

A Manger, Some Shepherds and Angels, Oh My!

A Lay Commentary on Luke 2:1-20

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Introduction

Until recent decades, most westerners found this story very familiar. The number of people now familiar with it continues to decline as fewer and fewer young people go to church, even at Christmas time, and fewer people send Christmas cards with its words on them.

Sadly, many of the people who are still familiar with the story believe it is just a legend made up by early Christians to make their god Jesus sound as good as all the other gods of the day. College religion professors will point to the similarities in the way the Romans felt about Caesar Augustus. For example, the highest elected official in the Roman Empire, Paullus Fabius Maximus, proposed beginning the new year on the birthday of Caesar Augustus by claiming,

(It is hard to tell) whether the birthday of the most divine Caesar is a matter of greater pleasure or benefit. We could justly hold it to be equivalent to the beginning of all things ...; and he has given a different aspect to the whole world, which blindly would have embraced its own destruction if Caesar had not been born for the common benefit of all.

When the provincial assembly agreed with Maximus they explained:

Whereas the providence which divinely ordered our lives created with zeal and munificence the most perfect good for our lives by producing Augustus and filling him with (virtue) for the benefaction of mankind, sending us and those after us a saviour who put an end to war and established all things; and whereas Caesar (Augustus) when he appeared exceeded the hopes of all who had anticipated good tidings...; and whereas the birthday of the god marked for the world the beginning of good tidings through his coming....¹

At this time, the Jews were stuck between a rock and the sea again (Exodus 14:10). On the one hand, they cannot deliver themselves from the Romans' oppressive military might and the Romans preach the "good news" that their leader is a godlike savior who brought peace to the world. On the other hand, Herod, the pseudo-Jewish leader the Romans appointed over them is trying to force a detestable Greco-Roman culture upon them. They are longing for their God Yahweh to prove his superiority, come to their rescue and deliver them from these evils.

In the midst of this dark and desperate time, the horizon is finally showing some glimmers of that exciting new dawn of salvation. An angel appeared to an old priest in the Temple at Jerusalem. The angel was none other than Gabriel who appeared to the OT prophet Daniel. Gabriel told Zechariah his wife would bear a son even though she was past her childbearing years. Born just 6

months ago, John will be the messenger predicted by Isaiah and Malachi who will prepare the people of Israel for the long-awaited Messiah. (1:5-25; 57-79) The news of his birth was spreading throughout Jerusalem and in the surrounding hill country of Judea.

Gabriel also appeared to a 12-year-old virgin peasant up north in Nazareth, in Galilee. Gabriel told her that God would miraculously make her pregnant without the help of a biological father. Furthermore, he told her this child is the Messiah. (1:26-38) The news of this is surely spreading throughout Galilee. When Mary visited John's mother Elizabeth, who is actually a relative, John leaped in her womb and she received divine revelation from the Holy Spirit about Mary's child, Jesus. (1:39-56) This news is also now spreading throughout the Judean hill country.

Now, Mary and Joseph have come to Bethlehem, near Jerusalem to register in a census. They are staying in a small peasant house where she gives birth to Jesus. They could not use privacy to escape the burden they carry which is at once a joy and a heavy weight of responsibility. Suddenly the dark night no longer conceals their identity when shepherds knock on the door wanting to see the baby Savior. They explain that an angel told them about the baby and then a multitude of angels appeared, singing praises to God. Something huge is happening. "The Rising Sun (has) come from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." (1:79)

Like the previous events and their prophetic interpretations, this story contains many rich allusions to OT themes that connect these events with God's old and slowly unfolding plan of salvation for all people.

2:1

In those days

Luke uses this phrase several times when referring to major events in God's plan of salvation. (see: Luke 4:2; 5:35; Acts 2:18). The words create a somber and ominous feeling that something of great significance is happening.

Caesar Augustus issued a decree

In the Greek text this story begins much like Luke 1:5 ("In the days of Herod king of Judea"). The events of that story take place in the Temple in Jerusalem, at the very heart and center of the Jewish world, as well as the immediate domain of Herod, also known as "king of the Jews." The prophecy Gabriel gave to Zechariah about John focused on God's working on behalf of Israel. John will be the messenger the ancient prophets Isaiah and Malachi predicted would prepare the people of Israel for their long-awaited Messiah. This story widens that scope of salvation to include the Gentiles as well (v.14). Therefore, Luke appropriately locates the time of Jesus' birth in relation to the representative of the greater Gentile world, Caesar Augustus.

Caesar Augustus (63 B.C. – 14 A. D.) vanquished his military and political rivals in 27 B.C., making him the first emperor of the unified Roman Empire. His predecessor, Julius Caesar, adopted him, so they gave him the title of Caesar in remembrance of him. Augustus is from the word "august" which means "inspiring reverence or admiration; of supreme dignity or grandeur;

majestic.”² Therefore, Augustus means “Revered One.” This designation would begin the cult of worshipping the emperor as a son of god. One ancient Roman inscription describes him as:

“Divine Augustus Caesar, son of a god, imperator of land and sea, the benefactor and savior of the whole world ...”³

At the beginning of this Gospel, Luke introduces into his account of the life of Jesus the most powerful man in the Jewish world, Herod, king of the Jews (1:5). Now he introduces the most powerful man on earth into the events he reports. Herod made whatever compromises necessary to win the approval and support of Caesar Augustus. As for Herod, the few to whom Herod passed on this power loved him while most Jews despised him for forcing Greco-Roman culture on them. Similarly, as for any dictator, those who benefited from Caesar Augustus’ power loved him, while those who did not—did not. To the poor powerless peasant the power of the two leaders seemed impossible to overcome. They squashed immediately and mercilessly any glimmer of rebellion. The Jews’ only hope was God’s promised and long-awaited Messiah. They believed that somehow, by the power of almighty God, he would deliver them from this mighty physical and spiritual oppression. He would “rescue (them) from the hand of (their) enemies and enable (them) to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all of (their) days.” (1:74-75) It is as if the two heavy weight champions of the universe are now gearing up for battle. All of this adds to the somber and ominous feeling. Implied is the question: Which son of god will win?

that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

2

(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)

An empire or nation uses a census as a powerful way to impose its authority on its subjects. It tells the government how much tax revenue they can count on and in the case of the Roman Empire assess and enforce the allegiance of the people. The Roman Empire stretched over three thousand miles from the British Isles and Spain to modern day Iraq and down to Egypt, making it roughly the size of the United States.

This census has given biblical scholars a big headache because as of yet we do not have any record of this census ever being conducted. Some have used this lack of corroboration as a reason to doubt the reliability of the Gospel of Luke as an accurate history of Jesus’ life. They then go on to assert that since Luke made up this census he must also have made up the teachings, miracles, death and resurrection of Jesus as well. However, they really can’t justify these conclusions. Just because we don’t possess a record of it, it doesn’t mean it did not take place. Fires, earthquakes and wars destroyed a lot of ancient records. In addition, the Bible has consistently stood up to these kinds of attacks as newly discovered records from the past continue to affirm its reliability.⁴

The timing of this census poses another problem. Reliable sources tell us that Quirinius came to Judea in 6 or 7 A.D. while Luke puts the births of John and Jesus during the reign of Herod around 4 B.C. Scholars have proposed several potential resolutions to this problem, but they are beyond the scope of this present commentary.⁵ One brief solution worth mentioning here though

is that the Greek can also be translated, “This census was prior to the one conducted by Quirinius...” Now, we do have record of a Jewish uprising in defiance of the census conducted by Quirinius. That census, then, was a better-known census that Luke assumed his readers already knew about. Therefore, Luke could be saying, “You know the census that caused the uprising when Quirinius was governor of Syria? Well, this census was before that one.” Most of the proposed solutions are viable, and given Luke’s accuracy in all other details concerning the rulers of the period, we should give him the benefit of the doubt.

Among other things, a census assessed the value of their property for the purposes of taxation. Most newly subjected people probably took it in stride saying, “It doesn’t matter if I pay my taxes to the old conqueror or the new one. They’re all the same.” However, the Jews felt very different about it. They only acknowledged God as their legitimate Master, and cooperating with a census was tantamount to replacing God with Caesar as one’s Master. A rabbi by the name of Judas the Galilean led a revolt against the famous (infamous?) census Luke mentions here and apparently got a lot of people killed. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus (c. 75 A.D.) relates:

a certain Galilean, whose name was Judas, prevailed with his countrymen to revolt, and said they were cowards if they would endure to pay a tax to the Romans and would after God submit to mortal men as their lords.⁶

It is hardly worth mentioning that Judas and his revolt did not last very long.

3

And everyone went to his own town to register.

We don’t know why they made people go to the town of their ancestor’s origin. The reason does not really matter to this story, but the result does, as we’ll see in a moment.

When Luke says that Caesar Augustus issued a decree for a census that forced the men to travel to their ancestral homes for a census this creates a conflict of interests. It creates a tension in the mind of the listener or reader of the first century. It evokes, even in us today, images of dangerous absolute governmental power and painful feelings of oppression and helplessness. The tension in this story flows from the conflicts of interest between the most powerful ruler on the planet and the needs of his empire on one hand and the interests of the Jewish people who believe only God should be their Master on the other hand.

4

**So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea,
to Bethlehem the town of David,
because he belonged to the house and line of David.**

Luke jacks the tension up a notch when we find out that the decree affects Joseph. He must travel to his ancestral home 70 miles away. The reason this heightens tension is that we learned earlier that he is betrothed to Mary, who is pregnant with the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. How will this decree and his having to go to Bethlehem affect them and God’s unfolding plan to provide the Messiah?

Although a remnant of the line of David (including Joseph and Mary) now lived in Nazareth, David's birthplace was in Bethlehem, so that is where they had to go to register. (See Commentary on Luke 1:27) Bethlehem lies about six miles south of Jerusalem, putting it about 70 miles due south of Nazareth (longer by road). The reason Luke says Joseph went "up" to Bethlehem is that Bethlehem lies at a higher elevation.

Critics have accused Luke of making up the idea that men had to go to their ancestral homes to register in a census. However, we have a record of such a requirement:

Gaius Vivius 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."⁷

Apparently, the reason for sending men to their ancestral homes was to ensure that there was no unclaimed and therefore unregistered property that the Romans didn't know to tax. Here again, extra-biblical documents have silenced the critics.

The words "Joseph" and "line of David" remind us of what the OT prophets and Gabriel have already revealed. The Messiah would be a descendant of David, and Joseph is betrothed to the virgin who would bear this Messiah. Now Luke adds in a new element—"Bethlehem." The OT prophet Micah prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2-5).

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.
Therefore Israel will be abandoned
until the time when she who is in labor gives birth
and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.
He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they will live securely,
for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth
And he will be their peace.

In his Gospel, Matthew shows us that the Jews of Jesus' day understood this as meaning the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. (Matthew 2:3-6) When the Magi come to King Herod inquiring about the newborn king of the Jews the chief priests and teachers of the law told Herod that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem and then quote this prophecy.

Adding this new element to the story heightens our expectation and hope that the son Mary bears in her womb really is the long-awaited Messiah.

5

He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

Now, Luke ratchets the tension up still another notch when he reveals that Mary is accompanying Joseph. How will this affect the young woman who God entrusted with His Messiah? Stay tuned and we'll find out.

What was the nature of their family unit at this point? The text implies they were still in the betrothal period, but it would be against the customs for her to travel alone with Joseph during this time. However, if everyone had to go to their ancestral towns then they would be traveling with their families and extended families.

Why did Mary travel to Bethlehem with Joseph? Some commentators think that the decree required her to register as well, but the text does not require this interpretation. Neither does it seem necessary that a pregnant girl who is only betrothed make the journey. Why would the Roman Empire require whole families to journey to their ancestral towns? This would create a giant upheaval in the society and economy.

All of this seems to miss a very important point, that is, that she probably came along in order to give birth to Jesus in Bethlehem to fulfill Micah's prophecy. They knew when her due date was. Gabriel and the Holy Spirit (through Elizabeth) told her she was carrying the Messiah. Joseph had to go to Bethlehem for the census. Micah prophesied the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. It all added up for her to go. People often imply that the young couple simply got swept up in the bureaucratic demands of the Empire and just happened to be in Bethlehem for this census and could not avoid giving birth there. Most certainly, God's providence was at work, but they must have been aware of the well-known prophecy. Now, a cynical person might say, "Well, here is an example of them manipulating the life of Jesus in order to make it appear that he fulfilled this prophecy." However, since prophecies were already being fulfilled without anyone's manipulations, it makes more sense to suggest that they chose to obey the prophecy.

Mary has already been to this region (the hill country of Judea) before to visit Elizabeth and Zechariah. The first time, she went to see the fulfillment of Gabriel's news about Elizabeth's pregnancy. This time, she came to fulfill Gabriel's news that she would bear the Messiah. If he was indeed the Messiah, he would need to be born in Bethlehem as Micah prophesied. She probably even came to nearby Jerusalem at other times for the great festivals and for her father to bring sacrifices to God at the Temple. At those times, she could not even come close to the symbols of God's presence in the Temple, but now, she carried in her own womb the One whom they called Immanuel, which means "God with us." (see Matthew 1:23)

So far, in this story, we see two immense forces at work. Caesar Augustus is the most powerful human the world had ever known to that point. Even so, God is infinitely more powerful. He can manipulate world events and rulers to accomplish His unstoppable plan for salvation and deliverance. Caesar Augustus thinks he is the sovereign king of the world, and he doesn't have a clue that he is merely a pawn on God's chessboard.

Luke began the story with the universal context of the Roman Empire and the census decreed by Caesar Augustus himself. His literary lens then zoomed in to the town of Bethlehem and now it zooms in all the way to the inside of a peasant house.

6

**While they were there,
the time came for the baby to be born,**

Luke does not give us any specific references concerning time. The words "While they were there" imply they were there some time, but they could mean days, weeks or months. Again, I don't think Mary was in Bethlehem at this time by accident. With this point of view, I in no way desire to minimize God's providential work. God worked providentially to provide the timing by which Mary and Joseph could obey Micah's prophecy.

7

and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.

Luke includes the word firstborn for three reasons. First, it supports Luke and Mary's claims that she was (and technically still is) a virgin (1:27, 34). She will have other children by Joseph later. Second, it affirms that God fulfilled Gabriel's words, which in turn, affirms the credibility of the rest of Gabriel's prophecies about John and Jesus. Third, it shows that Jesus now possesses the right to inherit Joseph's birthright as a direct descendant of David.⁸

Another way of saying birthright is "the rights of the firstborn son." In the ancient world the family name, titles and much of its possessions passed through the line of the eldest son. In Judaism, the birthright possessed great spiritual significance as well. The firstborn son inherited God's covenant with Abraham and passed it on to his firstborn son.⁹

The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible summarizes the privileges of the firstborn male in Jewish culture:

He enjoyed prerogatives over his brothers, like receiving the father's blessing (Gen. 27:1-4, 35-37), preferential treatment by the father (43:33), respect as leader among the brothers (37:22), and a double portion of the inheritance, twice what any other son received (Deut. 21:17).¹⁰

Exodus 13:2 tells us that God claimed the firstborn males and the firstborn male animals for himself.

The Lord said to Moses, “Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether man or animal.”

The most important right that Jesus’ received was that of the Davidic ancestry required to fulfilled his role as the Davidic Messianic king who will reign forever.

She wrapped him in cloths

William Barclay explains the way a baby was wrapped:

Swaddling clothes consisted of a square of cloth with a long bandage-like strip coming diagonally off from one corner. The child was first wrapped in the square of cloth and then the long strip was wound round and round about him.¹¹

and placed him in a manger,

A manger usually refers to a stone feeding trough for livestock but may also refer to the stall in which the animal stands to eat out of the feeding trough.¹² To be sure, it is an unusual place to lay a newborn baby.

because there was no room for them in the inn.

Again, verse 6 implies they were there for some time, perhaps days, weeks or months. The view is that is often portrayed to us is that they just arrived in town from their long journey and could not find a place to stay. This is apparently not correct.

There has also been some confusion about what kind of place they were staying in. The Greek word the NIV and other translations render “inn” is “kataluma.” It “is a flexible word and can denote any kind of place where one might stay, from a primitive inn to a guest-room of a house to a totally unspecified place where one might stay.”¹³ The first place to start in determining the meaning of a word is to learn how the author uses the same word or forms of the word in the rest of his writing. Luke uses the same word to refer to the “guest room” where the Last Supper takes place (22:11). He uses a verbal form of the word to refer to staying at Zacchaeus’ house as a guest (19:7). He uses another verbal form of the word in 9:12. Jesus had been speaking to the crowd of five thousand:

Late in the afternoon the Twelve came to him and said, “Send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside and find food and lodging, because we are in a remote place here.”

Small villages off the main road like Bethlehem did not typically have public lodges and the countryside, of course, only has individual houses. The disciples expected people in the area to

take these people into their homes as guests. Next, in the story of the Good Samaritan the Samaritan takes the wounded man to an inn and Luke uses a different and more specific Greek word for inn, which is “pandocheiov” instead of “kataluma.” Therefore, it seems most likely that the place he is talking about here means guest-room—“because there was no room for him in the guest-room.”

Next, we must think about what this house might have been like. The smallest peasant house had only one room. One side of the room was slightly elevated and the family lived on this platform. They brought the animals into the house at night and they stayed on the ground level. There would be a manger or feeding trough either standing on the floor or attached to a wall. Now, if my understanding is correct that Luke refers to a guest-room instead of a public inn then this house had at least two rooms: one for the family and one for guests plus the area at ground level for the animals. The two rooms were not necessarily divided by a wall but may simply have been two open areas under one roof. Finally, Mary or Joseph was probably related to the host family who might have let them stay at no cost or in exchange for work over this extended period of time.

To summarize, it seems best to understand the situation as follows. Mary and Joseph and the relatives and friends they might be traveling with are staying with relatives in a small house in Bethlehem. This house is large enough to have at least two rooms including a guest-room/area. Because there were other people using the guest-room/area the host family devoted the stall and feeding trough to the baby Jesus. Since Mary and Joseph were there for some time and the delivery time could be estimated to within a couple of days, the manger or stall was probably cleaned and prepared for the occasion.

With this verse, Luke delivers a huge surprise to the expectant Jewish reader. He informs us that they are staying in a peasant home and it is so crowded that the only place she can lay the baby is in a feeding trough! Isn't Jesus the Messiah, the new King of the Jews, a descendant of King David? A feeding trough is no place for a king! This story just got very strange.

At this point, it seems like Caesar has the upper hand. The Jews, as subjects, must cooperate or pay the consequences. Poverty seems to overwhelm them as underdogs as well. This definitely has the beginnings of a “rags to riches” story. This is the crisis point of the story even though it comes early in it. How will the conflict be resolved?

Whatever the situation really involved we must acknowledge what is inescapable. Jesus was born into a peasant family in the rough make-do provisions of a peasant house. In this way, the Creator of the universe took the form of a created being. Instead of coming to a mansion, the King of Kings came to a peasant home. Instead of laying the King of Kings in fine purple cloth, they wrapped him in plain rough cloth and laid him in an animal's feeding trough. Divinity put on humanity. Eternal Almighty God put on human frailty and vulnerability.

Paul quoted a then popular Christian song when he wrote to the Christians at Philippi (Phil. 2:5-8):

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

8

**And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby,
keeping watch over their flocks at night.**

The setting of the story changes from a daytime journey and birth in a small crowded peasant house to nighttime in the open spaces of shepherds' fields.

Luke repeats the pattern he began in the story of Zechariah. First, he introduces the setting, introduces the main characters and the events. Then he quotes what people and angels say to let them interpret those events. He will repeat this pattern throughout his Gospel. So far, in this story, Luke has only narrated the course of events, so now he begins a new section that interprets the significance of Jesus' birth. The main characters God uses in this interpretive drama are shepherds and angels.

Why did the angels appear to shepherds rather than a group of other professionals? First, the shepherds serve to associate Jesus with King David who was himself a shepherd in this very countryside near Bethlehem (1 Samuel 16:11-12; 17:15, Psalm 78:71-72). Luke does not say, but perhaps these shepherds were descendants of King David's family.

A second reason the angels appear to these shepherds is to anticipate Jesus' use of the imagery of sheep and shepherding to describe His ministry. He would later say (John 10:11):

I am the good shepherd.
The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...

Shepherds raised the lambs the faithful Jews brought to the Temple to sacrifice for the payment of their sins. They had to sacrifice lambs once a year on the Day of Atonement. Jesus came to lay down His life as the ultimate, one-time sacrifice for our sins. He is not only the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep but also the sacrificial lamb that would atone for our sins.

A third reason is that the imagery draws the analogy between of the relationship of shepherds and their sheep and the relationship between Jesus and His followers. He would later say (John 10:14):

I am the good shepherd;
I know my sheep and my sheep know me.

Finally, the appearance to the shepherds begins to fulfill Mary's prophecy that God will bring down rulers and lift up the humble (1:52). Luke observes the immense contrast between Caesar Augustus on the one hand and the peasant shepherds and the peasant Jesus on the other. There is also the contrast between the urban elite who build for themselves sophisticated social and architectural structures and the rural country folk who, in their simple lifestyle, must depend on their Creator. This visitation to the shepherds reverses the supposed roles of who God blesses and esteems. Instead of delivering news from heaven to rulers (Herod and Augustus), God delivers it to peasants. Their privileges are now reversed—and that by God rather than violent uprising.

A second aspect of this appearance is significant. Until now, the symbol of God's presence has been the Temple in Jerusalem. That is where heaven and earth met. Now heaven and earth meet in a human baby in a small, crowded peasant house in the midst of lowly shepherds and a fields of sheep! This too underscores the radical overturning of the social and religious order. This calls for a completely different way of thinking about religious purity, holiness and service. A completely new kind of kingdom is breaking across the land like a huge spiritual tsunami.

9

An angel of the Lord appeared to them,

Luke used the same expression “an angel of the Lord” in Gabriel's visit to Zechariah (1:11). He does not tell us if this angel is Gabriel, but his role is the same. He serves as God's personal messenger to deliver divine perspective on these events. To Zechariah and Mary he interpreted the events that would soon take place; here he interprets the event that just happened.

Luke uses the Greek word that is translated “appeared” in other similar angelic appearances in his Gospel and in Acts. Those examples help us picture what this appearance might have been like.

While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. (Luke 24:4)

Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up... (Acts 12:7)

The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said... (Acts 23:11)

These examples, along with Gabriel's appearances to Zechariah and Mary imply a man-like figure suddenly became present and stood with the shepherds.

and the glory of the Lord shone around them,

The Hebrew word for glory is “kavod” and literally means weight, heaviness, worthiness, fame, dignity or honor. OT authors often used it to communicate the splendor of a person in fine clothing, the splendor of a king or king’s court or king’s army. They also used it to describe the effect of God’s presence. Luke’s language evokes the descriptions of how God displayed His presence to Israel as a bright light or bright object (Exodus 16:7, 10; 24:17; 40:34; Psalm 63:2; Isaiah 60:1, 2; Ezekiel 1:4ff)

Other examples given by Luke of this phenomenon are:

Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up... (Acts 12:7)

About noon ... I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. (Acts 26:13)

Because the angel appeared to them at night, the shepherds could not mistake the light as coming from any other source but God.

and they were terrified.

This is an understandable and not uncommon reaction (1:12). I wonder why in some instances the people an angel appears to are terrified while in other instances they are not (or at least are not reported to be terrified).

10

**But the angel said to them,
“Do not be afraid.
I bring you good news of great joy
that will be for all the people.**

Since the shepherds understood this mysterious light to be God’s presence, they were naturally afraid of some kind of divine judgment for their sins. The angel instead bears good news so there is no need for fear.

When he appeared to Zechariah Gabriel said, “I have been sent to tell you this good news.” (1:19) He also associates joy with the fulfillment of God’s plan of deliverance: “He (John) will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth....” (1:14, 58)

Especially in the Psalms and Isaiah, the term “good news” or “good tidings” is used to announce Yahweh’s universal victory over the world and his kingly rule. The new era of salvation, redemption and peace dawns when the messenger makes the proclamation.¹⁴

Isaiah (48:20):

Leave Babylon,
flee from the Babylonians!
Announce this with shouts of joy and proclaim it.
Send it out to the ends of the earth,

Isaiah 52:7-12

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"

Listen!

Your watchmen lift up their voices;
together they shout for joy.
When the Lord returns to Zion,
they will see it with their own eyes.
Burst into songs of joy together,
you ruins of Jerusalem,
for the Lord has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.

The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

The Greek word translated "that" specifically means "the kind that." This joyful news is the kind of news that is for all the people, including shepherds, not just a privileged few or the elite.

"The people" refers to the people of Israel. John's purpose in life is "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (1:17) Zechariah praises the Lord "because he has come and has redeemed his people." (1:68) Zechariah tells John that he will "give his people the knowledge of salvation." (1:78) The announcement to the shepherds of Jesus' birth is not for them alone but for all the people of Israel.

11

**Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you;
he is Christ the Lord.**

Luke will use the word "today" several times in his Gospel to show that God is now working in the present to save Israel (4:21; 5:26; 19:9; 23:43). Remember it has been hundreds of years since God has worked in the ways He prophesied through the prophets. Now God is finally working to fulfill those prophecies in new ways. He is now graciously providing their long awaited savior.

We have already seen how the Bethlehem is significant to God's plan. King David was born here and God promised a Messianic king from his descendants. In addition, the OT prophet Micah (5:2) affirmed that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

The language of verses 10 and 11 echo Isaiah:

Isaiah 9:2, 3, 6:

You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you...
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given....

The angel calls the newborn a Savior. Savior connects this announcement to what Mary and Zechariah said earlier. Mary "rejoices in God my Savior." (1:47) Zechariah said that God "has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David...salvation from our enemies..." (1:69-71) Then, he said John would "give his people the knowledge of salvation..." (1:77)

This is the first time Luke uses the Greek word "Christos," which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for Messiah. Therefore, the language of this verse adds up to a clear unmistakable announcement that their long-awaited Messiah is now here. This is more than just good news. This is exciting news!

Finally, Gabriel adds the unnecessary words "to you" for special emphasis. This child was not only born to Mary and Joseph but to them and the whole people of Israel as well. Jesus will later say,

My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice.
(Luke 8:19-21)

This is the people's Messiah. He has come to rescue them, even the common peasants of Israel.

12

**This will be a sign to you:
You will find a baby wrapped in cloths
and lying in a manger."**

Just as the listener or reader of verse 7 received a shocking disappointment when they (and we) are told that the baby Messiah is lying in a feeding trough, so do the shepherds. Can you imagine what they were thinking? "What? Our kingly Messiah is a baby lying in a feeding trough?" Is this some joke that this angel is playing on us?

God graciously allows the shepherds to view Jesus as a positive sign to help them believe the angel's word. It will be 30 long years before Jesus begins His public ministry. Some of these

shepherds may have died by then. Perhaps only the younger ones will have seen their Messiah as a baby and then as a grown man.

13

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Suddenly” reinforces the “today” of verse twelve and goes with the character of God’s recent and present decisive action in salvation history. The long-awaited Messiah is suddenly and unexpectedly here. Heaven is upon them. These angelic beings burst into our material dimension from the spiritual dimension unannounced to join and affirm the angel’s announcement.

What is the heavenly host? The Greek text literally reads, “a multitude of the heavenly army.” The following verses shed some light on the meaning intended here. The underlying Hebrew word usually means an army also. However, the word can also refer to a non-military group.¹⁵

1 kings 22:19

Michaiah (a prophet) continued, “...I saw the Lord sitting on his throne with all the host of heaven standing around him on his right and on his left. And the Lord said, ‘Who will entice Ahab into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there?’ ... Finally a spirit came forward, stood before the Lord and said, ‘I will entice him.’”

Nehemiah 9:6b

... and the multitudes of heaven worship you.

Daniel 7:10

... thousands upon thousands attended him;
ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.

Revelation 5:11

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand....

From these verses, we learn there are vast numbers of spiritual beings (“spirits”) that are all around God’s throne worshipping him and available to serve Him in specific ways. Rather than giving us any clues about even an approximate number, Luke simply wants us to feel some of the awe the shepherds felt by the size of the group of spiritual beings. At a Promise Keepers convention I once stood in an indoor stadium with about 13,000 men singing the hymn “O for a thousand tongues to sing my great redeemer’s praise...” I was so struck with awe that I could not hold back the tears. I can use that experience to only begin to imagine what that

multitude of angels sounded like to the shepherds. And that was only a portion of all the angels singing God's praises in heaven!

14

**“Glory to God in the highest *heaven*,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”**

Because these lines are so familiar to us from Christmas cards, it is easy to overlook the significance of what they say, so let's carefully unpack the meaning.

The term “highest” literally means “the highest places” and is a poetic way of saying “heaven.” A better translation of “To men on whom his favor rests” is probably “among the people whom God has favored.”¹⁶

Let's regroup these phrases in order to better understand what they mean:

Glory	to God	in heaven,
peace	among the people whom God has favored	on earth

Glory here means to attribute to God the honor that He deserves. The shepherds are to join the angels in honoring and praising God for bringing peace among (or to) the people on earth to whom He has chosen to be gracious. In other words, God elected Israel to be His chosen people. That is what He meant when he told Abraham,

“I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.” (Genesis 17:7)

Of course, God plans to use Israel to extend his saving grace to all the Gentiles as well. I propose the following paraphrase that I think communicates the meaning in a way we can better understand it:

“God is being glorified in heaven because He is graciously bringing peace to all men.”

Why did all these angels come from heaven and make this great display to make a one-sentence announcement? It must be important because of the following reasoning. One angel (Gabriel) appeared to Zechariah. One angel (Gabriel again) appeared to Mary. One angel (Gabriel again?) appeared to the shepherds to announce the Messiah has been born and where to find him. But now, a multitude of angels comes from around God's throne into an obscure field to make this announcement.

Psalm 68:11

The Lord announced the word,
and great was the company (army) of those who proclaimed it...

This must be it. This must be the whole point of Jesus' birth. Only a huge army of angels would be appropriate to announce what God is accomplishing through Jesus' birth. Anything less would be an insult to Jesus. This is the climax, or the high point of the story. At first, I thought the birth of Jesus was the climax, but it is not. The birth, as a very human birth, is just a one-time event, whereas the ramifications are eternal. The true climax of this story is what God accomplished through the birth.

The angels are announcing a great accomplishment by God (*fait accompli*). God has managed to engineer the events of history and people's lives over thousands of years to accomplish this awe-inspiring feat of strategy—a Savior who will restore peace between men and God. We cannot even begin to imagine the complexity of this strategy involving millions of people's lives, many cultures and languages, military victories and defeats, the obedience and disobedience of uncountable numbers of people, uncountable numbers of angels carrying out uncountable assignments and on and on and on... Only an all powerful, all wise, all loving, gracious and merciful God could pull off providing the "path of peace." (Luke 1:79) Hallelujah!

Let's explore this peace more. The OT background of the idea is very important here. The Hebrew word for peace is "shalom."

Shalom is the opposite not so much of war as of any disturbance in the communal well-being of the nation, a disturbance which of course, may in certain circumstances make it necessary to go to war... Shalom covers well-being in the widest sense of the word... Shalom is a comprehensive kind of fulfillment or completion, indeed of a perfection in life and circumstances... Shalom is ultimately the gift of Yahweh.¹⁷

Isaiah (9:5-7) makes it clear that the Messiah will bring peace when He comes.

Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and
forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

This is the very peace the multitude of angels announces arrived with the birth of the baby they will find in the feeding trough.

15

**When the angels had left them and gone into heaven,
the shepherds said to one another,
“Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened,
which the Lord has told us about.”**

When Gabriel announced to Zechariah the upcoming birth of John he responded in doubt by asking for a sign to prove Gabriel’s words would come true. Gabriel gave him a sign, although it was a negative one. When John was finally born, he then responded by praising God, blessing John and prophesying his coming role. When Gabriel announced to Mary that God would miraculously fertilize her egg without the use of a biological father, she responded in faith and submission. She did not ask for a sign, however Gabriel gave her a positive sign. He told her that Elizabeth was pregnant and that would be the sign to prove that his words would come true. When she met Elizabeth, she responded by glorifying God and prophesying what God had done. In our present story, God gives the shepherds a sign: a baby in a manger. How will the shepherds respond? First, they will go to check out the sign, and then they will respond by “glorifying and praising God for all the things they had hears and seen, which were just as they had been told.” (1:20)

16

**So they hurried off
and found Mary and Joseph,
and the baby,
who was lying in the manger.**

This is the third time in the story Jesus is lying said to be in the feeding trough. When Luke writes it in verse 7, it has to shock the first century reader. Jews and Gentiles both know kings are born in stables. When the angel says it the second time (vs. 12), the shepherds must be shocked. , Just as Mary hurried to Elizabeth’s house to see the sign from Gabriel the shepherds hurried off to Bethlehem to see the sign the angel (Gabriel?) gave to them. It is not important to Luke or to us, really, how they found the right house in the middle of the night. However, they probably only had to knock on one door (one of their own relatives?) as news of a birth traveled quickly in a small town. They found everything just as the angel had told them.

Notice that Mary’s name appears first here. This is the opposite of the normal custom of listing the husband’s name first. When they dedicate Jesus at the Temple, Luke will put Joseph first to emphasize they “had done everything required by the Law of the Lord.” (2:39) Therefore, Luke probably put her name first to emphasize her role in giving birth to this newborn Savior.

When they found everything just as the angel had told them they confirmed the truthfulness of what he told them as well as the nature of the child as their Savior.

17

**When they had seen him,
they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child,**

18

and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

The Greek literally reads, “and seeing they made known concerning the word spoken to them concerning this child.” Primarily this means that they told the inhabitants of the house including Mary and Joseph about the angels and their announcement. The NIV’s “they spread the word” seems to generalize this to include what we may assume to happen outside of the house later. After leaving the house, they would naturally tell other people around Bethlehem and the countryside. What will they tell people? They will tell others what the angels told them: “a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”

Luke uses the same Greek word for “amazed” in 1:21, 63 and 4:22. In 1:21, the people marveled when Zechariah was in the Temple so long. In 1:63, the neighbors and relatives were astonished when Zechariah wrote, “His name is John.” In 4:22, the people in his hometown synagogue (in Nazareth) were amazed when Jesus claimed to be the Messiah. This last situation shows that amazement does not always lead to faith. Faith does not come from amazement or any other emotion, it comes from a willful choice to believe that something is true.

19

**But Mary treasured up all these things
and pondered them in her heart.**

Since the shepherds told her that angels just appeared to them, she must have reminisced about Gabriel’s visit and words to her. Over the past nine months she has been thinking about those words, as well as Elizabeth’s and Zechariah’s words and her own prophecy. Adding all that to this event, it gave her a lot to think about, plus, she was probably exhausted. She appears to be a reflective kind of person. When Gabriel greeted her, “Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.” Then when she and Joseph find the twelve-year-old Jesus at the Temple and learn of his dialog with the teachers and his perspective on the matter she again “treasured all these things in her heart.” Her response is also similar to that of the people of Judea who heard about Zechariah, Elizabeth and John. “Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, ‘What then is this child going to be?’ For the Lord’s hand was on him.” Perhaps Luke includes these statements in this kind of wording to motivate his reading audience to also think deeply about the significance of these events.

20

**The shepherds returned,
glorifying and praising God
for all the things they had heard and seen,
which were just as they had been told.**

Now we learn about the shepherds’ response to the angel’s revelation and its confirmation. They glorify and praise God, which the angels that appeared to them were doing also (2:13). Mary

responded to Elizabeth's revelation by glorifying the Lord and rejoicing (1:46-47). The people of the Judean hill country responded in praise to the miraculous nature of the naming of John (1:65). Zechariah responded in praise. (1:68) How will we respond?

This verse also restates in the past tense the shepherds' earlier determination to see the angel's sign (2:15): "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." This functions as a conclusion to the whole story.

Contrast this with how Herod responded to the news of the birth of the baby.

Not only the shepherds but the angels too serve to show the significance of Jesus' birth. First, they associate Jesus with God and the realm of the supernatural from which He came. God's divine favor and blessing is on this child from the beginning. Second, in this way, they give credibility to Mary and Joseph's claims of earlier angelic visitations and promises to them. Gabriel gave Zechariah the sign of speechlessness and deafness to prove his prophecies about John would come true. Gabriel gave Mary the sign of Elizabeth's pregnancy to prove his prophecies about Jesus would come true. The angels appearing to the shepherds and them coming to see Jesus with their own eyes adds to the proof of Gabriel's prophecies about Jesus' coming.

All of this happened away from the Temple in Jerusalem and the mansions and offices of the secular rulers. In those days, secular rulers were also supposed to be God's appointed rulers. God is signaling a radical overhaul or overturning of this order.

In the Introduction, I explained that the Romans viewed Caesar Augustus as a godlike savior that brought peace to the world. They basked in this "good news." On the surface this language sounds a lot like God's claims in the OT that the good news would one day proclaim the day of His salvation and the resulting peace on earth. In his Gospel, Luke wisely avoids setting up a blow-by-blow boxing match-like contrast between Jesus Christ and the several emperors who came and went during Jesus (and Luke's) lifetime. This would come across like a childish, "My daddy is stronger than your daddy." To Luke, that was not necessary. He knew if he simply presented Jesus' life, teachings, death and resurrection in an objective manner, people could figure out for themselves that Jesus is the real God and the Caesars were posers. What is more, because of the Jewish leaders rejected Jesus, God did not deliver the Jews and restore their kingdom. However, God in His mercy provided spiritual salvation—the forgiveness of sins to those who ask.

Application

Each of us tries to be the Caesar Augustus of our own worldly empire. We want to unify, control people and events in our own way and in our own style. Sometimes we are successful but that success is fleeting. Sometimes we feel very powerful, but that is a delusion. We don't realize how much more powerful God is and how much bigger His kingdom is than the largest kingdom we could imagine building for ourselves.

In verse 19, Luke records that:

**But Mary treasured up all these things
and pondered them in her heart.**

If you were Mary, what thoughts and feelings would you have? What would you be pondering?

Look at your own life, family, place of employment, community and church. In what ways are the social and religious orders opposite what Jesus would like them to be? What can you do to begin to change that?

Endnotes

The following books serve as major sources of information and ideas:

Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke*. Eerdmans. 1997.

Nolland, John. *Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 1:1-9:20*. Word Inc. 1989.

The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible.

Roberts, Edgar V. *Writing about literature*. 10th ed. Prentice Hall. 2003.

¹ Both quotes are quoted by Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke*. Eerdmans. 1997. p. 133.

² *August*. Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language. Random House. 2001.

³ Braund, *Augustus*, quoted by Green. p. 126.

⁴ For a readable book about these discoveries, see Price, Randall. *The Stones Cry Out*. Harvest House Publishers. 1997.

⁵ see Barnett, Paul. *Jesus and the rise of Early Christianity: a history of New Testament times*. InterVarsity Press. 1999. p. 97ff.

⁶ Barnett says this revolt was against the census by Quirinius and quotes from Josephus. The quote can be found at http://www.templebuilders.com/Index_josephus_book2chapter8.php.

⁷ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Luke*. rev. ed. Westminster Press. 1975. p. 21.

⁸ Green. p. 128.

⁹ White, W., Jr. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 1, p. 617.

¹⁰ Rosscup, J. E. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 2, p. 540.

¹¹ Barclay, p. 21.

¹² Nolland, John. *Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 1:1-9:20*. Word Inc. 1989. p. 105.

¹³ Nolland, p. 105.

¹⁴ (Brown, Colin. ed. "Gospel." *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Zondervan. 1976. Vol. 2, p. 109.

¹⁵ Huttar, D. K. *Host of Heaven*. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 3, p. 215-216.

¹⁶ Green. p. 109.

¹⁷ Brown, Colin. (ed.) "Peace." *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Vol. 2, p. 777ff.