

The Story of the Life of Christ – Lesson 4

4 BC

In the last lesson we studied the Gospel's accounts of the announcement of the Virgin Birth to Mary, Mary's visit to Elizabeth and Zechariah, and the confirmation of the origin of Mary's pregnancy to Joseph. We also studied the Old Testament prophecies of the Virgin Birth. In this lesson we will begin with the birth of John the Baptist according to the Gospel of Luke.

The Birth of John the Baptist

Luke 1:56 **Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.**

Because Elizabeth was in her sixth month before Mary came to visit her (Luke 1:36) and Mary remained three months, it is clear that Mary remained almost until the completion date of Elizabeth's nine-month pregnancy.

Luke 1:57 **When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son.**

The baby was a son just as the angel Gabriel had prophesied to Zechariah (Luke 1:13).

Luke 1:58 **Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.**

When the news spread of this unusual birth to a woman who was thought to be long past the age of bearing children, all of her neighbors and relatives "shared her joy." This comment speaks to how well Zechariah and Elizabeth were loved by their community and family.

Luke 1:59 **On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah,**

Since circumcisions were performed by third parties, and it is said that "they came to circumcise the child," the language indicates that then, as is the Jewish custom even today, the circumcision was performed in the home. Those officiating just assumed that, as the first-born son, he would be named after his father.

Luke 1:60 **but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."**

The English name John is the Greek name Ἰωάννης (ee-o-an'-nace) which means "Jehovah is a gracious giver." The name foreshadowed John's ministry of grace. The name was also per Gabriel's instructions to Zechariah in Luke 1:13. Elizabeth's instruction also confirmed that Zechariah had communicated in writing to Elizabeth what Gabriel had told him.

Luke 1:61 They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”

They were shocked that the baby was not at least named after one of the relatives. That seems to have been the custom in those days.¹

Luke 1:62 Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child.

So, they proceeded to ignore Elizabeth’s wishes and went to Zechariah hoping he would overrule her. This tells us that Zechariah seems to have told no one but Elizabeth what he had been told by Gabriel. Probably Elizabeth had also told Mary.

1:63 He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.”

He confirmed Elizabeth’s choice the only way he could, in writing.

Luke 1:64 Immediately his mouth was opened, and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God.

Gabriel’s original prophecy had been that Zechariah wouldn’t be able to speak until after the baby was born. Little John was now eight days old, and Zechariah had not been able to speak until he had obeyed the LORD’s command regarding his name.

Luke 1:65-66 The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.

These two verses speak of the general amazement not only in the naming of the baby and the restoration of Zechariah’s speech, but also to what he said next.

Luke 1:67 His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

For the first time Zechariah shared with his neighbors the message of the angel Gabriel concerning John the Baptist. When Zechariah had been struck dumb in the Temple some nine months before, his next task after burning the incense was to have come out of the Temple and praise God and bless the people. At last, nine months later, in front of his neighbors and relatives, he was able to fulfill this duty. The benediction he gave was also inspired by the Holy Spirit and has the authority of being the Truth from God.

¹ *A few years later Elizabeth’s sister’s daughter Salome (the sister of Mary) also named her son John. He became the Apostle John who was also a disciple of his cousin, John the Baptist.*

Luke 1:68 **“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.**

Here Zechariah rejoiced because he knew that, though an unborn child, the LORD our redeemer was already a life in Mary’s womb. In his Spirit filled mind, he regarded the redemption, still to be done, as good as accomplished.

Luke 1:69 **He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David** ²

The verse quoted here (Psalms 132:17) used the Hebrew word for “horn” קֶרֶן, {keh'·ren}. That word was used in the Old Testament for animal horns or the horns of the altar. It was understood to be a symbol of power. On the altar of incense and the brazen altar, the horns symbolized the sacrifice which was to come. The horns stood for the power of Jesus’ death. Paul later spoke of that power:

Romans 1:16 “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”

Zechariah was clearly announcing the oncoming Advent of the long-awaited Messiah from the line of David although he didn’t announce who it was (though he knew). However, Scripture tells us that what Zechariah had said was talked about throughout Judea. This was part of the backdrop against which was played out the birth of Jesus six months later in nearby Bethlehem.

Luke 1:70 **(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),**

This “horn” had been referred to in Psalms:

Psalms 132:17-18: “Here (Zion) I will make a horn grow for David and set up a lamp for my anointed one (*Messiah*). I will clothe his enemies with shame, but the crown on his head will be resplendent.”

Luke 1:71-75 **salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us -- to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.**

All these things would be accomplished by the coming “Son of David.” The most important things would be accomplished at His First Advent. Some parts of His covenant would not be accomplished until His Second Advent.

² This was obviously speaking of Jesus, the son of David. It did not refer the baby John. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were from the line of Aaron and Levi.

Next, Zechariah turned his remarks toward his eight-day old son.

Luke 1:76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

Jesus said of John the Baptist in Matthew:

Matthew 11:9-10 “Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’”³

Luke 1:77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins,

The ministry of John was to remind the Jews that knowledge of God’s salvation came through His mercy and forgiveness of sin. It didn’t come through living a sinless life or through human works of self-righteousness. Salvation had always depended on faith and the grace of the LORD.

Luke 1:78 because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

The last prophetic utterance of the Old Testament was in Malachi and was in the same vein. There the Messiah was compared to the rising sun:

Malachi 4:2 “But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.”

Luke 1:79 to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”⁴

This passage was also an echo of a Messianic prophecy from Isaiah:

Isaiah 9:2 “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”

³ This was quoting Malachi:

Malachi 3:1 “See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,”

⁴ The Messiah was to be the “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). In Psalm 72, the coming Messiah was called by the name “Solomon” which means “peace.”

This was also a promise that the light would come to every man living in darkness, not just to a select few. It was their free will choice to respond to whatever light they chose to see.

Luke 1:80a **And the child grew and became strong in spirit;**

We know that both of John's elderly parents were strong spiritually themselves. No doubt they dedicated their lives to teaching him and were empowered in their task by the Holy Spirit.

Luke 1:80b **and he lived in the ~~desert~~ *sparsely inhabited places* until he appeared publicly to Israel.**

The Greek word translated "desert" in the NIV is the Greek word ἔρημος {e'-rā-mos} in the plural. The word in English usage conveys a dry and arid place. The Greek word refers to places which were largely uninhabited, but not necessarily dry. It would seem that John's training in the word came from his parents and the Holy Spirit. He did not enter any of the famous schools of theology taught by the prominent Jewish teachers of that day in Jericho and Jerusalem (definitely not deserts). Considering the widespread fame of John's birth, it was undoubtedly prudent that he was raised in obscurity. That protected him from the temptations of fame before he was ready to handle them.

Another question that is raised is: When did John "appear publicly to Israel"? I think scripture makes it clear that by the time Jesus appeared, John the Baptist already had a worldwide reputation among the Jews and that this was in spite of the fact that the leaders of the Jews tried to repudiate him.⁵ To me, this indicates that he had probably been preaching from five to ten years before he baptized Jesus, who was six months younger than he was. According to the regulations laid down in the time of Moses, a priest's service could start at the age of twenty-five (Numbers 8:24), but according to the regulations laid down by David, they could start at the age of twenty (1 Chronicles 23:24-27). That is why I speculated that John's ministry started five to ten years earlier than Jesus' ministry.

The Birth of Jesus Christ ***The Night of January 29, 4 BC***

Of the four Gospels only Matthew and Luke have an account of the birth of Christ. We already looked at the verses in Matthew's account which amounted to:

Matthew 1:25 "But he (*Joseph*) had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus."

Now we will look at the much more detailed account of Luke.

⁵ *Matthew 14:5, John 21:26, Mark 11:32, Luke 20:6.*

Luke 2:1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

The Greek word translated “census” here is ἀπογράφω {ä-po-grä'-fō}. The word literally means “written from.” It referred to the exercise of entering into a public record the names of all men, property and income of a district or province. This “census” did not necessarily take place all at once throughout the Roman world. However, it was a general mandate from the Roman Emperor to every Governor and King in the Empire to render an account of the population, resources and wealth under their jurisdiction. The censuses would also usually include an estimate of the territories’ capabilities in producing goods from farming, fishing, mining, and manufacturing. These censuses were important as they were used as a basis for military levies and taxation.

Luke 2:2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)

Josephus only records one census by Quirinius, who is also called Cyrenius in some translations of Josephus. This has led to some criticism of the accuracy of the Biblical text by those who are always hoping to find errors in the Bible. Although I often quote Josephus as a reliable source for the historical background of the life of Christ, I must disagree with Josephus on this point. There are five primary points to my conclusions on this subject.

1. The Bible is the document to which primary veracity must be ascribed over any other document. It is the inspired Word of God. Josephus’ account is not the inspired Word of God.
2. Although I find that Josephus is a very accurate recorder of his own time, the farther he gets from the events that happened during his own life, the more prone to inaccuracy he is. Since the taxation of Cyrenius occurred about 40 years before Josephus’ birth, I am not surprised to find some inaccuracy in his account of those events.
3. The Biblical account of Luke 2:1-4 indicates that there was more than one census taken by Cyrenius.
4. The Biblical account of Acts 5:34-37, which was also written by Luke connects a census of Cyrenius with the revolt of the Zealot, Judas of Galilee.
5. From a more obscure historical account, Sir William Ramsey discovered that Cyrenius, the Roman Governor of Syria, had been Governor twice and had ordered two censuses. Ramsay, W.M.; The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament. (1915) or Sir William Ramsey, St. Paul: The Traveler and the Roman Citizen (1897)

So, from the five points above you can see that I must believe that there were at least two censuses as the Bible implies by calling the one that Luke refers to as the “first.” Next, I have listed two related conclusions.

1. In Antiquities of the Jews, Book XVII, Chap. 1:1 Josephus connected a census of Cyrenius (evidently the second), taken after the death of Herod and the accession of his son Archelaus, with the revolt of Judas of Galilee, the founder of the Zealot political movement among the

Jews. This census was actually more concerned with valuing the estate of Herod the Great before the Roman Empire divided it among his heirs and taking a cut for itself.

2. I believe that Josephus mistakenly overlooked the first census which was the occasion of the trip of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. Luke and the Holy Scriptures are correct. The revolt of the zealots in which Judas of Galilee declared he was the Messiah took place after the second census.⁶ That census occurred about a year after the birth of Christ. That revolt took place against the backdrop of all the signs recorded in the New Testament which had signified that the Messiah had already been born. We also know that, at the time of that revolt, Herod had died, and Jesus was living with His parents in Egypt. That revolt took place in the vicinity of the major Galilean town of Sepphoris and must have embroiled the little village of Nazareth which was only a couple of miles away. This was recorded in Josephus' Antiquities of the Jews, Book XVII, Chap. 1:1. The consequent reaction to the rebellion by the Roman government was to send in the Roman Legions. That resulted in the enslavement of much of the population of Sepphoris and the surrounding countryside (which included Nazareth). Most of those who were not enslaved fled the area. This helps to explain the fact that when Joseph, Mary and Jesus returned to Nazareth some years later, they were never able to reestablish contact with Mary's sister Salome (the mother of James and John), who had eventually married and settled in Capernaum after gaining her liberty. Mary evidently only reestablished contact with her sister Salome after James and John accompanied Jesus to the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-2, 12).

Luke 2:3 And everyone went to his own town to register.

The phrase says, "everyone went to his own town." Nearly every Israelite living in Galilee in those days was a Jew. Being a Jew meant they were from the people of the old Southern Kingdom of Judah. If everyone had gone to the country of his original people at the same time, it would have meant that Galilee would have been left empty of everyone but Gentiles (who made up about 30% of the population). This language may mean that such people registered over a period of several months. More likely, it just meant that the term "his town" meant the town of his own choosing.

When the Jews returned after the exile in 538 BC, they had returned to the Persian province of Judea, which consisted of the territory of the old Southern Kingdom of Israel. The rest of the original lands of Israel were at that time parts of other Persian provinces. There were undoubtedly some Jews that lived in those provinces, as indeed they lived in nearly every

⁶ *This was implied by the famous Jewish theologian Gamaliel as recorded in Acts: Acts 5:34-37 "But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. Then he addressed them: "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt."*

Persian province all the way east to India, but they were a small minority. After the Greeks defeated the Persian Empire, and its lands were divided among the four generals of Alexander the Great at his death, the situation remained the same. However, after the rise of the Maccabees who won the independence of Judea in 161 BC, the Jews also conquered and colonized Galilee. Both the families of Joseph and Mary had no doubt moved to Nazareth during this colonizing period of about eighty years.

We know that both Mary's father and Joseph's father were from the line of David. However, this passage does not indicate that either one of them returned to Bethlehem with Mary and Joseph for the census. This may indicate that both were already dead. Or it may indicate that the place of registration was voluntary as I believe. Neither parent was mentioned in the Gospels, outside of the genealogies, so they may have both been deceased. Other relatives of both Mary and Joseph were mentioned.

It may be that Bethlehem was where Joseph was actually born and that he had relatives there. That may explain his original impulse to return to Bethlehem when he and Mary returned from Egypt with Jesus (Matthew 2:21-22).

Luke 2:4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

From Nazareth to Bethlehem is 68 miles as the crow flies. Joseph and Mary probably took the direct route through Samaria and west of the Jordan. It was winter and the route east of the Jordan would have been difficult because the annual winter flooding of the river and the subsequent difficulty of crossing back across the Jordan to Bethlehem. This passage does not say that everybody from the house and line of David went back at this time. We do know that to fulfill prophecy, the Messiah had to fulfill two conditions. He had to be from the line of David. He also had to be born in Bethlehem. Below are two of the prophecies to that effect:

Jeremiah 23:5-6 “‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.’”

Micah 5:2 “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you ⁷ will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

It could be that Joseph was aware of the prophecy about Bethlehem, or it could be that the LORD simply told Joseph that he needed to go back to Bethlehem for the birth.

⁷ *What constituted the territory of a village also included the pasturelands just outside the village (Numbers 35:5) to a distance of over a quarter of a mile in every direction.*

Luke 2:5 **He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.**

This brings up an interesting point. Mary was only pledged to be married to Joseph. Under the Mosaic Law and Jewish practice at that time, a man and a woman who were espoused or pledged to each other were under the same obligations as if they were married. Property rights had transferred, and sexual fidelity was strictly enforced. However, it was expected that only after they were formally married were they to have conjugal sex.

Edersheim's Sketches of Jewish Social Life give us some of the details:

“Even in the Old Testament a distinction is made between betrothal and marriage. The former was marked by a bridal present (or *Mohar*, Genesis 34:12; Exodus 22:17; 1 Sam 18:25), with which the father, however, would in certain circumstances dispense. According to Rabbinical law certain formalities were requisite to make a betrothal legally valid. These consisted either in handing to a woman, directly or through messengers, a piece of money, however small, or else a letter, provided it were in each case expressly stated before witnesses, that the man thereby intended to espouse the woman as his wife. There was also a third mode of espousal--simply by cohabitation, but this was very strongly disapproved by the Rabbis. The marriage followed after a longer or shorter interval, the limits of which, however, were fixed by law. The ceremony itself consisted of leading the bride into the house of the bridegroom, with certain formalities, mostly dating from very ancient times. Marriage with a maiden was commonly celebrated on a Wednesday afternoon.”

In the case of Mary and Joseph, their neighbors might have considered them married because Mary's pregnancy seemed to make the case that they had sex already. Besides which, Joseph had taken her into his house. However, we know from Matthew that they didn't have sex until after Jesus was born:

Matthew 1:24-25 “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son.”

So how do we reconcile the fact that in Luke 2:5 Mary was said to be pledged (or espoused) to be married to Joseph, and yet in Matthew 1:24-25 it says she was taken home as Joseph's wife. The reconciliation is easy. The LORD knew that the marriage had not been consummated, and that until it was, Mary's true status was only as an *espoused* wife. This was in spite of the fact that their neighbors, ignorant of the true facts, considered Mary as Joseph's *married* wife.

Luke 2:6-7a **While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.**

Notice that this does not say “when they arrived,” but “while they were there.” The common idea that the birth took place only after they had just arrived late at night might have had its roots in the statement that “there was no room for them in the inn.” It might have happened just that way, but that is only speculation. They also might have been there for a week or more. Most Jews were used to living in tents, as often, more than a million did when they camped outside of Jerusalem at every major Jewish feast. Of course, an inn inside the wall of Bethlehem would have been preferable to Joseph and his expectant wife. It was mainly preferable because the walled village afforded more protection from bandits and wild animals, which abounded. The winters are not severe in Judea, but rather mild. It also should be noticed that the account says nothing about Mary riding from Nazareth to Bethlehem on a donkey. She might have walked the seventy miles in easy stages. I have been told that method would actually have been easier for a pregnant woman than riding the same distance at the same speed on the jolting back of a donkey.⁸

Luke 2:7b **She wrapped him in cloths**

The Greek word translated “cloths” here is only found in the New Testament in this passage. It is the Greek word *σπαργανόω* {spär-gä-no'-ō}. It is derived from the root word *σπαράσσω* {spä-rä's-sō} which means “to tear.” The word is used to refer to the torn strips of cloth which were also used in grave wrappings. Thus, even in His birth, the Father provided a covering for the baby which foreshadowed the death which was His destiny.

Luke 2:7b **and placed him in a manger,**⁹

This **does not say that Jesus was born in a stable**. The word for “stable” does not appear in the entire New Testament. Instead, the Gospel of Luke says that, after Jesus was born, He **was placed in a manger**. A manger is a feeding trough filled with hay or grain. In sheep and goat ranches I have seen in this country, such “mangers” are scattered out in the fields. This would certainly have been the way the enormous numbers of sheep in the “Shepherd’s Field” were fed as I explain below. Thus, this manger would have been out in the fields under the open sky. It makes a lot more sense to believe that when He was born, the baby Jesus was laid out under the stars under the gaze of the worshipping angels. Laying His body in a manger (feeding trough) full of grain also connected His body to the figure of His human body presented by the grain offerings of the Temple. It also connected Him to the unleavened bread used in the Temple and in worship. He was the bread who came down from heaven:

⁸ *One of my students, who is from Mexico and has been both pregnant and ridden on a donkey, has assured me that donkey riding while pregnant is very undesirable.*

⁹ *From the Greek *φάτνη* {fä't-nā} which was a receptacle in which grain for the livestock to eat was placed. A “manger” means the same thing in English and is derived from the same root as our English word “munch.” The French word meaning “to eat” is *manger* {man-jay}.*

John 6:47-51 “I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

This was also meaningful because being “the bread of life,” he was born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem is a Hebrew word which means “house of bread.”

Luke 2:7b because there was no room for them in the inn.

Bethlehem was a small village of about 500 people in those days. You will notice that there was only “the inn,” or one inn. It is likely that a lot of the inhabitants were the families of the shepherds who tended the nearby Temple flocks.

Luke 2:8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

Remember, Bethlehem was just 5 miles south of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The flocks were kept in what is now called “Shepherd’s Field” outside of Bethlehem. They were owned by the Temple and the High Priests. The sheep kept there would be used to supply the many tens of thousands of lambs which were sold by the Priests to be sacrificed at the Passover and eaten afterward at the Feast of Unleavened Bread. They were also used for other offerings in the Temple. An acceptable lamb for the Passover sacrifice had to be at least a year old, born the prior spring (Exodus 12:1-7). The priests would only accept lambs from these flocks for offerings. They sold them in the Temple. According to the 1st Century AD Jewish historian Josephus the numbers of people who partook of the sacrificial lambs in 65 AD were estimated by the Sanhedrin to be over two million seven hundred thousand. For that number of people Josephus estimated that there needed to be a quarter of a million lambs.¹⁰ While this number of Passover attendees is considered by some modern historians to have been grossly over inflated, even if you reduce the number of people by four fifths, that means there were at least 50,000 sheep in that field. I believe that the birth of Jesus occurred not more than two or three months before Passover, and that many of the lambs that would be sold in the Temple for that event would have already been brought to that field. Those numbers of sheep would have overwhelmed the amount of natural forage in those fields, so the sheep had to be fed out of feeding troughs (mangers) which would have been scattered through the field and replenished periodically with grain.

¹⁰ *In Wars of the Jews, Book VI, Chapter 9 by Flavius Josephus it is said that in about 65 AD, during the reign of Nero, the Priests “found the number of sacrifices was two hundred and fifty-six thousand five hundred; which, upon the allowance of no more than ten that feast together, amounts to two millions seven hundred thousand and two hundred persons.”*

The “Shepherd’s Field” is to the east of Bethlehem and south of Jerusalem. Today it covers about five square miles. It would have been much bigger in Christ’s day. This was where the Temple kept the lambs for the Passover sacrifice. The road from that field ran up to join the road from Jericho to Jerusalem where it turned north to run past the eastern wall of the Temple to the “Sheep Gate” of Jerusalem. When Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in 30 A.D., and when He was arrested at the Garden of Gethsemane, He was led up that same road through the “Sheep Gate.” He was, after all, “the lamb of God.” How fitting that the true Passover Lamb of God was born in the field where the all the figurative Passover lambs came from.



Shepherd’s Field East of Bethlehem Today

Although the flocks were considered special, the shepherds of those sheep were a different matter. Shepherds in Judea in that day were generally looked down on as reprobates by the religious crowd. It was impossible for shepherds to work in their profession and observe the myriad rules for the Sabbath and the other rules that had been the pure invention of the religious leaders. It was not an accident that this underclass was the first class of people to whom the Lord’s birth was revealed.

Luke 2:9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

It should be kept in mind that the size of the flock would have numbered in the many tens of thousands. According to what we know about the usual attendance at Passover, the demand for

Passover lambs would have numbered at least close to fifty thousand. That would have meant that the number of shepherds in that valley was not the half dozen which are portrayed in most movies or pageants. There may have been as many as several hundred shepherds. The angel described in this verse would have been seen and heard from one end of the valley to the other end. He made his proclamation not just to one small group of shepherds, but to all who were in the valley. He must have appeared high in the sky. He would have been large enough to be seen and heard from one end of the valley to the next. The entire valley would have shone with “the glory of the Lord.” Since the people in Bethlehem would have closed their wooden shutters against the cold winter night, only Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds would have seen that display and heard the forthcoming proclamation.

Luke 2:10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

I expect that this proclamation to the shepherds was made just about the time Mary was wrapping Jesus in swaddling clothes and laying Him on the grain in the manger.

Luke 2:11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

Jesus’ name means “savior.” Of course, the angel would have spoken to these shepherds in their own language, which was Aramaic. The angel would have used the Aramaic word מָשִׁיחַ {mä·shē·akh} or “Messiah.” The Greek translation is Χριστός {khrē-sto’s} or “Christ.”¹¹

Luke 2:12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

The uniqueness of both the baby’s covering, and his resting place were to be a sign. This also strengthens my contention that His manger was in the open fields. There were undoubtedly many barns in and around Jerusalem. I can’t imagine the shepherds breaking into every barn or stable looking for a baby. However, as they came from the east out of Shepherd’s Field toward Bethlehem, the baby (perhaps crying) in the manger, surrounded by His parents in the open field would have been easy to spot. The two unique signs given to them were also unmistakable. The crowd around the manger must have eventually numbered over a hundred shepherds.

Luke 2:13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

As Mary finished taking her newborn baby and laying it in the manger, the host of angels appeared in the sky above. The angels broke into a spontaneous celebration at the wonder of the

¹¹ John 1:41 “The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (that is, the Christ).”

Sovereign God humbling Himself to become a human baby. The reconciling ministry of Christ was not only important to mankind. It was also vastly important to angels as Colossians tells us:

Colossians 1:19-20 “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and **through him** to reconcile to himself **all things**, whether things on earth or **things in heaven**,¹² by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

Luke 2:14 “**Glory to God in the highest (heaven), and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.**”

Many translations¹³ understand that there are two areas being compared here. The first was heaven (the abode of God). The second was earth. They translate it “highest heaven.” This is correct. The Greek word here is ὑψίστος {hü'-pse-stos}. Strictly speaking, it means “highest.” However, it can mean either “highest in rank” or “highest in location.” If it is meant to mean “highest in rank” as in “the most high God”, it appears in the masculine singular.¹⁴ If it is meant to mean the “highest in location”, as here, it appears in the neuter plural. The word here is in the neuter plural. In the highest heaven (the universe in which most of the angels live) God’s glory was demonstrated by this birth. This birth would also bring peace to those on earth on whom God’s favor rested (those who trusted in Him).

Luke 2:15a **When the angels had left them and gone into heaven,**

The word translated “heaven” here is the Greek word οὐρανός {ü-rä-no's} which can mean one of three things. It can refer to the sky or atmosphere, the universe of the planets and stars, or the throne room of God. I suggest that in this verse, it just means the sky. I believe it is likely that this host of angels then ascended high above the clouds above Bethlehem and emanated the light which was seen as the “star” by the wise men in the east who we will see in the next lesson. Perhaps they consisted of the twelve legions of angels that Jesus said were always at His disposal as recorded in Matthew:

Matthew 26:53 “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions¹⁵ of angels?”

¹² *This verse seems to indicate that Christ’s death effected not only the reconciliation of the human race to God, but also the angelic creation. Some have alluded to Job in support of the idea that the elect angels required reconciliation:*

Job 4:18-19 “If God places no trust in his servants, if he charges his angels with error, how much more those who live in houses of clay, whose foundations are in the dust, who are crushed more readily than a moth!”

Job 15:15-16 “If God places no trust in his holy ones, if even the heavens are not pure in his eyes, how much less man, who is vile and corrupt, who drinks up evil like water!”

¹³ *Those versions include the RSV, the Amplified, and the New Living Bible.*

¹⁴ *As in Luke 1:32 “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most **High**.”*

Those twelve legions (or 60,000 angels) would have filled the skies over Shepherd's Field.

Luke 2:15b the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

Even the most remote parts of those fields were not more than two miles away from Bethlehem.

Luke 2:16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

As they approached Bethlehem from the east, they found the baby, just as they had been told. We are not told that there was anything especially exceptional about the appearance of the baby, but after the display the shepherds had seen, there didn't need to be. I must believe they asked Mary and Joseph about the baby, and they shared with them the story of their experience.



Shepherd's Field as it Exists Today East of Bethlehem

Luke 2:17-18 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

It goes without saying that for the next weeks and months, the shepherds would have told everyone they talked to about the most unique thing that had ever happened in their life. Because of their social standing, they would have only been taken seriously by other shepherds and humble folk. Evidently, King Herod never heard about the event until about forty days later, when the Magi showed up to inquire about the unusual “star” they had seen in the sky all

¹⁵ A legion was typically composed of 5,000 soldiers.

the way over in the east, around the Euphrates River. In the meantime, Joseph and Mary had found a house in Bethlehem and weren't so easy to find as they had been that night in the fields.

Luke 2:19 **But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.**

Although Mary had been told who her child was by Gabriel, she hadn't comprehended it fully. This had given her new information. Just like Jesus' disciples, she didn't comprehend it fully until after He had risen from the dead. Although it isn't recorded in scripture, I have to wonder if Mary wasn't one of those that Jesus visited during the full forty days between His resurrection and His ascension.

Luke 2:20 **The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.**

These shepherds understood the tremendous honor that they had been paid in being shown these things. Undoubtedly, they would be among the most devastated when they heard of Herod having all the babies in Bethlehem slaughtered. Those of them who truly trusted in God, would have hung on to the confidence that God had somehow preserved the baby. Consider what it must have been like to have been one of those of shepherds who lived to see Jesus begin His ministry as a grown man thirty years later.