



The Investigator's Gospel

Session 3 – Chapter 2 – The Birth, The Blessing, The Boy

“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.”

Once again, Luke sets the time, place and situation for us. The story takes place in the context of the wider Roman world: Caesar Augustus is Roman Emperor; Quirinius is the Roman official in charge of the Roman governmental district of Syria. The population is undergoing some displacement, as they must return to their home town for registration – most likely for taxation purposes.

While there were numerous such census events, there is no direct Roman record of this particular one. Compounding the difficulty is Luke's reference to *“Quirinius, Governor of Syria.”* We know from other sources that Quirinius did serve as governor, but a full ten years after this time frame; and that a census was conducted in 6 AD – to which Luke makes reference in his Book of Acts (5:37). Did Luke get it wrong? If so, it is the only historical or geographical reference he makes which is not verified by literary or archaeological sources.

But did he get it wrong? There is some inscriptional evidence that Quirinius may have been governor of Syria twice, first in 10–7 B.C. and then again in A.D. 6–9. Luke's reference would be to his *first* governorship and a *prior* census – or, as Luke says, *“this was the first census,”* which implies that he knew of a second. Finally, the Greek text can be translated *“before Quirinius was governor”* instead of *“while.”* Rather than assume Luke is in error, we may simply be lacking further archaeological discovery. Again and again, excavations and discoveries in the area of the Holy Land confirm the veracity of New Testament events.

As a member of the “house” or ancestral line of David, the census requires Joseph to register in his ancestral town, rather than Nazareth, where he lived and worked. The text carefully says (v5) *“He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.”* Note that they are still not fully married, but only pledged; note also that there is nothing (other than our own assumptions) to cause us to assume that Mary travelled with Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

The Bethlehem setting is important, although Luke doesn't mention why (whereas Matthew, whose Jewish audience is more sensitive to such reasons, spends a fair bit of time on this). Bethlehem is the birthplace of King David, and seat of his ancestral line. There was an expectation that the coming Messiah would be from this same town, affirming the ancestral connection. The prophet Micah plants this seed (Micah 5:2): *“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”*

Luke matter-of-factly outlines the birth: *“While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.”*

Note that Luke refers to Jesus specifically as *“her firstborn,”* implying that there were children to follow in coming years – the “brothers and sisters” of Jesus mentioned in the Gospels. Not all Christian traditions agree – they would claim the phrase “her firstborn” simply affirms that Mary had borne no children previously, and the “brothers and sisters” are products of a previous marriage of Joseph, a widower; Mary would then be his second wife. “Firstborn” is also important in Judean society; the first born were to be “consecrated to God.” Luke returns to this later in the chapter.

Jesus was swaddled (the common practice at the time), and placed in a manger – a feeding trough for animals. We extrapolate from this that Jesus was born not in a house room (nothing was available that could be used for such purposes) but in a stable used to house livestock. This is not unusual among those of humble circumstances; the process of birth would render rooms ritually unclean, and would require seven days of cleansing before they could be used again. Also, remains of 1st century homes commonly reveal stable caves as being attached to the homes, rather than isolated from them. This can be seen in Israel to this day.

The stable would have been a cave, rather than a self-standing wooden structure. Caves are common in the area. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which marks the traditionally acknowledged place of the birth of Jesus (mentioned by Justin Martyr as early as 150 AD), is constructed above a large cave complex, located under the main altar. Interestingly, to the left of the “birth cave” is a cave containing the offices where Jerome translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin (the Vulgate); to the right are the burial caves of the Greek Orthodox monks who have been resident there since at least the 300s AD. Jerome, working in the late 300s, is already complaining about all the tourists – still a common complaint, 1650 years later!

The scene now shifts to the shepherds. The terrain surrounding Bethlehem – hilly, rocky, and often very dry – is more suitable for grazing than for concentrated agriculture. Shepherds and flocks of sheep and goats can be seen to this day. David, as a young Bethlehem shepherd, composed the 23rd Psalm – “The Lord is My Shepherd” – reflecting upon the rigours of shepherding in that area. Without a shepherd to guide to pasture and to protect from dangers, the sheep had little chance of survival.

Despite their vital role in the economy of the region, shepherds were regarded as belonging to the lower strata of society. That they would be the first to hear of the birth of the Messiah fits well with the humble circumstances of Jesus’ birth – the Gospel would be for all people, with a particular resonance for the poor.

An unnamed angel appears, radiating heavenly light, causing terror among the shepherds. The angel’s message is a study in contrasts:

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

The announcement of good news (*euangelizomai*) is a common verb for Luke and has its roots in Isaiah’s announcement of end-time salvation (52:7 – *“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!”*”).

There is also an interesting parallel in an inscription found at Priene (an ancient city – now archaeological ruins - in western Turkey) celebrating the birth of Augustus. The inscription calls Augustus a “saviour” and says that “the birth date of our God has signaled the beginning of good news for the world.” Both of these backgrounds could have had significance for Luke, who has just made reference to Augustus (2:1). Though Augustus is acclaimed by many as the Roman world’s god and saviour – even son of a god - Jesus is the true deliverer.

Adding irony to this comparison, the shepherds are told to *“find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”* These are not the typical signs accompanying a royal birth! This theme of “great reversal” will typify the ministry of Jesus – as Mary indicated in her song of celebration, and as Jesus will teach, as in the Sermon on the Mount – *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted; Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”*

A “heavenly host” appears – literally, a heavenly army (*stratia* – rank upon rank), as in Psalm 148:1-2: *“Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights above. Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his heavenly hosts.”* They proclaim, *“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”* This birth is celebrated in heaven and on earth – from the heights to the depths.

Christmas carols and the traditional KJV translation are more familiar to us: *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”* However, most modern translations reflect a slightly different meaning: *“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”* The difference arises from the Greek text, with the better manuscripts reading *“eudokias”* (“of good will”) rather than *“eudokia”* (“good will”). The King James translators used the best Greek manuscripts available to them, but many more older and superior manuscripts have since been found. The phrase *“people of good will”* is a Hebrew phrase referring to God’s favour bestowed on his people.

The shepherds *“hurry off”* to find the baby, and *“spread the word concerning what had been told them,”* setting the pattern for all people who encounter the Messiah. Those who hear the shepherd’s story are *“amazed,”* rather than skeptical – again, modelling the proper response. Mary’s response is interesting: *“But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.”* Other translations: *“Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them*

often.” *“Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully.”* This “internal insight” is another indication of Mary’s eyewitness testimony to Luke.

It is also a model of the ideal disciple; we too are to highly value and internalise the words of the Gospels, and think upon them often. In the Orthodox tradition, Mary is venerated as the exemplar of perfect obedience to God, and the model for all Christians to follow – present at his birth, his life, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, and the Baptism of the Holy Spirit; as well, she is the Theotokos, the Bearer of God, who brings the Word to life in the world.

“On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.” Mary and Joseph are observant Jews, and so follow the practice of male circumcision, the sign of belonging to the covenant community of faith. In the early Church, there was considerable debate regarding the ongoing necessity of circumcision for Christians – whether or not conversion to Judaism was required for all who would follow Jesus. Ultimately, baptism rather than circumcision was regarded as the Christian sign of belonging.

There is a further religious obligation which Mary and Joseph perform. Jewish ceremonial law required a forty-day period of purification for the mother after the birth of a son: seven days before the circumcision and thirty-three days after (Leviticus 12:1-8). During this time, *“she must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over”*. At the end of this time, a sacrifice was made for her purification. Leviticus indicates that a lamb and a dove are the appropriate sacrifice, or two doves or pigeons for those who cannot afford a lamb – a clue to the Holy Family’s limited finances.

Also, Old Testament law stipulated that every firstborn male, whether human or animal, was to be dedicated to the Lord. Firstborn animals were to be offered as a sacrifice. For humans, a redemption price of five shekels was to be paid – a sum equivalent to a modest week’s wage.

While performing these duties the Holy Family is approached by Simeon, a man described as *“righteous and devout,”* and within whom the Holy Spirit was active, assuring him that he would see the Messiah before he died. The Holy Spirit led him to the Temple while the Holy Family was present, and Simeon praised God in words we now call the Nunc Dimittis: *“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.”*

As with the song of Zechariah and Mary, Simeon’s song is steeped in Old Testament imagery, particularly the Prophet Isaiah (eg 42:6 *“I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles”*). He also speaks directly to Mary: *“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”* Not all will believe; many who are in high positions of religious authority will be blind to Jesus, while many regarded as outcasts will believe. And, in words which foretell the

manner of Jesus' death, Mary will experience deep suffering. Ancient icons commonly portray Mary as appearing sad; it is in reference to this foreshadowing.

Luke also mentions a female prophet, Anna, an elderly widow, who "*never left the temple but worshipped night and day.*" She also identifies Jesus as the Redeemer – "*and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.*" Another model of discipleship behaviour.

Luke gives us our only boyhood glimpse of Jesus. Having returned to "*their own town of Nazareth,*" the family made annual visits to Jerusalem for Passover – as did many other observant Jews. Jerusalem would swell ten-fold with the arrival of the pilgrims from throughout the Empire. One year, when Jesus was twelve, his family inadvertently left him behind, "*thinking he was in their company*" of relatives and friends (pilgrims would travel in groups for safety and fellowship). Discovering his absence at the end of the day, Mary and Joseph made their way back to Jerusalem – 15-20 miles uphill from Jericho.

After three days – one day out with the caravan, one day back, one day looking - they finally found him "*in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.*" His "*understanding and answers*" amazed all who heard, demonstrating, even at that age, his unusual ability. Mary recalls asking him, "*Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.*" Jesus' response, "*Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?*" baffles them – establishing the consistent pattern of even Jesus' immediate family not being clear about his person or purpose (see Mark 3:21 - *When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."* John 7:5 – "*For even his own brothers did not believe in him.*").

They return to Nazareth, and Jesus "*was obedient to them.*" Luke again adds, "*But his mother treasured all these things in her heart,*" another reference to his interviews with Mary.

Luke concludes these introductory sections with, "*And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man,*" a direct quotation from 1 Samuel 2:26 – "*And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with people.*" Mary had quoted the song of Samuel's mother Hannah in her Magnificat; Hannah had brought Samuel to the Temple, and consecrated him to God (1:28 – "*So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord.*") as did Mary and Joseph; the Lord blessed the nation with Samuel (3:19-4:1 - *The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground; And Samuel's word came to all Israel*) as the nation would be blessed by the words of Jesus. Under the prophet Samuel, the Kingdom of Israel would be established (beginning with Saul and David); with Jesus, the Kingdom of God comes into the world. Luke is continuing to tie the Old Testament together with the New; what is happening in John and Jesus is the outworking of God's plan. The New Testament era is about to begin.

Bonus: When was Jesus born?

Many people assume Jesus was born in the year “0” or “1” AD. That dating, however, is the result of an error in calculation made by a sixth century monk known as Dionysius Exiguus (or Dennis the Small) in A.D. 525. At that time, Pope John the First asked Dionysius to prepare a standardized calendar for the western Church. Prior to this, most dates in the West were calculated from the founding year of Rome – 725 BC – or the Julian Calendar, established by Julius Caesar in 46 BC – or the reign of Augustus (or other Emperors). There was considerable variation throughout the West as to just what year it now was!

The Pope wanted a new, standardized calendar which would reflect the new Christian, rather than the old Roman, era, and regularize the calendar. This was important for numerous reasons, not least the calculation of the celebration of Easter, the dates of which also varied considerably. Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, Dionysius missed the real B.C./A.D. division by at least four years.

The Gospels tell us that Jesus’ birth was shortly before Herod the Great died. Herod's death can be fixed with certainty as occurring between March 29th and April 4th in what we now call 4 B.C. Matthew tells us that Herod killed Bethlehem's babies two years old and under, pushing the birth of Jesus back to as early as 6 BC. Through a variety of other time indicators, we can be relatively confident that Jesus was born sometime between 6 and 4 B.C.

The specific date of December 25, celebrated already in the 200s AD, came to be observed as a result of a Jewish tradition: while birthdays were not regularly recorded, for significantly holy people, their date of conception was considered to correspond with their date of death, thereby completing a notable cycle of life. That is to say, if a notable personage died on January 1, their birthday would be celebrated on the date of their conception, 9 months prior – in that case, April 1. This was not intended to be chronologically accurate, but to reflect a sense of momentous order in the lives (conception to death) of the particularly notable.

There is strong evidence that Jesus died on March 25; therefore the conception of Jesus was determined also to be March 25, or 9 months before December 25. Although other dates had been proposed and celebrated within the early church, ultimately the December 25 date was regularized by the Roman Emperor Constantine, who was interested in the December 25 date replacing a Pagan Roman holiday, Saturnalia.

After all of that it must be said that there is no direct Biblical evidence for the month or day of Jesus’ birth.