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# Bethlehem, Tax Census and Birth

### Bethlehem

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

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. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.

*Luke 2:1-6*

Matthew 2:1 and Luke 2:4-7 state that the Lord Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The town of Bethlehem lies on a ridge about 2,500 feet high some six miles south and slightly west of Jerusalem in the Judean hills. In Old Testament history Bethlehem was the home of David, son of Jesse, (1 Samuel 16:1) and was therefore the ‘town of David’ (1 Sam 20:6 and Luke 2:4—in older English translations of the Bible sometimes rendered ‘city of David’). King David however, decided to make his capital at Jerusalem and

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Bethlehem remained a ‘town’ as it is called in John 7:42. Older translations, such as the Revised Standard Version, render this, perhaps more correctly in view of its small size in Herod’s day, as ‘village’. The prophet Micah thought of Bethlehem as of great potential importance when he wrote of it as being the home of the future messianic ruler (Micah 5:2) and this is certainly how the town was viewed in Herod’s day (Matt 2:4-5).

The name Bethlehem is rendered in Arabic, *Bayt Lahm* (“House of Meat”) and in Hebrew *Bet Lehem* (“House of Bread”) The town is certainly an ancient settlement being (possibly) mentioned in the Amarna Letters —14th century B.C. diplomatic documents found at Tell el-Amarna, Egypt. The Hebrew meaning of *Bet Lehem* (“House of Bread”) is doubly significant when we consider Christ’s controversial assertion that He is *the Bread of Life*. The account of Jesus using this title is found in John 6:25-59. “But here is the bread that comes down from heaven,” said Jesus (verse 50), “which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven.” This was extremely controversial at the time, but provides a much deeper significance to the ancient Hebrew name of David’s town.

Bethlehem is first mentioned in the Bible in relation to Rachel, who died on the wayside near there (Gen 35:19), and is the setting for most of the Book of Ruth, one of David’s ancestors. It was in Bethlehem that David was anointed as king of Israel (1 Sam 16) by the prophet Samuel. The town was fortified by Rehoboam, David’s grandson and the first king of Judah after the division of the state between Israel and Judah (2 Chronicles 11). Following the return of Jewish exiles to Judah after their Babylonian Captivity (516 BC and after), the town was progressively repopulated by the Hebrews. Much later, a Roman garrison was stationed in Bethlehem during the second Jewish revolt led by Bar Kokhba (AD 135).

The site of the Nativity of Jesus was identified by Justin Martyr, a second century Christian apologist, as a manger in a cave close to the village. The cave, which is today under the nave of the Church of the Nativity in the heart of Bethlehem, has been venerated by

Christians ever since. It is frankly impossible to state whether or not this was the precise site of Jesus' birth. Christians should always be wary of the danger of venerating things or places, rather than the One who provided them. It might be added that it is a fact (and believing Christians would add, a wise and godly fact) that no details or artefacts of Jesus or any of His disciples have survived. This may well be God's protection against the possibility of superstition taking hold among His people. The only fully dependable records we have, Christians believe, are those of the Bible itself.

Not only Old Testament prediction via the words of Micah, but also rabbinic teaching, pointed directly to Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah. Micah 5:2 was universally understood at the time of Jesus' birth as identifying Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah. Besides this, the practice of using *Targumim* to translate and interpret Scripture from Hebrew to other languages pointed in the same direction. Thus the *Targum Jonathan*, mentioned in Alfred Edersheim stated this to be the case.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the *Talmud* (scholarly interpretations of the *Mishna* — the codification of Jewish Law) contained references to the belief, such as one citing an imaginary conversation between an Arab and a Jew, where Bethlehem is named as the Messiah's birthplace. (Mentioned in Edersheim again —see reference below)

Whilst the birth in Bethlehem is affirmed by Matthew and Luke, neither Mark or John mention the fact. There is, however, in John's Gospel an oblique reference to the Bethlehem birth, in the context of a contemporary debate about the Lord Jesus among his fellow countrymen. So in John 7:40-43 we read: "On hearing his words, some of the people said 'Surely this man is the Prophet?' Others said 'He is the Christ'. Still others asked, 'How can the Christ come from Galilee? Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?' Thus the people were divided because of Jesus." We see in these verses the fact that John also understood The Lord's birth to have taken place in Bethlehem —otherwise he would presumably have commented upon it.

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Nothing less likely than the circumstances of the Gospel accounts of the birth in Bethlehem would have suggested itself to Jewish minds: a boy born of a visitor from Nazareth, not a native of Bethlehem, to participate in a counting of the people, or census, carried out at the instruction of a heathen emperor, and executed by one so universally hated as Herod, the emperor's puppet king. These facts would have been totally repugnant to all Jewish expectations.<sup>2</sup> Had the Gospel writers wanted to create a legend around Jesus' birth, in order to persuade Jews of the messiahship of Jesus, they would surely have chosen a more likely and more conducive scenario! If the account of the circumstances which brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem had no basis in fact, but was simply a plot to locate the birth of a Nazarene in the royal town of David, then it must be pronounced a most clumsily devised plot. There is nothing to account for the origin of such a 'legend', either in parallel events in the past, or from contemporary expectations. So why, apart from their belief in its truthfulness, should the Gospel writers have connected the birth of the Lord Jesus with what was most repugnant to Israel?

### **The tax census**

The census is by no means a modern invention. Practised in ancient times, it was used then, as today, for two extremely reasonable purposes. It provided the relevant information firstly for drafting men for military service and secondly for tax. In subject countries it was the second of these that most concerned Rome. Without exacting tribute from its foreign possessions, Rome could not with its own resources have sustained its magnificent and extravagant style.

There has been some debate in recent years as to the reliability of Luke's report of the Tax Census called by the Emperor Augustus. Some arguments have been scholarly, but others decidedly not! The problem revolves around the fact that P. Sulpicius Quirinius (sometimes written as Cyrenius), who undertook the census on behalf of the emperor, is known to have carried out such a census in AD 6, when he became governor of Syria. At this time

Judaea was absorbed into the Syriac territory as part of Quirinius' responsibility to 'wind-up' the estate of Herod's son Archelaus who had by this time been banished to Vienna by the Emperor as a result of various misdemeanours. Jesus was born, as best can be reckoned, in 6-5 BC. Luke 2:2 says, "this was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria." But he did not become governor of Syria until ten years later. Did Luke make a mistake? Worse, did he make the story up?

If Luke had been in the business of making up stories, he would not have done so about such an event. He would surely have selected some other, less controversial but more nebulous reason to prise Mary and Joseph out of Nazareth and locate them in Bethlehem. After all, Luke knew full well about the census in AD 6—he referred to it in Acts 5:37! So, we appear to have a major dating problem, indeed Paul Barnett suggests that it is probably the major historical problem in the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> Let us be precise, then, about the nature of this problem. Luke refers to Mary's conception of Jesus as being "in the time of Herod, King of Judea" (Luke 1:5 and 36) and to Jesus' birth as occurring "while Quirinius was governor of Syria" (Luke 2:2). A ten year gap separates the two events from our present understanding of history.

Some scholars believe that Luke made a glaring error, yet this would be most remarkable for an educated man who wrote both his Gospel account and the book of Acts some years after the event and was certainly aware of the latter census under Quirinius. It also does not fit neatly with the idea of a witness who himself "carefully investigated everything from the beginning" (Luke 1:3). A number of points therefore need to be made:

1. The problem is confined, as Paul Barnett points out, to one very short sentence of eight Greek words. While the most likely translation is, "This was the first census that took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria," it is possible that the correct rendering should be: "This was the first census that took place *before* Quirinius was governor of Syria." In other words, it is telling us that the census that took place before that of the well known

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census in AD 6, so that the two are not confused. This is certainly a possibility: while the translation may have become corrupted, it might well have been an objective of Luke to emphasise that the census was *not* the famous Quirinius/Syriac one, so his readers were quite clear that Jesus was born in the time of Herod.

2. It is possible that such a census coincided with the oath of loyalty that all the people made to Herod and Augustus in 7 BC. (See point 5 below.) If so, this would virtually coincide with Jesus' presumed date of birth and with the triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn which occurred that year and which may have been the 'star' followed by the wise men from the east.

3. The supposed error should be compared with the precision with which Luke writes in the very next chapter (Luke 3:1-2), "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanius tetrarch of Abilene – during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...." This accurate information proves that Luke was well aware of the complex division of the former Herod's kingdom, including the part of it then under direct Roman rule.

4. At the time of the famous Quirinius census, in AD 6, the census applied only to the people of Judea, not Galilee, where Mary and Joseph were. So it is highly unlikely that the betrothed couple would have responded to a census covering Judea only. It is far more likely that the census was an earlier one covering Judea *and* Galilee, both then under the control of Herod 'the Great'.

5. Whilst Herod 'the Great' had been Rome's useful puppet king during most of his reign and had paid considerable honours to his Roman overlords (naming buildings after Augustus, naming his Jerusalem palace 'Caesarium' and so on), and most crucially kept the peace within his borders, towards the end of his reign Herod did incur the Emperor Augustus' deep displeasure. And this would have been about the time that the Lord Jesus was born.

The cause of Augustus' displeasure was Herod's invasion of the neighbouring kingdom of the Nabataeans. Herod made two attempts to placate and curry favour with Augustus, both of which

backfired badly: first in 7 BC he issued an order that all people in his kingdom should take an oath of loyalty to himself and to Augustus. Six thousand Pharisees refused to comply for religious reasons and faced severe punishment, but Herod relented under domestic pressure. The aged Herod, losing his grip mentally as well as physically, now ordered that a giant golden eagle, symbol of Rome, should be affixed on the great gate of the Jerusalem temple. Angered by Herod's blatant disregard for Jewish religious laws against idolatry, two leading rabbis incited their followers to remove the offending symbol. For their pains Herod had them burned alive. Now desperate to please Rome, upon Emperor Augustus' issuance of a decree concerning an empire-wide census, could it be that Herod over-enthusiastically carried out the decree, insisting not only on registration, but on registration in 'ancestral homes'? This would have been a more 'Jewish' way of performing the necessary census and perhaps made it appear less Roman to a predictably hostile Jewish audience.

Whilst one, or a combination, of these possible answers to the problem may fully resolve it, there appears to be a much simpler solution. This is suggested in Werner Keller's influential and popular book *The Bible As History*.<sup>4</sup> Keller explains that Cyrenius the Governor was actually the senator P. Sulpicius Quirinius, who is known to historians from other Roman documents. The Emperor Augustus certainly rated highly the outstanding abilities of Quirinius both as an administrator and as a soldier. He was born in modest circumstances in the Alban hills near Tusculum, a place that was reckoned to be among the favourite resorts of wealthy Roman families. In AD 6 Quirinius was sent as legate to Syria. Coponius was sent with him from Rome to an appointment as the first procurator of Judea.

Between AD 6 and 7, Quirinius and Coponius carried out an administrative census for the Romans, but this certainly cannot be the one referred to by Luke, as by this time Jesus would have been over ten years old. According to Luke's narrative the census ordered by Caesar Augustus took place in the year Christ was born. For a long time, says Werner Keller, it seemed as if Luke had made

a serious mistake in his research. It was only when a fragment of a Roman inscription was discovered at Antioch that a surprising fact emerged: that P. Sulpicius Quirinius had been the Emperor's legate in Syria on an earlier occasion—in the days of Saturninus the pro-consul. At that time Quirinius' assignment had been solely a military one. He had led a campaign against the Homonadenses, a tribe in the Taurus mountains of Asia Minor. Quirinius set up his seat of government as well as his headquarters in Syria between 10 and 7 BC. This would explain why Luke emphasised that, "this was the first census while Quirinius was governor of Syria"—he wanted to make sure his readers understood he was talking about events in 6 BC, *not* AD 6. For the Judean and Galilean elements of the earlier census, Herod would have acted as Quirinius' agent.

So much for the scholarly objections to the account of the census. Readers who have access to the internet may have visited sites which purport to debate the accuracy of the Bible. These sites approach the subject from an atheist point of view and their scholarship is often questionable. One such website visited by the author made two objections to "the story". The first was that there "was no universal census at the time of Jesus birth" and then goes on to cite the 'problem' that we have just considered, i.e. Quirinius carried out his famous census in AD 6.<sup>5</sup>

The second 'problem' was that 'chaos would have resulted'! The argument is put forward: "Caesar, according to Luke, decided that everyone would have to return to the town from which they descended. Who could imagine the efficient Romans requiring millions in the empire to journey hundreds of miles to villages of millennium-old ancestors merely to give in a tax form!" This objection is rather quaint, the idea that the Romans, who thought little of nailing thousands upon thousands of vanquished foes to a forest of execution crosses should balk at the idea of mounting a census, however inconvenient to their subject peoples! As we have seen however, it appears that Herod may well have interpreted the Emperor's call for a census in his own way. The Romans would have been unlikely to have objected to this, providing the resulting tax revenues were in due course collected and paid to Rome.

## The census and Joseph and Mary

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. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

*Luke 2:4-5*

We can now follow the course of the Gospel narrative. In consequence of the decree of Caesar Augustus, Herod directed a general registration in the Jewish, rather than the Roman manner. In most practical points the two would be similar: country people being required to register in ‘their own city’—meaning the town to which the village or hamlet where they were born was attached for administrative reasons. We might think of this in modern terms as the ‘catchment area’ of the major town. Certainly most people would not be required to travel far, as most people were born, lived and died in the same place. Indeed it is possible there may have been local dispensations for certain categories of subjects to enable them to register elsewhere. But this does not seem to have been the case with Joseph.

According to the Jewish mode of registration, their people were enrolled according to *tribes, families* or clans and the *house* of their fathers. As the ten tribes of Israel had not returned to Judaea and Galilee *as tribes*, but rather as individuals and mixed-tribe groups, this could only be undertaken in a very limited way, although it would be simple enough for people to be registered in their ‘own city’ where the *house* and *lineage* of each person was recorded. In the case of Joseph and Mary, whose lineage from King David was known, it was most important that the unborn infant should be born in David’s city, and no doubt Mary and Joseph realised this in some limited way—the angel had, after all, told them that their son would inherit “the throne of his father David” (Luke 1:32). Furthermore, it was important that the birth should be recorded there. We might readily recognise, for all too obvious reasons, that Mary and Joseph were probably glad to leave Nazareth and

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if possible seek a new home in Bethlehem. In these circumstances Mary, now the ‘wife’ of Joseph, though in fact continuing the correct relationship of betrothal, would certainly accompany her husband to Bethlehem, even though the law did not require her presence.

The impression is certainly formed that the couple intended to stay in Bethlehem; the fact that Herod ordered the destruction of boys up to two years of age, and the reference to the wise men coming to worship the infant in a *house* (Matt 2: 11) both suggest that the couple stayed on in Bethlehem after the birth. And the fact that it took a warning in a dream to persuade Joseph to quit Bethlehem also lends weight to the idea that Mary and Joseph had intended to settle permanently.

### **No room at the inn – the birth of the Lord Jesus**

The journey from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judaea would have been something a little in excess of ninety miles, including likely detours. The way would have been long and tiring, whatever route was taken from Nazareth. In all probability the route chosen would have been that most often followed by Jews, out of their strong desire to avoid the hated Samaria, along the eastern banks of the Jordan and by the fords of Jericho. Travel down the Jordan valley would have taken them past the Gentile city of Scythopolis, through the bleak Judaeian desert, on through the oasis city Jericho, and then by a slow ascent of some 4,000 ft through the ravines up to Jerusalem. This route would have taken at least six days to travel, but Mary’s condition would certainly have necessitated a slower pace.

Although passing through one of the warmest regions of ‘Palestine’, the likely time of year (winter, as we shall see later) must have increased the difficulties of the journey. It must have been with a sense of great relief that the couple reached the rich fields that surrounded the ancient ‘House of Bread’ and, passing through the valley leading into the town, no doubt recalled some of the former glories associated with the names of Ruth and Boaz, of Jesse and of David himself.

There was a distinct contrast, however, between that glorious past and the circumstances of the present for, as the travellers reached the heights of Bethlehem, the most prominent object in view was the great castle to the south-east of the town which Herod 'the Great' had built, and immodestly named after himself, as Herodium. Whilst Mary and Joseph could not yet realise the danger to which the king would shortly put them and their unborn son, they would probably have been aware of the fearsome reputation of the castle and the king whose name it bore. Herodium was a fortress palace, which became the final resting place of the bloody king, who would soon be buried there. In all, along the borders of his kingdom and for internal control, Herod possessed no fewer than eleven fortresses, of which Herodium near Bethlehem and Herodium in Jordan were his own constructions. The remainder had been built by Maccabean and Hasmonean leaders and later re-fortified and improved by Herod.

Josephus says that Herodium near Bethlehem was built on an artificial hill (which remains to this day) and was lavishly decorated by Herod. The site was chosen because it was where, in 40 BC, Herod fought and won an important battle against the Hasmoneans and their Parthian supporters (*War* 1:13:8:265). Of the castle-palace itself, Josephus tells us: "He bestowed much curious art upon it with great ambition, and built round towers all about the top of it, and filled up the remaining space with the most costly palaces round about, insomuch that not only the sight of the inner apartments was splendid, but great wealth was laid out on the outward walls, and partitions and roofs also. Besides this, he brought a mighty quantity of water from a great distance, and at vast charges, and raised an ascent to it of two hundred steps of the whitest marble...." (*War* 1:21:10:419-420.)<sup>6</sup> It was no doubt from this self-congratulatory fortress that Herod's soldiers issued forth to carry out his order to slaughter the infant boys in Bethlehem and surrounding parts.

The first necessity for Joseph and Mary on reaching Bethlehem was to find shelter and rest. The little town was crowded with those who had travelled from outlying districts to register their

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names. Had the visitors from Galilee known anyone in the town personally, they would have found their house fully occupied. Even the inn<sup>7</sup> was filled, and the only available space was the place where cattle were normally stabled. It should be noted at this point that Luke's account does not state categorically that the place of Jesus' birth was a stable. It is only conjecture, though entirely reasonable and likely to be true, that the place was a stable. Mary placed the new born baby in a manger *because there was no room for them in the inn*. It is possible that a manger was taken from a stable and used in some other place, but the three references to the manger (Luke 2:7, Luke 2:12 and Luke 2:16) clearly imply there was something unusual and very humble about the circumstances of the Lord's birth.

“Bearing in mind the simple habits in the east,” writes Alfred Edersheim, reflecting on the use of a stable, “this scarcely implies what it would in the west; and perhaps the seclusion and privacy from the noisy, chattering crowd, which thronged the khan, would be all the more welcome.”<sup>8</sup> We cannot help, however, being amazed that the King of Glory, the Creator of the world and the author of moral perfection should have chosen to allow His Son to be born in such circumstances. Plainly in this circumstance there is in evidence a real-life parable being acted out. The King of Glory had become the Servant-King, identifying first and foremost with the poor of this world, and with the social outcasts. Not for Him all those things that the world holds so dear: wealth, comfort and position. For the Saviour, only a borrowed stable. Far from men's deference, all that the Lord received was mankind's meanest left-overs.

The point is fairly made that the Greek word rendered “inn” in most Bible translations (Luke 2:7 —there was no room for them at *the inn*) should perhaps more correctly be rendered “lodging house”. Very similar Greek words are used in Luke 9:12 and Luke 19:7, where the context is about finding lodgings. The New Testament Greek word used by Luke for what we might call a ‘commercial inn’ is quite different (as used in Luke 10:34). The idea often advanced today is that Joseph would have sought to

stay with relatives in Bethlehem and that the domestic housing arrangements for most poor folk in biblical times involved humans living and sleeping on a raised platform, whilst animals occupied a lower “ground floor” space. So humans and animals lived in very close proximity, as animals would be brought into the ‘house’ at night, for protection from predators and the elements. The argument is heard that, because Bethlehem was overcrowded, and the upper space was filled to capacity, Mary and Joseph were forced to sleep (and Mary to give birth) in the lower space, amongst the animals. The theory may be correct but there are some possible flaws, as we now consider.

Firstly, Joseph may indeed *not* have sought relatives in Bethlehem. He came from Nazareth, so any relatives may have been quite distant. Although the rules of hospitality would probably have demanded that even distant relatives should provide lodging, Joseph may not have sought them out. He left Nazareth with Mary for good reasons, we have already conjectured—to leave behind any tittle-tattle about the timing of the child’s birth. Lodging with even distant relatives would surely soon have reignited unwelcome explanations. Modern Jehovah’s Witnesses, who deny Christ’s deity and have made it an article of faith not to celebrate or acknowledge Christmas in any form, question many elements of our ‘traditional’ understanding of the Nativity. They say that the placing of a child in a manger signifies only that the device also made an excellent crib, even when placed in a house—or on the ground floor of a built dwelling. However Luke’s triple reference to the use of a manger (Luke 2:7, 12 and 16) may be to emphasise the unusual nature of this aspect of the Lord’s birth. Whilst we cannot be totally sure of this aspect of the account, it seems equally likely that indeed the traditional view is correct. Mary and Joseph arrive in a strange town, overcrowded on account of the tax census, and fail to find proper lodging. Instead an outhouse of some sort is offered to them and they accept, with no other option.

Others who doubt the idea that a borrowed stable could be the location of the Lord’s birth have suggested that a wise and

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honourable man like Joseph would never have allowed his wife to bear a child in such a place. But this view simply ignores the exigency of the situation —*there was no room at the inn*. These same critics argue that we must stretch our imagination a long way to believe that there was not one innkeeper in the whole of Bethlehem who could offer reasonable accommodation to the weary travellers —and that it is inconceivable that Almighty God would allow His Son to be born in a borrowed stable. They perhaps forget that his body was to be laid in a borrowed grave (Matt 27:60; John 19:41). No, the Gospel writers leave us in little doubt that the circumstances of the Lord's birth were in every way testing and humbling.

Although in our modern view, it may seem important to possess details of the event of the Lord Jesus' birth — after all, the most important birth in history — the Gospels provide none. All we are given by Luke is: "While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, for there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2: 6-7).

The Gospels were never intended to provide a biography, nor even the material for one. They were provided so that, in the words of John, "you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). Commenting on this lack of detail, Edersheim writes:

"It is better that it should be so. As to all that passed in the seclusion of that 'stable' — the circumstances of the 'Nativity', even its exact time after the arrival of Mary (brief as it must have been) — the Gospel narrative is silent. This only is told, that then and there the Virgin-Mother 'brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger.'" Beyond this announcement of the bare fact, Holy Scripture, with indescribable appropriateness and delicacy, draws a veil over that most sacred mystery. Two impressions only are left on the mind: that of utmost earthly humility, in the surrounding circumstances; and that of inward fitness, in the contrast suggested by them. Instinctively, reverently, we feel it is well it should have been

so. It best befits the birth of the Christ —if He be what the New Testament declared Him.”<sup>9</sup>

But the humble circumstances provide strong indirect evidence of the truthfulness of the account we have in the Bible. If it was the outcome of Jewish imagination, then where is the basis for it in terms of contemporary expectation? Would Jewish legend have portrayed the Messiah as being born in a stable, to which lowly circumstance His mother had been reduced on account of a tax census by a foreign power? All contemporary Jewish thought would have run contrary to this! Opponents of the authenticity of the Gospel accounts of the Lord’s birth are bound to face and answer this. It might be added, no myth would ever have been given with such scantiness of detail —the essential features of legend and of tradition are that they always seek to portray their heroes with glory, and to provide detail in their accounts that emphasise this heroic portrayal. In both these respects, a sharper contrast with the Gospel narratives could hardly be imagined.

### **The visit of the shepherds**

And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, 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.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the

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word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

*Luke 2:8-20*

We can perhaps imagine the traditional scene in our mind's eye —so often have we seen it depicted in Christmas cards and children's books: a clear mid-winter sky, stars glistening brilliantly in the clear, cold night air. This was before the days of atmospheric and 'light pollution'! Even today the 'firmament' in the southern hemisphere glows with an intensity that many of us who live in northern climes do not fully appreciate. Perhaps huddled around a small fire, trying vainly to keep the night chill at bay, sit a handful of shepherds. Silhouetted faintly behind them we can see the shapes of a large flock of sheep scattered across the hillside. A shepherd's crook or two may lean against a small boulder. Suddenly a brilliant light bursts upon the scene, illuminating the startled faces of the shepherds —and, in the words of the famous carol, "the angel of the Lord came down and glory shone around."

Jewish tradition regarding the birth of the Messiah is also illuminating. It was a settled conviction that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, as we have already seen. So too was the belief that the Messiah was to be revealed from *Migdal Eder* - 'the tower of the flock' according to the Targum Pseudo-Jon on Genesis 35:21. (This concerns the death of Rachel at Bethlehem Ephrathah —after the death and burial of his wife, Jacob pitched his tent at Migdal Eder, near Bethlehem). This *Migdal Eder* was *not* the watchtower for the ordinary flocks of sheep which pastured on the barren hills beyond Bethlehem, but lay close to the town, on the road from Jerusalem.

Jack Finegan refers to third-century writings of husband and wife pilgrims Eusochium and Paula (circa 386 AD) and their first visit to Bethlehem. Paula travelled from the traditional cave of the

Nativity in Bethlehem “a short distance down the hill to the tower of Eder, that is ‘of the flock’, near which Jacob fed his flocks, and where the shepherds keeping watch by night were privileged to hear the words ‘Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill towards men.’ Hebrew Migdal Eder means “tower of the flock” (as the same words are translated in Micah 4:8) and in Genesis 35:21 Jacob is said to have journeyed on from Rachel’s tomb “and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder”. Hence, says Jack Finegan, “it was evidently supposed that the place where Jacob pastured his flocks was the same as that where the later shepherds heard the angel’s message.”<sup>10</sup>

Here we return to the helpful work of Alfred Edersheim: he points out that a passage in the Mishnah (Shek 7:4) leads to the conclusion that the flocks which pastured at Migdal Eder were destined for temple sacrifices. The Mishnah, says Edersheim, “expressly forbids the keeping of flocks throughout the land of Israel except in the wilderness —and the only flocks otherwise kept, would be those for the temple-services..... accordingly, the shepherds who watched over them, were not ordinary shepherds. The latter were under the ban of Rabbinism, on account of their necessary isolation from religious ordinances and their manner of life, which rendered strict legal observance unlikely, if not absolutely impossible. 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 passover – that is, in the month of February, when in Palestine the average rainfall is nearly greatest. Thus, Jewish tradition in some dim manner apprehended the first revelation of the Messiah from that *Migdal Eder*, where shepherds watched the temple-flocks all the year round.”<sup>11</sup>

This is a wonderful testimony to the fore-planning of God. Jesus was foreshadowed as the Lamb of God from the earliest of times. So the lamb is seen as being an acceptable sacrifice throughout the Old Testament (e.g. Gen 22:7; Ex 12:3; Lev 3:7; Isaiah 1:11). Although Jewish teaching saw a connection of the Messiah to Migdal Eder, in the sense that the Messiah would first be revealed from there, it is plain that Jewish teaching in no way

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fully understood the Messiah as being the Lamb of God, a truth only fully revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. When John the Baptist pointed out Jesus to his followers, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29, 36). We are not, wrote Peter, ransomed with perishable things like silver or gold, but with “the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Peter 1:18-19). When Philip met the Ethiopian official in Acts chapter 8, he found him reading the passage from Isaiah 53:7, “... he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before a shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” Beginning from here and in these terms Philip explained to the Ethiopian the gospel of Christ.

The lamb, of course, has always been a symbol of innocence, meekness, lowliness and gentleness. It is also a symbol of dependence. God is the Shepherd of men (Ps 23:1) and we are the sheep of his pasture (Ps 100:3). No one is more dependent than the lamb is upon the shepherd. The lamb is a symbol of trust and dependence, expressing the trust and dependence of Jesus on God His Father. Among Jews the lamb was singularly *the* animal of sacrifice. So we read in Genesis 22:7 the question of Isaac to his father Abraham: “where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” and Abraham’s answer: “God himself will provide the lamb.” In this, Christians see Abraham’s unwitting prophecy of the Messiah —after he had sacrificed the lamb miraculously provided by God, Abraham called the place “The Lord Will Provide” (Gen 22:14). Some two thousand years later the Lord again provided a Lamb without blemish for slaughter —this time on the cross at Calvary.

It is of the deepest significance, therefore, that the angels should have announced the birth of the Messiah first to shepherds whose role in life was to care for the temple’s sacrificial lambs. “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” It was the Saviour who had been born for all the people. The shepherds’ awe,

surprise and fear would quickly have given way to excitement as they heard from the angel that what they were witnessing was not judgement upon them, but news of great joy. They reacted straightaway: “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” Finding the family in a small village like Bethlehem would have presented little difficulty. Even by the primitive conditions of the time, Jesus’ birth (probably) in a stable was unusual and therefore remarkable, and no doubt news about it would have spread quickly among the village people.

“So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 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.” As temple-shepherds, no doubt one of the places to which they carried this amazing news was the temple itself. Whilst the chief priests may have heard the news, and probably scoffed at it (who, after all, would expect such an announcement to be made to lowly, unwashed men of the field?) others would have heard and believed. In this way, we may speculate, Simeon and Anna’s minds and hearts were prepared to meet the baby who would be brought to the temple just eight days later.

### **Circumcision and naming in the temple**

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. When the time for the purification according to the law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”) and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what was said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons”.

*Luke 2:21-24*

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After their exhausting journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, followed by the immediate birth of the Lord Jesus and the visit just hours later of the shepherds with their amazing account of the message from the angel, Mary and Joseph must have wondered what might happen next. As a faithful Jewish couple, anxious to fulfil all the requirements of the Law, it was to the temple in Jerusalem that Mary and Joseph next travelled, now with the new born infant. There were two reasons for this: first to dedicate and name the infant, and second to present Mary for the rite of purification.

The first of these was the circumcision, representing the voluntary and willing subjection to the conditions of the Law, but also an acceptance of the privileges of the covenant between God and His chosen people. Just as, some thirty years later, Jesus would present Himself to John the Baptist to go through the symbolic rite of baptism (Matt 3:13-15), so now His parents brought Him to the temple for the symbolic rite of circumcision as required by the Law (Gen 17:9-14). The ceremony took place, in the usual way, on the eighth day when the child was given the name Jesus (*Jeshua* in Hebrew).

The firstborn son of every household was, according to the Law (Numbers 18:16), to be “redeemed” of the priest for the price of five shekels of silver ‘according to the Sanctuary shekel’. To this simple scriptural Law, rabbinic tradition had added many needless and even repulsive details. For example, the earliest period of presentation was thirty-one days after birth, to make the legal month quite complete. The child must be the first born of his mother, neither father or mother must be of Levitic descent and the child must be free of all bodily defects which would have disqualified him from the priesthood. It was greatly dreaded that a child should die before his “redemption”. If, however, his father died before the child’s redemption, then the child was to redeem himself when of age. The redemption could be made by any priest and attendance at the temple was not a prerequisite.

The requirements for the purification of the mother after childbirth are set out in Leviticus 12. This requires the mother

to wait thirty-three days before making the necessary offering to the priest. Rabbinic tradition had increased this to forty-one days after the birth of a son, and eighty-one days after the birth of a daughter so as to make sure the biblical requirements were quite complete! In fact there was no connection between the time of the circumcision of the child and the purification of the mother. In special circumstances the circumcision might be delayed for days—in the case of sickness for example, when the ceremony would wait until recovery. Equally, the purification of the mother might take place at any later time. Typically, it might be delayed until attendance at one of the great religious feasts in Jerusalem brought the mother to that city.

So it was that a mother could in some circumstances offer several sacrifices of purification at the same time. Further, the woman was not required to be personally present. Her offering could be presented by a member of the laity who daily partook in the religious ceremonies on behalf of the districts from which they came. However, mothers who were within easy travelling distance of Jerusalem, and especially the more zealous among them, would attend the temple in person. In such cases, when possible, the redemption of the firstborn and the purification of the mother would be combined. And this was, according to Luke, the case with Mary and her son. So, the holy family travelled from Bethlehem to the temple for this solemn and serious rite. The baby Jesus would have been presented to the priest, with two short prayers of blessing: one for the law of redemption and one for the gift of a firstborn son. After this the redemption money would be paid.

The rite of purification, as already noted, could be carried out without the presence in person of the mother. It consisted of a sin-offering for the Levitical ‘defilement’ symbolically attaching to the beginning of life, and a burnt offering which marked the restoration of communion with God. The sin offering consisted in all cases simply of the sacrifice of a turtle dove or a young pigeon. For the burnt offering, wealthier people would bring a lamb for sacrifice, but poorer people could instead bring a turtle

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dove or a young pigeon. The temple price for the meat and drink offerings was set once a month and special officials assisted the intending offerors. Quaint as it may sound to modern readers, those poor women who bought the turtle dove or young pigeon as an offering would need to deal with the ‘superintendent of turtle-doves and pigeons’. Located in the *Court of the Women* were thirteen trumpet-shaped chests for money contributions of various types. Into the third of these the mother would drop the price of her sacrifice. An offeror of the poor’s offering, such as Mary, would not need to deal directly with any sacrificing priest—instead the poor’s trumpet chest would be opened at a certain time of the day and half the contents applied to burnt-offerings and the other half to sin-offerings. And so sacrifices were provided for a corresponding number of those who were to be purified, without either shaming the poor, needlessly disclosing the nature of the impurity or causing unnecessary logistical difficulties to the temple authorities.

The contrasts in the account of the Lord Jesus’ Nativity are striking: together with every humiliation suffered by the infant and His family, there were wonderful affirmations from heaven of His priceless worth. So, although He was born of the poor and humble maiden from Nazareth, yet His birth was announced by an angel. Although He was laid to sleep in a cattle feeding trough, yet a shining host from heaven heralded His entry into the world. Although He was not recognised for whom He was by most, yet He was accorded His royal office in the worship of the wise men. Although a despot sought His life, yet His parents were Divinely warned of the danger and brought Him to a place of safety. And now, when the poor mother of Jesus could only bring the ‘poor’s offering’ yet there would be another affirmation of His greatness from two people, an elderly man and an elderly woman, in each of whom burned the true spirit of the Old Testament.

“Now there was a man living in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to

him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God saying:

'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for Glory to your people Israel.'

The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: 'This child is destined to cause the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and will be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty four. She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."

*Luke 2:25-38*

As they entered the temple courts, Joseph and Mary were met by a man whose venerable figure must have been well known at the temple to worshippers and temple officials. The aged Simeon combined three characteristics of true Old Testament piety, in distinct contrast to the Pharisees who so boastfully claimed that piety as their own. Firstly he was deeply concerned about *justice*, waiting as he was for the consolation of Israel. Secondly he had a genuine *fear of God*, being righteous and devout, in stark contrast to the Pharisees who heaped burden upon spiritual burden onto the ordinary folk of their day. Thirdly, Simeon had a genuine *longing expectancy* of the near fulfilment of God's great promises to his fellow Israelites. Coming 'in the Spirit' into the temple, Simeon

took the infant in his arms and burst into rapt thanksgiving. God had fulfilled His word — Simeon would not see death until he had seen the Christ. Now this elderly and most loyal servant could be ‘dismissed in peace’; he had witnessed the salvation so long awaited. He had seen the glorious light that would illuminate the heathen world as well as the land of Israel. Everything breathed by Simeon was a rich fragrance of all that was best in the Old Testament.

His unexpected appearance, and even more unexpected words no doubt reinforced the sense of awe in Mary and Joseph. Whatever unspoken questions may still have lingered in their minds, the aged Simeon began to supply the answer. It was as if the whole history of the Christ upon the earth was flashing before Simeon’s mind’s eye. Jesus was to be a stumbling block to many, a sign which would be spoken against, and the sword of deep personal sorrow that would pierce His mother’s own heart.

Simeon’s was not the only amazing prophetic utterance that day. A sad mystery surrounds Anna, who approached the group just as Simeon finished his prophecy. She was elderly — some eighty-four years of age. The early pain in the loss of her husband had been followed by many years of mourning, fasting and prayer, never leaving the temple. Alfred Edersheim comments that Anna was: “one of those in whose home the tribal genealogy had been preserved. We infer from this, and from the fact that it was that of a tribe which had *not* returned to Palestine, that hers was a family of some distinction. Curiously enough, the tribe of Asher alone is celebrated in tradition for the beauty of its women, and their fitness to be wedded to High-priest or King.”<sup>12</sup>

Deepest in Anna’s soul was a yearning for *the* promised ‘redemption’, and now that redemption had arrived in the flesh. In contrast to Simeon’s rejoicing in the ‘salvation’ of Israel, Anna gave thanks for Israel’s ‘redemption’. The mother who was shortly to pay the redemption money for her firstborn son was told by Anna that Jesus was Himself the redemption for which Jerusalem had so long waited. We can still, even at the distance of two millennia, feel with Anna the desperate need of redemption

for her unhappy people: the hopeless state of Anna's own tribe, never to return from exile, the desperate political state of Israel, riven for generations by internecine warfare and now under the iron rule of a psychopathic despot, the submission of Israel to an all-powerful and all-pervasive heathen foreign emperor, and the unhappy moral, social and religious condition of her own Jerusalem. All these sad factors kindled in Anna and Simeon, and all like-minded servants of Israel's Holy God, a great longing for the promised time of 'redemption'.

*Notes*

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit. The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* p. 143.

<sup>2</sup> As evidence of the feelings of Jews towards a tax census, see *Josephus* Antiq. 18.1.1, although note this was a *later* tax census.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Barnett *Bethlehem to Patmos* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Werner Keller *The Bible As History* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1956), p. 327.

<sup>5</sup> I have referred to this census as 'famous' because it is well documented in *Josephus' Antiquities* 17.13.5 and 18.1.1.

<sup>6</sup> William Whiston, A.M. *Josephus, The Complete Works* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> There has been some question as to whether the 'inn' is as we understand the term. The view has been expressed that it would be a guest-chamber attached to a house, but most scholars hold that the word translated 'inn' is, as we understand it, a place where travellers stay, in exchange for payment.

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit. The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, p. 130.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131.

<sup>10</sup> Jack Finegan *The Archaeology of the New Testament Revised Edition* (Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.* pp. 131f.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 140.

