

“Journey to Bethlehem”

Luke 1:80-2:7

One of the challenges in approaching a study on any part of what we call “the Christmas story” is its familiarity. You know what I mean. There’s a tendency for our minds to disengage, and for our eyes to glaze over as we say to ourselves something like; “I’ve heard this a million times already in my life.” It is as Aesop says in one of his fables, “Familiarity breeds contempt.”

Another challenge is to overcome all the unbiblical assumptions made by poets and artists under the guise of “artistic license.” Through the centuries the story of Christ’s birth has become encrusted with all kinds of ideas, traditions, and associations of questionable value. My desire in looking again at this very familiar account is to stick to what the text, and other complementary scriptures, clearly tells us.

There’s another issue here too. If you’re like me, you may have already wished that Jesus had given more specific teaching on a particular issue; or that we had more details about His childhood or some other aspect of His ministry. But we must understand that the Gospel records were never meant to be a “complete” account of all that Jesus did and said. The apostle John wrote in the last verse of his Gospel record; *“And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written.”*

Just prior to these words, in John chapter 20:30 and 31, John gave us the reason why the Scriptures were written as they are. *“And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you might have life through his name.”* It is important for us to keep this in mind as we progress in our study of Luke’s Gospel. God, in His sovereignty, has given us the details we need in order to believe.

Now, let’s turn our attention to the text from Luke. Listen carefully as I read God’s Word from the last verse of chapter one, verse 80, and then **Luke 2:1 to 7**. This will be the basis of our study today. I’ve titled our study, “Journey to Bethlehem.”

As God's plan of salvation unfolds on the stage of Luke's gospel narrative, our text highlights the roles of several principal ACTORS in the divine drama, "Journey to Bethlehem."

The First ACTOR is

A Prophet Named John

Though he appears only briefly here, his appearance is significant. The final verse of Luke chapter one sets the stage for the beginning of chapter two. We read that "*[John] grew, and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.*" It is noteworthy that very similar language is used to describe the childhood of Jesus in Luke 2:52. We have very little information about the childhoods of both Jesus and John.

Like any normal human being, John grew physically. In addition, like all of us, he developed a unique personality and calling. God used the circumstances of his childhood and young adulthood to mold and shape both his character and his ministry. He does the same thing in our lives today. And in His proper timing, He initiates the ministry for which He prepared us.

It is interesting that John's childhood and early adulthood were spent in the wilderness. Our King James Version uses the word desert. This can lead us to picture a very hot, dry, barren place filled with not much more than sand, scrub brush and some cactus. It is likely that a better translation would be to use the word, wilderness or uninhabited place.

To support this understanding I appeal to the words of Jesus Himself in Luke 9:10. After the twelve disciples returned from their successful mission trip, Jesus, as we would say today, debriefed them; He questioned them about their mission and their experiences. As part of that process "*...he took them, and went aside privately into a desert place belonging to the city called Bethsaida.*" We know that Bethsaida was not located in a desert area as we understand the word desert. One writer suggested that a "desert place" was uncultivated ground used for the grazing of sheep." There are other instances in the Gospels where Jesus and His disciples retired to uninhabited areas after particularly strenuous times of ministry.

While the biblical record does not tell us exactly where Zacharias and Elizabeth lived, tradition says that John likely grew up in the Hebron area in the hills of Judea. It is fitting, I believe, that the last of the Old Testament prophets should spend his early years in the wilderness. Moses, Elijah, and other prophets spent considerable time in uninhabited areas - either in their training or during their ministry.

The Second ACTOR is,

A Sovereign Ruler

I chose this wording purposely because, in a sense, there are two sovereign rulers involved, although only one is visible. The visible sovereign is Caesar Augustus, ruler of the Roman Empire. Yet above him stands the sovereign God directing Caesar's actions even though Caesar would not have acknowledged it even if he had been aware of it.

Chapter two begins with these words, "*And it came to pass in those days...*" This phrase connects the birth of Jesus with the last verse of the previous chapter. It was during the days of John's childhood that these events began to take place. Now granted, it would have been during John's infancy because he was only about 6 months older than Jesus.

It was during this time that Caesar Augustus made a decree; that's an official edict or proclamation. The reason for the proclamation was to inform the citizens of the Roman Empire of an upcoming census. The purpose of the census was to make a public record of all subjects of the empire together with their income and property. The valuation of their property would then be used to determine the tax levy. Imagine an enrollment and assessment for the purpose of being taxed. There's really nothing new under the sun, is there?

Verse two of this text presents some difficulty in the historical record. It says that "*This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.*" From historical records we know that Quirinius or Cyrenius was not governor of Syria until about 12-15 years after Jesus was born. We know from Matthew's Gospel that Herod was the ruler at the time of Jesus' birth. This is the kind of thing skeptics like to point out to prove that the Bible is inaccurate.

But I say, "Hold on, not so fast." One of the things I noted a couple months ago in the introduction to our study of Luke's Gospel is how particular Luke is in accurately reporting the facts. So just from the standpoint of logic it seems unlikely that he would make such a glaring mistake. And further, the Scriptures themselves assert that they are God-inspired.

So how do we reconcile this? Well, let me give you a couple things to think about. First, we know that Luke was aware of another census taken by Quirinius because he wrote about it in Acts 5:37. And that one caused a revolt! Second, note that verse two is what we call a

“parenthetical aside.” It is added to the sentence to give additional supporting detail. Now, just for the moment, let’s take this out of the picture. As modern readers of the text, what have we lost? Nothing!

However, we must keep in mind Luke’s original audience. His parenthetical aside was meant to establish in their minds the historical connection with Jesus’ birth. He appeals to a fact he knows they will be acquainted with. So it is not very convincing if Luke is recounting an event he’s not personally familiar with.

I appreciate the way Alfred Edersheim defuses this controversy in his book, “The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah.” Here’s what he says. “That the Emperor Augustus made registers of the Roman Empire, and of subject and tributary states, is now generally admitted. This registration would also embrace Palestine.

Even if no actual order to that effect had been issued during the lifetime of Herod, we can understand that he would deem it most expedient, both on account of his relations to the Emperor, and in view of the probable excitement which a heathen Census would cause in Palestine, to take steps for making a registration according to the Jewish manner rather than the Roman manner. This Census, then, arranged by Augustus and taken by Herod in his own manner was, according to Luke, first [really] carried out when Cyrenius was governor of Syria, some years after Herod’s death when Judea had become a Roman province.” End of quote.

Herod’s understanding of the Jewish sensitivities would cause him to order a census that would not unduly excite the citizens of Palestine. We can therefore conclude that Herod’s census provides the backdrop for the birth of Jesus. If this is indeed the case, the readers of Luke’s gospel would have clearly understood this detail of the narrative.

One of the qualifications of this enrollment was that citizens had to be enrolled in their city of birth. This detail seems a bit curious for a census ordered by Rome and may reinforce the idea that this census was carried out in a thoroughly Jewish manner. After all, the knowledge of family history was very important in the Jewish culture.

The larger and more important point is this; God (the other sovereign in the picture) was using the edict of a pagan ruler to arrange the setting for the birth of Jesus. Because the birth of the Christ-child had been prophesied for hundreds of years, there were many details that needed to be arranged so those prophecies could be fulfilled. So God demonstrated His sovereign control

by having Caesar Augustus exercise his sovereign power to order an administrative act of civil government that would accomplish God's purposes.

Since God needed a way to get Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem to fulfill His pre-Creation plan of salvation, He used the Roman Emperor's edict of a census to accomplish that plan. His plan affected not only Joseph and Mary, but everyone else in the whole region of Palestine. Thus God had the leading role on the stage of human history, arranging the details that introduce us to the next actors in the divine drama.

The Next ACTORS are,

An Obedient Couple

Joseph models for us the character of a good citizen. Upon hearing the edict of the Emperor, he prepares to leave Nazareth for his ancestral home of Bethlehem. The text states, *“And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) to be taxed (or enrolled) with Mary his espoused wife, who was great with child.”*

The text says that Joseph went up from Galilee. Often in our modern way of thinking, we think of up as being in the north. For example, when I travel to Canada I say I am going “up” to Canada because it lies to the north of the US border. When I travel to areas lying south of where I live, I say I am going “down” to Florida or some other state. But when Joseph and Mary went up from Nazareth they were going south. They were going up in terms of elevation. Bethlehem lies at just above 2700 feet in elevation. The elevation of Nazareth is about 1600 feet.

Historical records suggest that the Romans may have required all adults from a household to appear for the purpose of registration. This may have been the primary reason Joseph, whom we later see as a very compassionate and devoted husband, took his very pregnant wife along on the 80-mile journey to Bethlehem! But we also know that God was continuing to orchestrate the whole process to accomplish His plans for the birth of Jesus.

Certainly, there would have been other reasons for Joseph to take Mary with him. Knowing human nature, we can surely imagine the gossip that was circulating in Nazareth about Mary's pregnancy. Unfortunately, we also know that this kind of gossip is not confined to unbelieving scoffers, but sadly, is found among the people of God. So, both Joseph and Mary

could have been under a significant amount of emotional stress from their unusual circumstances. Traveling to Bethlehem, and taking up residence there, would remove much of this stress.

Here too, we see the sovereign God at work. As devoted followers of Jehovah, both Joseph and Mary most likely knew about Micah's prophecy. *"But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."* That's Micah 5:2.

Since Bethlehem was the birthplace of David, and Jesus was to be "born of David's family line," it was necessary for Mary to travel with Joseph so these prophecies could be fulfilled. It is interesting that the attachment to Bethlehem became so strong in the holy family that later it took special Divine direction by way of a dream to persuade Joseph to leave Bethlehem and return to Galilee. You'll find the record of that in Matthew 2:22.

Now I know you've seen pictures of Mary and Joseph traveling along a lonely road to Bethlehem with Mary riding on a donkey. Those pictures are seen on greeting cards, calendars, and other items but have little, if any, biblical facts to support them. There's a reason why the Gospel narratives leave out many details of this incident and others in the life of Jesus. The reason is - so we can learn and concentrate on what really matters! The writer's contrast was between the royal birthplace that this Son of David deserved and the humble one He received. His exclusion from human society anticipated the rejection that He would continue to experience throughout His ministry.

As Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem it's more likely that they traveled in a group, a caravan, rather than traveling alone. It was a much more common way to travel and provided a measure of protection for them. There is safety in numbers. As for Mary riding on a donkey, it's possible but not likely, given the poverty of this couple. And that is one of the important points in this whole narrative, indeed in the whole narrative of Jesus' life; His identification with the poor and the outcasts. This was the subject of numerous prophecies like Isaiah 53:12, Isaiah 61:1 and 2, Ezekiel 34:16 and many others.

Some might object to the idea of Mary walking to Bethlehem on the basis of Mary's pregnancy; but there a couple of things to consider. First, whoever said walking was harmful for

a pregnant woman, especially if she is accustomed to daily exercise and manual labor – as Mary most surely was. We must remember that for the most of human history childbearing was viewed as a natural process, not a medical condition. It would help us to keep that in mind today!

Then, there's another thing; where do we get the idea that Mary delivered her baby immediately upon reaching Bethlehem? What the text actually says is "*While they were there, the days were accomplished...*" It doesn't say Jesus was born the night they arrived there. It's just my opinion, but based on what I read about Joseph in other Scriptures, I believe he would have chosen what was best for Mary with regard to her health and comfort.

The picture many of us grew up with is Joseph banging on the door of the inn (which, by the way, was not like our hotels), and not finding any room available, he hustles Mary off to the stable out back so Jesus can be born that night! Now I grant you, the previous verse says that Mary was "great with child." So she obviously was not too far from her due date. But that still gives no justification for the idea that they barely made it to Bethlehem.

You see, what happens so often as we read the Bible is this, we read it through the filter of our own experience. To a certain degree that can't be avoided. But as I've said earlier, we must try to understand how the original readers would have understood what was written. So we need to approach the Gospels from the mindset of someone living in the Near East instead of our Western understanding.

Just for an example, take DaVinci's famous mural, "The Last Supper." I'm sure you've seen it because it's available on anything from china plates to pillows and from puzzles to wall-hangings. This famous painting by an Italian artist who lived during the 1400s pictures Jesus and His disciples sitting behind a western-style table, sharing the final Passover meal together. Do you think this is really the way they celebrated that final meal? You don't if you are paying attention to history and to the Bible itself!

So, as we look at the birth story, and indeed, the Gospel accounts, we need to keep in mind the differences in our culture and the culture in which these things were written. The text tells us that because there was no room in the inn Mary laid Jesus in a manger or crib.

In some renderings of the Christmas story, the innkeeper is almost made into a heartless villain. But the fact is, he's not even a part of the story! While he certainly had to be there to inform Joseph and Mary of "No Vacancy," his part has to be fabricated from our imagination.

From my research, I believe the inn referred to in our text was most likely what was called a khan or caravanserai. I first read of this kind of facility while reading to my children the story of Gladys Aylward, pioneer missionary to China. Ms. Aylward and her companion, Mrs. Lawson operated such a facility for the Chinese mule caravans.

The khan was usually a stone building with a large courtyard that included a well to provide water for the animals and guests. The courtyard was surrounded on 3 or 4 sides by a raised platform, called a piazza. From this platform, doors led to a single oblong room or cell where the guests would sleep. The space they rented was the room itself and their part of the raised platform that was open to the courtyard.

In many of these khans the animals occupy the space in the courtyard just below the raised platform. In the Near East it was not uncommon for animals and people to occupy the same living space or to be in very close proximity to it. So the presence of animals close to the birthplace of Jesus is a realistic feature of some artwork. But here again, you'll often notice that the setting, often called a stable, reflects a western point of view.

Some of the larger inns would have had recesses in the rear of the guest chambers that extended from the back wall of the lodging to the outer wall of the building; this formed a kind of "stable." About this Albert Barnes writes, "Though these recesses were small and shallow, they formed a convenient retreat for servants and muleteers in bad weather." He adds, "That it [the recess] might be rendered quite private by a cloth being stretched across the lower half." It's interesting to note that this arrangement, by divine appointment I might add, probably gave Joseph and Mary more privacy than they would have had if they had been given a normal "room" in the inn!

We note also that Mary laid her baby in a manger or crib; a kind of feeding trough for animals. We don't know exactly what this would have looked like, but having it filled with clean hay or straw would have made a secure and comfortable bed; certainly more comfortable than the normal straw mat on a stone or dirt floor! The circumstances of Jesus' birth were different from most of His peers because he was born away from home, but the other particulars of the birthing process were common to his time.

A final detail of the biblical record is that Mary wrapped Jesus in "swaddling bands." We understand from the prophet Ezekiel that this was normal procedure. Let me read Ezekiel 16:4.

“And as for your nativity, in the day you were born your navel was not cut, neither were you washed in water to make you supple: you were not salted at all, nor swaddled at all.” This lack of normal care was associated with God’s judgment on sinful Jerusalem.

So what were these swaddling bands? They were made from linen or cotton material and were four to five meters long (15-18 feet), and the width of the band was from four to five inches. Salt was pulverized, usually by the mid-wife, until it was in the form of a fine powder. When the baby was born, the mid-wife first washed the baby in water. Then a piece of cloth about a square yard in size was laid out and the baby placed on it in a diagonal position. If you have daughters, like I do, you’ve probably wrapped their doll babies in a cloth like that. And then, as the custom was, the baby's body was sprinkled and gently rubbed with the finely powdered salt.

Swaddled infants did not have the free movement of their arms and legs. The legs were placed closely together and then the baby's arms were placed at its sides and the piece of swaddled cloth was folded over the baby's feet and arms. Then the band was wrapped from under the baby's chin, over the forehead and wrapped around and around the infant all the way down to the ankles. When the baby was finished being wrapped in the swaddling band, it had all the appearance of a mummy. In the case of Jesus, Mary most likely did the wrapping herself.

This obedient couple, Joseph and Mary, followed the instructions God gave to them as well as the customs of their time. In this, they carefully filled their role in the divine drama.

The Final ACTOR is,

A Firstborn Son

In Bethlehem, in the part of the inn reserved for the keeping of animals and the care of the servants and muleteers, Mary gave birth to Jesus, her firstborn. Here, the firstborn Son of God in the flesh makes his debut on the stage called earth.

There is an inescapable Divine irony in having the King of Kings born, not in a royal palace, but in the keeping place of animals! No one could have invented such an unusual story when the whole current of Jewish opinion, regarding the Messiah, would run in such a contrary direction. Alfred Edersheim makes a very interesting observation regarding this fact.

He states “The two essential features shared by legend and tradition are, they ever seek to surround their heroes with a halo of glory, and (second) they attempt to supply details which are otherwise wanting. And, in both of these respects a more sharply marked contrast could scarcely be presented, than in the Gospel narrative.” End of quote.

As the Scriptures inform us, Jesus was the firstborn of Mary, but not the firstborn of Joseph! He was “begotten by God.” The Golden Text of the Bible, John 3:16 tells us; *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* As a child of the covenant He was a recipient of the rights and privileges of the firstborn. Let us reflect just briefly on the impact of His position.

The elevation of the position of the firstborn son came about during God’s preparation for the exodus from Egypt. As you recall, the blood of the yearling lamb had to be applied to the doorpost and lintels of the houses so the death-angel would pass over them. Because the Egyptians were either unaware of this provision or simply ignored it, all the Egyptian firstborn across the land died that night.

In the aftermath of the exodus from Egypt God instructed Moses that all the firstborn males of man and animals must be sanctified or set apart for God. The male animals were to be sacrificed to God and the male children needed to be redeemed by the death of an animal. And what was the reason for this requirement?

Here is Exodus 13:14 to 16. *“And it shall be when your son asks you in time to come, saying, ‘What is this?’ that you shall say unto him, By strength of hand the LORD brought us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage: And it came to pass, when Pharaoh would hardly let us go, that the LORD slew all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man, and the firstborn of beast: therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all that opens the matrix, being males; but all the firstborn of my children I redeem. And it shall be for a token upon your hand, and for frontlets between your eyes: for by strength of hand the LORD brought us forth out of Egypt.”*

Mary’s firstborn, Jesus, was certainly set apart or sanctified for God’s use. Yet He had the distinction of becoming the perfect lamb of sacrifice in order to give us the privilege of being consecrated to God. Here is how the writer of Hebrews captures this truth.

*“But you are come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, **To the general assembly and church***

of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaks better things than that of Abel.” That’s Hebrews 12:22 to 24. Because of Mary’s firstborn, you and I can be among the “church of the firstborn...”

As we’ve viewed this divine drama of the “Journey to Bethlehem,” it is my hope and prayer that you’ve gained a new appreciation for the facts as Luke presents them to us. Yes, there is much that we do not know, yet the record we have tells us what is most important. Each of the actors filling their role on the stage of human history authenticates the promises of God and brings to life the story of Messiah’s birth.

There is a prophet named John, the forerunner, whose birth signals the advent of the coming Messiah. There is a sovereign ruler who issues a decree that will lead a godly couple to a specific town for the birth of a very special son.

There is an obedient couple; Joseph and Mary. With simple faith and trust in the promises of God, they step out in faithful obedience to His guidance and leading. And there is a firstborn son who not only holds a special place in His earthly family, but in the family of God.

God, in His sovereign wisdom, has withheld from us many details. Let’s take time to reflect on what the record tells us and refuse to obscure it with the traditions of men. Let each of us humbly and thoughtfully make the “Journey to Bethlehem.”

Let’s pray. Gracious God our Heavenly Father, we come to you in the name of Jesus, your only begotten Son. We marvel at the way in which you chose to have Him enter our world, not as a spectator, but as one with us in our humanity! We’re so thankful that He didn’t come to a palace and relate only to the rich and powerful; but that He came in circumstances that identified Him with the poor and the powerless.

And Father, as we reflect on the humble birth of Jesus we acknowledge that when He comes again He will come with power and great glory. He will come to gather to Himself all who have humbled themselves and accepted His righteous requirements for eternal life. For this appearing we wait with anticipation in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.