

Gloria

¹ Luke 2:1 In those days a decree (dogma) went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town.

⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David,

⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.

⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

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

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

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.

¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

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

²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

²¹ And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

(Luke 2:1-21)

A Loveable Loser and The Meaning of Christmas

The year was 1965. “[Sparky](#),” Mendelson, and Melendez had just received an unexpected offer from Coca-Cola to buy their Christmas program. However, they only had a rough sketch of where they wanted this one to go, and they only had a few months to get it done.

[Sparky](#) was given his nickname many years earlier from the kids at school based off a comic strip horse named [Spark Plug](#) who was popular in the ‘20s and ‘30s. But Sparky was a [terrible student](#). He failed every subject in the Eighth

Grade, and then flunked Physics, Latin, Algebra, and English in high school. His only claim to fame was making the golf team, but in the only match that mattered, **he lost**.

Sparky was **socially awkward**. Other kids rarely said, “Hello.” He never once went out on a date, being too afraid of being turned down. Sparky was your **classic loser**, and everyone knew it.

During his Senior Year, he decided to go public with **his art**, of which he was very proud. He submitted some drawings to the class yearbook editors, but was rejected. Upon graduation, which was itself a miracle, he applied to draw at Disney Studios, but after sending in some samples, he received a form letter. Rejected again.

So, Sparky decided to **write an autobiography**. He would tell his own story through the characters he had developed in his own cartoons. The little boy loser with the brown-stripped yellow shirt, a pet dog with a wild imagination, a kite that wouldn't fly, and a Christmas tree that looked more like a weed, Charlie Brown, would give the whole world insight into the person of Charles M. Schultz, his creator.¹

¹ This is basically the story as told by **Paul Harvey**, “Charles Schultz (poor student and loser),” *The Rest of the Story*, Paul Harvey Archives (uploaded June 6, 2022), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQkD8C5_R7A&ab_channel=PaulHarveyArchives.

As he, his producer, and animator got to work on the show, Schultz, a deeply religious Christian, told them, “We’re going to have to have Linus read from the Bible.” The special that Coca Cola wanted would become their famous *Charlie Brown Christmas*. His two friends said, “I don’t know if you can animate from the Bible, you know, it’s never been done before.” Sparky’s response? “If we don’t do it, who will?”²

While Christmas programs had been popular since the beginning days of television, giving the story of the birth of Christ had not. Less than 9% of Christmas specials contained the Nativity of Jesus as their central theme, all this in a culture where (in later surveys) 79% of Americans identified as religious, but less than 6% of television characters can be identified as such. Almost sounds like a conspiracy foisted on religious America by Godless secularist media moguls, but I digress.

This made the *Charlie Brown Christmas* special both dangerous and, in the eyes of the network, an almost certain flop. Yet, until just 2020 (of course!), this program had been

² This part and the numbers to follow are told in Stephen J. Lind, “Christmas in the 1960s: A Charlie Brown Christmas, Religion, and the Conventions of the television Genre,” *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 26:1 (Spring 2014), 1-22.

continuously running on Network TV, making it the second longest annually airing program, behind only Rudolph. Today, they no longer play it.

The scene that [stuck with me](#) and millions of others takes place near the end—after the kids ruin the practice of their Christmas play and Charlie ruins them by picking the biggest loser tree in history. Charlie yells out, “[Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?](#)” Suddenly, Linus, the sage of all wisdom, moves to the center of the stage, takes his thumb out of his mouth, and recites:

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this *shall be* a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, 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, good will toward men.

([Luke 2:8-14](#) KJV)

After a long pause and total silence, Linus concludes, “**That’s what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown,**” promptly puts his thumb back in his mouth and walks off stage.

Many of us had those verses memorized because of this show, and this marked one of the only times many people would ever come close to hearing the heart of the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Luke 2:1-21. Context and Structure

In Luke 1, we have been given **a series of pairs** that compare and contrast the events leading up to the birth of Jesus. An angel appears to **Zechariah and then to Mary**, telling them that they will both give birth miraculously. Then, both people, in reverse order, **sing contrasting songs** about the joy they have experienced, and the wonderful things God has done and will do for his people through these babies. Luke also told us about the birth of John the Baptist and now, in **Luke 2:1-21**, his **third pair** will conclude with the birth of Jesus.

Of the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, it is often said that only two give birth stories. These are Matthew and Luke. It is true that Mark does not, though he at

least gives the prophecy from **Malachi 3:1** which Luke alludes to in the song of Zechariah (**Luke 1:76**).³ For his part, I believe that **John's birth story** appears in **one verse: John 1:14**, “**And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us**,” but that he gives a longer birth narrative in **Revelation 12** using astronomical signs with a woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars (**Rev 12:1**) who is **pregnant** and giving birth (**2**) to a male child “**who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron**” (**5**), a reference from **Psalm 2:9** and the coming Messiah.

The date of Jesus' birth has been the source of disagreement since almost the beginning. **Clement of Alexandria** (150-215 AD, in his *Stromata* 1.21) believed it corresponded to our **Jan 6** (hence, the Eastern churches celebrate on this day).⁴ **Julius Africanus** (221 AD in his *Chronicle*) and **Hippolytus of Rome** (d. 236), on the other hand, gave reasons for a **Dec 25th** date.⁵ While I'm not presently aware of anyone in the early church that proposed other times of the year, based on **John 1:14**, **many Puritans and Reformers** believed Jesus

³ More formally, **Malachi 3:1** appears in Matthew and Luke after the nativity stories.

⁴ On the computation see **Darrell Pursiful**, “When Was Jesus Born? Clement of Alexandria,” *Dr. Platypus* (Dec 19, 2006), <https://pursiful.com/2006/12/19/when-was-jesus-born-clement-of-alexandria/>.

⁵ **Darrell Pursiful**, “When Was Jesus Born? Why December 25?” *Dr. Platypus* (Dec 20, 2006), <https://pursiful.com/2006/12/20/when-was-jesus-born-why-december-25/>.

must have been born in September, around the **Feast of Tabernacles**.⁶ Comparing John 1:14's "tabernacled" with what many scholars believe is astral-prophecy being used in Rev 12, that is the precise alignment of the stars (including the sun), moon, and planets at a given time, you come to a very precise date where everything aligns perfectly only one time around the period that Jesus was born.⁷ This is **Sept 11, 3 BC**. This took place on the second day of the Feast of Trumpets that year, a feast that culminates in the Day of the Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles.⁸

Matthew's account of the regal "**star of Bethlehem**" (**Matt 2:2**) also has astronomy. In Matthew, he has **wise men from the east** reading the signs of the heavens and making the

⁶ **Joseph Mede** (1586-1639), **John Lightfoot** (1602-1675), **Nathaniel Lardner** (1684-1768), **John Gill** (1697-1771), **Abraham Rees** (1743-1825), **Matthew Henry** (1662-1714), and according to Turretin (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 2 [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992—1997], 337), also **Joseph Scaliger** (1540-1609), **Sethus Calvisius** (1556-1615), **Mathieu Beroald** (1520-1576), and others.

⁷ **Ernest L. Martin**, "The Time of Jesus' Birth," Ch. 5 of *The Star that Astonished the World* (1991), <http://www.askelm.com/star/star006.htm> (endorsed by F. F. Bruce and others); **Frederick A. "Rick" Larson**, *The Star of Bethlehem*, Mpower Pictures, Stephen Vidano Films (2007), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exmbuX1NffU>; **Richard B. Sorensen**, "The Star Gospel," (2011), https://www.academia.edu/42296729/The_Star_Gospel; **Michael Heiser**, "The Birthday of Jesus Christ (September 11, 3 BC)," *YouTube* (May 13, 2012), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDJa2gKQf94&ab_channel=ManicMiner (Heiser has also written about this in his novel *The Portent*). Others who see constellation significance but not necessarily this date are Peppler, Aune, Leithart, and other commentaries.

⁸ An interesting summary page for Dec. vs. Sept. is **John J. Parsons**, "Christmas Day: Was Jesus Really Born on December 25th?" https://hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Christmas/Printer_Version/printer_version.html; **Douglas Van Dorn**, "Revelation 11:18-12:6—The Woman and the Dragon: A Biblical Theology of Genesis 3:15," *RBCNC* (5-30-2021), <https://uploads.documents.cimpress.io/v1/uploads/03ae07cf-e2c3-49dc-a361-fcf5eb0adc40~110/original?tenant=vbu-digital>.

long trek to Israel to see the baby Jesus. But Luke tells the story of Jesus' birth quite differently. Rather than wise men, he tells us about **local lowly shepherds** who also visited Jesus. This is typical **Lukan subversion**, letting you know that the gospel isn't just for the wise and rich, but the outcast and lowly. Rather than a **star**, he has an **angel** giving them a message (curiously, angels and stars overlap; **Job 37:8; Ps 148:1-2; Rev 1:20**). Instead of the vicious and wicked **king** Herod (Matt 2:1; though, see **Luke 1:5**), he talks about **Caesar** Augustus (**2:1**) and a **governor** named Quirinius (**2**). Luke focuses is on Jesus' humble birth in a stable and manger, never using the word "king" for Jesus. Matthew uses "king" for Jesus, clearly contrasting him with king Herod, but never once mentions a stable or manger.

This **isn't because Luke and Matthew contradict**, but because **they are focusing on different aspects** of the story. Matthew wants us to know that Jesus is the King. Luke wants us to see that Jesus is humble, born not in a palace, but in a manger. Luke is giving us the details of *the day* Jesus was born, but in Matthew, Jesus has already been born when the wise men come, so perhaps they arrive many months later.

The way Luke develops Jesus' birth, we can outline as a series of three movements:

1. Setting (2:1-7)
2. Annunciation to the Shepherds (8-14)
3. Reactions (15-20)

The first two scenes have **completely different characters** (Joseph, Mary, and Jesus; shepherds and angels), who surprisingly meet up together in the third climactic scene.

However, we can also read it **chiastically**, with a double center pointing out a sharp contrast in the annunciation given by the angels. Read this way, we have the *Messiah*, the *Savior*, the *Lord* of the world lying *in a manger*, which, as we will see is no regal palace.

- A. Census, registration, days “completed” (**pimplēmi**) (2:1-6)
- B. Gives birth, lay him in a manger (7)
- C. No room at the inn (7b)
- D. Shepherds in their fields (2:8)
- E. An angel said to them... (9-10)
- F. Unto you: “There has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (11)**
- F’. A sign for you: “You will find a baby... lying in a manger” (12)**
- E’. The angel and heavenly host praise God saying... (13-14)
- D’. Shepherds go to Bethlehem (15)
- C’. Find their way to Mary and Joseph (16)
- B’. Jesus laying in a manger (16b-20)
- A’. Eight days passage (**pimplēmi**), he is circumcised and named Jesus (21)⁹

⁹ I was inspired here by **Mike Rusten**, “The chiasm of Luke 2:1-21,” *How The bible Fits Together* <https://www.howthebiblefitstogether.org/chart/the-chiasm-of-luke-21-21/>, and “Literary Structure (chiasm, chiasmus) of Gospel of Luke: Luke 2:1-21,” *Literary Structures of the Bible*, http://www.bible.literarystructure.info/bible/42_Luke_pericope_e.html#1.

The Birth of Jesus

Like any good story, we begin with **the setting**. We learn where the story takes place and what the circumstances that lead to its unfolding. “**In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered**” (**Luke 2:1**). **Augustus** was a title given by the Senate. It means “**majestic**” or “great” or “venerable.” His birth name was **Gaius Octavius** (64 BC – 14 AD), but he took the name of his adopted father Gaius Julius Caesar (100 – 44 BC), with Caesar (Gk: *Kaisar*) being a family name. This Caesar became the **first Emperor** of the Roman Empire after the fall of the Republic. He is considered one of the great rulers of world history, his reign ushering in the famous *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace), also called *Pax Augusta*.

Augustus had **sent out a decree** to the four corners of the empire that all the citizens should be registered. The word “registered” (*apographō*) is also translated as “**census**” (NAS), “**enrolled**” (YLT), or “**taxed**” (KJV). Of these words, the one that makes the best sense to me of the history is probably “**registered**.” But this is not a registration like a census which is just trying to figure out population and other de-

mographics. Rather, it is more like a county assessment, ascertaining the total wealth of the individual for the true tax to be collected later.¹⁰

Luke continues, “This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria” (2:2). Publius Sulpicius Quirinius (51 BC – 21 AD), served as governor of Roman Syria probably sometimes after 12 BC. We know from Josephus that Quirinius carried out a registration around 6 AD, but we have no direct information of one before. For this reason, skeptics love to assume from silence that no such decree was ever issued by Augustus, thus, Luke is hopelessly wrong about his history (cf. the *Wikipedia* “Census of Quirinius”). Of course, if true, this would totally defeat the whole point of book, since he told Theophilus that he made very careful inquiry into the events he is about to tell.

We do know from Josephus that Augustus demanded an oath of allegiance sometime in 3 BC (Josephus, *Antiquities* XVII.41–45), and would have been an opportune time for the Empire to take another registration to collect more

¹⁰ See this post. J. Caleb Jones, “Solving the Census of Quirinius,” *The Spirited Nature* (Oct 27, 2020), <https://jcalebjones.com/2020/10/27/solving-the-census-of-quirinius/>, including the video on Roman taxation cited in the blog post.

taxes.¹¹ Why wouldn't they? **Nothing in life is certain except death and taxes!** In fact, Luke is not confused at all. He knows full well of this later more famous census (see **Acts 5:37**), which is why he calls this lesser-known registration the “*first*” one.

So, we are in my opinion sometime in **late August or early September** of 3 BC. Luke continues, “**And all went to be registered, each to his own town**” (**Luke 2:3**). **Vs. 4** tells us this was **Bethlehem**. “**And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David**” (**4**).

What does it mean that he went “**up?**” **Don't think of a modern map**, where Bethlehem is below (south of) Nazareth. Rather, **think elevation**. The Sea of **Galilee** [meaning “circuit” or “revolving”] is nearly 700 ft. below sea level. **Nazareth** [Branch] is around 1,138 ft. above, and Bethlehem [House of Bread] makes it up to nearly half a mile, at 2,543 ft.). This is why in the Bible they are always said to go “up” to Jerusalem—**Bethlehem**, only five miles from Jerusalem, is in the mountains.

¹¹ See **Martin**; and **Bryan Windle**, “Caesar Augustus: An Archaeological Biography,” *Bible Archaeology Report* (Dec 13, 2019), <https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2019/12/13/caesar-augustus-an-archaeological-biography/>.

If Joseph must go to his home in Bethlehem, **why is he up in Nazareth?** The most probable answer is that this is **where Mary is from**, and he has just gone up to marry her. Yet, **verse 5** continues, “... **to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.**” We can explain this because until the marriage was consummated, you would still be considered betrothed, even if you had gone through the official ceremony, hence, some manuscripts say she was his wife.¹²

We know from ch. 1 that Mary herself travelled into the hill country of Judah (**1:39**) to stay with Elizabeth, meaning that **she was not from Judah** (including Bethlehem). Rather, as we learn now, **she is from Nazareth**, which, of course, is

¹² **Going Deeper:** We already knew that Joseph was betrothed to Mary (**1:27**). But now, she is with child. The ESV reads that they are still “**betrothed.**” But betrothal in the ancient days was not like our “engagement” period. In fact, you could be “**divorced**” from your betrothed, especially if adultery was in view (*m. Yebam.* 2:8; *Sotah* 5:1; Rome had abolished the OT sentence of the death penalty. Hence, Joseph could seek to divorce her quietly even in the state of betrothal; **Matt 1:19**). A minority of manuscripts [*b c sy*^s] say that she was at this point now “**his wife.**” There is **an old legend** called the “**Golden Legend**” (*Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew; Proto-Evangelium of James*) that says when Mary was 14, through an amazing miracle of budding rods in the temple, Joseph’s budded and so he ended up marrying her sometime *before* the journey to Bethlehem. Whether any of that is true or not, it seems likely that Joseph has now married her, but that because they have not consummated their union sexually, Luke therefore rightly still considered them betrothed (or as the KJV, following still other manuscripts, “his espoused wife”). On the divorce, see **R. T. France**, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007). On the manuscripts, see **John Nolland**, *Luke 1:1–9:20*, vol. 35A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1989), 97.

exactly why Gabriel went there to talk to Mary (26). So, Joseph and her make their way “up” to Bethlehem, where he was from. But she is pregnant. Why would Joseph be so cruel as to have his wife travel with him? It was probably the law; but is it really that harsh? They had horses and they **had invented the wheel** by then!

Of course, the key to **vs. 5** is that Mary is with child. Reading this with verse 4 that Joseph is from “**the house and lineage of David**” is also important, because this teaches us that **the child is necessarily** (even if by adoption), **royalty**. The comparisons do something else too. As Joel Green makes clear, “**On one level, Joseph’s journey is the consequence of the almighty decree of Augustus. On another, even the universal rule of Augustus is conceived as subordinate to another purpose, the aim of God. One may call this ironic, as if Rome is made unwittingly to serve a still greater Sovereign. But it is also prophetic, for it reveals the provisional nature of even Roman rule.**”¹³ Remember, this is the home of his ancestors, especially, *king* David! In fact, the whole point of this aside is to make it very clear that Augustus’ decree was predestined by God **so that prophecy might**

¹³ **Joel B. Green**, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 127.

be fulfilled. **Micah 5:2**, “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel” (cf. **Matt 2:6**).

Vs. 6 is transitional. “And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.” It is here that Luke flips the story on its head, as he will do so many times afterward. If this is royalty, he must be born in some kind of royal palace. Luke continues, “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths ...” So far so good. We are right on track for that regal birth.

Let’s look at something that might make us think that even more: *The firstborn*. Pardon the pun, but **the firstborn** is a reference is pregnant with meaning. *Before looking into this, as an aside, why would Luke tell us that Jesus is Mary’s firstborn if she never had any more children, as the whole perpetual virginity doctrine of Mary proposes?* At any rate, the title has **priestly implications** to some degree, and since Luke is the Gospel of the Ox, that’s important. In Moses, the **firstborn is set aside and belongs to the Lord** (**Ex 13:12**), something that would later be exchanged by the Levites (**Num 3:12**). Probably more immediate to the context, the firstborn usually got all the privileges, including becoming the king if he is in **the royal line**. It came to be used as a title for Christ (**Rom 8:29**;

Col 1:15, 18; Heb 1:6), especially as it regards royalty, “... firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth” (Rev 1:5).

But the word also recalls the stories of Esau and Jacob, Reuben, Ephraim and Manasseh. In each of those instances, the firstborn does *not* receive the blessing! That leads us to the real shocker, though we are so used to it by now that it barely causes us to blink. “... and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (7). An inn? A manger? Uh oh. Kings can’t be born in such squalor surroundings!

Unfortunately, there are many things about the story of Jesus’ birth that have come down to us that simply are not historically accurate (see n. 12). I’m not completely opposed to that, if through the poetry and retelling we are helping people see something important about the story. However, Luke is not describing the nativity the way you think he is, the way you have seen it your whole life in manger scenes.

Two things need to be identified in this verse: The manger and the inn. Dr. Kenneth Bailey, who spend 40 years living in the Middle East teaching New Testament, puts the popular legend that most have in their mind this way. “The Holy Family arrives late in the night. The local inn has its

‘no vacancy’ sign clearly displayed. The tired couple seeks alternatives and finds none. With no other option, wearied from their journey and desperate for any shelter because of the imminent delivery, they spend the night in a stable where the child is born [in an animal manger].”¹⁴ But, he says, “this popular pageantry is flatly denied in the text of Luke,” as well as the culture of that day which still persists in Israel to our own. Here are just a few of the problems.

- **Tradition** says Jesus was born the night the family arrived, and that in a great hurry. But in **Luke 2:4**, we are told that Mary and Joseph “went up” to Bethlehem. Then in **vs. 6** we are told, “**And while they were there, the days were fulfilled for her to be delivered.**” So, *the couple has already been in Bethlehem for a while.*
- *Joseph is from Bethlehem.* In this culture, even if you didn’t know anyone, because they were your relatives, you could show up unannounced and say, “**Hello. I’m Joseph, son of Jacob, son of Matthan, son of Eleazar**” and immediately you would be welcomed. This is **all the truer** if your beloved was pregnant. It would have been unthinkable to make them look around for an inn.
- Luke mentions an inn later in his Gospel (*pandokheion*, see **Luke 10:36**), but the word he chooses here means a “house” or “*guest room*,” as we also see later in his Gospel (*kataluma*, **22:11**). Modern

¹⁴ **Kenneth E. Bailey**, “The Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2:7,” *Bible and Spade* 20, no. 4 (2007): 99. The following come from his article.

translations render the word popular “inn” (KJV, ESV) as “guest-chamber” (YLT), “guest room” (MIT), or “living quarters” (CJB).

- Like today, commercial inns were put on the **busy highways** in major centers of commerce. Bethlehem has neither a major road nor a lot of people. We are aware of no evidence for one near or in Bethlehem after the exile.
- One would never **allow a pregnant relative** to give birth in a stable!
- To this day, mangers for animals are found **inside the houses** in this region, to both keep the animals safe and warm at night. Luke tells us as much later (**Luke 13:15**). As Bailey retells the story, the Middle-Eastern reader naturally thinks, “**Manger—oh—they are in the main family room. Why not the guest room?**” The author instinctively replies, “**Because there was no place for them in the guest room.**” The reader concludes, “**Ah, yes—well, the family room is more appropriate anyway.**” Thus, with the translation “**guest room,**” all of the cultural, historical and linguistic pieces **fall into place.**

It seems as if the **legend may have developed** outside of Judea in the early church, in the Arabic and Syriac Fathers. Bailey says that in reading them he gets the distinct feeling that there is an unspoken pressure to understand the birth as having taken place without witnesses because of the sacred nature of the “**mother of God**” giving birth to the “**Son of**

God.” In other words, the legend is there to protect God. But Luke doesn’t care about any of that, because God doesn’t.

How *very much like God* and not men to have the *King of the universe born in such humble, yet ordinary conditions?* Think about the truth, not the legend. “The city of David was true to its own, and the village community provided for Him. He was born among them, in the natural setting of the birth of any village boy, surrounded by helping hands and encouraging women’s voices. For centuries Palestinian peasants have been born on the raised terraces of the one-room family homes. The birth of Jesus was no different. His incarnation was authentic ... a proper understanding of the story of His birth forces us to not lose sight of the One who “took upon himself the form of a servant and was found in the likeness of man.” And, after all, it is still possible for us to sing,

*Ox and ass before Him bow,
For He is in the manger now,
Christ is born to save,
Christ is born to save.”¹⁵*

¹⁵ Bailey, 105-06.

That Jesus was born in a private home and laid in a manger for animals in a living room of some relative or friend's house is actually quite important to the next part of the story. These unpretentious **beginnings of Jesus are put on full display** when we combine the place and circumstances of his birth with those whom Luke says came to visit him that very night. “**And in the same region there were *shepherds* out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night**” (**Luke 2:8**).

Recall again, Matthew tells us about *magi* (*magos*) from the East, the wise-men perhaps descended from the school of Daniel in Babylon centuries earlier. Their arrival was almost certainly much later than Jesus' birth. **The shepherds are different** on both counts. They arrive the night of the birth from just a hill or two over, but with no knowledge of any such birth. Besides, there are not men of high standing and social clout, but quite the opposite. Again, Bailey puts it poignantly.

Shepherds were near the bottom of the social ladder and indeed, their profession was declared unclean by some of their rabbis. Many places would not welcome them. In many homes they would feel their poverty and be ashamed of their low estate. But no—they faced no humiliation as they visited that

child, for he was laid in a manger. That is, he was born in a simple peasant home with the mangers in the family room. He was one of them. With that assurance they left with haste.¹⁶

That's a great summary of their part in this story, but let's look at it more closely.

First, as we saw in the first chapter, an angel appears and talks and gives the message of the good news. “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” (Luke 2:9). Suddenly, they then see “the glory of the Lord.” This is an important OT idea that is intimately related to God himself.

The Greek word here for “glory” is *doxa*, from which we get words like doxology. A doxology is literally a glorious word or a word of praise (*doxa* = glory, praise; *logos* = word, speaking). The OT equivalent (*kabod*) means “weighty, full of good things.” God's Glory is often associated with physical phenomena such as a cloud or light (as it is here). I like how Joel Green puts it. God's glory is normally associated with the temple. *Now it is manifest on a farm!*¹⁷ What kind of a God does this?

¹⁶ Ibid., 102.

¹⁷ Green, 131.

The God of *Glory*. The Father is called “the Father of glory” (Eph 1:17). The Word of God, the Son comes in the flesh as “the glory of the only Son” (John 1:14). The Spirit is “the Spirit of glory” (1Pe 4:14). Hence, when the glory of the Lord shone around them, this is meant to convey that God is somehow present. Hence, a kind of double-fear (*me-gas phobeō*). As the KJV puts it, they were *sore* (sickly, painfully) *afraid*.

Christians today are much too casual as they seek to call God down to meet with them. The almost greasy familiarity that people act as if they have in their songs and their theology about God does not take into account how vastly otherworldly those dwelling in the other realm are. The angel terrified the shepherds. How much more the God of glory!

It is only when you understand the sheer terror of such an encounter that you can truly appreciate what the angel says. “The angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people’” (Luke 2:10). “Fear not.” Why? Because he comes with good news. In fact, this good news will trade their “great fear” with “great joy”!

In 1:19, Gabriel came to Zechariah with “good news” (*euaggelizō*). Now, again, good news comes. Gabriel focused

mostly upon the birth of John, though he did say that John would “go before [the Lord their God] ... to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (16-17). Zechariah was given a hint of even greater and better news than his own son in these words.

Now, the angel gives this better news, not to a priest of Israel, but to these lowly outcast despised shepherds. What is that news? First, let’s look at *its scope*. It is “for all the people.” This word “people” was used to distinguish the people from the rulers or upper classes, and that fits well with Luke, though of course, it does not exclude rulers or upper classes. Also, the word in the LXX refers to the nations, but with a special emphasis on Israel as God’s “people.”¹⁸ Yes, the Messiah is coming to everyone.

Next, we see *its content*. This takes us to the center of the birth story of Jesus, and therefore, perhaps one of the more important couple of verses in the Bible. “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” (Luke 2:11-12).

¹⁸ Hermann Strathmann and Rudolf Meyer, “λαός,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 4.39-57.

The two verses are **knit together** by the language “**for you**” and “**born**”/”**baby**.” Remember, this news is first coming for *shepherds*, social outcasts, pariahs of society. It is *for* them. It is *their* sign, *their* token from God. The God of the Bible is not coming to the elites, snobs, ultra-wealthy, celebrities, sports-athletes, the rich-and-famous, those who already have everything. He comes to those that embody the opposite. He comes to tell them that the news is *for* them.

This very day someone has been *born*. He is a *baby* (Gk: *brephos*, Lat: *infantem*). He has been born nearby, just over that hill, in the city of David. Of course, **David was himself a shepherd** living near the same place at Bethlehem.

But specifically, he is called “**a savior, who is Christ the Lord.**” *Sōter hos estin christos kurios*. While a savior in the OT could apply, for example, to **Israel’s judges** like Samson or Othniel, it is much more often used of **God himself**. God delivers his own people (**Deut 32:15; Ps 24:5; 25:5**; etc.). The title could be a kind of jab at Augustus who was known as the *savior* of the world.

In fact, there could be a lot of **subversive anti-imperial sentiment** going on here, as an edict from 9 BC tells us that the Roman provincial calendar was changed to honor Augustus, moving new year’s day to his birthday, coincidentally

or not, just two weeks after 9-11, on Sept 23, the eve of the Feast of *Tabernacles* in 3 BC. The reason for this momentous change? Caesar's coming had ushered in "good news" (*evangelion*). For Augustus was "a *savior* who put an end to war and established all things ... exceed[ing] the hopes of all who had anticipated *good tidings*" and "the birthday of the *god* marked for the world the beginning of *good tidings* through his coming."¹⁹

The title "Christ" translates the Heb. "*māšīaḥ*" (*messiah*), a title initially given to David as the Lord's "anointed." The Dead Sea Scrolls show you that they were anticipating his coming, for a messiah from David's line will "arise to save Israel" (4Q174 1.13), exactly what the angel is now proclaiming. "Lord" is perhaps the most important of these three words, because this is the word used throughout the OT to describe Second Yahweh, Christ himself (e.g. **Ps 2:4** [in **2:2** he is called messiah!]; **110:1**; etc.). And, of course, we've already seen that **Mal 3:1** predicts the Lord will come as the messenger of the covenant—God himself.

Two more prophecies of this visitation are amazing as it regards "keeping watch over their flock by night." **Micah**

¹⁹ **Simon Rowland Francis Price**, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 54. The text is from the Priene Calendar Inscription, discovered in Western Turkey and was the edict of Paullus Favius Maximus, proconsul of the Roman province of Asia in 9 BC.

4:8 says, “And you, *dark tower of the flock* (LXX), hill of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, the former dominion shall come, kingship for the daughter of *Jerusalem*.” Towers are for **watching**. **Dark** matches night. And **flocks** go with shepherds. Just a few verses later we read that important prophecy, “**But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah ... from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel**” (5:2). We find very similar language used way back in **Gen 35:21**. “**Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond *the tower of Eder [Flocks]***.” The Jews themselves had seen this as **Messianic**. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan says, “**Jacob journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the Tower of the Flock, *the place from which the King Messiah will reveal himself at the end of days***.”

Now, putting all this with the second half of the center makes it just stunning. For this God has come in the form of a baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in an animal manger?!? First of all, **how can God come as a baby?** Second, **why would God come in such a meager, unimaginable way?** Imagine Elizabeth or Charles or any other king in history being born like that?

As soon as this unimaginable announcement is completed, “**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 2:13-14). This is almost too much to hear in so few verses. First an angel comes in the middle of nowhere to a bunch of shepherds. Then they see the very glory of God. Then it is announced that God in human flesh, the savior of all peoples has arrived, all backed up by prophecy. And now a multitude of the heavenly host starts singing?

Heavenly host is OT language for the angels, the sons of God. One of their main functions is adding their voices to the liturgical choir of heaven. Nehemiah says, “All the host of heaven worships you” (Neh 9:6). At creation, “the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy” (Job 38:7). In Rev 4-5, myriads or myriads and thousands of thousands of angels and living creatures and elders—the host of heaven sing song after song, praising the lamb who was slain.

Sadly, there are fallen hosts of heaven, and these creatures love to receive worship rather than give it (Deut 4:19; 17:3; 2Kgs 17:16; 21:3). For it, God is going to punish the “host of heaven, in heaven” (Isa 24:21). But not here. There are still many that are loyal to Yahweh. And at this singular moment in time, it is as if the veil between our worlds is rent

open on that little hill outside of Bethlehem through the sheer volume of the heavenly choir singing praises to God.

And what do they sing? **Glory to God in the highest.** *Gloria in altissimis Deo.* This is the third song of the four given by Luke in the infancy narrative. Like the previous two, it is known for its first word. We call it the *Gloria*, or the *Greater Doxology* to distinguish it from the *Minor Doxology*—the *Gloria Patri. Gloria in excelsis Deo* has been sung in the church since at least the third century and its Latin version since at least Hilary of Poitiers in the 4th. It seems to have originally been a prayer in the Greek and Syrian churches that was later sung at dawn on Easter.

The content is otherworldly. Ascribing to God glory is the only true response at this moment, for he has just shown himself *in his glory* as the *God of glory* to the shepherds! What would they have thought both seeing and then hearing the glory? This God is in the highest, the highest of heavens, far above his creation, enthroned on high, the King of his creation. Yet, he is **not the God of the deists**, aloof and far away. His peace has come to earth, to where we are, and he is pleased to give it to whomever he wishes.

As the song ends, **the veil is sown back up**, the angels disappear and “**went away from them into heaven**” (**Luke**

2:15). The response of the shepherds to this inconceivable sight is to speak to one another and say, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” How interesting! The Lord has made known to them in the fields that the Lord has been born in Bethlehem! They didn’t seem bothered at all by this Trinitarian observation.

At that moment, “they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger” (16). It doesn’t say they looked hard to find this couple that had just arrived. It reads more like they knew nearly where to go and had no problem finding them.

Then, there he was. The one we will later call Jesus. Eternal God. Firstborn. Creator of all things. Eternally co-equal with the Father. Uncreated Word. Only Begotten Son. Angel of the LORD.

A baby.

In a sheep’s manger, a trough used to hold food for an animal.

Lest you’ve forgotten, or perhaps been so desensitized to the wonder of it all, let me refresh just a taste of that old wonder you had when you first understood this news. There are reasons, good reasons, that this event has probably

sparked more deeply paradoxical and bewilderingly joyous lyrics than any other.

*The shepherds heard the story,
Proclaimed by angels bright,
How Christ, the Lord of Glory,
Was born on earth this night.
To Bethlehem they sped
And in the manger found him,
As angel heralds said.*²⁰

*These are the tokens ye shall mark:
The swaddling-clothes and manger dark:
There ye shall find the Infant laid
By whom the heav'ns and earth were made.*²¹

*Who is this so weak and helpless...
Coldly in a manger laid?
'Tis the Lord of all creation,
Who this wondrous path hath trod;
He is God from everlasting,
And to everlasting God.*²²

²⁰ “Behold a Branch is Growing,” trans. Harriet Reynolds Krauth, Trier, Germany (1500).

²¹ “From Heaven High I Come To You,” Martin Luther, trans. Catherine Winkworth (1535).

²² “Who Is This, So Weak and Helpless,” William W. How (1823-1897), *Supplement to Morrell and How’s Psalms and Hymns* (1867).

*All praise to thee, Eternal Lord,
Clothed in a garb of flesh and blood;
Choosing a manger for thy throne,
While worlds on worlds are thine alone.*²³

*Lo, within a manger lies
He who built the starry skies:
He who, throned in height sublime,
Sits amid the cherubim.*²⁴

Luke tells us next that when they saw this sight, “they made known the saying that had been told to them concerning this child” (Luke 2:16). We can imagine what the scene may have been like.

Knock, knock.

“Oh my. Honey, it’s a group of shepherds.”

“How can we help you, men? Has one of your sheep gone missing?”

As the shepherds, out of breath from their run into town, get their first glimpse through the crack in the door of the lower level of the main room, there they see him, just as they were told. “No. It isn’t a lost lamb. Oh, nevermind. You wouldn’t believe us if we told you,” one says.

²³ “All Praise to Thee, Eternal Lord,” Martin Luther, trans. Anonymous (1524).

²⁴ “See Amid the Winter’s Snow,” Edward Caswall, *Masque of Mary* (1858).

As they are about to turn around and leave, they hear a deep voice from the other room. “Try us,” Joseph blurts out, thinking to himself of what he’s already been through.

“We were out in the fields, just a few minutes ago, when suddenly ...” one shepherd begins. With all the excitement, they start stumbling over one another with their story, until they finally get to the end and the reason why they are there. It’s like Linus said, this is the reason. “We were told that glad tidings have come to this place and that God has sent a savior, the Messiah himself that we’ve long heard about. Even the Lord.”

As they are finishing up their story, Luke records, “And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them” (18). Notice, there is a whole group of people here. They aren’t out in some stable place behind the back by themselves. The commotion of those few minutes must have been something to witness. Did others start to talk about Elizabeth? Had the couple in this house come from Nazareth themselves even said anything about their own story?

As the entry way of the house is overcome with the noise of voices, excited and perplexed, a few feet away, a bit lower in the room with the manger, there sits a young woman. She is exhausted, for she has just given birth. She picks up her

baby and is overwhelmed. Staring into the tiny face, freshly arrived in the world, *she says nothing*. She is alone in her thoughts as the voices fade into the background.

“*But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart*” (19). What an amazing verse this is. The sign for the shepherds becomes another sign for Mary. Jesus born here in this place is for them. Them come here to this place is for her! Later, she will ponder something similar (2:51). The word “*treasured*” is not found often in Scripture. Just this once in Luke. Once in Matthew, where new wine is put into new wineskins and so “*both are preserved*” (Matt 9:17). Once in Mark where Herod *keeps* John the Baptist safe for a time (Mark 6:20). This is a precious moment, and she never forgot it.

She had sung earlier, *perhaps prophesying* something even of this very moment. “*He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate*” (Luke 1:52). *Shepherds*. Here? “*He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy*” (54). What is God doing with and through her in this little boy? Only time will tell.

For their part, having seen that it was just as the angel had told them, *the shepherds returned* (2:20). And as they went, they too *burst into song*, “*glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*” As

almost an aside, the passage ends in a parallel to John. “And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised...” (21). Mary and Joseph also obey the law, and their baby is here given the sign of the covenant. And, finally, his name. “He was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.” Why? He will save his people from their sins. Jesus means savior, just as the shepherds were told.

It is worth summing up that in being welcomed in the home at the birth of God enfleshed, where they were not humiliated, but treated as equals, where they understood that this baby was one of them, more than they probably understood. For there, in that sheep’s manger, they were in fact looking at Jacob and David’s *Shepherd*. Shepherds beholding the Great Shepherd of the sheep, as but just a babe. Of Jesus, Jacob said, “The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been *my shepherd* all my life long to this day” (Gen 48:15). Of the same, David famously says, “The LORD is my Shepherd” (Ps 23:1). Is he yours?

*Good Christian men, rejoice,
With heart, and soul, and voice;
Now ye hear of endless bliss:*

*Jesus Christ was born for this!
He hath op'ed the heavenly door,
And man is blessed evermore.
Christ was born for this!*²⁵

Bibliography

- “All Praise to Thee, Eternal Lord,.” Martin Luther. Trans. Anonymous (1524).
- Bailey, Kenneth E. “The Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2:7.” *Bible and Spade* 20.4 (2007): 99-106.
- “Behold a Branch is Growing.” Trans. Harriet Reynolds Krauth. Trier, Germany (1500).
- “From Heaven High I Come To You.” Martin Luther. Trans. Catherine Winkworth (1535).
- “Good Christian Men Rejoice.” Trans. John Mason Neale (1818-1866). German/Latin (14th cent.).
- Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997.
- Harvey, Paul. “Charles Schultz (poor student and loser).” *The Rest of the Story*. Paul Harvey Archives (uploaded June 6, 2022). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQkD8C5_R7A&ab_channel=PaulHarveyArchives.

²⁵ “Good Christian Men Rejoice,” trans. John Mason Neale (1818-1866), German/Latin (14th cent.).

- Heiser, Michael S. "The Birthday of Jesus Christ (September 11, 3 BC)." *YouTube* (May 13, 2012). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDJa2gKQf94&ab_channel=ManicMiner.
- Jones, J. Caleb. "Solving the Census of Quirinius." *The Spirited Nature* (Oct 27, 2020). <https://jcalebjones.com/2020/10/27/solving-the-census-of-quirinius/>.
- Josephus. *Antiquities of the Jews*.
- Larson, Frederick A. "Rick." *The Star of Bethlehem*. Mpower Pictures, Stephen Vidano Films (2007). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exmbuX1NffU>.
- Lind, Stephen J. "Christmas in the 1960s: A Charlie Brown Christmas, Religion, and the Conventions of the television Genre." *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 26:1 (Spring 2014): 1-22.
- "Literary Structure (chiasm, chiasmus) of Gospel of Luke: Luke 2:1-21." *Literary Structures of the Bible*. http://www.bible.literarystructure.info/bible/42_Luke_pericope_e.html#1.
- Martin, Ernest L. "The Time of Jesus' Birth." Ch. 5 of *The Star that Astonished the World* (1991). <http://www.askelm.com/star/star006.htm>.
- Nolland, John. *Luke 1:1–9:20*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 35a. Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1989.
- Pao, David W. and Schnabel, Eckhard J. "Luke." *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007.
- Parsons, John J. "Christmas Day: Was Jesus Really Born on December 25th?" https://hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Christmas/Printer_Version/printer_version.html.
- Price, Simon Rowland Francis. *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Pursiful, Darrell. "When Was Jesus Born? Clement of Alexandria." *Dr. Platypus* (Dec 19, 2006). <https://pursiful.com/2006/12/19/when-was-jesus-born-clement-of-alexandria/>.

- _____. “When Was Jesus Born? Why December 25?” *Dr. Platypus* (Dec 20, 2006). <https://pursiful.com/2006/12/20/when-was-jesus-born-why-december-25/>.
- Rusten, Mike. “The chiasm of Luke 2:1-21.” *How The bible Fits Together* <https://www.howthebiblefitstogether.org/chart/the-chiasm-of-luke-21-21/>.
- Ryken, Philip Graham. *Luke*. Reformed Expository Commentary 1. Ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009.
- “See Amid the Winter’s Snow.” Edward Caswall. *Masque of Mary* (1858).
- Sorensen, Richard B. “The Star Gospel.” (2011), https://www.academia.edu/42296729/The_Star_Gospel.
- Strathmann, Hermann and Meyer, Rudolf. “Λαός.” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–: 4.39-57.
- Van Dorn, Douglas. “Revelation 11:18-12:6—The Woman and the Dragon: A Biblical Theology of Genesis 3:15.” *RBCNC* (5-30-2021). <https://uploads.documents.cimpress.io/v1/uploads/03ae07cf-e2c3-49dc-a361-fcf5eb0adc40~110/original?tenant=vbu-digital>.
- “Who Is This, So Weak and Helpless.” William W. How (1823-1897). *Supplement to Morrell and How’s Psalms and Hymns* (1867).
- Windle, Bryan. “Caesar Augustus: An Archaeological Biography.” *Bible Archaeology Report* (Dec 13, 2019). <https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2019/12/13/caesar-augustus-an-archaeological-biography/>.