

The Birth Of Jesus Christ (Part Two): Nativity

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Most of us have probably had the—sometimes excruciating—experience of hearing second- or third-hand the plot of a movie or the account of an event or incident.

Obviously, the story is nowhere nearly as detailed and gripping as actually witnessing it would be, and to have it related by someone who heard it from someone else lessens its punch and reality even further. Like the old parlor game in which a sentence or two are whispered from person to person to person, the usually incoherent result is altogether different from the original.

In a way, modern retellings of the events surrounding the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, resemble this process. The accounts found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke provide enough details to weave a picturesque, even glorious, record of earth's most important birth. Yet, after so many centuries of accumulated lore, today's crèches, storybooks, videos, and even some sermons perpetuate myths and assumptions that have little basis in Scripture. Some town square displays even include Santa Claus among the infant Jesus' worshippers!

It is astounding that people feel the need to sensationalize the Gospel narratives, or even to take creative license with them. Matthew and Luke write riveting accounts, complete with a divine impregnation and birth, potential scandal, angels, visions and dreams, magi bearing regal gifts, a murderous king, and a mysterious, guiding star. What need is there for embellishment?

Part One dealt with the angel's—probably Gabriel's—separate visits to Mary and Joseph to announce the human advent of Immanuel, "God with us," into their lives. They were told that this divine Being would be born of Mary, and that Joseph, as her betrothed husband, would take on the responsibilities of the Child's human father. They were instructed to name Him *Jesus*—more correctly, the Hebrew name, *Joshua*—which means "savior." Perhaps most amazing is that both Joseph and Mary accepted this overwhelming responsibility, thrust on them without warning, with humility and without complaint. Jesus would be in good hands.

No Vacancy

The next we hear of the expecting couple, they are traveling:

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:4-7)

Luke's account is once again very straightforward, providing succinct details and moving the story along quickly. The events probably took place around the time of the fall harvest. The evangelist informs us that Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem to be registered for the tax that had been decreed by Caesar Augustus in 8 BC, but which was not levied on the Jews until 4 BC due to a Jewish

revolt. Normally, registrations like this were done after the people were finished harvesting their fields so that they, first, would not be working and, second, would have the money to pay the tax. This latter reason was very important to the Romans.

The best estimate is that Jesus was begotten, as announced in Luke 1:26-38, ironically, during the end of December, and that He was born near the end of September or in early October of the following year. This means His birth occurred around the Feast of Trumpets in 4 BC. Scripture, of course, nowhere states this explicitly, but the internal evidence points to this general time.

That these events took place around the fall holy days, and that the Romans' registration was happening at the same time, indicates why "there was no room for them in the inn." Jews would have begun to travel to Jerusalem for the holy days to be there for the Feast of Trumpets, and would have remained there until the Last Great Day. Bethlehem, being only about six miles outside of Jerusalem, would probably have received much of the capital city's overflow. There were probably no rooms available for miles around.

Joseph and Mary did not have a convenient Holiday Inn or Motel 6 to pull into, so they had to go wherever they could find a place to stay. They probably ended up in a grotto, a cave behind a home or an inn, where the owner housed his or his customers' horses, donkeys, and oxen. As the text relates, Jesus' first crib was a trough for the animals. With a good cleaning and some fresh straw, this stable was probably not a bad place to stay. They were at least out of the elements and had a roof over their heads.

Many people mistakenly believe that the swaddling cloths Luke mentions are rags. It was a custom of the time to wrap a child in strips of cloth, especially the limbs, perhaps to help them to develop straight. Today's equivalent would be a receiving blanket. Swaddling cloths are not an indication of Joseph and Mary's poverty. In all likelihood, they were neither better nor worse off than the average Jew of the day.

Breaking News!

Luke continues his narrative with the announcement to some nearby shepherds of the Messiah's birth:

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night and behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, 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, goodwill toward men!" (Luke 2:8-14)

Verse 15 then relates that, once the angels disappeared, the shepherds said (to use today's vernacular), "Wow! Let's go see this! Heavenly revelations don't happen every day!"

As mentioned earlier, Jesus' birth occurred in September or perhaps early October. This could not have taken place in December because shepherds would not have been out in the fields at night then. In Palestine, the rainy season transpires between the end of October and early April, with the most

inclement weather occurring between December and February. In fact, around Jerusalem, much of the region's 24 inches of annual rain falls during this winter period. Shepherds did not want to keep the sheep in the rain and cold anymore than they wanted to be there themselves.

Most translations tone verse 9 down a bit from its intended sudden majesty. It should read, "And BOOM! an angel of the Lord stood before them." The angel's appearance was instantaneous and shocking! One second they were peacefully minding their sheep, eyelids half-shut, and the next, right in their midst, perhaps hovering just over their heads, stood an angel in all the brilliance of angelic glory!

Luke writes that "they were greatly afraid." What understatement! Today, we might say they were terrified out of their skulls! Occasionally, we hear of a person's supposed abduction by aliens suddenly in the night. Television and movies have visualized this for us—but what if an angel actually did appear abruptly before our eyes, radiating light like a huge spotlight and looking directly at us? Most people would be on their faces in an instant, probably holding their heads, wondering when a thunderbolt was going to strike!

The angel says to them, "Do not be afraid" (verse 10), trying to shush their fears a bit, although it is hard to say what success he had. At least he was able to communicate to them what he needed to say. Evidently, they were calm enough to listen to his announcement, despite their terror.

What he says is quite interesting: "I bring you good tidings of great joy." The Greek word for "I bring good tidings" is *evangelízomai*, literally, "I evangelize you," and his good news is a matter "of great joy." In a way, this is the beginning of the preaching of the gospel, as this is the sense of the Greek term. He is informing the shepherds that God had sent him as an evangelist to let them know that the way of salvation was beginning to open to *all* people. This was great news indeed for the common folk, as these shepherds were, who have rarely been considered among the worthies of society.

That God sent the first announcement of His Son's birth to shepherds among their sheep has an appealing, symbolic connotation. Recall that these shepherds were in the field watching over sheep at night when the angel, a messenger from God, illuminated them with the good news of salvation. Shepherds are biblical symbols of spiritual leaders or ministers, and sheep are well known to represent God's elect. Jesus' parables often employ the image of a field to signify the world, and the darkness of night stands for the condition of being cut off from God. This scene is a beautiful foreshadowing of the pattern God uses to evangelize through the gospel message.

Another intriguing fact, hidden in the English translation, appears in the last phrase of verse 10: "to all people." In the Greek text, a definite article appears before "people," so it should read, "all *the* people." When the Bible reads "the people," it usually refers to the people of Israel. The birth of the Savior was to be great joy for all people, of course, but especially for Israel. If we understand this spiritually, His coming has its greatest effect on the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16), the church. Certainly, the church, to which God has revealed His way most fully, has both the fullest appreciation as well as the deepest understanding of Christ's coming in the flesh.

The Heavenly Host

Gabriel then tells the shepherds, "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11), which is similar to what he told both Mary and Joseph. He relates all the essential information to tie Jesus' birth to the prophecies of the Old Testament.

The title "Christ the Lord" would probably have been said as "Messiah Adonai" in the Aramaic that these shepherds spoke. This is a not-so-subtle intimation that this newborn child was not only the promised Messiah, but also the One known as "the Lord" in the Old Testament. The angel is not merely announcing the birth of a special baby in Bethlehem but that God had been born as a human being (Matthew 1:23; John 1:14)!

In verses 13-14, Luke writes: "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, goodwill toward men!'" Here appears another BOOM! in the evangelist's narrative. Suddenly, there was not just one angel in the glory of the Lord, but a whole host of them all around the quivering shepherds. Not only were they visible, they were singing as only angels can, praising God. Their presence heightens the importance of the announcement.

The angels are obviously overjoyed that this greatly anticipated event in God's plan had finally taken place. Another huge step in God's purpose had been accomplished. Note, too, that this was not just a small, heavenly choir but the heavenly host that appeared in full force. God's vast army came to add their voices to the announcement that their great Captain had just been born!

The hymn they sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" requires some explanation. *Glory* is the Greek word *dóxa*, which means "praise, recognition, honor, worship"—the height of reverence and adulation that we could give or say to God. "In the highest" is a somewhat controversial phrase in that, as a superlative, it could modify either "glory" or "God." Thus, it could refer to the highest glory or the highest God (or even God in the highest heaven). There is a possibility that in the Aramaic, the words the angels sang may have been "Glory to the Most High God," since that is a common title of God in the Old Testament.

They also sing of peace on earth. One of Christ's titles is "The Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6), and He who had just been born would eventually bring peace on earth. He would do it first through His sacrifice, making peace between God and sinful man (Romans 5:1), and later He would return in glory, bringing peace to the earth with the sword (Revelation 19:11-21). He will have to impose peace at His second coming, but once He does, the earth will have real peace. Only through the birth of God's Son in Bethlehem could the process of bringing true peace to the earth begin.

The final words in the angels' song are "goodwill toward men," a long-disputed phrase. However, most modern experts in Greek agree that the whole clause should be translated, "Peace on earth among men of His good pleasure." This implies that God was bringing peace and joy especially and specifically to those to whom He had granted favor or extended grace.

During the Passover sermon Jesus gave His disciples, He says, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you" (John 14:27). His disciples, numbering a mere 120 (Acts 1:15), were the only ones who could really experience peace because they comprised the extent of those with whom God had found favor. Yet, within days, thousands more had been converted, and God's peace began to expand. Real peace, a fruit of God's Spirit (Galatians 5:22), can only be produced in those in whom God's Spirit dwells (Romans 8:14). Right now, members of God's church are the only people on earth who can really have godly peace on earth because "unto us a Child is born. Unto us a Son is given" (Isaiah 9:6).

We are the "men of His good pleasure." Jesus tells His disciples in Luke 12:32: "Do not fear little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." We are the ones who have this

favor from God. The angels' song is a declaration to us that God is with us, just as He was with Mary when He overshadowed her (Luke 1:35). As spiritual Israel and spiritual Zion, we are the apple of His eye (Deuteronomy 32:9-10; Zechariah 2:7-8), and He will do all He can to bring us to salvation and into His Kingdom.

These passages mean so much more than what we usually see in a Christmas pageant, a nativity scene out on the town common, or hear in a catchy jingle. What we see in these announcements are elements of the way God works, and they should strengthen our faith in Him and what He is doing. They should solidify our hope in the resurrection because, not only did the Father bring His Son into the world just as prophesied, but He also guided Jesus through a perfect human lifetime to His sacrificial death for us all, resurrecting Him from the grave exactly three days and three nights later, as Jesus had said was the only sign of His Messiahship (John 2:18-22).

That glorious Holy One ascended to heaven and now sits at the right hand of God as our High Priest. He is the Head of the church and our soon-coming King. He promises us, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5), as well as, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:3). He now awaits the word from His Father to return to this earth to set up His Kingdom. What great confidence we can have that all this will happen as planned, and we will be part of it!

As the angels sang to the shepherds in the field, "Glory to the Most High God and peace on earth among those He favors!"