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Grace Bible Church NorthWest  
The Birth and Childhood Narratives Luke 1:5-2:52  
The Announcement of the Birth of Jesus Christ 1:26-38

Introduction: At various times in the Old Testament we read of several “birth announcements” that are “starting,” “unexpected,” even “impossible.” These announcements come from God and usually to women who did not have children and (humanly speaking) could not have children—unexpected announcements that someone is going to be (as we used to say) “expecting.” Sometimes these accounts are on the “dramatic side”—for instance the promise to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 17 (“No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you will call his name Isaac . . .”) Other times they are on the “humorous side”—for instance the announcement to Manoah and his wife in Judges 13 (at least I find that account humorous!) Among other things that these accounts have in common is this—the birth being announced is *a birth that only God could make happen*. That is, the circumstances of the woman, or the couple, or simply the situation at hand make it unlikely, even impossible (it would seem), for a birth to happen—nevertheless, God comes and promises it *will* happen. It is *a birth only God could make happen*, so that *when* it happens it will be absolutely clear *God is the One Who accomplished it!*<sup>1</sup> A New Testament instance of this is found in Luke chapter 1. Here (in Luke 1:5-25) the angel Gabriel comes to Zacharias and tells him he and Elizabeth will have a son; of course, the barrenness of his wife and the fact that both of them are “of an advanced age” lead Zacharias to doubt the message. But that only makes the point—again!—that when this child (John the Baptist) is born it will be clear *God is the One Who accomplished it!*

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<sup>1</sup> We should ask why would God do this in the Old Testament? Why did He delay the son (Isaac) to be given to Abraham and Sarah in their old age? Why did He delay to give Hannah a son (1 Samuel 1)? Why, in these various instances, does He work it out so that it is clear *He* is the One making it happen? One reason is to foreshadow the Birth with which we are now concerned! —the Birth of the Son, Jesus Christ! He wants it to be clear He is at work in this Birth—as He was at work in those previous births that could only happen if He made them happen—because, this Birth—these births—are key links in His promise fulfilling plan; in these births, especially this Birth—God is working out His promises. And, you see, God wants it to be very clear that it is *He* Who is working out His promises. These things are not mere coincidences—they are not working themselves out; *He* is accomplishing it, *He* is making it happen! So our trust is in Him!

And then we come to the announcement to Mary.<sup>2</sup> She is promised a son—before she is “expecting” —before she and her betrothed have consummated their union—while she is a *virgin* (1:27 [2x], 34; three times in these few verses that fact is mentioned—and that’s kinda odd!) This Birth will be—absolutely and uniquely!—a Birth only God could make happen! And He does this so that when it happens (as Mary’s “Magnificat” 1:46-55 shows) everyone will know that God, through this Birth, is accomplishing His Word—in this Birth He is keeping His promises to Abraham and David—in this Birth He is bringing the promised blessing of salvation—through this Birth—a Birth only He could make happen—He will accomplish that which only He could accomplish the “seeking and saving” of the lost (see 19:9-10).<sup>3</sup>

#### The Announcement of the Birth of Jesus 1:26-38

The Time of the Announcement 1:26a: The date stamp—**the sixth month**—is the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy (see v. 36). Remember Elizabeth kept this news to herself (1:24). This sets up the news of her pregnancy as a “sign” to Mary.

The Agent of the Announcement 1:26b: As with Zacharias, it is **Gabriel** who brings the announcement. Apparently, Gabriel was the “messenger” angel (the Greek *angelos*, like the Hebrew *malak*, actually means “messenger”) (see Daniel 8:15-16; 9:21). Gabriel is a uniquely qualified messenger since he is identified as one who “stands in the presence of God” (1:19); this angel’s word can be accepted with unqualified certainty.

The Location of the Announcement 1:26c: **a city in Galilee, called Nazareth**. Since the story was probably already widely known (“oral traditions about Jesus’ origins were in circulation” Bock, *Luke*, 104) Luke retells the story in a way that builds expectation for those who already know it (a common story-teller’s device is to delay giving the reader/hearer “known information”—this makes the

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<sup>2</sup> I have always liked the way this scene is depicted in the film version of the Life of Christ *Jesus of Nazareth* by Franco Zephirelli. The actress portraying Mary is at home in a simple adobe style house, sleeping on a mat on the floor, when a bright blue-white light shines in through an un-shuttered window. The window is above eye-level so the young lady—Mary—has to look up from her knees to see the light. There is no sound, no angel as such is seen or heard (how would you depict an angel on film?), but the actress does a marvelous job of making you think she’s hearing a voice. The scene isn’t rushed, for several minutes all you see is the light, then Mary, then the light—no music, no dialogue, very quiet. Then Mary speaks, quoting Luke 1:34b, Mary’s words “How can this be, since I am a virgin” (Actually, I think in the movie she says something like “since I’ve never known any man.”) More silence, more of the light and then Mary bows her head and says, with conviction, “Behold, the handmaiden of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word.” To me it was very believable.

<sup>3</sup> Some have tried to suggest a parallel between this account and accounts in pagan literature of interaction between the gods and humans; but this suggestion depends on some rather strained readings of both the pagan accounts and the biblical text. As just noted, the Old Testament provides the best background of a story of an angelic visitation and a blessed announcement. As we will see, the very delicate and reserved [but nevertheless quite unmistakable] way Luke makes his point is very unlike the lurid pagan accounts of encounters between Greek gods and human beings. We know what Luke is saying but it is said in a very graceful and tactful way that preserves the beauty and even conveys a sense of reverence about the encounter.

reader/hearer read/listen more closely for what he/she “knows” is coming). The region—**Galilee**—is not notable; the city—a city (*polis*) . . . **Nazareth**— is actually more of a rural village. Like the recipient herself, the location is humble and obscure; contrary to expectation. The most astonishing and world altering event in human history, namely, the Incarnation of the Son of God—God’s coming in flesh, the coming of the One who “was with God,” Who was God (John 1:1-2; Philippians 2:6) into this world to take on “the form of a bondservant” to be “made in the likeness of men” and be “found in appearance as a man” (Philippians 2:7, 8)—is going to happen, not in the great cities or regions of power but in the obscure and humble locations of Nazareth and Bethlehem.

Of course, we are so familiar with these locations—they seem so right, so normal—it’s as if . . . well, duh! But think of Luke’s readers. They no doubt knew the general story of Jesus, but these details are—unexpected! And, we should not miss the point—it’s NOT right! It’s not what the world expects and by rights, we should NOT *expect* the Son of God to show such condescension. If He were to come to the grandest city in the world, to the halls of supreme earthly power, to the family of the most noble lineage—it would still be a condescension of cosmic proportions! But to come to this place? At this time? To this young woman?

On another note regarding the location of the announcement—we should note the angel’s announcement here (as with Zacharias) is private. Very often God chooses not to work most often through the most public, most prominent, the most successfully self-promoted; but He works through the lowly, the humble, the unlikely. Why would He do that? Again, it’s so that when the “thing is done” no credit will go to “vessel” and all credit will go to Him! For our good and His glory it has to be understood . . . He is the One accomplishing all this!

The Recipient of the Announcement 1:27 The information given about **Mary** is “peculiar.” First the “order” of the information is “backward”—that is, we would have expected her name to be given first (although this again may be more of the story telling device of “delay the information already known”); then we would have expected to learn about her associations—family, occupation, life-circumstances; and only then would we expect more personal details—but not too personal! But the first thing Luke mentions, is ( . . . again, a rather peculiar thing to note when you think about it) she was a **virgin**—and he mentions it twice in verse 27. The Greek term is *παρθένον* / *parthenon* and it is quite *unambiguous*—it means she had never had intimate [sexual] relations. Period. Why does he mention—indeed emphasize—this particular bit of very personal information? It’s interesting that Luke (unlike Matthew; cf. Matthew 1:22-23) does not tie in Isaiah 7:14 (especially since Luke seems to be, in these first chapters, very much interested in tying the events to Old Testament promises.) (By the way, if it were not true that she was a virgin then there would be no reason for Luke to make it up.)

Many theologians have argued that the Virgin Birth is (apparently) the means God used to unite the divine nature with the human nature in Christ; the Virgin Birth is (apparently) the means by which Jesus was “made like us yet without sin” (Hebrews 2:17, 4:15). That seems right. And yet, we could imagine other miraculous ways for God to accomplish those ends. It would be enough to simply have the Scriptures assert “Jesus is fully God and fully man and yet He did not inherit the sin nature, He is without sin.” We could assume a “Divine preservation.” Why do we need a Virgin Birth? As a matter of fact, a Virgin Birth only makes believing in Jesus harder for our rationalistic little brains! Why a Virgin Birth?

Well, Luke mentions it (1) because it just happens to be the case that she was a virgin! It’s a fact! However, (2) as noted in the introduction, God delights to work in ways that make it clear *He is the One working*. Could God have accomplished a “sinless Christ” through some other—perhaps more

mysterious but less “incredible” means? Could He have made a union of God (Divine Nature) and man (human nature) in one person by some other means? Of course He could (see 1:37). But . . . He choose the Virgin Birth as an obvious way to say, “Only I can do this! Only I can make life happen this way!” By the way, since both Matthew and Luke, not to mention Isaiah affirm that she was a virgin—again, a woman who had never experienced sexual relations with another—we must affirm the Virgin Birth as a tenant of the Divine inspiration of the Bible. In other words, I hold to The Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ as a cardinal doctrine not so much for the implications of this fact for the doctrine about Christ but for the implications of this fact for the doctrine of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. It’s a good “litmus test” of orthodoxy—anyone who denies this is likely not a believer in the inerrant Word of God at other key points! Born of a virgin! Amazing! Can you believe it? I have always said it’s not a matter of believing in the Virgin Birth –it’s a matter of believing in God. I mean com’on, if He made the world in six days, if He can raise the dead . . . well, then . . . this is not a problem! It’s a matter of “theology.”

Now, when you put the fact of her virginity next to the fact that she was **engaged to a man whose name was Joseph** (and knowing where this announcement is going) some degree of tension begins to build. The term **engaged**, if understood in terms of our current use, does not do justice to the meaning of the term in the original; actually, “betrothal” might be a better translation. The Jewish “betrothal” was a legal arrangement in which the bride and groom would be, for all legal purposes, fully married. A “betrothal” could only be broken by a divorce. This would be followed by a time of physical separation (the couple would not live together nor have any relations—it was a testing and proving and “making ready” period [see Ephesians 5:26-27].) The final stage of the “wedding” would come about a year later when the bridegroom would come for his bride to take her to his home (see John 14:1-3; Matthew 25:1-13) and at his time there would be a festive wedding feast (see Revelation 19:7-10 “the Marriage supper of the Lamb”.) **Joseph**, it is noted, is **of the descendants (house) of David**. Later, in the genealogy provided by Luke in 3:23-38 it’s clear that Mary was also from the line of David (3:31). [[We may note here that she is called a **relative** of Elizabeth 1:36; this has caused some confusion since Elizabeth has already been identified as being in the line of Aaron. Actually, Bock (Bock, *Luke*, 107-08) makes the common sense observation that a “mixed lineage” is likely; so (for both Mary and Elizabeth) the intermarriage of the tribes would give multiple ancestral backgrounds for most Jews.]]

Her name **Mary** means something like “excellence” (Bock, *Luke*, 107). Lacking any other description, we might legitimately conclude that while we discover her piety, submission, humility as the story proceeds, she was chosen for none of those reasons, she was chosen by God sovereignly. She is an example of the principle by which her ancestor David was chosen by God, (1Samuel 16:7) “for man looks on the outward appearance but the LORD looks on the heart.”

The Greeting at the opening of the Announcement 1:28 The Angel begins with two alliterative terms (Χαῖρε / *chaire*, κεχαριτωμένη / *kecharitomene*), **Hail, favored one**; “Grace to you, graced one.”<sup>4</sup> She is assured **The Lord** (Κύριος / *kurios*) **is with you**. This brief—and apparently merely cordial—note is actually rich with significance. In a sense this is that for which the nation has been waiting for generations! The Lord (not un-legitimate-ly Κύριος / *Kurios* = YHWH יהוה) has returned to visit His people! With GRACE! Through this young woman!

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<sup>4</sup> It hardly needs to be said but the translation (based on the Latin) “Hail, Mary full of grace” as if she has grace to spare, or grace she could bestow on others, is not at all the point here; she herself is a person who, though undeserving, is receiving God’s unmerited favor.

The Reaction to the Announcement 1:29: Her reaction is interesting; whereas Zacharias was terrified at the sight of the angel (“fear gripped him” 1:12) Mary **was very perplexed** (“greatly troubled” NIV). She was not “nonchalant,” not “completely unruffled” by the appearance of an angel—(see v. 30) but she wasn’t “frightened out of her wits” either. It seems her mind was caught more by what he said than what he was. She **kept pondering what kind of salutation this might be**. That is, she was trying to think about the import of the words themselves; she was already mulling them over. As noted, while it was a brief (and to an un-attentive mind merely cordial) greeting, apparently Mary immediately picked up on the potential significance of the greeting. (A careful student of the Word picks up on clues like this that the casual Bible reader misses.)

The Note of Assurance and Honor in the Announcement 1:30: The angel continues **Do not be afraid Mary**; literally, “Stop being afraid”: however, it might have caused a renewed sense of concern that he actually knew her name! The angel renews the note of grace **for you have found favor** (χάριν) **with God** (see Genesis 6:8, Noah; Exodus 33:12, 17 Moses; Ac 7:46, David). While “found favor” is a rather common Old Testament expression (Bock, *Luke*, 111), **favor found with God** is no mere pleasant sentiment—this indicates a divine intention to use the favored one in some important way.

The Message Itself 1:31-33 The Message is about Jesus Christ!

The Impending Events: 1:31. The angel sort-of rushes through this list of events. He mentions the Virginal Conception v. 31a . . . the Virgin Birth v. 31b . . . the naming of the child—v. 31c **you shall name Him Jesus**. Mary is not told (as Joseph was Matthew. 1:21) why this rather common name “Jesus” is to be given to the Child—“He will save His people from their sins.” His name (like *Jeshua*, *Joshua*) means “the Lord saves.” He doesn’t explain or expand on any of this, incredible information! It seems the angel wants to get to this information . . .

The Transcending Significance: 1:32-33. Nothing in Luke’s Gospel so far has prepared us for this information—an obscure region of the nation (an obscure part of the Empire); a lowly rural village, a humble young Jewish girl—is given the news “You are going to have a son”—and . . . He. Is. The. Messiah!

His Person v. 32a – **He will be great**; same as John—only greater!

**He will be called the Son of the Most High**; this is “simply another way of saying ‘Son of God.’” (Bock, *Luke*, 113) John is a servant; Jesus is the Son.

His Purpose vv. 32b-33 – **the Lord God** (from the Old Testament Lord GOD) **will give Him the throne of His Father David**; here is the recurring theme of the Birth Narratives in Luke’s Gospel: This Child--Jesus Christ— will bring Salvation! AND He brings Salvation through the promises God made to Abraham (cf. Luke 1:55; 1:73) and David (1:69)! The promise in view is found in 2 Samuel 7; 1 Chronicles 17; Psalm 89. There is no way to “spiritualize” this promise—David and the generations after him, down to the disciples of Jesus (see Acts 1:6) were expecting a literal earthly kingdom. That literality is in no way mitigated by the fact that this reign is described as **forever** and that **His kingdom will have no end**. On the contrary, those features were part of the very temporal and earthly promise from the beginning (see 1 Samuel 7:16; Psalm 89:1, 2, 3, 28, 29, 36, 37, 46, 52 “forever.”) Bock notes “The fact is He will reign. When the reign commenced, or commences is not noted or explored here by Luke. Jesus in the announcement is simply presented as the Davidic son.” (Bock, *Luke*, 117) Mary (as the *Magnificat* proves) would have instantly picked up on the allusions to the Davidic Covenant—she would have understood—this Child is the Greater Son of David and He will be the King! And that Kingdom is over **the house of Jacob**. This reference to Jacob, not Israel is a very standard clue that we must not take the reference as anything other than the historical people of the

Jews. Yes, there is a sense in which Jesus “rules” over all; but *this* promise is that He will rule over the nation of Israel, over the Jewish kingdom—*this* is what was promised to David, *this* is what Mary would have understood, (*this* is what we are to expect!)

Mary’s Puzzled Reaction to the Announcement 1:34. Unlike the incredulity exhibited by Zacharias (1:18) Mary’s question shows no hint of disbelief—only a question about the manner of fulfillment. Not “Impossible!” But “How’s that gonna work out?”

The Angel’s Patient Explanation 1:35-37 The angel makes three points: 1) he gives a delicate description v. 35; 2) he provides Mary with a sign—Elizabeth is expecting a son as well; 3) he makes the assertion (which is the essential point—if you know God, really know God! The description in v. 35 does not actually say “how” the conception takes place; who can say “how” a miracle is accomplished. The two key points here are the Agent, namely the Holy Spirit and the power—namely that of the Most High.

**For nothing is impossible with God.** This is very assuring . . . but only if you know God! You gotta have some “theology.” Actually, the phrase is “Nothing will be impossible with every word (ῥῆμα *rema*) of God.”

Mary’s Humble Submission to the Announcement 1:38: Your heart just has to go out to Mary! (By the way, we must take care in our aversion to “Mari-olatry” not to exhibit an aversion to Mary!) Do not think that this was an easy decision! Do not underestimate the difficulty that accepting the angel’s word would present to this young Jewish woman. Morris writes “We are apt to take this as the most natural thing and accordingly we miss Mary’s quiet heroism.” “Mary could not be sure that she would not have to suffer” for this decision. “But she recognized the will of God and accepted it.” (Morris, *Luke*, 74) She had to know some theology; she had to know some OT promises; she had to trust God’s Word. Commendable before God; usable by God.

Conclusion: Glance back at verse 35: Bock calls it one of the most important Christological verses in the book (Bock, 123). He is the holy offspring of a young woman; He is the Son of God; He is God—He is man. The full salvific significance is worked out in the rest of the New Testament’s teaching, particularly on the atonement. For now it means INCARNATION. If you ever get over it –go back and think about it some more!

## The Gospel According to Luke The Birth and Childhood Narratives Luke 1:5-2:52

The Birth of Jesus Christ Luke 2:1-7

The Visitation of the Angels to the Shepherds Luke 2:8-14

The Visitation of the Shepherds to the Child Luke 2:15-20

Introduction: “Luke’s narrative of the birth of Christ has surely become the most well-known religious story of history and one which is read more during the Christmas season than any other. In it Luke sets forth the historical and central details of the birth of a babe who is the Savior of the world. Yet how little of this historical event is truly understood and believed, especially in our modern, secular society.” (J.

Hampton, Keathly III, “Acclamations of the Birth of Christ (Luke 2:1-20),” <https://bible.org/article/acclamations-birth-christ-luke-21-20>

I have often mentioned that the narratives / events recorded in the gospels are so familiar to us that we often don't notice the unexpected elements or surprising aspects of those narratives / events. In other words, we read the text, we know the story, and everything in it seems to us to be “right!” “Of course! There it is—Jesus being baptized, Jesus calling fishermen—to be “fishers of men,”—Jesus preaching, heading, feeding thousands . . . yes, that's ‘right!’.” But . . . that means we are not surprised, we are not so thoughtful, we are not so attentive to the details. There is no better example of this phenomenon than right here in Luke 2—The Birth of Jesus. Everything “fits!” Only, it doesn't! Nearly everything . . . every detail . . . in this narrative should cause us to go “What wut?” (In these notes look for the \*'s and when you see \* think—“Wait wut?”

Transition: The next sections of the Gospel of Luke (we are into chapter 2!) sort of oscillate between the normal and mundane—the expected—on the one hand . . . and the wonderful and extraordinary—the unexpected—on the other hand.

The Birth of Jesus Christ Luke 2:1-7: We have here some of the most familiar words in the Gospel of Luke and perhaps even the whole New Testament; (although some of the words we “know” from the KJV are not actually here!

It begins . . . **Now in those days** . . . The KJV has “And it came to pass . . .” That's more literal (!)—it has the idea of “it came to be” (*Ἐγένετο* / *egeneto*) . . . but it's not “It just ‘happened to happen . . . ; on the surface, it may seem that an event—or series of events—“just so happened”—but again, since his readers (and we) already knew (know) . . . the effect is “Whoa, look what's lining up! This is not accidental!”

“How simply the story begins, yet how serene it is and its results to mankind. All my life, as I've heard these introductory words, I have been lifted up into a spirit of expectancy, awe and wonderment over the account that flows. Something so simply told and yet so significant to all mankind.” (J. Hampton, Keathly III, “Acclamations of the Birth of Christ (Luke 2:1-20)”)

An Imperial Edict vv. 1-2 . . . \*

Who was Caesar Augustus? Octavian—great nephew of Julius Caesar, defeater of Lepidus and then of Mark Anthony and Cleopatra (battle of Actium 31 BC); he ruled Rome for 41 years, the emperor behind *Pax Romana* (Peace of Rome); shrewd and ruthless in his rise to power—wise and even benevolent in his actual reign, accepted the (semi-divine) title of ‘Augustus’ in 27 BC (the beginning of his reign and of Emperor worship) and he died in AD 14 and was succeeded by his step-son Tiberius (see 3:1).

Who was Quirinius? Obscure to us (aside from this reference) he was a well know figure of the era; mentioned in *Josephus*; a military man; he was governor of Syria (a much wider area than the present day country).

What was this census? Caesar Augustus had ordered a number of regular and special censuses—this is not out of the ordinary. The purpose of the census was to get an accurate record for the purposes of taxation. The problem is trying to fit Luke's census with those of the day (according to the extra biblical records). In brief, we know of a census conducted by Quirinius in AD 6 (cf. Acts 5:37) but that does not fit with this census (it's too late). Furthermore, the most likely time for Jesus'

birth (all things considered) is between 4 and 6 BC—but Quirinius was governor of Syria much later than that. Two possible solutions: 1) there is evidence that Quirinius was governor of Syria twice; 2) the word **first** in v. 2 (**This was the first census taken**) could be understood as “before,” or “prior to”—hence, Luke is saying this census was before the (more famous one) conducted by Quirinius. All in all, the scene here is quite believable and we can assume that the problems can be worked out if we had more specific information; there is no reason to doubt Luke’s accuracy.

Who was involved? Luke says this decree involved **all the inhabited earth**. This is hyperbole—he means of course the Roman Empire. But the point should not be missed—there are grand, imperial, world-affecting events going on . . . but the truly world-affecting events involve a Jewish man and his espoused wife and their unborn child. Luke is writing history.<sup>5</sup> And that history . . .

. . . Intersects with Biblical Prophecy vv. 3-4. Luke doesn’t mention Micah 5:2—but remember that his readers would have known the story; just mentioning **Bethlehem** and **the house and family of David** with all the significance of those names already highlighted by the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-56) and the *Benedictus* (Luke 1:67-79) would have made his point—while the powerful and mighty are “doing-their-thing” they are actually being directed by a Higher Power to accomplish His purposes. (E.g. Cyrus in Ezra Chapter 1; Nebuchadnezzar Daniel chapters 1, 2).

Why did the couple travel? \* (1) the legal requirement (v. 3, v. 5a) Joseph was obedient to the secular government: “The accidental events of history have become acts of” God’s providence. “Little actions have great significance.” (cf. Bock, 203); (2) the family obligation (v. 4, **because he was of the house and family of David**); this was not a Roman requirement but was apparently a Jewish one; (3) the prophetic fulfillment). The question has to be asked here is “Why is Mary along with him?” Various suggestions: 1) her condition—if left alone in Nazareth it might have been difficult for her; 2) the trip would have taken more than a few days (it’s ninety miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem) he would have wanted her with him, they would have wanted to be together for the birth; 3) it turns out they are away from Nazareth for an extended time—perhaps they had planned on this.

Where did the couple travel? (v. 4) We’ve seen this before in Luke (he stretches it out, builds the tension): **up from Galilee from Nazareth** (although on a map it’s ‘down’ in terms of real geography it’s ‘up’) **to Judea to the city of David** (there can be a bit of confusion—the phrase ‘City of David’ is most often used for the oldest city of Jerusalem, the area south of the Temple Mount; here it means the city of David’s family origin) **which is called** . . . (we already know it! We are ‘thinking it’ before Luke says / writes it . . .) **Bethlehem**; “the house of bread.” This would have been quite an undertaking for a young expectant mother.

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<sup>5</sup> The entire narrative “stresses [historical] reality.” “Some theologians, writers, educators, propagandists, some Jews, Gentiles and Marxists toy with and propagate the idea of “the Christmas and the Christ myth.” They teach that Christ never really existed, that the stories of His miraculous birth, life, death and resurrection were all a myth. They say these myths were promoted by a group of despondent Jews who were tired of waiting for their expected Messiah, or something of this sort. But those who say this have absolutely no historical evidence. The historicity of Jesus Christ, for the unbiased historian, is as axiomatic as that of Julius Caesar.” (J. Hampton, Keathly III, “Acclamations of the Birth of Christ (Luke 2:1-20)”)

What we learn about Joseph (mostly by implication): 1) he was obedient to earthly rulers (“render unto Caesar . . . see Hendriksen, *Luke*, 146); 2) he was obedient to God’s call on his life (see Matthew 1); 3) he was a man of remarkable character.

What we learn about Mary (v. 5) (explicitly in this context—Luke’s focus is on Mary): 1) she was **along with** her espoused husband—that is, she was submissive (as we have seen) to God and to her husband; 2) she was **engaged to him**—this note is subtle but clear—they are legally bound to each other but the marriage had not been consummated (another nod at the Virgin Birth); 3) she **was with child**—do we need to know this? Does this need to be mentioned? Well, it tells us we haven’t missed anything while we were thinking about John’s birth and circumcision and naming. Again, Luke is a master at building the anticipation; 4) she is at the full term of her pregnancy; the note in v. 6 **the days were completed** not only says the obvious, but may hint at a more important “fullness of time” (see Galatians 4:4).

The Birth vv. 6-7; this account is told with a studied reserve and simplicity—and that’s on purpose! Here, Beloved, is the most cosmically, universally, colossal, stupendous event in the reign of either Augustus or Tiberius (or any other earthly potentate before or since)—this is the Incarnation of the Son of God . . . but the account simply says, a humble young Jewish girl, far from home (**while they were there** in Bethlehem), gives birth to a normal human child, in the most humble conditions imaginable. The child is her **firstborn**—could indicate she had other children, but the point is this is this was her first child—with all that means in terms of joy, hope, heartache and hardship. **She wrapped him in cloths** (KJV ‘swaddling clothes’) indicates nothing out of the ordinary; these cloths would have made the child snug, kept the limbs tight for protection, and provided the necessary “sanitary protection.” But now something completely un-expected—she **laid Him in a manger**.\* We are so used to those words they do not land on our ears with the appropriate dissonance; try this—“she laid Him in an animal feeding trough.” What!? Why would she do that? Where are you when there’s a “feeding trough” handy? Well, a stable or some similar housing for animals—there’s an ancient tradition that it was a cave. Luke notes **because there was no room for them in the inn**, which we are to take as the reason for the (supposed stable setting, which is indicated by the presence of a manger). Just look at what Luke actually records and think about what we have “built up” around this scene. The “inn” was nothing like a roadside motel or even a place of lodging with rooms—it may have been nothing more than a public shelter. “The “inn” probably refers to a public caravansary (a crude overnight lodging place for caravans), which was the one lodging place in Bethlehem.” (Stein, see footnote 6 below) Why was there no room? That’s not indicated but it may have been due to the census—the very reason that brought Joseph to his ancestral village. All that we know by our Christmas traditions is based on this verse—in a way based on that one bit of information-- she **laid Him in a manger**. (The present tradition location of the Church of the Nativity may or may not be the actual spot—the location was identified hundreds of years after the event.) The point: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9; cf. Phippians 2:5-11).

This was completely *unexpected!*\* Or better, it is contrary to expectation.

This most important and cosmically significant event cannot go unnoticed . . .

The Visitation of the Angels to the Shepherds Luke 2:8-14

A Quiet Pastoral Setting, v. 8; the scene shifts unexpectedly to the fields around Bethlehem—to **shepherds** \* . . . **keeping watch over their flock by night**. The familiarity of these words have made them almost poetic—Luke is merely setting the scene; it’s all very mundane, normal.

Shepherds, especially those charged with night duty, were not the highest rung of the social ladder. Robert Stein notes the “humble” of Luke 1:52 are visited (cf. 7:22). One should not romanticize the occupation of shepherds. In general shepherds were dishonest (many ancient sources confirm this) and unclean according to the standards of the law. They represent the outcasts and sinners for whom Jesus came. Such outcasts were the first recipients of the good news.” Not the people one would (from the world’s perspective) expected to be the first to hear the good news.

A Heavenly Visitation, v. 9;\* a single angel appears at first (Gabriel?); he appears **suddenly** and he **stood before them**. This in itself would have been “disconcerting”; but add this, **the glory of the Lord shone around them** and you have reason for “mega (the Greek term is *mega*) fear” (literally, “they feared a great fear.”) This is the Shekinah Glory (in Hebrew the *kebod*, the heaviness) the very presence of God.

The Angel’s message, vv. 10-12; 1) reassurance, “stop being afraid” v. 10a; 2) proclamation vv. 10-11; 3) the sign v. 12.

The Initial Proclamation, **For behold**, v. 10a

The nature, (**good news**) v. 10b; The quality (**of a great joy**) v. 10c;

The scope (**for all the people**; the Jews, the people of the promises) v. 10d;

The timing (**for today**) v. 11a . . . of the message.

The Main Content of the message: where? **city of David**, v. 11b;

what? a Child **has been born** v. 11c

Who? v. 11d Three Titles: **a Savior, Who is**

**Christ the Lord**; this combination appears only here in the NT; all three are frequent in the OT—putting them altogether here is unexpected.\*

**Savior** – again, has national (theocratic) and salvific (soteriological) aspects; it speaks first to the national deliverance of Israel but also to salvation from sin and death and hell. (we’ve been belaboring this point—the Savior (from sin—the only Savior cf. Acts 4:12)) is the Messiah (King-Priest) of Israel’s expectation.

**Christ** – Messiah, Anointed One; the One Who fulfills the promises (see again Magnificat and Benedictus).

**Lord** – the most surprising title of all; *Kyrios* is the name used (in the LXX) to translate LORD – Yahweh! It is a key title for Luke (and he will bring out the significance as the narrative unfolds).

“This verse gives a brief summary of the gospel message and provides the reason for the statement found in the previous verse. It tells of the birth of a Savior. This title is applied to God in Luke 1:47, but its use here of Jesus is prepared for by 1:69 (cf. Acts 5:31; 13:23). There is a sense in which this statement is not only Christological in nature (in what it says about Mary’s child) but also anthropological, for it says that the Gospel’s readers, both past and present, are the kind of people who need a Savior! / This verse also states that the child’s name is Christ, for Christ functions here primarily as an identifying name. Although “Christ” is actually a title (Acts 5:42; cf. also Acts 17:3), this verse reveals that the title was so closely identified with Jesus of Nazareth that it soon became part of his name—Jesus Christ. The reader has been prepared for the use of this title by 1:32–33, 69; 2:4. / This Savior is also the Lord. (In 2:26 we have the expression “Lord’s Christ,” but here in 2:11 the title “Lord” clearly refers to Jesus rather than God.) Although the realization of the authority of the titles “Christ” and “Lord” would await the resurrection (Acts 2:36), Jesus at his birth was already both Christ and Lord, for the one born to Mary in Bethlehem is the same person who is raised in glory and given the authority to be Lord and Christ. No doubt for Luke’s readers this description of the child would have far greater

theological meaning than for its original hearers. These three titles also appear together in Phil 3:20.”<sup>6</sup>

The Sign of the Message, v. 12; again the swaddling clothes is pretty normal stuff—it’s the manger that’s the sign\* (as well as an indication of where the shepherds are to start looking for the Child). Note “it is *the* sign, not *a* sign.” (Hendriksen, *Luke*, 153)

The Heavenly Doxology, vv. 13-14; “surprise follows surprise” (Hendriksen, *Luke*, 153)  
 (1) How the doxology began, **And suddenly** v. 13a; (2) Who sang it, **with the angel a heavenly host**, 13b; (3) why they sang **praising God**, v. 13c; (4) what they sang—has reference to heaven and earth, v. 14: a) **Glory to God in the highest**, v. 14a; b) **And on earth peace**, v. 14b. (The famous “Peace on Earth Good Will Toward Men – is really not even close to the point!) To whom is this peace extended? (This is not “World Peace” – this is peace with God and it is extended) To those on whom His favor rests—it is for those who put their trust in this Child for peace with God! They are the elect—the ones who by sovereign grace are “favored.” (see Hendriksen, *Luke*, 156; Bock, *Luke*, 220) Stein notes “‘Peace’ refers here to the fullness of blessing which the Savior/Christ/Lord brings and is essentially a synonym for salvation (cf. Acts 10:36).”

The Visitation of the Shepherds to the Child Luke 2:15-20

The end of the heavenly visitation, v. 15a

The Shepherds Discuss and Decide to Visit the Child, v. 15b

The Shepherds Search for and Discover the Child, v. 16

The Shepherds see the Child and relate their story, v. 17

The Reactions to the Shepherd’s story, vv. 18-19;

1) **all . . . wondered** v. 18

2) Mary **treasured and pondered** them v 19.

The Shepherds return **glorifying and praising**, v 20a

with faith in God and His Word, v. 20b.

Conclusion: What are the “moods” of this account? Wonder, praise, joy! The blessed couple, Joseph and Mary are examples of humble obedient trust in God. The angels are examples of unrestrained joyful God focused Praise. The shepherds are examples of “not many noble” who nevertheless hear the Good News and respond in faith. The crowds are examples of those on the periphery, they hear, they wonder, but hey do not become part of the event; here Mary is again the example—the message is not for speculation and wonder (for wonder’s sake) or for joy (for celebrations sake)—it is to be treasured and pondered. **For today in the City of David there has been born for you a Savior, Who is Christ, the Lord.**

“‘Those days,’ were days of Messianic hope. It appears that many in Christ’s day were expecting and looking for Messiah to come. This is evidenced by many things:

(1) They knew where Messiah was to be born (cf. Matthew 2:4). Simeon was looking for the consolation of Israel, the Messiah (Luke 2:25-38). In the Jewish Talmud there were two sayings “All the prophets

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<sup>6</sup> Stein, R. H. (2001, c1992). Vol. 24: Luke (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (104). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

prophesied only of the days of Messiah,” and “the world was created only for Messiah.” Thus the Jews saw predictions of Messiah throughout Scripture.

(2) But much like the New Testament and the church’s view of Christ as seen in the Old Testament, the Jews held to “the pre-existence of Messiah, His elevation over Moses, above angels, His representative character, His cruel sufferings, His violent death for his people, His redemption, and restoration of Israel and many other such things.” (Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 164)

(3) The Jews, however, were very vague about the sufferings of Messiah and the removal of sin because of their view of sin, even though the law taught them clearly about the nature of sin and man's sinfulness. The rabbis did not believe in the doctrine of original sin or inherent sin or the sinfulness of our nature. Thus, man’s need of a suffering Savior to bear the penalty of sin was overlooked. They were ignorant of their sinfulness and of God’s absolute holiness (Romans 10:3). They taught there were two impulses in man, one good and one evil and that God actually created both. So very little blame was attached to sin in man—it was God’s fault.

(4) With the absence of a felt need of deliverance from sin, the rabbinic tradition found no place for the priestly office and work of Messiah or of a substitute suffering Savior, or even for His prophetic office. They taught that it was within the power of each to overcome sin and to gain life by study and works. The thing which loomed large and which overshadowed everything else was Messiah as King and political Savior from the tyranny of the Gentiles and the elevation of the nation Israel above all other nations.

Such was the hope of Messiah when Jesus came on the scene of human history. Nothing could be more directly contrary to Jewish thought and feelings than the mundane or simple circumstances of the birth of Jesus Christ, with the exception of a small remnant of Old Testament believers who had a proper view of sin and the hope of Messiah for Israel, as well as for themselves (Joseph, Mary, Simeon, Anna). The majority were so caught up with the details of life and their external religiosity that when the signs of Christ’s birth were given to the nation, such as the news of the shepherds and wise men—very few could be concerned.

Israel was spiritually bankrupt. It was a time of external religiosity, pharisaic letterism and formalism, and Sadducian unbelief. Like much of America today, Israel was caught up with materialism, with human good deeds, and with ritual. There was a form of godliness, but they denied the power thereof. They were practical atheists—living as though God were dead or as though He were non-existent.

And so, it was into these conditions that Christ was born to deliver us from religion, from human philosophy, from materialism—indeed from sin and from all its forms

Spiritually speaking, those days were really no different from these days. So, what does the birth of Jesus Christ mean to us? This birth—God revealed in the flesh—is the secret to godliness, the secret to happiness and inner stability and peace. But only those who will seek to know and apply what the meaning of Christ’s birth, life and work really means to them, can know the salvation Christ offers.” (J. Hampton, Keathly III, “Acclamations of the Birth of Christ (Luke 2:1-20)”)