

The Birth of the Son of God - Part 1

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Luke 2:1-7

Preached on: Sunday, December 9, 2012

It is my great joy to be able to minister the Word of God to you again this morning. I would like to invite you to take your Bibles and turn to Luke's gospel chapter two. And this morning I will be speaking to you about the birth of the Son of God. Actually this will be the theme of my discourses to you over the next few weeks.

Let me read the text we will look at this morning beginning in Luke chapter two verses one through seven.

Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register, along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. And it came about that while they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her first-born son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.¹

No one knows the exact date of Jesus' birth. December 25th is purely an arbitrary date chosen by church bishops in Rome some time during the fourth century. They decided that they needed to Christianize the numerous winter solstice and other pagan celebrations practiced by various ancient tribal and ethnic people groups.

While none of these idolatrous celebrations are relevant today, while none of those superstitions have any meaning to us as Christians, nor virtually any other people group in our present day, it is sad that the celebration of our Savior's birth is mixed up in all of that, obscure and as irrelevant as those things may be.

Nevertheless, I rejoice in the Christmas season because it gives the Church a world wide platform to proclaim the greatest news on earth, the incarnation of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. When we use the term incarnate, it basically means God in human form. It gives us an opportunity to present the gospel message that men can be made righteous and have peace with God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who came. And I will not allow the superstitions of men to render such a glorious subject somehow improper for this season. Rather, what I would choose to do is launch my boat in its very current and, by God's grace, use it for his glory.

¹ Luke 2:1-7.

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So it is to these ends that I draw your attention to some amazing passages here in Luke's gospel that point us not only to our glorious God who has made provision through his Son, the Lord Jesus, for sinners to be reconciled to him, but it also points us to the veracity, the truthfulness of Scripture.

Think about it. Our God who cannot lie has revealed himself through his inerrant, inspired and authoritative Word, the Bible. And one of the ways this can be proven is by examining the claims of Bible prophecy. You realize that the Bible is the only religious document in the world that contains prophecy. And there is a good reason for that. And that is because it is the only document in the world written by the omniscient, omnipotent sovereign God of the universe who alone can declare the future and cause it to come to pass.

The prophet Isaiah tells us in chapter 45 verse 21, the Lord speaking here:

“Who has announced this from of old? Who has long since declared it? Is it not I, the LORD? And there is no other God besides Me, A righteous God and a Savior; There is none except Me.”²

And Isaiah tells us, as well, in chapter 46, beginning in verse nine:

“For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, ‘My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure.’”³

With this in mind, I wish to introduce to you this text in Luke's gospel by first examining one of many prophecies pertaining to the birth of the incarnate Christ, a prophecy that was written 700 years before the Messiah King, the Lord Jesus was born. It was written by the inspired prophet Micah. And if you would like to turn there, you can. It is in Micah chapter five and verse two. And what we will see is that this prophecy was literally fulfilled in our text in Luke chapter two verses one through seven.

Now, let me give you some context. Micah's inspired prophecy was one of a pending doom. It was speaking to his friends, his countrymen, the people of Judah, warning them about the consequences of their sin, warning them that eventually the Babylonians would come in and destroy them as God's judgment upon them.

But this horrific judgment that he pronounced also had a message of hope in it because he included in this message a promise of future blessing, not because the people deserved it,

² Isaiah 45:21.

³ Isaiah 46:9-10.

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but because God is faithful to his covenant promises, his unchanging covenant to the forefathers of the people.

So we reading Micah 5:2 when he says:

"But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity."⁴

Now let me explain this to you a bit. It is really quite exciting when you understand how it fits into the gospels and the messages of Christ's coming to faith. Ephrathah is merely the ancient name for Bethlehem and it was used to distinguish it from other towns, but this refers to the Bethlehem where David was born. You can read about that, for example, in 1 Samuel chapter 17 and verse 12.

Now we might ask: Why in all of the places on earth would the Son of God choose to be born in such an insignificant little village a few miles south of Jerusalem? Why not Rome? Why not Jerusalem? Why Bethlehem.

Well, there is two reasons. One, because Bethlehem was a royal city even in ancient days. And since Jesus was born, the King of Israel, it was only fitting that he be born in the city where Israel's great King David had been born. You see, over 1000 years before Jesus was born God made an unconditional covenant with David. We read about it in 2 Samuel seven, promising him that God would raise up from him a descendant, the Messiah King who would establish David's kingdom forever, an eternal kingdom, whereby the whole world would be blessed through the coming seed of David. But also Bethlehem's history is a picture of the coming Messiah King.

You see, Bethlehem means house of bread. Bread is the symbol of life in Scripture, not only physical life, but spiritual life. Physically we are reminded of the manna that God sent down from heaven to supply food for his people in the wilderness, but also spiritually, did not Jesus say in John six:

"For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world."⁵

He went on to add:

"I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger."⁶

⁴ Micah 5:2.

⁵ John 6:33.

⁶ John 6:35.

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But both life and death are marked in the history of Bethlehem. Genesis 35, you will recall, that God changed Jacob's name to Israel, that he said to him, beginning in verse nine:

"Your name is Jacob; You shall no longer be called Jacob, But Israel shall be your name." Thus He called him Israel. God also said to him, "I am God Almighty; Be fruitful and multiply; A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, And kings shall come forth from you."⁷

And we know that on the heels of that covenant promise Jacob's beloved wife Rachel died in child birth. And she was buried in Bethlehem and it was in Bethlehem where Jacob set up a pillar over her grave.

The child that was born to her was named Benjamin. In fact, as Rachel was about to die we read from the Word of God that she named her son Benoni meaning son of my trouble. Little did she know that there would be much more trouble inflicted upon mothers and little boys in the days of Herod that would one day come in the very region where she died.

Now Benjamin was one of Jacob's 12 sons and eventually from Jacob's son Judah came King David. And ultimately the greater king, the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. So it was in Bethlehem where Rachel agonized in the birth of Benjamin. The history is so profound. It was place that later became a symbol of pain, of sorrow, painful waiting of the sons of Israel for their promised Messiah.

The reason for this is because Rachel was the ancestress of the northern tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh through Joseph and Benjamin in the South. And later when the Babylonians came to carry off the Jews into exile, the Lord spoke through the prophet Jeremiah and this is what he said in Jeremiah 31:15.

"A voice is heard in Ramah, Lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; She refuses to be comforted for her children, Because they are no more."⁸

And, of course, it was later in Bethlehem where the enraged Herod slaughtered all of the male children. We read about it in Matthew two. According to verse 17 we read:

Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying, "A VOICE WAS HEARD IN RAMAH, WEEPING AND GREAT MOURNING, RACHEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN; AND SHE

⁷ Genesis 35:10-11.

⁸ Jeremiah 31:15.

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REFUSED TO BE COMFORTED, BECAUSE THEY WERE NO MORE."⁹

Now, as we move forward in the history of Bethlehem, we discover more reasons for its royal greatness, more reasons for its symbolism. About 900 years after the days of Rachel a Moabitess journeyed to Bethlehem. Her name was Ruth. And there she was a servant and a wealth man named Boaz found her and took her unto himself to be his wife. Boaz, as we look in Scripture was a type or a picture of Christ, the one who became Ruth's kinsman redeemer. And Ruth was included, even, in the physical lineage of the coming Messiah as we read about in Matthew chapter one and verse five.

And Boaz and Ruth had a son. And they named that son Obed who became the father of Jesse who lived, guess where? In Bethlehem. Who had a son named David.

So it should be no surprise that the Son of David, the Messiah King, be born in that royal village just as Micah prophesied. It should be no surprise that in the providence of God many years later Caesar Augustus would demand a census to be taken, one that would require Mary and Joseph to register in the city of their birth. It should be, therefore, no surprise that Mary and Joseph would embark upon roughly an 85 mile journey through treacherous terrain in her advanced state of pregnancy to make their way to Bethlehem.

And I am sure Mary and Joseph reflected upon this great prophecy as they made their way to that little village. And, no doubt, it would be the them of Mary's pondering when the shepherds told her their announcement:

"...for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."¹⁰

Now a few more things about Micah's prophecy that will help us better understand what Luke has to tell us in Luke chapter two. Notice Micah also prophesied of Bethlehem:

"From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel."¹¹

And, of course, we know that happened. The Father sent forth his Son. In John five verse 36 Jesus said:

"...the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish, the very works that I do, bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me."¹²

⁹ Matthew 2:17-18.

¹⁰ Luke 2:11.

¹¹ Micah 5:2.

¹² John 5:36.

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And, likewise, in John seven and verse 28:

Jesus therefore cried out in the temple, teaching and saying, "You both know Me and know where I am from; and I have not come of Myself, but He who sent Me is true, whom you do not know. I know Him; because I am from Him, and He sent Me."¹³

Just as God prophesied through his servant Micah.

So we can see that, indeed, the Father sent forth his Son to be the ruler in Israel.

Now critics might say, "Well, then where is he? He is certainly not ruling over Israel today. He came unto his own. His own did not receive him. They crucified their King."

Well, that is true. Israel rejected their king. They crucified the Son of Man, but this was precisely according to God's plan. This didn't catch God by surprise. Peter told the Jews this in Acts chapter two verse 23 that this man delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put him to death.

You see, what the critic fails to understand is that the Messiah King was also the Passover Lamb, the final and perfect sacrifice that would come to make atonement for sin, that we might be saved.

From the beginning of his earthly ministry the Savior King preached, as we read in Matthew 4:17:

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."¹⁴

And did not Pilate say to him in John 18:37:

"'So You are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.'"¹⁵

And did not John the Baptist, the divinely appointed herald of the king also say in John 1:29:

"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"¹⁶

¹³ John 7:28-29.

¹⁴ Matthew 4:17.

¹⁵ John 18:37.

¹⁶ John 1:29.

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He accomplished this in his first coming. But we know according to Scripture, according to prophecy that in his physical millennial reign on earth he will reign as king and that date awaits a future fulfillment. As we look at the gospels we see the Lord Jesus as the Lamb of God. We see him in his humiliation and in the book of Revelation we see the Lord Jesus in his glorification, not so much as the humble Lamb, but the glorious lion, the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

And what we must understand is that during the inter regnum, which is the interval between Christ's first coming and second coming, the kingdom has taken the form of what he called in Matthew 13:11 the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, which refers to those doctrinal truths not disclosed in the Old Testament related to the gospel and the church.

You see, the kingdom of God is primarily a spiritual kingdom wherever it exists in time and eternity. But it can and it will manifest itself in a physical world. And the Church that was formed at Pentecost is merely the spiritual nucleus of the coming physical kingdom on earth.

So, dear Christian, let no one deceive you. The King will return. He is the King of Israel. He will come as the prophets have foretold. In fact, Paul tells us, Romans 11:26 when this will happen. He says:

...and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS."¹⁷

But notice also what the prophet said about the one whom the Father would send forth. He says:

“His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity.”¹⁸

And Scripture bears testimony to this great truth. We know that the preincarnate Christ appeared as the angel of the Lord on numerous occasions. I will give you a few examples. We read about that in Genesis 16 when he appeared to Hagar near a spring in the desert and commanded her to return to Sarah. In Genesis 18 he appeared to Abraham where he promised him and his elderly wife that they would have a son. And out of Abraham and wonderful and powerful nation would arise and all of the nations of the earth would be blessed through them.

¹⁷ Romans 11:26-27.

¹⁸ Micah 5:2.

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In Genesis 31 he came to Jacob in a dream. You will recall in chapter 32 we read how Jacob wrestled with him all night after which the Lord blessed him and changed his name to Israel. In Exodus three he appeared to Moses in the burning bush. In Joshua five he appeared to Joshua near Jericho with the sword drawn in his hand. He appeared to Gideon in Judges six and said, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior." And in Daniel three he appeared in the furnace fires of Nebuchadnezzar with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

And now, beloved, he appears again in Bethlehem, the Son of God who willingly laid aside his glory to take on the form of a Jewish peasant child from Galilee, sent from the Father, conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin. Imagine this, the Creator of the universe coming into the world as a babe, placed in a manger. And from Bethlehem he would eventually go to Jerusalem, then to Gethsemane and, ultimately, to Calvary to purchase our redemption.

What manner of love is this?

No wonder after Jesus' birth an angel of the Lord announced the birth to a group of lowly shepherds one night. They were caring for their sheep on the hill sides around Jerusalem, an area where sheep grazed that were to be used in the temple sacrifices. And little did those shepherds know that the birth of the final sacrifice, the Lamb of God had occurred. And they were the humble recipients of the angelic announcement. We read about it in Luke two beginning at verse 10.

And the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger." And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."¹⁹

Now, with this prophetic background concerning Bethlehem, we come to Luke's narrative here. And I wish to focus on three very intriguing concepts that I believe emerge from this historical narrative in verses one through seven. We are going to look at Bethlehem's destiny in verses one through five. That is what we will focus on today. The next time we get together we will focus on Bethlehem's child and ultimately Bethlehem's manger.

¹⁹ Luke 2:10-14.

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So let's think about Bethlehem's destiny as prophesied in Micah 5:2. Notice what Luke says in Luke chapter two now beginning at verse one.

"Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth."²⁰

Think about it. Because God is sovereign, he ultimately orchestrates history through the miracle of divine providence, in an effort to accomplish all of his purposes.

Luke, being the master historian inspired by the Holy Spirit tells us something here. I want you to notice what he says.

"Now it came about in those days...."²¹

Now think about this. What he is saying is that God caused certain things to happen according to a predetermined plan to happen at a predetermined time in history. And had this not happened the way it did, Jesus would not have been born in Bethlehem, Micah's prophecy would be unfulfilled, it would be false the Word of God would be discredited. But, my friends, such is not the case.

So just what was it that came about? Well, the answer is:

"Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth."²²

Now, you might say, "Well, big deal."

Yes, my friends, that was a huge deal. Let me explain why. Let me give you the context of those days. It came about in those days. Every good Bible student is going to stop there and say, "All right. Spirit of God, help me understand what is happening in those days. Otherwise I will not be able to fully grasp what you have to tell me."

So let me tell you about those days. My friends, those were days when the covenant people of Israel were scattered all over the Roman Empire. They were basically owned by Rome. They were dejected. They were confused. They were even deceived by their own leaders. They were longing for their Messiah to come and to deliver them not from sin, but from Rome.

Because of the idolatry and rebellion of their ancestors God had not spoken directly to the

²⁰ Luke 2:1.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

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covenant people of Israel for 400 years. The dazzling light of the divine presence called the shekinah that once hovered between the cherubim over the ark of the covenant and the holy of holies had departed from the temple in Jerusalem. Ezekiel tells us about this, for example, in Ezekiel 11 verse 23 we read:

“And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city, and stood over the mountain which is east of the city.”²³

Referring to the Mount of Olives. And eventually it disappeared. By the way, this same place where he will once again return and enter in to the holy place in Jerusalem.

So for 400 years most Jews floundered around in ritualistic Judaism and Legalism and hypocrisy and in frustration and sorrow. They are waiting the messianic kingdom while subjects of Rome. And only a remnant of faithful worshippers of Yahweh still really remained, those who truly love the Lord their God with all their heart.

These were also days, therefore, of Roman occupation in Israel. The Romans, of course, were idolaters. They were a barbaric Gentile people. The Jews considered them unclean, wanted nothing to do with them, wouldn't enter into their house. They would clean themselves if they brushed up against one. If they came out of the Gentile land before they entered into Israel they would shake the dust off. They absolutely abhorred the Gentiles. They were the uncircumcised pagans outside the covenant.

And yet here they are, required to actually use the coinage of the Romans that had the idolatrous inscription of Caesar on them. Caesar, by the way is not a name. It is kind of like king or emperor or pharaoh. His name actually was Gaius Octavius. He was born in 63 BC and later on he is simply referred to as Octavian. But what is interesting about this guy whose face was on all of the coins that the Jews had to use, in 27 BC the Romans senate awarded him with the title Augustus which means majestic one, holy one, a title that basically deified him.

Well, this was absolutely repulsive to the Jews. He later became known as, quote, Caesar Augustus, savior of the world. Boy, what a perfect context for the true Savior to come.

These were also days when the insanely jealous Idumean King Herod was the vassal appointed by Rome to rule Judea in which Bethlehem existed. Idumean basically means he was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau. And, of course, these were the perennial enemies of God and of Israel. The Israelites hated them and they hated Herod. Herod would later slaughter all the babies in that region in hopes to eliminate the rival to his throne when the Persian king makers came to worship the one they called the King of the Jews.

²³ Ezekiel 11:23.

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And, like all wicked leaders Herod had other corrupt politicians around him. They were his henchmen. Many of them were religious leaders and they helped him control the masses. These were the legalistic Pharisees and the liberal Sadducees, all Jews that grossly distorted the law, distorted the Scriptures to support their own agendas. Think of them of the reverend Jessie Jackson and Al Sharpton of that day, the World Council of Churches, all of these types of things that help our government move forward some of their agendas.

This was also days, my friends, in which the Parthian Empire, the land of the Medes and the Persians, which the Romans greatly feared, had deposed their king and they were looking for another king, one that would help them come along and conquer Rome. But kings of the Parthian Empire, the great Persian Empire could only be chosen by the magistony, in short, the magi, the priestly line of people from among the Medes.

In fact, the wisdom of the magi was called the law of the Medes and the Persians in Esther 1:19, Daniel 6:15 as well. And, of course, one of their specialties was dream interpretation. We know from history that the magi rose to power through their demonic cultic astrological abilities, sorcery, divination, astronomy and so forth. And they became the advisors of the royalty of the East and, thus, they were called wise men. They can be traced back to the court of Nebuchadnezzar. We read about them, of example in Daniel two. They were also called Chaldeans. They were called magicians.

And you will recall that they were unable to interpret the dream of Nebuchadnezzar and so the king was going to put them to death. But God raised up a man by the name of Daniel that could interpret that dream and Daniel pleaded with the king in Daniel 2:24:

"Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon! Take me into the king's presence, and I will declare the interpretation to the king."²⁴

And in chapter five verse 11 of Daniel we see that Nebuchadnezzar makes Daniel the master over the magi it says the king appointing him chief of the magicians, conjurers, Chaldeans and diviners.

And so being their new leader and at some level their savior, he had their undivided attention and, no doubt, he taught them about Jehovah God, about the coming Messiah and all the Old Testament prophecies as I am sure he did many of the other saints in the Diaspora of that day. And then 600 years before Jesus was born, we must realize that the sovereign grace of God was working even in the hearts of—we don't know how many—but certainly some of those magi in Nebuchadnezzar's court through Daniel. They learn of a coming Messiah, of coming forgiveness, of Immanuel, of God being with us, of the

²⁴ Daniel 2:24.

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glorious presence of God which would again be seen in this world, a light that would shine out of Judah.

No doubt the reminded them of the prophecy in numbers chapter 24 verse 17:

“A star shall come forth from Jacob, A scepter shall rise from Israel.”²⁵

A כֹּכַב (ko-kawb'), blazing forth of light. Well, obviously, they were looking for that blazing forth of light when Jesus was born. And when they saw it, they knew exactly what to do.

You see, Rome in those days was terribly afraid of the eastern empire across that vast Arabian desert. They were violent enemies. They fought in 63, 55 and 40 BC. And guess where they always fought? In the land of Syria, Jordan, Palestine, the coast of the Mediterranean.

So tiny little Israel was basically no man's land between two great and opposing powers. The Romans especially despised and feared these sorcerers, these astrologers, these magi. So in the miracle of divine providence 600 years later isn't it interesting what happens. The magi, the king makers see a blazing forth of light. They see the כֹּכַב (ko-kawb'),

Jumping ahead for a moment we build further context in Matthew chapter two and verse one. There we read:

“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem.”²⁶

Behold could be translated, “Wow, look at this.” Verse two:

"Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him." And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.²⁷

That is one of the greatest understatement in all of Scripture. The word troubled means to quake, to shake, to stir up, to throw into confusion. Think of knees coming together. He was troubled and all Jerusalem with him. By the way, a little further context and what makes this almost humorous is that Herod's troops were out of town out on a mission. They were vulnerable at this time.

²⁵ Numbers 24:17.

²⁶ Matthew 2:1.

²⁷ Matthew 2:2-3.

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Imagine. You are the king. You are jealous. And a large entourage of the dreaded Persian king makers come riding into Jerusalem with their caravan which they would have had to have had to make such a journey. And, by the way, normally they had a military escort. And they are inquiring about a new born Jewish king.

By the way, don't get your theology off of post cards and off of some silly carols. There weren't three kings. That is ridiculous. These men, these king makers were led by a supernatural light. What was that light? We are not completely sure, but it certainly wasn't a star like you see and you hear people talk about. The closest star to the earth is the sun. Can you imagine following the sun to an actual house? A sun, a star that we know from Scripture would appear and then disappear and then appear again that some people could see and other people couldn't?

I believe there is evidence that this αστηρη (as-tare'), this star was the shekinah glory, the presence of God, the same light that led the children of Israel during the exodus, the light, you will recall, that the Egyptians could not see. They saw it as darkness. But it was light to the covenant people. I believe it was the same light that blinded Paul on the road to Damascus, the ineffable light that emanated from the Lord Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration when he peeled back his flesh. And I believe it was the shekinah, the dazzling light of the divine presence that led king makers to Jerusalem and to Bethlehem.

And, again, it is interesting as you read Scripture. We see that some of the people that the King makers could see it, but other people, they couldn't see it.

So eventually it comes, it appears again and it hovers over the house where Jesus lived to lead them to this place. By the way, Jesus by that time was about ... anywhere between three months and two years old.

So terrified by all of this Herod schemes against God. He consults his emissaries and his consultants. They were basically emissaries of Satan, the chief priests and scribes. And in verse four of Matthew we read:

And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born. And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet..."²⁸

And who is he quoting? Micah chapter five and verse two.

²⁸ Matthew 2:4-5.

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Beloved, can't you just see the miracle of divine providence at work here as God orchestrated the perfect and precise context for his plan to come together where the Messiah, the King of Israel, the Savior, would come into the world.

I would also add that these were days as Luke describes, in which for 400 years God has been silent to Israel. And then suddenly we know that the angel Gabriel appears to a righteous Jewish priest named Zacharias to tell him that his barren and his aged wife is going to give wife to a son who is going to be the herald of the king. His name is going to be John. In Luke one verse 17 we read:

"And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."²⁹

So he was to be the herald of the king. And, my friends, these were also days when the angel Gabriel came to a couple of other people. They came to a 15 year old boy, probably around 15 years old, Joseph, and about a 13 year old virgin girl, his betrothed wife named Mary, both descendants of David, to tell them that they were going to be the proud parents of the Son of God.

Luke one verse 31 we read:

And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end.³⁰

So, folks, when Luke describes those days, this was what was going on. Think about it. These were days in which the Jews hated the emperor of Rome who was a false Savior. These were days when they were under the thumb of a puppet king Herod that hated them and his people had historically hated them. And they were days when they were longing for their Messiah, days when the Parthian Empire was looking for a king, when the king makers see this blazing light as the prophet foretold. They come to worship him. These were the perfect days for the Messiah to come and to be born.

Now, let's come again to Luke chapter two verse one.

²⁹ Luke 1:17.

³⁰ Luke 1:31-33.

The Birth of the Son of God - Part 1

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Luke 2:1-7

Preached on: Sunday, December 9, 2012

“Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.”³¹

That is a phrase referring to the Roman Empire. Now a census was a record for the purpose of collecting taxes and they were taken, we know, about every 14 years. But notice in verse two he says this was the first census taken by Quirinius who was governor or, in other words, leader, ruler of Syria, which, of course, was another name for the region of Judaea.

So Luke is very specific here. He says this was the first census taken. In other words, the first 14 year cycle why Quirinius was governor. Now why is this important? Well, as you look into Scripture and other historical accounts, we know that the second census that was taken when Quirinius was governor resulted in a violent rebellion. The Jews railed against it. In fact, Luke mentions this in Acts 5:37 where he quotes Gamaliel. And the great Jewish historian Josephus describes this uprising. And we also know that the second census occurred between AD 6 and 9. But we also know that that occurred about a decade after Herod’s death in 4 BC.

So since we know a census was taken every 14 years and the second census was taken in AD 6 to 9, all we have to do is go back 14 years to determine the date of the first census that Paul or that Luke underscores which would be about 8 BC. And it would appear that it was finally carried out and completed in Palestine about two to four years later.

Now, of course, those living in Luke’s day would have a very accurate understanding of this. I might also add that there was a fragment of stone discovered near Rome in 1764 that contains very strong evidence that, indeed, Quirinius was governor of Syria twice, which would confirm Luke’s account.

So somewhere between 6 and 4 BC the Son of God was born in Bethlehem, not, shall we say, zero AD as I guess many would believe.

Notice verse three. He goes on and he says:

“And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city.”³²

Now this is fascinating. The Jews, of course, despised being taxed. And we know that the Romans would normally allow their citizens to be taxed in the ... and be ... and I should say be registered to be taxed in the city where they currently resided. But for reasons we don’t fully understand, Mary and Joseph traveled approximately 85 miles to register in Bethlehem rather than in Nazareth where they lived.

³¹ Luke 2:1.

³² Luke 2:3.

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Now why did this happen? Well, we can't be dogmatic, but we can deduce some very compelling hypotheses about this. Think about it. The Jews highly honored their ancestry, where they came from. They kept meticulous records. You might remember that when they entered into the Promised Land of Canaan every tribe was allotted a specific region where they were to live and each family was forever linked to that tribe and that region. And so they kept scrupulous genealogical records for this purpose. We also know that every seven years the land would be returned to the original owners in order to maintain that ancestral ownership. And now perhaps this is what motivated Mary and Joseph to return to Bethlehem. Perhaps this was something that Herod required so he could keep track of the families. Perhaps they even owned some land in Bethlehem which by Roman law would require you to go. We are just not sure. But whatever the reason, it must have been important. It was important enough to cause Joseph and Mary to make such a strenuous, such a dangerous trip all the way to Bethlehem, exactly as Micah prophesied, exactly as God ordained. And so we read in verse four:

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register, along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child.³³

It is interesting as a footnote in the genealogy of Jesus that Luke supplies us in chapter three we learn that Mary was physically linked to David, a physical descendant of David. And, thus, her ancestry was linked to the city of David where the Savior was born. And because of his physical connection to Mary, Jesus had a legitimate claim to the throne.

Matthew, however, had a different genealogy in Matthew chapter one and there the genealogical record supplies for us Jesus' legal claim to the royal throne, the royal bloodline, if you will, through Joseph, who was Jesus' legal, though not natural, father, linking him all the way back to Abraham, all the way back to the Abrahamic covenant and to David. Therefore Jesus Christ is described in Matthew 1:1 as the son of David.

Well, now we understand why Bethlehem, I hope. But why didn't Joseph go alone? If your wife was pregnant like that, would you bring her along? I am not sure I would. Why would Mary choose to endure such a trip with him? Honey, get on the donkey here and we have got about 85 miles here over the next several days.

Why would she do that? What must that trip have been like? Why was there no room in the inn? Why a manger? Well, we are going to examine these things next week and in the week to come. But I want to leave you with a bit of a challenge as we close this morning.

³³ Luke 2:4-5.

The Birth of the Son of God - Part 1

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Luke 2:1-7

Preached on: Sunday, December 9, 2012

Beloved, I would like for you to spend this week meditating on the miracle of divine providence, how God in his omnipotence, in omniscience and sovereignty can orchestrate the myriads of variables in human history to accomplish all that he has promised. I want you to also think about the staggering accuracy of the Word of God. Think about the literally fulfillment of Bible prophecy. And what impact should this have on your understanding of Scripture? What impact should this have on your life? And think about how our sovereign God rules in the hearts of men even wicked rulers without them having any idea that they are merely pawns on the chess board of redemptive history, being moved around by the hand of almighty God? And then finally I want you to think about how God may be working in you and your family in ways that you can't even fathom. Maybe he is working in you to bring you to conviction so that you will see your sin and cry out to the Savior for forgiveness and experience the miracle of the new birth. Maybe you know Christ. But maybe what you don't know is God is working in very mysterious ways in your life and in your heart right now, in the heart of your family to bring you to a place of greater understanding, to cause you to understand more of who you need to be, to sanctify you, to bless you. Think about those things and let all of this drive you to your face in humble adoration and thanksgiving and cause you to sing that great first stanza of Wesley's hymn:

Hark, the herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn king.
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.
Joyful, all ye nations, rise.
Join the triumph of the skies.
With the angelic host proclaim,
Christ is born in Bethlehem.
Hark, the herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn king.

Let's pray together.

Father, we rejoice in these glorious truths that remind us that you are indeed a sovereign God who has ordained the end from the beginning. And, Lord, it also reminds us that you love us with a love that we cannot fathom, that you would send your Son to take upon human flesh and ultimately purchase our redemption on the cross of Calvary.

Lord, we are humble. We are overwhelmed. We give you praise. May our lives be a testimony of that praise that others might see the transforming power of the gospel in us. And for those that do not know you, oh God, how I pray that you will convict them even this day. Bring them to a place of humble repentance. We commit it to you. Amen.

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