

BIBLE SERIES: **"EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"**

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LUKE 2 & MATTHEW 2 – JESUS' BIRTH IN BETHLEHEM



We begin our study with the details of Christ's birth given in Luke 2. It's amazing how historically accurate Luke's statements have turned out to be. He did say at the start that he "*carefully investigated everything from the beginning* and have decided to write an *orderly account*" (Luke 1:3). As we will see, he certainly did fulfill his statement!

We read in Luke 2:1-5, "And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. 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."

Regarding the famous Caesar Augustus, Roman historians mention this first Roman emperor reigned for over 40 years--from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14. So he would have been ruling about 23 years when Jesus was born in 4 B.C.

Concerning Quirinius, he was a major figure in Roman politics. He is mentioned by Tacitus and was a confidant of Caesar Augustus. He was chosen to train up Augustus' son and his name is mentioned in *Res Gestae* (The Deeds of Augustus) and Augustus made him as consul in 12 B.C.. Now the information about Quirinius at first seemed controversial, since the Jewish historian Josephus had him ruling Syria in A.D. 6—ten years after Christ's birth—but now the controversy has been cleared up.

Archaeologist Randall Price notes, "Some recent archaeological evidence has provided new insights into the time and place of the birth of Jesus. The Gospel of Luke gives the time of birth with a specific reference to a census decreed by Quirinius, the governor of Syria. While inscriptional evidence reveals that there was *more than one ruler* with this name, a Quirinius within the time frame of Jesus' birth has been found *on a coin* placing him as proconsul of Syria and Cilicia from *11 B. C. until after 4 B.C.* Quirinius' census mentioned also by Luke in Acts 5:37, has numerous parallels in papyrus census forms dating from the first century B.C.—1st century A.D. For example, both the Oxyrhynchus papyrus 255 (A.D. 48) and British Museum papyrus 904 (A.D. 104) order compulsory returns to

birthplaces for census-taking just as Luke records" (*The Stones Cry Out*, 1997, p. 299).

Census were important to the Roman government, as you might guess, since it was used for military service and tax purposes. They were usually taken every 14 years and in some periods, every 5 years.

The Encyclopedia Britannica mentions: "Every five years the Romans enumerated citizens and their property to determine their liabilities. This practice was extended to include the entire Roman Empire in 5 B.C." (14th ed., 5:168).

The Archaeological Bible adds: "With the establishment of the empire, Augustus Caesar created a regular bureaucracy for conducting the census and collecting taxes. The provinces were subjected to both a poll tax and a land tax. The revenue supported the army, the imperial household, government salaries, road maintenance and public works, as well as the dole of grain for the Roman masses. The actual task of gathering revenues in the provinces was farmed out to private companies of tax collectors called *publicani*. These tax collectors accumulated enough money to meet the demands of the state and also to retain a profit for themselves. As the New Testament reflects, *publicani* were hated by the people. Taxation could be heavy and unfair, and the *publicani* were regarded as greedy traitors serving foreign overlords" (p. 1855).

So Joseph and the pregnant Mary had to make the long journey to Bethlehem, Joseph's place of birth, to be registered by the publicans under the Romans.

The Bible account continues, "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 clothe, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:6-7).

First, let's again notice the term "firstborn" (*protogenes* in Gk.) is used only if you have more than one child. If you have an only child, the term "only-begotten" or *monogenes* in Gk. is used.

Next, we notice what a contrast we have with the way God does things and man. Here we have Immanuel (God with us) being born, not in a luxurious palace, surrounded by the high and mighty and great celebrations, but in the humble place surrounded by animals. It's the principle of the mustard seed—of God using the smallest to one day

convert into the greatest. It's the same way He is using us, the weak and insignificant (1 Cor. 2:26) that will one day inherit His kingdom (Lk. 10:21; 12:32).

There is some controversy about the place Christ was born. Recent studies indicate the "inn" was probably the upper place of a house that had the guest room full. The account clearly says, "So it was, that *while they were there*, the days were completed for her to be delivered" (vs. 6). So they were already staying in Bethlehem, but the guest room was full.

Here are the reasons against it being an inn. N.T. scholar Kenneth Bailey mentions: "First, Luke uses *pandokheion* to designate a commercial inn (Lk. 10:36). This common word for an inn is *not found* in our text. Second, the only other use of the noun *kataluma* in the Gospels is in Luke 22:11 (and its parallel passage in Mark 14:14) where it clearly *does not mean an inn*. Third, as we have observed, a man returning to his home village *insults his family or friends by going to an inn*. Fourth, it remains uncertain as to whether Bethlehem would have had a commercial inn...Inns, then as now, were found on major roads. No major Roman road passed through Bethlehem, and small villages on minor roads had no inns....Fifth, any type of inn is culturally unacceptable as a place for the birth of a child. It is not a matter of privacy, but rather the deeply felt sense that a birth should take place in a home. The text does not say that the *kataluma* was not fit, but rather that it was full....Finally, the Arabic and Syriac versions have never, in 1900 years, translated *kataluma* with the word 'inn.' This translation is a product of our Western heritage.

"The traditional Middle Eastern farmer lived close to nature and in fact did want the animals in his house for at least two reasons he could verbalize. First, the animals helped heat the house in winter. Second, keeping them in the same room the villager slept in assured that *they would not be stolen*....The raised terrace on which the family ate, slept and lived was unsoiled by the animals, which were taken out each day and during which time the lower level was cleaned....Still, the home is one room, consisting of the family living room terrace and a lower level with *mangers built into the floor of the former*. This same house has an adjoining special guest room. Such a home precisely fits the requirements of Luke 2:7....For centuries Palestinian peasants have been born on the raised terraces of the one-room family homes. The birth of Jesus was no different" ("The

Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2:8," *Bible and Spade*, Fall 2007, pp. 103-106).

Once Jesus is born, whom does God call to celebrate the event? The rich and the mighty? No, he invites humble shepherds tending their sheep at night. Some rabbis even considered shepherds "unclean" due to their sometimes messy job—but not by God!

We read, "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.' So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.' And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them" (2:8-20).

Notice the shepherds were out in the fields at night, something they only did until October. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* mentions, "And as these shepherds had not yet brought home their flocks, it is a presumptive argument that October had not yet commenced, and that, consequently, our Lord was not born on the 25th of December, when no flocks were out in the fields; *nor could he have been born later than September, as the flocks were still in the fields by night*. On this very ground the nativity in December should be given up." Besides, the Roman census was never carried out in wintertime, but in the fall, after the harvest had been taken up.

We now read, “And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, his name was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb” (2:21). The name Jesus means “Savior” and Christ means “the anointed One” or *Messiah* in Hebrew, which is His official title. Then, forty days after his birth, He was taken to Jerusalem according to the law of purification (Lev. 12:6; 13:2). At the Temple, Joseph and Mary offered a pair of turtledoves as a sacrifice.

In the Bible we see that, “By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established” (Deut. 19:15) and now two witnesses appear in the Temple to proclaim Jesus is the true Messiah.

First, Simeon, a righteous man, had received a vision from God that he would not die before seeing the Messiah. When Jesus arrived at the Temple, Simeon was led by God’s spirit to go to the Temple and to see the Child. When he saw Him, he took Him in his arms and blessed all of them and said to Mary, ‘Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (Yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (Lk. 2:34-35). Simeon predicted Jesus’ ministry would be filled with controversy, and his cruel death would pierce Mary’s heart.

Then Anna, an aged prophetess, appears and gives her testimony as well. We read, “And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem” (Lk. 2:38). The priests must have been very surprised when they checked the genealogical registry and seen that Jesus was a direct descendant of David from both sides of the family! As mentioned before, after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, the genealogical records were destroyed and so anyone now claiming to be the Messiah has no way of formally verifying he is a descendant of David.

The scene now turns to Matthew’s account of Herod and the Magi, where other witnesses of Jesus being the Messiah come to the fore. We read, “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen *His star* in the East and have come to worship Him. When Herod heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (Mt. 2:1-3).

As Halley mentions, “This must have occurred in the period when Jesus was between 40 days old [when he was taken to the Temple] and 2 years old. The 2 years seem to denote the time when the star first appeared, to start them on their journey, a journey of many months, and not necessarily to signalize the exact time of the child’s birth. But Herod, in order to be sure, took the outside limit. At least, the child was not still in the manger, as is sometimes pictured, but in the ‘house’....They are commonly spoken of as the ‘Three Wise Men.’ But the Scripture does not say how many. There were probably more, or at least they were with an entourage of scores or hundreds, for it would not be safe for a small group to travel a thousand miles over desert wastes that were infested with bandits. Their arrival in Jerusalem was of sufficient show of importance to stir the whole city” (p. 418-419).

The Magi, as Daniel had been in Babylon, were normally men of science, advisors to kings, and knowledgeable of astronomy, calendars and medicine. “The Magi,” says *The Archaeological Bible*, “were likely from Persia, [Babylon], or southern Arabia, which lay east of the Holy Land. Herod was ‘disturbed’ by the Magi’s announcement because he knew he was not the rightful heir to Israel’s throne, having usurped power by aligning himself with Rome. The Magi’s visit likely caused him to fear that invading forces from the east might join others within Israel to replace him with a king from the true line of the anticipated Messiah. The religious leaders had aligned themselves politically with Herod. If his power base was threatened, so was theirs” (p. 1560).

We know Jesus could not have been born after 4 B.C. because Josephus mentions Herod’s death occurred before the Passover of 4 B.C. and afterwards, there are coins of his sons ruling Israel.