

Luke 2:1-21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 2 verses 1 to 21. In these days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, 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, who was with child.

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.

And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord.

[1 : 0 6] And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, and 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 among those with whom he is pleased.

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us. And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.

And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Luke chapter 2 begins with a census of the whole world by Caesar Augustus. This sets Luke's story within the context of the wider empire of Rome, much as the later story of Israel in the Old Testament is placed within the context of larger empires, such as Assyria, Babylon, the Medo-Persians, as the influence of Israel and the Lord is felt throughout the wider world that Israel inhabits.

[2 : 3 1] Luke's narrative in Luke and Acts will conclude with Paul in Rome. By mentioning Rome at this point, this wider world provides a backdrop for the gospel, even though most of the action within it will be contained within Israel's borders and population.

It also makes clear that Israel is under foreign control. Under the shadow of Roman rule, an heir of David is returning to the city of David. Much ink has been spilt on the subject of Luke's census, as there immediately seems to be a number of problems.

First of all, Quirinius was not the governor of Syria at the time of Jesus' birth. Second, there's no evidence that people would have to return to their ancestral town to be registered, or that Mary would need to accompany Joseph.

And third, Judea wouldn't be included in such a census, because it was a client kingdom of the Romans, under the rule of Herod the Great. While I won't get into all of these issues here, here are a few observations in response.

First of all, it's likely that Bethlehem was not just Joseph's ancestral home, that it was his family home. Mary's home was in Nazareth, where Joseph had gotten betrothed to her.

[3 : 39] They then moved down to Bethlehem together, as their initial home as a couple, as Joseph presumably owned property and had family there. This was where he came from. Joseph takes Mary with him, because Bethlehem is his family home, and he intends that having been betrothed in Nazareth, they marry and settle in Bethlehem.

The census provides the occasion for this, but he goes back, because that's where he owns property. That's where he belongs. Later, as we read in Matthew chapter 2, they move back to her hometown of Nazareth, for the safety of the infant.

And there we get the impression that Joseph and Mary belonged in Bethlehem. They weren't just visiting there for a short period of time. Perhaps the best explanation I've found for the census is that advanced by Stephen Carlson, who argues that Augustus' census was not a once-off general census, but that Luke is referring here to a larger census policy.

The reference to the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria is better translated, he argues, as this became a very important registration when Quirinius was governing Syria.

Now, why would he refer to this? Because the 6 AD census under Quirinius was the time and context of the rise of Judas the Galilean and his resistance to the Roman Empire.

[4 : 59] He started the movement of the Zealots, which eventually led to the Jewish war with Rome in the late 60s AD. This was a hugely important event within people's memory, and it's referred to elsewhere in scripture in Acts chapter 5 verse 37, further evidence that Luke had some idea of the relevant history.

In Acts 5 verse 37 he writes, Other options have been suggested.

Some have suggested two periods of office for Quirinius. Perhaps one of the most important things to bear in mind here is the limited character of much of the historical evidence that we are working with, and how often we are in danger of jumping to conclusions on the basis of silence or very limited evidence.

There are a great many occasions where scepticism about the historical veracity of details in the Gospels has been challenged by later emergence of evidence that directly supports them. The infant is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger because there's no room for them in the inn.

We've all seen nativity plays in which the innkeeper turns away Mary and Joseph. Usually the assumption is that there were such crowds of people in the town for the census that they didn't have space in all lodgings.

[6 : 19] This is almost certainly mistaken. Joseph is just a young man returning to his family home, not to his ancestral home. There wouldn't be that much movement around, nor should we expect that the registration was all occurring on a single day, or a short succession of days.

These censuses could last many years. They weren't just over a period of days. Others have imagined that there was some sort of prejudice against Mary and Joseph, and so the innkeeper didn't let them in.

But there is a far simpler answer. There was no inn, and there was no innkeeper. It doesn't even need to mean that there was no room in the family guest room, so that they had to camp out with the animals, although it could mean that.

Rather, the more likely explanation is that they weren't short-term visitors to Bethlehem, but had moved back there on account of the registration and the marriage, and lived there.

The simplest way to understand it is that they were living with Joseph's wider family. They would have a smaller marital room attached to the house, but that room didn't have room for her to give birth, and so they had to relocate to the main room of the house, where the animals would also be present, in order to give birth.

[7 : 28] When he's born, Jesus can then be placed into one of the feeding troughs of the animals. While fishermen are prominent in the New Testament, in which the gospel goes out beyond the land to reach the Gentile peoples, shepherds dominate in the Old Testament.

The patriarchs were shepherds. They were distinguished from the Egyptians by that fact. Moses was a shepherd, as was David. In a familiar Old Testament image, both God and the leaders of Israel were regarded as shepherds of the people, with the nation as their flock.

See that in Psalm 23, or in Jeremiah chapter 3 verse 15, or 23 verse 1 to 4, and most strikingly perhaps in Ezekiel chapter 34. Moses was a shepherd, and he delivered Israel from Pharaoh as a shepherd, using a shepherd's rod to strike the enemy of his people, and leading Israel through the wilderness, like a flock.

This is the way it's described in Isaiah chapter 63 verses 11 to 13. Moses' first encounter with the Lord was while keeping watch over his father-in-law's flock.

He saw an angelic appearance with glory phenomena, something that probably occurred at night, considering the appearance of fire, and he was given the further sign that he would later worship the Lord on Mount Horeb with the people after bringing them out of Egypt.

[8 : 47] The shepherds in Luke are watching their flocks. When they are given a glorious angelic appearance, accompanied with the glory of the Lord, and are also given a further sign. And I think we should notice the parallels between Exodus chapter 3 verse 12 and Luke chapter 2 verse 12.

In Exodus, And this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you. When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain. In Luke chapter 2 verse 12, And this will be a sign for you.

You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, and lying in a manger. The contrast within the parallel is striking, however. The sign received by Luke's shepherds is that of a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, laid in a manger.

The sign given to Moses, the pyrotechnics of Israel's encounter with and worship of the Lord at Sinai, is eclipsed by the sign of an infant in a feeding trough. In both cases, shepherds are led to an encounter with the Lord.

In the first, the Lord is shrouded in the dread darkness of the thundering and fiery glory cloud, and in the second, he has come as a swaddled child in a manger. The significance of the sign of the swaddled child in a Bethlehem manger being given to shepherds probably arises from Old Testament prophecy.

[10 : 05] The Old Testament foretold the coming of a messianic shepherd from the line and the town of David. Ezekiel chapter 34 verse 23, And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them.

He shall feed them and be their shepherd. In Micah chapter 5 verse 2 to 5, But you, O Bethlehem of Fratha, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has given birth. Then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel, and he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth, and he shall be their peace. An infant in a sheep's manger in Bethlehem, the town of David's own birth, is a sign that she who is in labour has brought forth.

We can hear the story of Rachel in the background of Micah's prophecy. Just before the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel, Jacob is told that kings will come from his loins. And while journeying towards Bethlehem, Rachel gives birth to Benjamin and dies.

[11 : 23] That story lies in the background of Micah chapter 4 and 5. But now Bethlehem has been reached, and the true king is to be born. The shepherds, symbolising the leaders of Israel, encounter the promised great shepherd.

However there is a surprise. The one who was to feed the people as his flock is himself in the feeding trough. The Messiah will feed his flock, but not in the way that people might have expected.

He will be their food. Moses had a significant and foreshadowing encounter with the shepherds at a well in Midian, prior to his encounter with the Lord at the burning bush. He delivered the seven daughters of Jethro from the abusive shepherds and watered their flocks.

The one drawn from the water became the one who gave water in the wilderness. And his later ministry involved resisting false shepherds and leading and watering the people as the Lord's flock in the wilderness.

And there's also foreshadowing in Luke's account of the shepherds. Later in Luke's gospel, he describes Joseph of Arimathea requesting the body of Jesus from Pilate. In Luke chapter 23, verse 53.

[12 : 27] Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone where no one had yet been lain. The comparison with the description of the birth of Jesus is a pronounced one.

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn. The child wrapped in linen cloths and laid in the manger is later wrapped in linen garments and laid in the tomb.

The comparisons don't end here. Shortly after the wrapping of the body of Jesus and laying it in the manger or the tomb, there is a dazzling appearance of angels. Once again, a sign is given, but the sign is no longer the wrapped body of Jesus in a stone container, but it's the unwrapped linen garments and the empty tomb.

The women within Luke's resurrection account both receive the angelic message and serve as the angels, the apostolic shepherds. And in both cases, the result is marvelling.

We see that in chapter 2, verse 18 and in chapter 24, verse 12. The conclusion of Luke's gospel also tells the story of the shepherds. There, the apostolic shepherds are charged as witnesses of the resurrection who will make widely known the fulfilled sign concerning the sun.

[13 : 42] We could compare chapter 24, verses 45 to 49 with chapter 2, verse 17 here. The gospel ends with words that echo the end of the account of the shepherd's visit.

In Luke 24, 52 to 53, and they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple blessing God. In Luke 2, verse 20, and the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told them.

Luke's account of the shepherds is the story of a wondrous and remarkable sign. It's reminiscent of the sign of the burning bush. It's anticipatory of the sign of the empty tomb and it's revelatory of the promised arrival of the Davidic shepherd.

The shepherd Moses' burning bush anticipated the greater sign of the burning mountain of Sinai as the law's presence descended upon it, appearing to the people that Moses shepherded out of Egypt.

The wrapped child in the manger seen by the Bethlehem shepherds anticipated the greater sign of the unwrapped linen garments in the empty tomb to the apostolic shepherds.

[14 : 49] The account of the shepherds as witnesses, the bursting forth in praise, the theme of rejoicing and people pondering things in their hearts also connects this account with that which precedes it in the account of John the Baptist's birth and Zachariah's song of praise.

Once again, the purpose of such an account is to help the reader to interpret the meaning of the events. The angels are bringing good news of the birth of the Davidic Messiah to shepherds.

Some have observed that the language of Lord, good news and saviour were all terms that were prominently used within the imperial cult concerning the emperor with whose action in calling a census this chapter was opened.

If Matthew frames Jesus as a challenger to Herod as the king of the Jews, Luke might be framing Jesus as one whose kingdom will eclipse that of Rome. A question to consider.

This chapter begins with the actions of the great Roman emperor Caesar Augustus. But rather than sending heavenly emissaries to give the news of the birth of this new king to Caesar, God sends them to some small town shepherds on the night shift.

[15 : 57] What are some of the things that we learn about the character of the kingdom of God from our passage?