

# The Gospel of Luke

## Lesson 4

### Jesus' Birth

Luke 2:1-7

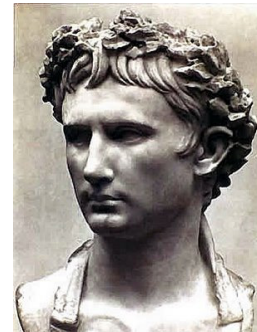
**Luke 2:1** Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. **2** This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. **3** And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. **4** Joseph also 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, **5** in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. **6** While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. **7** And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

These seven verses contain the information concerning the incarnate Son of God, the birth of the LORD Jesus. Surely, every birth of a child is a marvelous and magnificent event; it brings into this world a container of flesh and blood that houses a soul that will never die. However, never has a birth been so marvelous as the birth of Lord Jesus, a miracle of unprecedented proportion when God became manifest in the flesh. Paul says to Timothy,

By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, Was vindicated in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Proclaimed among the nations, Believed on in the world, Taken up in glory. **1 Timothy 3:16**

No one can imagine the blessings that the LORD's birth brought into the world! His birth opened an everlasting door of eternal life to all men and women.

Augustus, the second Roman emperor, (also called Octavius) issued a decree for a census that affected the Roman Empire. It was a census, not a tax, although Herod the Great did attach a tax to this census. A census is a written public record of personal information. The Jews in Israel were under the dominion and taxation of the Roman power; they were ruled by strangers. At that time, one ruler governed the Roman civilized world making it a suitable time for spreading of the message of the LORD's birth and introducing the gospel message without borders and boundaries. Concerning the world and the LORD's birth, Paul



Picture: 10  
Augustus Caesar

says, "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly."<sup>4</sup> Romans 5:6

Nothing can stop the news of the Savior's birth from spreading city to city and country to country. God knew the best time to send help to this earth, to send the light of salvation. He did not send it to Nazareth in Galilee, where his mother, the Virgin Mary, lived. The prophet Micah had foretold that the event was to take place at Bethlehem.

"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." Micah 5:2

Bethlehem, true to the promise, became the place of the Lord's birth. God orders things in heaven and earth; He turns the hearts of kings to do his will; He rules the time when Augustus decrees the census; He directs the enforcement of the decree in such a way that Mary must be in Bethlehem when "the time came for her to deliver her child." Little did the Roman Emperor know that he was just an instrument in the hand of the God of Israel to carry out the eternal purpose of the King of kings. He did not know that he was helping to lay the foundation of a kingdom before which the empires of this world would fall when the Revived Roman Empire passed away.

Jesus is born in a strange place, not in His mother's house. Jesus is laid in a manger, not laid in a carefully prepared cradle, "because there was no place for them in the inn." Do you see the grace and humility of Christ? Jesus comes into this world as poor as the poorest and lowly as the lowliest! Through this humiliation, Jesus brings to us a title to glory and through his poverty, we are made rich. Concerning His arrival, Paul says to the Corinthians,

I am not speaking *this* as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also. <sup>9</sup> For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.

2 Corinthians 8:8

## The Angels

Luke 2:8-14

Luke 2:8 In the same region there were *some* shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; <sup>11</sup> for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup> "This *will be* a sign for you: you will find a baby

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 5:6

wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

The angel makes the first announcement to the people of the birth of the LORD Jesus. The birth of a king's son is normally the occasion for public celebration but the angel announces the birth of the Prince of Peace privately at midnight and without worldly pomp and ostentation. The first to hear are shepherds, not priests or rulers as one might think, not scribes and Pharisees, as the religious world might expect, but simple shepherds. James says,

Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world *to be* rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? James 2:5

The LORD excludes no one from spiritual privileges because of a lack of money. In reality, the things of God's kingdom are often hidden from the great and noble and revealed to the poor. The Scripture calls the weak of the world mighty, the last the first, and the first the last.

The angel says to the poor shepherds, "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." The spiritual darkness that has covered the earth for four thousand years will soon roll away. The door to the way of pardon and peace with God will soon swing open to all humanity. The knowledge of God will no longer be confined to the Jews but offered to the entire Gentile world. The first cornerstone of God's kingdom will soon be set up. The first announcement of the good news comes from the angel and not men. It was an angel who had never sinned and who required no Savior! It was an angel who had not fallen, and who needed no Redeemer and no atoning blood. The first rhetoric to the honor of God manifest in the flesh was spoken, not sung, by "a multitude of the heavenly host." The angels have a clear knowledge of the heavenly Master. They know the misery sin has brought into creation. They know the blessedness of heaven and the privilege of its open door. The angels rejoice at the glorious prospect of many souls being saved.

The shepherds lived in the fields. It has been argued that our LORD could not have been born in the winter months because it was not the custom of the Jews to keep flocks in the field in winter. If the Jewish shepherds did not keep their flocks in the fields in the winter months, where did they keep them? Israel had no fences or corrals to contain their cattle. Did shepherds allow the sheep to wander in the winter months without a shepherd? Did shepherds put all of their flocks in stalls? Shepherds would have a difficult time bringing in enough food for the flocks each day. The Scripture offers a rebuttal to the silly notion that the shepherds were not in the fields in the winter months when Jacob says,

That which was torn *of beasts* I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself. You required it of my hand *whether* stolen by day or stolen by

night. <sup>40</sup> *Thus* I was: by day the heat consumed me and the frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. <sup>41</sup> These twenty years I have been in your house; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flock, and you changed my wages ten times. **Genesis 31:39**

## **The Shepherds and Jesus**

Luke 2:15-18

**Luke 2:15** When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds *began* saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." <sup>16</sup> So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child.

These poor, humble, pious, industrious shepherds, in the business of keeping watch over their flock, could not keep this revelation to themselves! Let God have the honor of this work and "Glory to God in the highest." God's good work, the redemption of the world, is for His glory in the highest. God brought peace and good will to this world by sending the Child. The good will of God towards men is glory to God in the highest and peace on the earth. The shepherds lost no time, but came with haste to the place where Jesus was born. Satisfied that this Baby was the Child, they repeated their story to all who would listen.

## **Mary Ponders**

Luke 2:19

**Luke 2:19** But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart.

Once again, Luke states that Mary pondered the circumstances surrounding her Child. Mary carefully observed and thought upon all these things. Maybe we would more often be delivered from errors in judgment and practice if we fully pondered these things in our hearts. The birth of Jesus should still be a constant glad tidings.

## **Mary Ponders**

Luke 2:20

**Luke 2:20** The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

The shepherds were eyewitnesses of the angelic host! Luke had investigated this event fully, possibly even talking with some of those who had been there that night. They were eyewitnesses of the Babe in the manger! The shepherds could not stop glorifying and praising God. They were the first to hear the news of the birth of the Savior of the world!

## Vatican Documents

In 1883, the archeological writings of the Sanhedrin and Talmuds of the Jews were uncovered in the stacks and scrolls of the Vatican library and vault area.<sup>5</sup> These volumes were the official documents of the religious courts in the days of Jesus. They consisted of manuscripts that had first been stored in Constantinople and then moved to Rome in the third century, shortly before the division of the Eastern and Western Empires. They were translated by Dr. McIntosh and Dr. Twyman in Geno Italy and the manuscripts have been reprinted several times through the years under several different titles.

Although these writings are not inspired, they are somewhat inspiring and contradict the Bible only in a few minor areas. On the other hand, they add great insight into the thinking of the people who were involved in the surroundings of the Lord's birth. The Sanhedrin commissioned an investigation of the birth in Bethlehem and entered the following final report in the Sanhedrin minutes numbered 88 B, Order No. 2, by Jonathan, the son of Heziel. It is also a part of the Babylonian Talmud, which is a vast collection of Jewish laws and traditions gathered during the first five hundred years after the birth of Jesus.

**Jonathan to the Masters of Israel, Servants of the True God:** In obedience to your order, I met with two men, who said they were shepherds, and were watching their flocks near Bethlehem. They told me that while attending to their sheep, the night being cold and chilly, some of them had laid down to warm themselves, and some of them had laid down and were asleep; that they were awoken by those who were keeping watch with the question: What does this mean? Behold, how light it is; that when they were aroused it was light as day. But they knew it was not daylight, for it was only the third watch. All at once the air seemed to be filled with human voices, saying, Glory! Glory! Glory to the Most High God! And Happy are thou, Bethlehem, for God hath fulfilled His promise to the fathers; for in thy chambers is born the King that shall rule in righteousness. Their shoutings would rise up in the heavens and then would sink down in mellow strains, and roll along at the foot of the mountains, and die away in the most soft and musical manner they had ever heard; then it would begin again high up in the heavens, in the very vaults of the sky, and descend in sweet and melodious strains, so that they could not refrain from shouting and weeping at the same time. The light would seem to burst forth high up in the heavens, and then descend in softer rays and light up the hills and valleys, making everything more visible than the light of the sun, though it was not so brilliant, but clearer like the brightest moon. I asked them how they felt – if they were not afraid; they said at first they were; but after awhile it seemed to calm their spirits, and so fill their hearts with love and tranquility that they felt more like giving thanks than anything else. They said it was around the whole city, and some of the people were almost scared to death. Some said the world was on fire; some said the gods were coming down to destroy them; others said a star had fallen; until Melker the priest came out shouting and clapping his hands, seeming to be frantic with joy. The people all came crowding around him, and he told them that it was the sign that God was coming to fulfill His promise made to their father, Abraham. He told us that fourteen hundred years before God had appeared to Abraham, and told him to put all Israel

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<sup>5</sup> Jerusalem Talmud and Babylonian Talmud

under bonds – sacred bonds of obedience; and if they would be faithful, he would give them a Savior to redeem them from sin, and that he would give them eternal life, and that they should hunger no more; that the time of their suffering should cease forever; and that the sign of his coming would be that light would shine from on high, and the angels would announce his coming, and their voices should be heard in the city, and the people should rejoice: and a virgin that was pure should travail in pain and bring forth her firstborn, and he should rule all flesh by sanctifying it and making it obedient. After Melker had addressed the people in a loud voice, he and all the old Jews went into the synagogue and remained there praising God and giving thanks. I went to see Melker, who related to me much the same as the shepherds had reported. He told me that he had lived in India, and that his father had been priest at Antioch; that he had studied the sacred scrolls of God all his life, and that he knew that the time had come, from signs given, for God to visit and save the Jews from Roman oppression and from their sins; and as evidence he showed me many quotations on the tripod respecting the matter. He said that next day three strangers from a great distance called on him, and they went to search of this young child; and they found him and his mother in the mouth of the cave, where there was a shed projecting out for the sheltering of sheep; that his mother was married to a man named Joseph, and she related to them the history of her child, saying that an angel had visited her, and told her that she should have a son, and she should call him Jesus, for he should redeem his people from their sins; and he should call her blessed forever more.

Whether this is true or not remains to be proved in the future. There have been so many impostors in the world, so many babes born under pretended miracles, and all have proved to be a failure, that this one may be false, this woman only wishing to hide her shame or court the favor of the Jews. I am informed that she will be tried by our law, and, if she can give no better evidence of her virtue than she has given to Melker, she will be stoned according to our law, although, as Melker says, there never has been a case before with such apparent divine manifestations as were seen on this occasion. In the past, various instances, virgins have pretended to be with child by the Holy Ghost, but at the time of their delivery there was no light from the heavens, and no angels talking among the clouds and declaring that this was the King of the Jews. And, as to the truth of these things, the whole of the people of Bethlehem testify to having seen it, and the Roman guard also came out and asked what it meant, and they showed by their actions that they were very much alarmed. These things, Melker says, are all declared in the Scriptures to be the sign of His coming. Melker is a man of great learning and well versed in the prophecies, and he sends you this letter, referring you to those prophecies ...

### **The Writings of Josephus**

Josephus received little credibility through the centuries. Yet, in the past five decades, the revelation and publication of archeological finds since the early 1800's have consistently proven the accuracy of Josephus' writings. Josephus (born 37 AD – died sometime after 100 AD), was a Roman citizen and a first-century Jewish historian of priestly and royal ancestry who survived and recorded the Destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. In May of 2007, the tomb of Herod the Great was finally found based on the writings of Josephus.

## Archeologists Find Tomb of King Herod the Great

By Julie Stahl  
CNSNews.com Jerusalem Bureau Chief  
May 08, 2007

**Jerusalem (CSNews.com)** – Archeologists here believe they have found the tomb of King Herod the Great, who ruled in the Roman-occupied land of Biblical Judea at the time of Jesus' birth.

The find is significant to both Jews and Christians because Herod was so famous, said archeologist Prof. Ehud Netzer, who headed the excavation on behalf of the Institute of Archeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Appointed King of Judea by the Roman rulers in 37 BC, Herod reigned until his death in 4 BC. He was known for his great building projects and his cruelty. In fact, he was so hated that sometime in antiquity his apparent burial coffin was smashed to pieces.

Although he considered himself to be Jewish, his father was Idumean (an Edomite) and his mother a Nabatea princess from Petra in present day Jordan. He had 10 wives at various times – some concurrently – and at least 14 children. He executed at least three of his sons before his death. Archeologists have always believed that Herod was buried at the Herodium, but excavations there since 1972 did not reveal the burial site – until recently, when the remains of his grave. Sarcophagus (stone coffin) and mausoleum were uncovered.

**The life of Herod is best described by first century Jewish historian Josephus Flavius, said Netzer. Josephus, who chronicled the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, wrote a detailed account of Herod's funeral, and some of those details have been confirmed by the discovery of the burial site.**

Because Herod was the king at the time of Jesus' birth, the discovery of his tomb may be of particular interest to the Christian world, said Netzer. Christians know Herod as the king who met with the wise men who, guided by a star, were seeking the baby Jesus. The story, recorded in the Gospels, says Herod directed the three wise men to let him know where Jesus was, once they found him.

When the wise men failed to return, Herod became enraged, and the Bible says he ordered the murder of all Jewish babies under the age of two in nearby Bethlehem and the surrounding area.

Herod the Great was also known for his building projects, said Netzer. He built extensively in Jerusalem and expanded the Temple Mount. He also ordered the construction of the Mediterranean port of Caesarea, a palace at Massada, and a huge compound called the Herodium, located in the desert south of Jerusalem.

The mausoleum was almost completely dismantled in ancient times. Spread among the ruins was a group of decorated urns used to store ashes as well as

large pieces of a sarcophagus made of reddish limestone from Jerusalem and decorated with rosettes.

The sarcophagus had been broken into hundreds of pieces as if deliberately smashed by a hammer, said Netzer. If someone had merely intended to loot the tomb they would have opened it and taken what they wanted, he said. Netzer surmises that the destruction occurred between the years 66-72 AD during the first Jewish revolt against the Romans, when the rebels took control of the site. They were known for their hatred of Herod because they regarded him as a "puppet ruler" for Rome, he said. There was no sign of Herod's actual remains and they are not likely to ever be found, said Netzer.

Archeologist Stephen Pfann of the University of the Holy Land, said the find is "very significant" and a "tremendous thing" but at the same time disappointing.

"[It] finally seals the hole in the history of the search for this tomb," Pfann told Cybercast News Service. But it is disappointing because there was so little found - it wasn't like the gold-filled tomb of the Egyptian King Tut, he said.

"We would expect to [see] something much more grandiose, ceilings with great frescoes and cut stone, and we have very little so far," said Pfann. Pfann said that it's not clear if this is the tomb of King Herod the Great or his son, Archelaos. The only way it will be confirmed is if fragments and monumental inscriptions bearing names are found, said Pfann. He believes that will happen eventually.