ox recognize their owner, but the people do not recognize their Lord. See Isaiah 1:3.

- Also, the donkey can represent an image of peace, in contrast to the war horse. See, e.g., Zech. 9:9-10. The faithful leaders of Israel tended to ride donkeys as a sign of humility and peace, in contrast to the war horses of the pagans. See, e.g., Gen. 49:11; Judges 5:10, 10:4.
- The ox stands in dramatic contrast to the golden calf the people of God worshipped of old. See Bishop Fulton Sheen, The Life of Christ (1958) 27-28

D. The text describes Jesus as Mary's "firstborn." But that is a title given to the first son of a family, regardless of whether there are more children. " " does not imply that there need be additional children. See Ex 13:2, 12-16; Num. 18:15-17.

1. One irony is that an animal (a sheep or two turtle doves) are sacrificed to "redeem" the firstborn son and consecrate him to God. Here, the firstborn will later be sacrificed for His people to raise us from an animal state, subject to sin and death, to the level of the sons. See Ex. 13:2-16.

2. The passage also implies the connection between heaven and earth. For Jesus is the firstborn of Mary, and also the

firstborn of God. See Col. 1:15, 18; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 1:5.

- E. Luke emphasizes the idea of a manger in chapter 2, verses 7, 12 and 16, showing both Jesus as humble and also as the one who will provide food for the world. Later on, He will be in an inn, this time on the night before His death. See Luke 21:1; Karris, *The Gospel according to Luke* ch. in The New Jerome Biblical Commentary 21:8.

- F. The swaddling clothes both reflects Mary and Joseph's humble care for Jesus, and the fact that He took humanity's full image. See Wis. 7:4 (Solomon describing the fact that he is as human as anyone by referring to the swaddling clothes he wore as an infant.)

II. The Shepherds and the Angels

A. It is fitting that the first witnesses to the new king would be shepherds in a field. For David was a shepherd and was herding flock when the prophet Nathan came to Jesse's house in Bethlehem to find God's new king. See 1 Sam. 16:1-13.

- Like Bethlehem itself, the image of shepherds receives great honor from Scripture, but was largely ignored until Jesus' day. See Micah 5:1-3; Ps. 23, 80; Is. 40:11. The prophets sometimes contrasted the shepherd God would send with false shepherds, i.e., negligent leaders of His people. See Ezekiel 34:5-23; Zech. 11:15-17.

- Shepherds were not considered part of regular society because they were semi-nomadic, and could not fully keep the Sabbath rest, nor the other rituals. But God chooses those who are least in the world as the best witnesses.

- In that area of the world, it is common to graze sheep at night to avoid the hot sun. In any case, at least some of the shepherds would have had to stay awake to prevent the sheep from wandering or being eaten or stolen.

B. The angel and the glory of God appear to the shepherds, who go from fear to thrill.

1. The shepherds understandably show great fear, for they are being brought into a realm vastly above their nature. See Judges 6:22; Isaiah 6:1 ff

2. The angel again comforts them and tells them rejoice. Luke again bringing in the theme of joy.
3. The angel tells them that the Messianic promises are at last being fulfilled. To an ancient Jew this news would have been the most exciting news possible.
 - a. The angel makes it clear that the Chosen People's history is being fulfilled, but that that fulfillment would be for all nations. The good news (evangelion, also translated as gospel) will be proclaimed to all lands, as the prophets had foretold. See Is. 60:10-14, 66:18-25; Dan. 7:14; Micah 5:3-4; Ps. 87
 - b. The angel says that the Messiah and Lord has been born.
 - c. The Messiah meant the anointed one (Christos in Greek). In ancient Israel, kings, priests, and sometimes at least, prophets were anointed. The expected anointed one would fulfill these roles and bring about the new kingdom of righteousness. See q Sam. 2:10; Ps.2:2, 20:6, 28:8, 84:9 (kings); Ex. 40:15; Lev. 4:3-6, 6:15, 8:2 (priests); 1 Kings 19:16; Is. 61:1-3.
 - d. Luke uses the term "Lord" over 100 times each in his gospel and Acts of the Apostles, referring to Jesus Himself or God in general, either directly, or in parable. The word, "Lord" could refer to a merely human lord. But, when Luke uses the term in an absolute sense, He is referring to God Himself. See, e.g., Luke 1:6, 9, 11, 13, 2:9, 15. There may be a deliberate contrast with earthly lords. Compare with Luke 22:25.
 - e. The angel also emphasizes that the birth is today. In Luke, there is a frequent reference to the kingdom of God breaking in here and now. See, e.g., Luke 4:21, 5:26, 12:28, 13:32-33, 19:5-9, 23:43; see also Luke 17:20-21 (the kingdom of God is among you.)

4. Then the multitude of angels appears, giving praise to God and a promise to earth.

a. The multitude of angels visible on earth went far beyond the visions of the Old Testament, which on rare occasions portrayed a multitude of angels in heaven. See 1 Kings 22:19; Ps 29:1; Job 1. But to have a host of angels visible on earth was a greater gift than even the great figures of old had received, except possibly Jacob. See Gen 28:10ff. In 2 Maccabees there are a visions of several angels assisting the people of God in combat, but not vast numbers. See 2 Macc. 3:22ff., 5:2ff, 10:29; 11:8.

b. As one would expect, the angels call for all people, human and angelic, to give glory to God in heaven. But they also add that upon all people of the earth His favor may rest. There is a theme throughout Luke of God showing forth the Gospel to all peoples.

C. The sign of the newborn infant likely reflects the prophesy of Isaiah 7:10ff, but adds the unexpected element of the child being born in a manger.

D. The shepherds would have guided their sheep through the small town of Bethlehem, at night, looking for this manger. There is a bit of humor even in the midst of this drama.

E. Consistent with his theme of God favoring the lowly, the shepherds become the first witnesses to the world. Luke leaves it to the reader's imagination to reflect upon how the people of Bethlehem reacted.