

Introductory

This material is exclusive to Luke. Matthew begins his Gospel with the genealogy of Jesus, then deals with how Mary came to be impregnated, then moves to the Magi and the Flight to Egypt and back to Nazareth. Mark does not have a birth account, per se, and John's account focuses on the theological meaning of the birth of "the Word," and His relationship and interaction with John.

In TLH, Luke 2: 1-14 is appointed to be read on Christmas Day, and 15-20 on Second Christmas Day, AKA Boxing Day to many of you. In LW, this text is appointed for Christmas Eve and Christmas Dawn in both the one-year and three-year lectionaries. LSB has Matthew 1: 18-25 on Christmas Eve – I tried that once; it did not work – and this text for Christmas Dawn and Midnight.

The problem with this text, of course, is that it's all very familiar. We have listened to it being read at least annually for most of us most of our lives, and we think we know it. But there's always more to learn, and as I journey through this familiar text on biblehub.com, I'm learning new things, like I learned new things last year, like I learn new things every time I engage in study of the Bible.

I'll never forget a Pastor lamenting that Pentecost is coming up, and didn't we just do that a year ago, and I can't keep preaching the same sermon every year. You're right about not being able to preach the same sermon every year, or maybe not. If you are actually doing that, then they are not actually listening, so you can preach the same sermon every year and they won't even know it.

The Fathers wax eloquent about the Nativity, like Jerome, for example,

He found no room in the Holy of Holies that shone with gold, precious stones, pure silk and silver. He is not born in the midst of gold and riches, but in the midst of dung, in a stable where our sins were filthier than the dung. He is born on a dunghill in order to life up those who came from it: 'from the dunghill He lifts up the poor.

I have something somewhere from Athanasius that's pretty good, and it goes on and on.

We see increased angelic activity during this time leading up to, during, and immediately after the birth of Jesus. The word "ἄγγελος" means "messenger" from God, and that messenger can, and

often does, take the form of a man, often a Pastor. To see that, go to a concordance and see how that word – you can do it at biblehub.com, or Strong’s (in English) – and see how it is used

When it comes to words, their meaning is determined by context. So, here we have one messenger coming to speak to the shepherds, who are frightened. That fright could be due to the appearance of the “Glory of the Lord” or to angels with wings. Or it could be because of strangers coming to them suddenly in the night, and the initial reaction is to be on guard. Then more messengers come.

Textual Notes

1. It came to pass that “δῶγμα παρὰ Καίσαρος Αὐγούστου ἀπογράφεσθαι πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην – a decree went out from Caesar Augustus to register all the world.” Augustus ruled the Empire from 27 B.C. to 14 A.D. His ascension marked the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the Roman Empire, specifically the Roman Principate, which then lasted until 284 A.D.

The order from Augustus that “all the world” should be registered may be hyperbole, or it may mean that in the Roman world “all the world” would be the Empire, which was for the most part the Roman world. They conquered, they subdued, and they colonized, and the conquered became part of their world, but beyond the borders was mostly unknown and largely unimportant.

The conquered Palestine would have been part of that world, and the verb “register” occurs here and in verse three, and the cognate noun makes an appearance sandwiched between in verse two. This was akin to taking a census, which we did in 2020. The census-takers came to us, or not, and in that time and place the people went to them, where their information was harvested.

The amount of data harvested by these Roman census-takers would not be matched until the arrival of Facebook over two thousand years later. The purpose of data harvesting was mostly so that the Roman IRS would know how much tax you owed. Rather than a quick show up and sign here, Joseph would have spent hours or even days handing over the most personal of information.

2. Such a thing was not a one-time thing, but “αὕτη ἀπογραφὴ πρώτη ἐγένετο ἡγεμονεύοντος τῆς Συρίας Κυρηνίου – this was the first registration, happening when Quirinius ruled over Syria.” The never-Jesus crowd wants to poo-hoo the timing of these events, and if you want to read about that, then WIK is a good starting point, but there’s a lot more than that out there.

They all assume that Luke is a complete dolt whose witness is inconsequential. But we know that Luke was an educated man, a physician, and that he begins this book by emphasizing that he has done his research and is giving an accurate historical account of things that actually happened, even using the same words as the Greek historian Herodotus to introduce this work.

When they talk about things “not recorded outside the Bible,” that means that those things are recorded in the Bible, and why should they not carry at least as much weight as other writers, even

not considering the matter of inspiration. Barclay is pretty good on this, and he talks about a fourteen-year cycle and concludes that this registration must have therefore been in 8 B.C.

That's pretty early, but the assumption is that there was not census taken between those taken every fourteen years like clockwork; Barclay says we have records for all of them "until about A.D. 270." Luke may well have been referring to something like that, and to say that we don't have a record of it "outside of the Bible" – does the biblical record count for absolutely nothing?

3. The critics also doubt people like Joseph being required to travel to the place of ancestry to take part in the registry because we don't have any record of such a thing "outside the Bible." Paul Maier, in *The First Christmas*, says that historians used to doubt Luke because the Romans never did that, until it was discovered that they did do that. Barclay quotes uncited in his commentary;

Gaius Vibius Maximus, Prefect of Egypt orders: 'Seeing that the time has come for the house-to-house census, it is necessary to compel all those who for any cause whatsoever are residing outside their districts to return to their own homes, that they may both carry out the regular order of the census. And may also diligently attend to the cultivation of their allotments.'

Having said all that, I will not talk about all that in a sermon on Christmas Eve.

4. So it is that Joseph left his hometown of Nazareth and travelled "εἰς τὴν Ἰουδαίαν εἰς πόλιν Δαυεὶδ ἣτις καλεῖται Βηθλεέμ, – into Judea, into the city of David, which is called Bethlehem. Speaking of Bethlehem as the City of David, Larry Eubanks says,

That title had always been given to Jerusalem. Forty times in the Old Testament, Jerusalem is referred to as the city of David, and no other city in the Bible is ever called by that name. Until Luke's gospel.

Eventually, he gets around to telling us why Luke calls Bethlehem the City of David,

By calling Bethlehem the city of David, Luke highlights Jesus' opposition to the powers that be in Jerusalem...He reminds his readers that David didn't come from a place of great power, but from a little town known as least of all the cities of Judah (see Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:6).

<https://goodfaithmedia.org/why-luke-referred-to-bethlehem-as-city-of-david-cms-23163/>

<https://www.nazcol.org/blog/3815/bethlehem-the-other-city-of-david/> has a lot to say about the significance of Bethlehem and Jerusalem and other parallels in the lives of David and Jesus. Twice before this (1:27, 69), Luke has made the point that Jesus is from the family of David, and it's an important point. Both Luke and Matthew include David as a matter of course in their genealogies.

To be sure, Jerusalem was known as The City of David, but in fact David hailed from Bethlehem (1 Samuel 16:3), and he was anointed there by Samuel. Two thousand years later, if you asked

ten Christians what the term “City of David” means, nine and a half of them would say Bethlehem. If you asked Jewish people that same question, you would probably get a different answer.

The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem is about a hundred miles, and the little town it’s located about six miles south of Jerusalem. The reason why they are making the journey to Bethlehem is διὰ τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν ἐξ οἴκου καὶ πατριᾶς Δαυεὶδ – because of his being from the house and family of David.” That terminology clearly and obviously refers to ancestors that go back quite a way.

David lived about a thousand years before Joseph. We look a lot more at Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus than we look at Luke’s, which is located in the third chapter. Both trace Joseph’s ancestry back to – among others – King David. It is because his ancestor David was from Bethlehem that Joseph must go there for this. Barnes thinks so, and I think he’s on to something when he says,

It is not improbable that he might also have had a small paternal estate in Bethlehem that rendered his presence there more desirable.

5. For the fourth time in five verses, he mentions the census, going to Bethlehem “ἀπογράψασθαι σὺν Μαριὰμ τῇ ἐμνηστευμένῃ αὐτῷ, οὕσῃ ἐγκύω – to register with Mary, betrothed to him, being with child.” That verb “ἀπογράφω – to enroll” is found four times in the NT, three here and once in Hebrews (12:23) where it is used in reference to people who are “enrolled” in heaven.

We would say that Mary and Joseph are engaged to be married, and that meant a lot more then than it does now. Back in the day, engagement the LCMS and other places was tantamount to marriage, at least when it came to commitment. To break an engagement was tantamount to getting divorced. These days, not so much. Engagements are entered into, and out of, much more easily.

Mary and Joseph “engaged” to one another by their respective fathers, quite possibly at a very young age. Modern man is horrified at such a thing but look at the divorce rate. I have heard of people – Christians – wanting to and actually going back to arranged marriages, and for it they are roundly criticized. But look at the divorce rate. And living arrangements are fluid and changeable.

On the screen, arranged marriages – much of the world still does that – are depicted as fathers pushing their children into unwanted marriages that end up horribly. I can’t speak for the rest, but if I were to arrange a marriage for my children, I would heavily solicit their opinion. What father would want to marry his child to a person the child does not want to marry? Some, I suppose.

6 - 7. While in Bethlehem, “Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἐκεῖ ἐπλήσθησαν αἱ ἡμέραι τοῦ τεκεῖν αὐτήν – it happened during their being there, that the days were fulfilled of her giving birth.” Her water broke, its time, and when is giving birth ever convenient? Mary gave birth to Jesus, her first-born, and she wrapped Him in rags, out back in the barn, and laid him in a feeding trough.

8. Meanwhile, out in the country, “Καὶ ποιμένες ἦσαν ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ τῇ αὐτῇ ἀγραυλοῦντες – and there were shepherds in that region, living out in the country.” Tents are not a new thing, or they

might have been sleeping on the ground. One lexicon entry says “bivouac.” And “φυλάσσοντες φυλακὰς τῆς νυκτὸς ἐπὶ τὴν ποίμνην αὐτῶν – and they were guarding their flock at night.”

Out of all the people with all the vocations available, why did God choose to send the angel and the Glory of the Lord to shepherds? Because they were shepherds, which is what the word “pastor” means, and these shepherd/pastors took what is told to them and ran with it. I know that flies in the face of conventional preaching, which makes their supposed being “humble” the reason for it.

And just what does that mean, that they were “humble,” and are we saying that God looked around Bethlehem and chose to send what He sent to these shepherds because they were “humble?” And why do you think the vocation of shepherd – do humble people shepherd, or does shepherding make you a humble person? Shepherds then, like now, are the owners of valuable livestock

In response to seeing what they see and hearing what they hear, as soon as the angel left, the shepherds as a group went quickly to Bethlehem to see what’s up. When they determined that, they did not return to their sheep, but went out and proclaimed the birth of Jesus far and wide. After then had done that, they returned and commenced to praising God for this Good News.

9. And just what was it that they saw and heard? What had been an uneventful night became, “καὶ ἄγγελος Κυρίου ἐπέστη αὐτοῖς – and an angel of the Lord stood by them.” The verb means that the angel came to them and was visible to them, standing there. In the NT, an “angel” is often visible, and often – the word means “messenger” – an angel takes the form of, and is, a man.

The angel is there to tell them not to be afraid, “καὶ δόξα Κυρίου περιέλαμψεν αὐτούς, καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν φόβον μέγαν – and the Glory of the Lord shined around them, and they were very afraid.” The verb “περιλάμπω – to shine around” is found only in Luke, here and in Acts (26:13), where Paul is describing his conversion experience to Agrippa, seeing light “brighter than the sun.”

The Glory of the Lord has a history.

10. The angel does his job, “καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὁ ἄγγελος Μὴ φοβεῖσθε – the angel said to them, ‘stop being afraid.’” That’s a Present Imperative preceded by the negator “Μὴ,” meaning to stop something you are currently doing – being afraid. Whatever angels looked like or however they made themselves known, it’s almost always a frightening experience for the one doing the seeing.

Using words, the angel tells them they should stop being afraid because, “ἰδοὺ γὰρ εὐαγγελίζομαι ὑμῖν χαρὰν μεγάλην, ἣτις ἔσται παντὶ τῷ λαῷ – see, I bring you good news, great joy, which will be to all the people.” This is the first recorded instance of “Good News” – we would say “the Gospel” – in the NT, and it comes in the form of a present verb. The content of that news follows.

11. Because we talk about the “good news” so much, there can be a tendency towards cliché, sort of like when we talk about “Word and Sacrament.” I’m not saying to stop using those words – I

think the “I preach Christ crucified” is another one – but to every now and then explain what those familiar words mean. Here, Jesus is called things like “Savior...son of David...Christ...Lord.”

Well, which is it? I am called things like “Pastor...dad...Steve...Reverend,” well which is it?

12. That’s the audio, and this is the visual, and it’s a little bit profound, “καὶ τοῦτο ὑμῖν σημεῖον, – and this, to you a sign.” Some manuscripts have the definite article “the sign,” one, specific sign, and I suppose you could say that. Or you could say “a,” but it’s singular, not plural; the entire scene is to be seen as a sign from God. That word “σημεῖον” is the word for a miraculous thing.

Go ahead and rattle off all the times the word is used in the NT, then cause pathos in your hearer by explaining that the miraculous thing here is “εὐρήσατε βρέφος ἐσπαργανωμένον καὶ κείμενον ἐν φάτνῃ – you will find the baby wrapped in rags and lying in a manger.” From there, it’s an easy transition to the obligatory and traditional conjuring up of the smells of the barn and diaper.

That’s the miraculous thing, the “σημεῖον,” that the holder of all those monikers would deign to take on mortal flesh, which He has just done. Often miracles are big and splashy things that make people ooh and aah. This miracle is neither big nor splashy, but God taking on human flesh to save humanity – that should be good for more than just oohs and aahs. And He’s wrapped in rags.

13. Joining the single angel, “καὶ ἐξαίφνης ἐγένετο σὺν τῷ ἀγγέλῳ πλῆθος στρατιᾶς οὐρανίου – and suddenly there came to be with the angel a multitude of heavenly soldiers.” The noun “στρατιά – soldier” occurs only twice in the NT. Its verb cognate “στρατεύομαι – to fight like a soldier” makes seven appearances in the NT. Use those terms to explain the meaning of “heavenly host.”

So, you have one angel, then scads of angels, and that group is “αἰνούντων τὸν Θεὸν καὶ λεγόντων – praising God and saying...” Those verbs are both present participles, connection to the person (angel), it indicates the content of their words, and they kept it up. At times like these, I like to connect the dots for the hearer between angels doing this and what we do on Sunday mornings.

During the times in the service when you’re not preaching “Christ, and Him crucified.”

14. The content of their praise is to quote – apparently – from the OT. My RSV has several verses listed as cross-references for the quote, and only one was in existence at the time of Luke’s writing; Isaiah 57:19, which mentions “peace.” NA (Nestle-Aland Greek Testament) indents the verse, indicating that it’s an OT quote, and gives several OT references that talk about various things.

I’m not sure how heavily this heavenly host relied on the OT for what they say, but the theology of what they said was certainly biblical, “Δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις Θεῷ – glory to God in the highest.” It’s a superlative glory, not a comparative glory, of course. It might be better to translate “Δόξα” as “praise.” It would certainly be more accurate, but “glory” is superlatively ingrained in people,

Whereas the rest of it “καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς εἰρήνη ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκίας. – and on earth peace, favor towards man” has become rather muddled. Probably, it’s best to stick with the KJV, “on earth peace, good will towards men,” which is the good news, worthy of praise; that in this “sign,” wrapped in rags, God’s favor towards sinful – not “men with whom He is pleased” (RSV) – men.

15. Those messengers begin to sing, and the reader can wonder if they are men or heavenly beings, right up to the time when Luke says, “Καὶ ἐγένετο ὥς ἀπῆλθον ἀπ’ αὐτῶν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν οἱ ἄγγελοι – it came to pass that the angels returned to heaven,” from whence they had come. When the angels left, “οἱ ποιμένες ἐλάλουν πρὸς ἀλλήλους – the shepherds were talking to each other.

They were saying, “Διέλθωμεν δὴ ἕως Βηθλεὲμ καὶ ἴδωμεν τὸ ῥῆμα τοῦτο τὸ γεγονὸς ὃ ὁ Κύριος ἐγνώρισεν ἡμῖν – Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this saying which the Lord has made known to us.” They believe the angels to be from God, and they believe their words to have been spoken to them by “The Lord,” and like Thomas later on they wanted to see it with their own two eyes.

16. Dropping everything, “καὶ ἦλθαν σπεύσαντες, καὶ ἀνεῦραν τὴν τε Μαριὰμ καὶ τὸν Ἰωσήφ καὶ τὸ βρέφος κείμενον ἐν τῇ φάτνῃ - they went quickly, and found Mary and Joseph and the baby, lying in a feed trough.” What? You get the “Glory of the Lord,” and the angels coming from heaven, telling you what they told you, and you’re going to do anything but go see for yourself.

So they say Mary – check – and they saw Joseph – check – and they saw the baby, and sure enough, he was lying in a feed trough. If I asked you to define “manger,” what words would you use? Google dictionary calls it “a long open box or trough for horses or cattle to eat from.” So I call it a “feed trough,” and around here most people know what that is, and a lot of them have them.

The noun “manger” comes from the Latin, French, Old English “manducated” – to chew or eat.

Shakespeare uses the word “manger” once, metaphorically, in *Much Ado About Nothing* (2, 2429).

17. The idea of “Humble Shepherds” is another myth firmly ensconced in Christmas lore. I’m not sure where that got started, or even what it means that they were “humble.” They seem confident to me, and if we’re talking about poverty, they owned livestock. People around here who own cattle or hogs may not be rich – or they may be – but they aren’t poor, and of variable humility.

God chose to make the reveal to shepherds not because they were humble, but because they were shepherds – it’s what “Pastor” means. Jesus was a Pastor too, as was Peter et al. These shepherds did what I do every time I preach a sermon. I go to biblehub.com on Tuesday morning, give God four hours to teach me, then on Thursday morning I write a sermon and preach it on Sunday.

Having seen it with their own eyes, ἰδόντες δὲ ἐγνώρισαν περὶ τοῦ ῥήματος τοῦ λαληθέντος αὐτοῖς περὶ τοῦ παιδίου τούτου – seeing, they proclaimed the saying that had been spoken to them about this child.” The verb “γνωρίζω – to proclaim” is the same word used earlier (15) where the shepherds were talking to one another about how God, through the angels, has proclaimed to them.

18. The response of the people who heard the proclamation of those Pastors, “καὶ πάντες οἱ ἀκούσαντες ἐθαύμασαν περὶ τῶν λαληθέντων ὑπὸ τῶν ποιμένων πρὸς αὐτούς·- and all those who heard marvelled about the things having been spoken from the shepherds to them.” This may – and it is – all old hat to us these days, but that first proclamation at that first Christmas? Marvelous!

You find the same thing with new Christians and new Christian peoples. There’s nothing quite like the person who has gone through life without God, or with a false god, and then God chooses that person, and it’s pretty exciting! They indeed marvel at all the new things that they never understood or even knew about, part of the drastically new man now residing with your old flesh.

19. Then there was Mary, who knew it all, all along, “ἡ δὲ Μαρία πάντα συνετήρει τὰ ῥήματα ταῦτα συνβάλλουσα ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς – Mary preserved all these words, thinking about them with her heart.” The first verb “συντηρέω – to preserve,” appears here, in Matthew (9:17), where Jesus talks about new wine preserved in new wineskins, and in Mark (6:20), Herod protects John.

KJV has “kept,” which is not bad, and the moderns seem to want her to “treasure,” which is not incorrect. What she held on to were “τὰ ῥήματα – the sayings,” and is that what almost all the translations mean when they say she treasured “these things?” A couple of off-the-beaten-path translations have “these sayings” or “these words,” which is the actual translation of that word.

Scrolling through the seventy occurrences of “ῥῆμα,” I’m having a hard time putting my finger on a time when it does not mean “saying.” What that means is that Mary preserved what she heard with her ears, and what she saw with her eyes – not so much. Don’t you suppose the Pastors told Mary and Joseph about the incident that led them to them, before they told the rest of the world.

The verb describing what she did with those words is “συμβάλλω,” meaning “tossed together,” meaning that she had a lot going on in her brain and heart, and a lot of it was personal, and much of it – there was a lot to think about. That is the nature of the Word of God anyway, that there is a lot of Word out there, and a lot of it makes it into the brain, and we toss it about up there.

20. Now the Pastors come back, “καὶ ὑπέστρεψαν οἱ ποιμένες δοξάζοντες καὶ αἰνοῦντες τὸν Θεὸν – and the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God” for what? They praise God “ἐπὶ πᾶσιν οἷς ἤκουσαν καὶ εἶδον καθὼς ἐλαλήθη πρὸς αὐτούς – for all they heard and saw, as it was said to them” by the original angel. Note here their dependance on their ears, as well as their eyes.