

The Birth of Christ (Luke 2)

The birth of Christ is an astonishing truth. He who is *spirit*, was made flesh (John 1.14). He who is *invisible* became visible and tangible (1 John 1.1). He who is *God* became a man (1 Timothy 3.16). *Through the miracle of the virgin birth, the eternal Son of the eternal God reached out and took to Himself a true and complete humanity without diminishing His essential deity. He united deity and humanity inseparably and eternally in one Person (JD Pentecost).*

There were 400 silent years between Malachi and the events which commence the NT. During these years the people of Israel sat in darkness (Luke 1.79) – there was no light to guide. But the NT begins with a light – a star, the sign of a King born (cf. John 1.8-9). The heavens were also *silent* during these years – God had ceased to *speak*. Now God breaks His silence as the angel of the Lord speaks to Zacharias (Luke 1.13). In the star, Matthew presents the sign of a *King*. In the babe wrapped, Luke presents the sign of a *Saviour* (Luke 2.12).

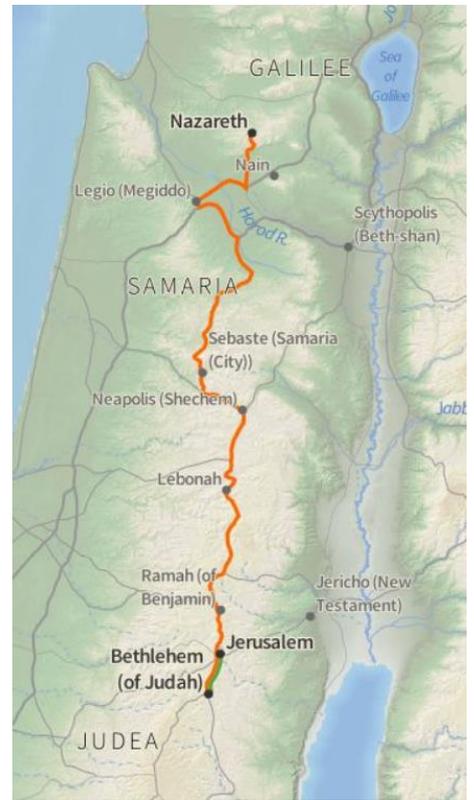
Theories *abound* concerning the date and time of the birth of Christ.

- What was the year? We cannot be sure but there are some historical markers. In broad terms, Christ was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus (44BC-AD14, Luke 2.1). He was also born *before* the death of Herod (March-April **4BC**, Matthew 2.1; Luke 1.5). According to Josephus, Herod left Jerusalem for Jericho in **5BC** where he died. Whilst still in Jerusalem, Herod slew ‘all the children’ in Bethlehem from ‘two years old and under according to the time’ which he had learned of the wise men. He clearly thought the Lord Jesus had been born within this time frame. Also, the *first* taxing of Cyrenius (Luke 2.2) was passed in **8BC** but may have taken some time to be enforced.
- Further evidence from Luke tells us Christ was *about* thirty years of age when John the Baptist commenced his ministry in the *fifteenth* year of Tiberius (Luke 3.1-2, 23). The time period that fits all the facts of Luke is AD27-29. With a little latitude to allow for Luke’s ‘about thirty years’, this suggests a year of c.**6BC**.
- What was the date? There is evidence for the traditional date of the birth of Christ (December 25) as early as Hippolytus in his commentary on Daniel (c.AD202-211). He believed that the conception and death of Christ occurred on the *same day in different years* (obviously!) According to his calculations, Christ died on March 25 (Passover) and thus Mary must have conceived on the same date. The birth of Christ was therefore December 25, exactly nine months later. This now traditional date seems to have been confirmed during the reign of Constantine (306-337AD) when the day was allegedly borrowed from the pagan festival of *Saturnalia* in order that it might be ‘Christianised’. Nevertheless, according to an *earlier* source than Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria (c.AD150-215), several different days for the birth of Christ had been proposed by Christians including April 20, April 21 and May 20.
- What was the time of year? The birth of Christ was during the time of census, which would unlikely have been during winter when travelling conditions became potentially difficult. Furthermore, Christ was born *six months* later than John the Baptist. Zacharias served in the temple during the course of Abijah (Luke 1.5). Historical calculations indicate this course of service corresponded to June 13-19 that particular year. After he completed his service, and according to the word of the angel, Elisabeth conceived (Luke 1.23-24). This would likely be the end of *June*, giving a birthdate of the end of *March*. Christ was born six months later in *September*. This was around the time of the Day of Atonement and Feast of Tabernacles – another reason why Bethlehem would have been very busy!
- The fact shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks by night in the fields of Bethlehem is not decisive. Shepherds generally took their sheep into the wilderness during warmer months (April-October) and returned to towns and cities to guard their sheep in the field during colder months (November-March). But, according to the *Mishnah*, livestock kept near Bethlehem were reserved for sacrifice in the temple and kept in the fields all year.

The Announcement of Caesar Augustus [Luke 2.1-5]

v.1: Luke sets the birth of Christ in the context of *world* politics, suggesting the impact of His birth would be *global*. The Jews were under Roman bondage, longing for a deliverer from their yoke. ‘In those days’ refers to the time of Herod (1.5) and the immediate events of the birth of John the Baptist (1.57). At this time a ‘decree’ (imperial edict) was given that ‘all the (Roman) world’ should be taxed (enrolled). *Caesar Augustus* (exalted or revered) ended bitter Roman civil wars and brought peace and prosperity to the empire (Pax Romana). Yet, he was just a pawn in the hand of God to ensure the Prince of Peace was born in the insignificant hamlet of Bethlehem according to the prophetic word (Proverbs 21.1; Micah 5.5). The decree of taxation probably refers to Augustus’ general policy rather than a single worldwide census during this time. The local census would register provincial citizens to assess taxation and those liable for military service (though the Jews were exempt from this). *JC Ryle: Augustus imagines that he is busied in advancing the glory of his name, and the lustre of his reign. And yet his orders, by means of others more powerful and absolute than his, become subservient to the accomplishment of prophecies, of which he is altogether ignorant – to the birth of a king whom he will never know – and to the establishment of a monarchy, which will subject his and all others to itself.*

v.2: This verse has caused no little controversy. According to *Josephus*, *Cyrenius* (Latin *Quirinius*) was governor of Syria (which included Palestine) in AD6-7 and conducted a census in AD6 (Acts 5.37). But *Sir William Ramsay* famously inspected inscriptions which show that *Quirinius* held an official military post (the word 'governor' can generally refer to a person in administrative authority) in Syria between 10BC-7BC and initiated a census in Palestine (8BC). Luke seems to recognise that more than one census was taken in the region as he uses the word 'first' (*prōte*). According to Roman policy, a local census was taken every 14 years. **v.3:** The census required individuals to return to their ancestral home (cf. Leviticus 25.10), not the place of their abode. **v.4:** Since Joseph was of the 'house and lineage' of David, he returned to the 'city of David', i.e. Bethlehem. This required him to go 'up' from Galilee (Bethlehem lies on a mountain 2,654 feet high) 'out of the city of Nazareth'. This was a journey of 90 miles if they travelled through the Jordan valley to avoid Samaria. If, as is more likely, they walked directly south through the central hill country (Road of the Patriarchs) it would have been a journey of about 70 miles. We are not told how they travelled, but a donkey is unlikely. Only the wealthy rode on the backs of animals, and donkeys could cost up to two years' wages. Nevertheless, Joseph and Mary were law-abiding citizens (Romans 13.1). Throughout the OT, the 'city of David' refers to Zion or Jerusalem from which David reigned (2 Samuel 5.7-9). Luke uses the term to identify the place of David's *birth* (1 Samuel 17.12; 20.6). Christ was thus born in Bethlehem, the place of David in his *lowliness*, rather than Jerusalem, the place of David in his *grandeur*. Bethlehem Ephrathah in Judah (not to be confused with Bethlehem of Zebulun, Joshua 19.15) was located *five miles south west* of Jerusalem. That the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem was common knowledge (Micah 5.2; Matthew 2.5-6; John 7.42). How blessed to think that the living bread which came down from heaven was born in the 'house of bread'. The corn of wheat who brought forth much fruit was found in *Ephrathah* (Bethlehem's original name, cf. Genesis 35.19) meaning 'fruitful' or 'fertility' (John Riddle). **v.5:** Mary may have been required to be registered in the census as women of twelve years and older were subject to a poll tax. In any case, Joseph had already taken Mary to wife, and therefore into his home (Matthew 1.20, 24). Though they were married, their union was not yet consummated (cf. Matthew 1.25) thus Luke uses the word 'betrothed'.

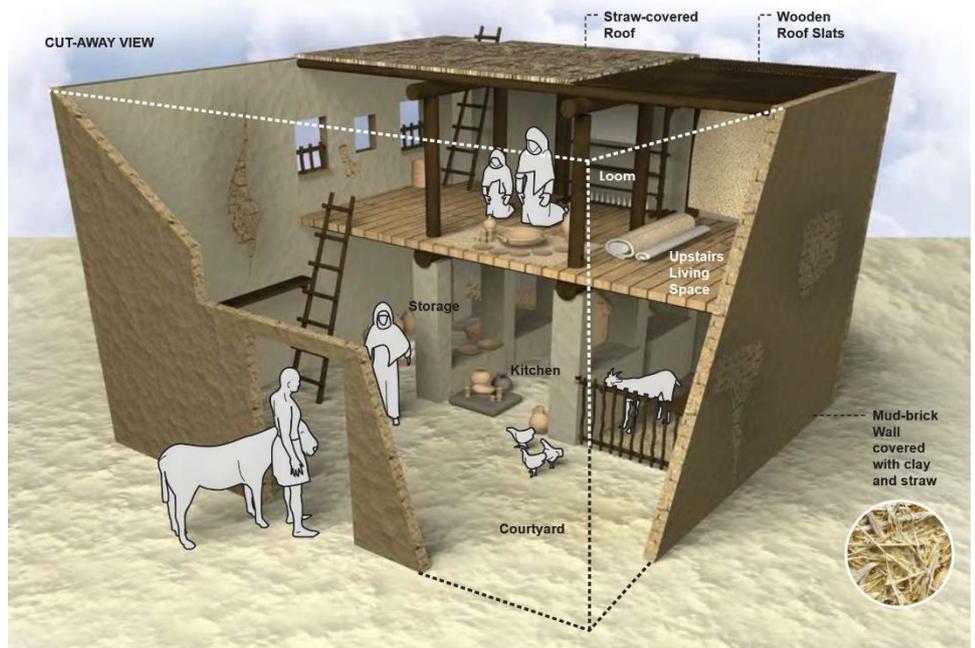


The Advent of the Saviour [Luke 2.6-7]

v.6: With a marvellous simplicity and economy of language, Luke announces the birth of the Saviour of the world. He does not say that Christ was born the instant they arrived in Bethlehem – it was 'while they were there' – some time had obviously elapsed. Subsequently, the 'full time' of her pregnancy was 'accomplished'. God is always on time. Just as Elisabeth (cf. 1.57), Mary obviously had a normal and natural birth. **v.7:** The word 'firstborn' signifies *first* in succession and rank (Romans 8.29; Colossians 1.15, 18). As firstborn son of Mary, Christ claims the *physical* right to the throne of David (Luke 3.23-38); through Joseph he claims the *legal* right (Matthew 1.1-16). The babe was wrapped in 'swaddling clothes' – strips of cloth intended to keep the limbs straight as a sign of motherly care and affection. Swaddling clothes were also used as burial cloths and stored in some of the caves of the hill country of Judaea. On the day of His *birth*, Christ was wrapped in the same kind of cloths as on the day of his *death*. This is the same one who was 'robed in majesty' and 'girded with strength' (Psalm 93.1), 'clothed with honour', and 'light as a garment' (Psalm 104.1-2). Shepherds would swaddle newly born lambs to preserve them from blemish that they might be fit for sacrifice – what a surprise when they saw the 'babe' swaddled the same way – this must be the Lamb of God! There are two references to 'swaddling' in the OT. In Job 38, the one who swaddled the earth in clouds of thick darkness is Himself swaddled by a lowly handmaiden of Israel! Ezekiel 16 records the failure of Israel's nativity. Israel was neither washed in water (for cleansing), nor rubbed with salt, nor swaddled, but cast into the open field. All signified the unclean character of the nation. Christ was swaddled, but there is no mention of cleansing – it was wholly unnecessary with Him!

A 'manger' was a feeding trough normally used for animals. This *could* be a connection to Isaiah 1.3: *An ox recognises its owner, a donkey recognises where its owner puts its food (manger); but Israel does not recognise me, my people do not understand (NET)*. Israel did not appreciate the God who nourished them. Now He lies in a manger. The manger declares His accessibility to all. If He had been born in a palace, only the nobility would have had access to Him. Lying in a manger, any soul, rich or poor, who wanted to see the Saviour was welcome – even despised shepherds. From the beginning, He was easy to approach. The manger also marked His identification with human suffering and wretchedness. He entered humanity at its lowest point, unlike Adam in the paradise of Eden's garden. The great humility which marked Christ rebukes our unwillingness to suffer lowliness to serve Him.

The manger was necessary because there was 'no room for them in the inn' (*kataluma*). The word *kataluma* does not signify a traveller's lodge (Luke 10.34) but likely refers to a 'guest room' in a private residence (cf. Luke 22.11). A first-century Israelite house was a simple two-storey affair with the guest room and living accommodation on the *upper* floor. There was no room for them here, so they were accommodated on the *ground* floor alongside the animals. This area in which the animals were kept was separated from other rooms by pillars between which mangers were hollowed out of stone. So, the Lord Jesus was likely born in the main quarters of a house which may have incorporated a **cave**



into its living space (see below). *Kenneth Bailey: In the East today the dwelling place of man and beast is often in one and the same room. It is quite the usual thing among the peasants for the family to live, eat, and sleep on a kind of raised terrace in the one room of the house, while the cattle, particularly the donkeys and oxen, have their place below on the actual floor near the door.* Tradition assigns the birthplace of Christ as a cave. *Justin Martyr (AD100-165), Origen (AD185-254) and Jerome (AD342-420)* all assert the same. *Jerome, who lived in Bethlehem for 40 years, claims that Hadrian (c.AD135) converted the cave into a pagan shrine. It was reclaimed and memorialised by Constantine (AD339) when he built a church over the site. This cave can still be seen today inside the Church of the Nativity.* But we must not miss the spiritual significance of 'no room'. It clearly illustrates the world's estimate of Christ. There was, and still is, no appreciation of His amazing condescension, far less His glorious person. Christ has been legislated out of schools, homes, hearts and society ever since He came. Perhaps Mary wondered how one so 'highly favoured', such as she was, could be found in such lowly surroundings. But those who are faithful to God are often found in such adverse circumstances – this is the *trial of contradiction* (cf. Daniel 6.16; Jeremiah 38.6; 2 Timothy 1.16). Notice the text says, 'no room for **them**', i.e. Mary and Joseph. For, those who are associated with Christ will soon find that His rejection becomes theirs (John 15.18).

The Appearing of the Angels [Luke 2.8-14]

v.8: In the same region, i.e. nearby to Bethlehem, were shepherds 'lodging' or 'camping out' (*present active participle*) in the fields with their sheep. They were literally 'watching watches' i.e. taking turns in sleeping and guarding the flock against thieves and wild animals. And it was 'night' (cf. Genesis 31.40). They were faithful, diligent and devout men. What a blessing these shepherds were going to receive! *Butler: God does not give choice blessings and revelations to deadbeats. The lazy and slothful in secular life will not do much in the spiritual area either. Diligence is a prerequisite for Divine blessing.* Generally, shepherds spent warmer, drier months (March-November) out in the wilderness, and colder, wetter months (November-March) nearer towns and cities. But, according to the Mishnah (oral tradition of Jewish law), livestock within a certain circumference of Jerusalem were reserved for sacrifice in the temple and kept outside *all year*.

Shepherds are often given a bad name (cf. Genesis 46.34). Later rabbinic writings (from the *fifth* century) describe shepherds as dishonest (often confusing 'mine' and 'thine'!) and untrustworthy. They could not serve as witnesses in court and were considered heathen because they were unable (due to the nature of their work) to keep all the details of the ceremonial law (washing and sabbath observance). **But** Scripture *commends* shepherds and their work, and the one who had been born was the Great Shepherd of the sheep (Psalm 23.1; Hebrews 13.20)! Nevertheless, shepherds were among the lower, uneducated classes in Israel and therefore represented the poor and humble for whom Christ came (Luke 4.18). None of the *prominent* men of the day were of the right spiritual condition to receive such news, but the lowly shepherds were clearly devout and believed in the true and living God. It is not position that receives divine favour, but devout, humble, faithful service for Him.

v.9: William Barclay notes: *In Palestine the birth of a boy was an occasion of great joy. When the time of the birth was near at hand, friends and local musicians gathered near the house. When the birth was announced and it was a boy, the musicians broke into music and song, and there was universal congratulation and rejoicing. If it was a girl the musicians*

went silently and regretfully away! For the birth of the Lord Jesus, God provided a heavenly chorus. The angel of the Lord 'came upon' or 'stood before' them (cf. 24.4). He was accompanied by the 'glory of the Lord', a re-appearance of the *Shechinah* glory (a visible manifestation of the majestic presence of God). Haggai had promised the departed glory would return in some *different* and *greater* way to the second temple (Haggai 2.9) – and so it did, in the person of Jesus Christ. God's presence had once again entered this sin-soaked world through the birth of Christ. The Jews believed a visible sight of the supernatural brought death (cf. Genesis 32.30) – no wonder the shepherds were 'mega' afraid!

v.10: But God does not want His people to be *afraid* of Him, thus the command to 'fear not'. Christ has released us from a 'spirit of bondage' characterised by fear (Romans 8.15). Instead, the angel evangelised the shepherds, literally, 'I evangelise you great (*megas*) joy'. The good news prophesied by Isaiah had come to pass in the birth of the Saviour, Christ the Lord (cf. Isaiah 40.9; 52.7; 61.1). Interestingly, an inscription celebrating the birth of Augustus calls him a 'saviour' and reads, "the birth date of our god has signalled the beginning of good news for the world". But Augustus presented a false salvation, false hope and false peace. Only in Christ can true and eternal salvation and joy be found. This good news is to 'all the people' (singular) signifying the nation of Israel from whom salvation springs (John 4.22). But the salvation of Christ will reach wider than merely Israel (2.30-32)! **v.11:** The birth of the Lord Jesus is described as 'unto you', i.e. it has *personal* implications for the shepherds (cp. Isaiah 9.6). There is a personal obligation and duty for *every* man in relation to Him. 'This day' was of great note in the record of heaven – the promises of *yesterday* were being fulfilled. The phrase is often used by Luke in the context of salvation (Luke 4.21; 5.26; 19.9; 23.43) which is bound-up in a Person who was born in the city of David (royalty). He is a **Saviour** (activity), **Christ** (identity) the **Lord** (authority).

- **Saviour.** Describes a *deliverer* from enemies such as a judge (Judges 3.9; Nehemiah 9.27) or king (2 Kings 13.5). Its primary reference in the OT is to God who delivers from peril, disease and enemies (cf. Deuteronomy 20.4; Psalm 24.5; 25.5; Isaiah 25.9; 43.3; 45.15). Christ is born as a deliverer from physical *and* spiritual peril (1.47, 69; 2.30).
- **Christ.** He is the anointed Messiah, the *promised* and *ultimate* prophet, priest and king. In Luke, messiahship is equated with deity, i.e. the 'Son of God' (4.41) and Lordship (20.41-44) as well as *suffering* and *glory* (24.26, 46).
- **Lord.** Literally, 'Christ Lord'. This is a statement of absolute deity. When used in reference to Christ, *kurios* (Lord) conveys all that is implied in the name Jehovah (translated as *kurios* in LXX). The Lord Jesus is not merely 'Messiah of the Lord' but 'Messiah who **is** the Lord'.

v.12: The 'sign' was a distinguishing mark by which the shepherds could identify the promised Messiah – He would be 'wrapped in swaddling clothes' and 'lying in a manger'. Not too many would fulfil those conditions in Bethlehem this night! The Lord Jesus was a sign to the world in His *incarnation* (Isaiah 7.14) as well as His *death* and *resurrection* (Luke 11.30). At least this news would be of some comfort to the shepherds who would not be welcomed in many homes and feel ashamed of their poverty and low estate. But Christ was born in a simple peasant home – He was one with them in their lowly estate. The proof of the angel's word was in the *ordinary* and *common* things of life – as is often the evidence of divine work (rather than the spectacular). For example, genuine salvation in a person's life is manifest in the behaviour of the everyday, rather than how one acts on special occasions! **v.13:** 'Suddenly', typical of heavenly appearances, and in contrast to the 'dwelling' of Christ (John 1.14), a multitude of the 'heavenly host' appeared (or 'army', paradoxically announcing peace) with the angel of the Lord. The word 'multitude' literally means 'fulness' – the area around the shepherds was full of angels. Heaven was *moved* at the birth of Christ sending a select group (multitude) of the entire heavenly array (cf. Revelation 5.11). But, in contrast, the earthly celebrants didn't fill much 'space'! *Butler: If you want to know if something is important, do not count how many human people honour it or crowd around it. Rather, check and see how heaven honours it.* **v.14:** The angelic chorus speaks of the significance of the birth of Christ in *heaven* (glory) and on *earth* (peace) and explains *why* (the Second Man). The birth of Christ, and consequent salvation, brings glory (honour) to God who dwells 'in the highest place'. *JC Ryle: Jesus Christ, by His life and death on the cross will glorify God's attributes – justice, holiness, mercy, and wisdom – as they never were glorified before. Creation glorified God, but not so much as redemption.* Those who dwell on earth can enjoy peace, i.e. spiritual wholeness and health (*shalom*) in relationship with God (*eirene*) through the Prince of Peace. 'Good will toward men' may refer to God's peace being bestowed on those He favours, i.e. believers (Luke 1.50). Alternatively, the phrase may be rendered 'good pleasure in men'. God could never find 'good pleasure' in Adam or his fallen race because of sin. But now the Second Man has been born, thus God is glorified in heaven and peace is offered to those on earth because God has found delight in a new order of man, the head of which is Christ.

The Activity of the Shepherds [Luke 2.15-20]

v.15: The shepherds clearly had a great desire to see Christ. They 'kept saying to one another' (*imperfect* tense), 'let us now go'! There was no *reason* or *debate* about who would watch the flocks, nor did they *doubt* the word of God. They desired, not to see **if** the thing had come to pass, but that which **had** come to pass. Professed faith in God's word cannot fail to foster a fervent response in the heart and actions of men. Heavenly *revelation* brought an earthly *responsibility* which they were keen to fulfil (cf. 2 Peter 3.11). **v.16:** Though they might have made many excuses, they came 'with

haste' and 'found'. Sometimes God tests our dedication by giving us inconvenient circumstances alongside the spiritual opportunities. Are we always looking for excuses, or are we diligent to serve? Their simple faith was rewarded with a first glimpse of the new-born Messiah.

v.17: Now the shepherds, instead of the angel of the Lord (v.10), have become the evangelists. They 'thoroughly broadcast' the 'saying', i.e. word of God, ensuring the 'child', not Mary and Joseph, was the focus of their declaration.

v.18: The response of the hearers was to 'wonder' (to be extraordinarily impressed), a favourite word of Luke often used in relation to the *words* and *works* of Christ (4.22; 9.43; 11.14; 20.26; 24.12). Both the *birth* (2.18), *life* (Matthew 8.27), *death* (Mark 15.44) and *resurrection* of Christ (Luke 24.12, 41) caused men to 'marvel'. He is indeed an astonishing Saviour. Sad to say, though those who heard were amazed at the message, there is no record of any further enquiry on their part. They were excited by the *sensational* but did not recognise the requirement for *personal application* – their duty to Christ. There was curiosity but no commitment. The word tickled the ears but missed the hearts. **v.19:** *But* Mary, in contrast to the superficial hearers of v.18, was a careful thinker. She 'kept on preserving' in her heart (cf. 2.51) all she heard and experienced, carefully 'pondering' such matters. The word 'ponder' means to 'weigh' or 'place side by side for comparison' in order that she might understand the significance of such events. The initial euphoria of salvation (as illustrated by the shepherds) often develops into a richer appreciation and meditation upon His person (as illustrated by Mary). She was a thinker more than a talker! **v.20:** The shepherds themselves returned to their duties. An encounter with Christ did not undermine their faithfulness to the legitimate responsibilities of life. As a result of their *hearing* and *seeing* (the *latter* confirming the *former*, cf. Luke 24.25-27) they continually 'glorified' and 'praised' God. A vision of Christ permanently affects the entire life.