

# The Greatest Life Ever Lived

A Study in the Incarnate Life of Jesus Christ and An Exposition of the Four Gospels

LESSON XIV: THE BIRTH OF JESUS / THE ANGELIC ANNUNCIATION TO THE SHEPHERDS

Matthew	Mark	Luke 2:1-20	John	related passages
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**v1** *And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.* : since Luke was writing for Theophilus (1:3), he presents the birth of Christ in respect to the general history of the world. Caesar Augustus' original name was Gaius Octavius. He was the grand-nephew of Julius Caesar who thought very highly of him. When Julius Caesar was murdered in 44 BC, Octavian learned he was named in Julius' will as Caesar's son and heir. He then changed his name to Gaius Julius Caesar. Octavian (Gaius) became emperor in 31 BC when Antony committed suicide with Cleopatra in Egypt. In 27 BC the Roman Senate conferred on Gaius Julius Caesar the title Augustus ("*majestic, sublime, highly revered*") and he was therefore known as Caesar Augustus.

Augustus was very methodical and a good administrator, and therefore probably did not order just one census but a regular system of censuses: a registration with a view to taxation that would occur at equal time intervals. It has been proven through archaeology that such registration did occur every fourteen years during the apostolic years. *That should be registered* is in a tense which denotes continued action, supporting Augustus' decree was not a one-time registration.

decree is the Greek word *dogma* from a root word meaning "to think." The word literally means *a personal opinion*, and when used of one who can impose his opinion on others, *a decree*. Hence our present use of church *dogma* as *authoritatively affirmed doctrine*.

the world = literally *the inhabited land* and not the typical word for world, *kosmos*. Originally used by the Greeks to denote *the land inhabited by themselves* in contrast with barbarian countries. Later it became used of *the entire Roman world*, and later still to refer to *the whole inhabited world*.

*be taxed* means properly *to register* or *enter in a list*. It could refer to a taxation, census or registration.

**v2** *(And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)* : could mean "this occurred as the first enrollment, this was the first enrolment made." The second took place about eleven years later and referred to in Acts 5:37.

Two difficulties are found in this verse: Cyrenius as governor and the dating of the enrollment.

- historically Cyrenius is found to have been governor of Syria but not prior to 6 AD, much too late for Luke's narrative. Several possible solutions have been offered. The solution I prefer is that although Cyrenius (or Quirinius) was governor in the formal sense of the word in 6 AD, he acted as military governor or commander-in-chief in Syria from 12 BC - 16 AD, and as such is referred to by Luke.
- the dating of the enrollment has been found to have been fourteen years apart, making this census in 8 BC, too early for the birth narratives (see last week's lesson for the dating of Christ's birth, lesson 13). One possibility is that the official Roman census did not directly effect Herod since Judea was not directly under Roman rule at the time. The Jews therefore may have been excluded from the census. Herod however may have seen what was surely to come and worked to prepare the Jews as best he could. Knowing their fear of census since the time of David (2 Sam 24), he may have ordered a registration according to the families of the Jews. That Herod understood the Jews on this issue is verified, since when they were forced to taxation in 6 AD there was a rebellion (Acts 5:37). Another possibility is that Herod knew the Jew's attitude and obtained permission to postpone the carrying out of the order to allow the Jews to gradually accept the notion.

These few verses have given rise to much controversy concerning the truth of Luke's statements. Prior to continuing:

- Whatever the solution, it must be remembered the attacks come from those who do not accept the inspiration of the Scriptures. For those of us who believe we have the Word of God, historical proof is unnecessary.
- It must be remembered that Luke did not have to include these statements. What is mentioned here is irrelevant to the birth narratives and could have been omitted. That Luke would have added something questionable or erroneous when his readers would have been well acquainted with the facts is very doubtful. Such an error would have undermined the entire purpose of his writing (Lk 1:1-4).

**v3,4** *And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David):*

Bethlehem = *House of Bread*, the birthplace of the Bread of Life. It was called the City of David as early as 1 Sam 20:6, where David was born and tended sheep. The trip from Nazareth was probably over 90 miles if they bypassed Samaria, a long trip for a nine-month pregnant woman.

**v5 to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. :** we may read either *went up with Mary*, stating she merely accompanied Joseph; or *to enrol himself with Mary*, implying both their names must be registered. It is uncertain whether Mary came along because she had to or because of the condition she was in at the time. Being nearly full-term, naturally Joseph would not have wanted to leave her in Nazareth. Combined with the probability that they have only been married for six months, he would not have wanted to expose her to the embarrassment and slander of having the child among those who knew the baby was early.

Note Luke calls Mary Joseph's *espoused* wife. That they were married at this point is clear from Matt 1:24,25. Possibly since the marriage was not consummated sexually is the reason Luke still refers to Mary as being betrothed to him as his wife.

Edersheim notes the providential care evident here. For a Jew to contrive this story is impossible to conceive. "A counting of the people, or census... taken at the bidding of a heathen Emperor, and executed by one so universally hated as Herod... was most repugnant to Jewish feeling." [Edersheim, *Life of Messiah*] Calvin as well noted that it was the Lord which brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem and not a decision they made themselves, to circumvent any saying they did so just to coincide with what they knew scripture to teach.

**v6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. :** Mary having reached full term brought forth the baby.

**v7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, :** another reference to the fact that Joseph and Mary had normal marriage relations after the birth of Jesus and Jesus had half-brothers and sisters.

**and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, :** swaddling clothes used only here and v12 in the NT. Found often in medical writings. From the word for swathing-band, used of a band of linen or the like in which something is wrapped; a bandage.

*she wrapped Him* does not demand Mary did this herself, any more than Herod stating "I beheaded John" or Pilate stating "I will therefore punish Him" (Lk 9:9; 23:16). But while Mary may have merely given the directions, the natural implication is that Joseph and Mary was alone in the birthing of their firstborn child, and Mary actually did the wrapping herself.

**and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. :** *manger* could be used to denote a stall, crib or manger; a feeding trough for animals.

*inn*: used only three times in the NT, here and Mk 14:14; Lk 22:11. The other two times it is used it is translated "guest-chamber." Used by the Orientals for a *khan* or *caravansary* (a kind of inn for the accommodation of caravans). There is another Greek word used for an inn in Lk 10:34, the parable of the good Samaritan. The word here literally signifies a loosening down, used of the place where travellers and their beasts untied their packages, girdles and sandals. "A Syrian *khan* is a fort and a mart; a refuge from thieves; a shelter from the heat and dust; a place where a man and his beast may lodge; where a trader may sell his wares, and a pilgrim may slake his thirst.... Where built by a great sheikh, it would have a high wall, an inner court, a range of arches or lewans, an open gallery round the four sides, and, in many cases, a tower from which the watcher might descry the approach of marauding bands. On one side of the square, but outside the wall, there is often a huddle of sheds, set apart from the main edifice, as stables for the asses and camels, the buffaloes and goats. In the center of the *khan* springs a fountain of water, the first necessity of an Arab's life; and around the jets and troughs in which the limpid element streams, lies the gay and picturesque litter of the East. Camels wait to be unloaded; dogs quarrel for a bone; Bedaween from the desert, their red zannars choked with pistols, are at prayer. In the archways squat the merchants with their bales of goods.... Half-naked men are cleansing their hands ere sitting down to eat. Here a barber is at work upon a shaven crown; there a fellah lies asleep in the shade.... Each man has to carry his dinner and his bed; to litter his horse or camel; to dress his food; to draw his water; to light his fire, and to boil his mess of herbs." [Dixon, *The Holy Land*; quoted in Vincent, *Word Studies*]

**Where was Jesus born?** Theories vary:

- following the description of the *khan* given above, the guests stayed on the second floor, having brought their own bedding. The ground floor was reserved for the animals where the servants in charge of the pack animals would stay as well. The first floor was also used as a cargo storage area for caravans. It was in such an inner courtyard where Mary found herself, having no room on the second floor.
- A.T. Robertson gives the same picture, although he places the stables as being on one side of the square, outside the wall. He points out the manger was either connected with the inn or was in a cave.
- the manger was in a cave that was definitely associated with the inn.
- since the inn was filled to overflowing, a local resident suggested them finding shelter in a cave-stable.
- since the word used here is elsewhere translated guest-chamber, Joseph and Mary was to find lodging with relatives but the extra space was used up. They then found lodging in an adjoining shed where the donkeys were kept. This is improbable however since there is no reason to depart from the common rendering of the word *inn*. It would also be difficult to believe relatives would not have given up their space for a nine-month pregnant family member.

If we can assume Rome had sent many who were responsible for the taking of the census (both officials and soldiers) and knowing the Jewish scruples concerning separation, they would have probably kept them as far as possible from private homes and

therefore in public inns. The owner of the inn should not be charged with cruelty therefore since he simply did not have the room, between those being registered and the Roman officials.

The notion that the birthplace was a cave goes back to Justin Martyr (about 114-165 AD). Helena, the mother of Constantine, built a church on the presumed site of the nativity, which can be neither proved or disproved. *The importance of the nativity is not where but the lowliness and humility involved in the site of the incarnation (2 Cor 8:9).*

**v8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. :** shepherds as a whole were a despised class and under Rabbinic ban. This was not only because of their necessary isolation from religious ordinances and their manner of life which made strict legal observance almost impossible, but in addition they were suspected of confusing “thine” with “mine.” They were therefore looked down upon, and were even excluded from being able to give testimony in court. Godet quotes from a treatise “Aboda Zara” in which it is forbidden to give help to shepherds and the heathen. [Godet, *Luke*] Even in birth, Jesus came to “proclaim the good news to the poor, to set free the downtrodden...” (Isa 61:1).

**When was Jesus born?** It is *impossible* to ascertain the month in which Jesus was born, but Hendriksen agrees with Lenski’s statement which may be a proper summation, “While Dec. 25 is only traditional ... it is at least traditional.” [Hendriksen, *Luke*]

- as for the sheep in the pasture, it has been shown that sheep destined for temple sacrifice could be found in the fields even in winter. “The same Mishnic passage also leads us to infer, that these flocks lay out all the year round, since they are spoken of as in the fields thirty days before the Passover - that is, in the month of February, when in Palestine the average rainfall is nearly greatest.” [Edersheim, *Life of Messiah*]
- the date of Dec 25 was proposed as the date of Christ’s birth much before Constantine. As early as Hippolytus were students of the bible focusing on this date (Hippolytus was a disciple of Irenaeus, who was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John).
- those opposed to Dec 25 do so because it coincides with Saturnalia, the orgiastic pagan festival celebrating the return of the sun. Festival gifts were exchanged. It became the “official” date of Christ’s birth when during the reign of Constantine (306-337 AD) special enquiry was made and Dec 25 received official sanction.

*keeping watch* uses a play on words, *watching watches*. “There was near Bethlehem, on the road to Jerusalem, a tower known as *Migdal Eder*, or *the watch-tower of the flock*. Here was the station where shepherds watched the flocks destined for sacrifice in the temple.... It was a settled conviction among the Jews that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, and equally that He was to be revealed from Migdal Eder. The beautiful significance of the revelation of the infant Christ to shepherds watching the flocks destined for sacrifice needs no comment.” [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

**v9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: :** there is no definite article for *angel*, and *came upon them* should not be taken in a hostile sense. It could be rendered *an angel of the Lord stood by them*.

**and they were sore afraid. :** literally, *they feared with great fear*. Note the common reaction, and compare that with the proud statements of sinful men.

**v10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, :** *good tidings* is from the same word which we translate *gospel*, *evangelizomai*. Wycliffe translates it as *I evangelize to you a great joy*.

**which shall be to all people. :** literally *the people*, referring primarily to Israel but would not exclude the Gentiles.

**v11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. :** according to Hendriksen, the wording places the emphasis on the fact that Jesus is Saviour.

**v12 And this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. :** as with Mary, the angels did not command the shepherds to go visit the baby, but merely a hint was sufficient. The sign was a baby in the manger, for while there may have been another or several babies wrapped in swaddling clothes in Bethlehem, the Lord was laid in an animal’s feed trough.

**v13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, :** *host* is literally *army*. I picture the allies opening the gates of the WW II concentration camps to proclaim to the inhabitants, “Peace has been declared! You are free!”

**v14 Glory to God in the highest, :** the angels begin with an outburst of adoration for the Lord. “These angels, having been associated with Christ in heaven before His incarnation, knew something about His glory, riches, and majesty. See Isaiah 6:1-4; John 12:41. They had also become aware of man’s fall. And they had been informed that God had provided a way of salvation for man.... Did they also know that this work of saving man, while at the same time fully maintaining God’s righteousness, meant that the Father would not spare His own Son; that the Son, though He was rich, for His people’s sake would become poor, vicariously bearing the curse resting on those whom He came to save; and that the Holy Spirit would condescend to dwell in sinful hearts, applying to them the salvation merited by the Son? We can assume at least that the very birth of Christ in a condition of poverty and deprivation must have caused these angels to stand in awe of God’s indescribable marvelous love. Was it not Paul who, when reflecting on this love, cried out, ‘Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!’ (2 Cor 8:9; 9:15)? And was not this very love

probably included among ‘the things which angels desire to look into’ (1 Pet 1:12), but could not comprehend? ... One might perhaps say that, having become informed about the Saviour’s birth, a birth under such circumstances and with such a self-sacrificing purpose, these angels never before had been so thrilled! No wonder, therefore, that from the bottom of their hearts they shout: Glory to God in the Highest!” [Hendriksen, *Luke*]

**and on earth peace, good will toward men. :** the Bible versions differ here, a result of a single Greek letter on the word for *good will*.

- The KJV takes the word as a noun. The reading would be broken into three sections:

Glory to God in the highest  
and on earth peace (between man and man)  
good will (of God) among men.

Taken as such the good will is general, in the sense that the Lord is gracious to all men and would refer to what we call “common grace.”

- many of the newer versions take the sense of *good will* as possessive. The reading would be broken into two sections:

Glory to God in the highest  
and on earth peace among men in whom He is well pleased.

Another rendering could be *unto men of good pleasure* (Lk 10:21; Eph 1:4,5,9). This form ‘men of [His, i.e. God’s] good will’ is common among the Hebrews and it must be remembered Luke was probably using Semitic sources for the birth narratives. Whose good pleasure? Clearly the Lord’s, with the angels glorying not in man and his merits but God and His grace. It has a sense of *and on earth peace among men whom God has graciously chosen*. This of course conforms with other scripture which speaks of the Lord gathering for Himself a new humanity.

One seems to make a general statement regarding God’s goodness to all mankind universally, the other narrows and magnifies the graciousness of God (while of course not denying the general goodness to all) to those to whom it pleases Him to bestow those blessings.

**v15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, :** “That is always the critical time. What the shepherds should do had been clearly implied. Will they do it? The minister has delivered his sermon. Will the listeners (including himself) take it to heart? The doctor has prescribed medication. Will the patient follow his prescription?” [Hendriksen, *Luke*]

**the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. :** the implication is that the shepherds had to go some distance to Bethlehem, the place was not next door. Nevertheless they left immediately.

**v16,17 And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. :** among those who they would undoubtedly have told is those who came to the temple to worship, since they kept charge over the flocks of the sacrificial animals.

**v18,19 And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. :** *kept* is literally *to guard* and therefore *to keep as the result of guarding*; the word is very expressive: *kept with herself, to guard within herself, closely*. *Pondered* is literally *bringing together*, in the sense of comparing and weighing the facts. The tense used implies continued action.

A contrast is being formed here with the general public’s reaction and that of Mary. Publicly, there was a passing wonder and surprise, *but* with Mary there was a profound impression and exercise of mind. “All wondered, but Mary thought on all the wonderful things that had happened to herself and to the shepherds; keeping them well in mind, and putting them together, so as to see what they all meant. The wonder of the many was a transient emotion; this recollecting and brooding of Mary was an abiding habit.” [Nicoll, *Greek NT*] It could be translated *But Mary continued to treasure up all these things, mulling them over in her mind*. Wuest: “*And all those who heard marvelled concerning the things which were spoken by the shepherds to them. But Mary kept on continually guarding all these words in her heart and bringing them together for the purpose of considering them in their total import.*” This same contrast may be found today. During the Christmas holiday, there is what seems to be the bulk of our culture who hears and understands (at least to a degree) the Christmas story and is touched emotionally. But while momentarily enthralled in it’s simplicity and beauty, the memory soon passes and life returns to normal. Then there are those whom God has been pleased to touch spiritually who *keep* and *guard* these precious truths deep within, never tiring of thinking upon them. Often these themes return during meditation and their hearts are filled to overflowing while reflecting on the great things the Lord has done for His people. This is the contrast Luke brings forth between the average listener in Bethlehem and Mary.

**v20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and see, as it was told unto them. :** far from being disappointed in what they had seen, or offended by the low estate of Joseph and Mary, they indeed acknowledged the child as the Saviour. Instead of complaining, they constantly ascribed glory and praise to God.