

LUKE 2

Luke 2:1–7. Jesus’s Birth in Bethlehem

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 138–140.

In these memorable lines, Luke paints the broad imperial setting for ensuing events, highlighting an important moment in the Roman Empire: the tax enrollment in the eastern provinces, particularly in Syria-Palestine. In our mind’s eye, we see streams of people trudging to their hometowns to enter their names on tax rolls. Then Luke beams light on one young couple, Mary and Joseph, who make the hundred-mile journey from Nazareth through the Jordan Valley to Bethlehem, where in humble surroundings, they welcome their first child.

A major issue has to do with the timing of the census. No Roman written source points to a tax enrollment—either local or empire-wide—that occurs at the time of Jesus’s birth. Hence, some dismiss the accuracy of Luke’s notation and, thereby, hold that Mary and Joseph are already living in Bethlehem, with no need to travel from Nazareth. But there are three cautions to advance against such a view. First, it is not uncommon that a single surviving source preserves important information about the ancient world. One thinks immediately of the anonymous *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, composed about AD 50, which survives in a single manuscript—in Heidelberg from the tenth century AD—and offers an important account about seaborne trade between Arabia and the Roman world, opening a view onto antiquity that no other source preserves. Concerning the census in Luke’s report, whether it is accurate or not, it stands as the only source. Second, it is largely a series of accidents that preserves most ancient sources, except perhaps those that are inscribed on durable substances such as stone. Those written on perishable materials—papyrus, leather—are at risk to loss from water, insects, fire, and humans. In the eastern and

southern Mediterranean area, the dry climate of Egypt and the Dead Sea has sheltered a wealth of documents, virtually all of which have been discovered in unexpected places. Third, Luke's story fits what is known about Roman taxing practices from a century or so later, as census records from Egypt show. Hence, Luke's account does not stand out as unique, an aspect that would make it suspect.

This said, the actual dating of the census that Luke reports continues to present scholars with a chronological challenge because of the ten-year difference between the birth of Jesus during Herod's reign (Herod died in 4 BC) and the only known census when Quirinius governed Syria (AD 6–7). Perhaps only the discovery of fresh historical evidence will bring a solution, or perhaps it is possible that Luke has included the pointer to Quirinius as a marker of a general era rather than of a precise moment (see the note on Luke 2:1–7).

Although it is uncertain whether Mary or Joseph, or both, owns or stands to inherit property in or near Bethlehem, it is certain that Joseph's family originally comes from the town, and it is most likely that Mary's family originates there as well because of her descent from David (Romans 1:3). Moreover, the fact that the youthful Mary can readily find her cousin Elisabeth (Luke 1:39–40) indicates that she is familiar with the region and, when a child, must have visited there with her parents. These observations carry the further likelihood that Mary's family is tied to the Bethlehem area through living relatives or property. However, if relatives of the couple reside in or around Bethlehem, it appears that Mary and Joseph are late-coming guests to their home and thus find no rooms available in their home because of the location of Jesus's birth—in a stable, which typically takes up the home's lower floor or sits in a cave. The same word used here for “inn” appears in Luke 22:11 as the designation for the space in which Jesus and His disciples would eat the Last Supper.

After an extended introduction, Luke narrates the actual birth of Jesus rather quickly, perhaps conveying the abruptness and stress with which the moment arrived. A series of staccato verbs—“brought forth,” “wrapped,” and “laid”—present a vivid image of the Lord's sudden arrival into the world as a helpless newborn and the timely life-supporting actions of His young mother (Luke 2:7). The humble beginning of God's Son, born to parents who are without a permanent home in Bethlehem, stands in marked contrast with the grandeur and opulence that encircle the Roman emperor whose decree sends Mary and Joseph scurrying to Bethlehem.

Luke 2:8–20. The Shepherds' Adoration

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2014), 145–147.

The episode with the shepherds raises the matters of humility and, again, birth. Humility has to do with the social status of shepherds. We can dismiss the later rabbinic judgment in the Mishnah, the second-century

composition of Jewish law, that shepherds are sinners, a judgment that the angels' appearance calls into question. Even so, in contrast with Matthew's wise men and their opulent gifts, shepherds stand on one of the lowest rungs of society and draw a certain amount of disdain, particularly those hired as herdsmen. Hence, Luke's retelling of the story of the shepherds links the birth of Jesus both to humility and to a certain level of social discrimination. The story thus hints that those who despise shepherds will come to despise Him. Further, because the shepherds are of a lower class, their inclusion in the celestial celebration of Jesus's birth may anticipate Jesus's willingness to work with lower classes, as does His first bed in an animal trough, the "manger" (Luke 2:12).

But the account also points to the one famous shepherd, the youthful David,¹ whose return is the subject of prophecy (Ezekiel 34:23). By going to "the city of David" to find the infant Jesus, the shepherds were effectively visiting one of David's sons, one born in his city (Luke 2:4, 11). Hence, Luke subtly underscores Jesus's genealogical link to David before reporting it (see 3:31; also 1:32) and brings us to the rich irony that stands forth in the combination of Jesus's royalty and shepherd-like humility.

The story also discloses a similar contrast between the humble character of the shepherds and the unparalleled, brilliant manifestation of angels from heaven. The angel's proclamation is universal in scope, ending with "on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14). These words hint that the shepherds are commissioned to spread the good news far and wide—to the whole world if possible. The fact that even today no Nativity scene is complete without a shepherd or two is a testament to their success. Even in a small village such as Bethlehem, finding Mary, Joseph, and the newborn Jesus would have been no easy task in the time before standardized street addresses. However, when they happened upon the infant Messiah, they could be sure of their success: "Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger" (verse 12). The scene demonstrates that diligent effort is required to find the Christ child.

Birth also weaves itself into this part of the report, renewing a theme that already appears both in the prophetic promises of the births of John and Jesus and in their actual births. Because, as is evident, the adult shepherds are out of doors at night when the angels find them, we know it is the season when lambs are born. We also suspect that just out of sight, stands death. Passover, which is celebrated in the spring, requires the sacrifice of tens of thousands of lambs (Josephus's number of more than 255,000 is surely an exaggeration but suggests a very large number). Thus, in the season of Jesus's birth many thousands of lambs die at the temple, where they are ritually slaughtered.

We must also grasp that God is adding to His pool of witnesses. Certainly, news of unusual events spreads across segments of the priesthood population because the events that engulf Zacharias will be known both to those of his order, owing to his sudden inability to speak and hear after officiating in the temple (see Luke 1:21–22), and to acquaintances near his home who witness or hear of his miraculous recovery (see 1:58–59, 65–66). To these God adds the lowly shepherds who dwell away from Jerusalem but evidently near Bethlehem. Thus, people in the two most important towns of Judea know that something special is occurring.

Finally, to this point Luke's report firmly establishes revelation as the mode chosen by God to interact with earth's inhabitants, with much of the focus resting on angels as carriers of God's message. We need only think of the angel who appears to Zacharias and changes the direction of his life. A few months later, the angel shows up in Mary's home, revealing the imminent birth of God's Son. Within a few more months, an angel comes by night to shepherds to disclose the Messiah's humble birth. Such angelic manifestations recall God's early efforts to turn people from their wicked ways (see Moses 5:58; 7:25–27). From another source, we learn that “the beholding of angels” is a spiritual gift (Moroni 10:14).

Luke 2:21–24. Circumcision and Purification at the Temple

The following is extracted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 150–151.

The sacrifices listed here are those prescribed to restore ritual purity to a woman after childbirth.

At the heart of these verses beats the principle of respect for law. In a concrete sense, Mary and Joseph fit snugly within this picture. It seems that Luke's report takes pains to note that those associated with the momentous events that lead to the Christian movement are, as we might expect, upright and honorable people before the law. Unlike others who revolt when the census is declared (see Acts 5:37), Mary and Joseph comply with the new law. Unlike those who seek to kill Jesus (Luke 22:2; Matthew 2:20), they do not break any of the Ten Commandments. Unlike those who stand as protectors of the law of Moses but break its tenets,² they obey the law, even its minor points.

A good reason stands behind this portrait. Luke seeks to answer questions about Christianity that have arisen in the larger Roman world, a world that his friend Theophilus represents.³ After all, within recent memory there has been a bitter war between Jews of Palestine and Roman legions, which ended with the fall of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70 and of Masada a few years later. Romans have long identified Christians simply as Jews. But Luke seeks to set the record straight by clarifying that Christians, and those involved in founding their movement, are very different from other Jews.⁴ Significantly, for him in his continuing story, it is Jews who inflame the unruly crowds that oppose Paul and his companions in Asia Minor and elsewhere.⁵

In another vein, amid these verses we meet possible connections to Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel (see the note on Luke 1:46–48). They have to do with the presentation of a child. Only in the story of Hannah do we see a mother bringing her firstborn son to the temple to present Him to the Lord. Only in the story of Hannah do we read of a woman offering sacrifice for her new son. Only in the story of Hannah do we witness a parent redeeming a son (1 Samuel 1:24–28). Though the law requires these acts of parents, it is only in the stories of Hannah and Mary that we see such actions carried out. The possible echoes are not to be missed.

One further observation needs attention. Jesus comes to the temple very early in His life in the arms of His mother, a poor young woman, as her redemption offering of two birds illustrates (Luke 2:24). The place where Mary brings Him is the Court of the Women, where she can see both the sacrificial altar and beautiful sanctuary through the connecting Nicanor Gate. Notably, in one brushstroke Luke's Gospel paints Jesus's life with the color of poverty in a place where the opulence of the temple is stunningly visible. As an adult, at the end of His life, with only a couple of days until His arrest, Jesus sits in the same courtyard and sees poverty, this time also in the person of a poor woman, a "poor widow" who "of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had" (21:2, 4). In a literary sense, Luke encloses his report of Jesus's life within the notices of poor women in the temple's Court of the Women. Their circumstances in life contrast sharply with the visible luxuriousness of the temple. Jesus knows poverty, both spiritual and physical; He comes to help those who seek a way out of their spiritual and economic penury.

Luke 2:25–35. Simeon

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 155–156.

In this passage and the next, we are introduced to Simeon and Anna, two steadfast individuals who have long been awaiting Israel's redemption. Their stories are examples of Luke's tendency to balance his narrative with gendered pairing—in this case the testimonies of a devout man and a prophetess. Simeon's name and Anna's tribal lineage (Asher) represent the mission of Jesus, a Judahite, to redeem all Israel, including the lost tribes (among which Simeon and Asher are included). These two individuals also demonstrate the messianic expectation in first-century Judaism: Simeon is "waiting for the consolation of Israel," and Anna "spake of [Jesus] to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem" (Luke 2:25, 38). While the redemption to be wrought is still decades away, these two faithful Israelites recognize their own salvation in the infant Jesus.

Our only record of the man Simeon appears in these verses. Attempts to link him to other known persons fail, though he may be tied to both the temple and the Sanhedrin at Jerusalem. Although we usually assume that he is an elderly person because of his reference to death, he need not be very old.

Simeon's entry into the story allows Luke to stress a number of important characteristics of this man that fit into a gospel framework. First, Luke emphasizes that Simeon is "just and devout," aspects that mirror a high degree of self-control and noble motivation. The result of Simeon's righteousness, of course, is that "the Holy Ghost was upon him" (Luke 2:25). This portrait of Simeon's life of devotion, brought forward in just a few words, underscores what is available to anyone who receives the newborn Messiah. Moreover, to Simeon, who has consciously cultivated a life of devotion, comes the spirit of prophecy, allowing him to reveal something of the Savior's future. That future will include touching not only Israelites

but also Gentiles with the message of salvation. This universalism underlies Luke's two volumes, his Gospel and the Acts. In addition, according to Simeon's prophecy, the future will include conflicts that will dog Jesus's footsteps throughout His ministry. Further, Simeon becomes a witness of the first rank, both before the infant's parents and before others, that God has initiated a special effort among His children.

The hymn of Simeon (Luke 2:29–32), called *Nunc Dimittis* (“now thou dismissest”), joins those of Mary (1:46–55) and Zacharias (1:68–79) to form a revealing pattern. In a literary sense, it stands at the end of a cycle that begins with promise (the hymn of Mary), continues with fulfillment in the birth of John (the song of Zacharias), and ends with a “response of praise” on the lips of Simeon. Such praise, of course, also bursts forth in the song of the angels (2:13–14) and in the words of Anna (2:38). But the angels' song comes from heaven, and Anna's praise stands unrecorded. Thus, Simeon's earthly hymn of praise neatly ties off Luke's presentation of the initial events of God's imminent salvation as seen by mortals, showing them to have come to one Simeon who is guided by God's Spirit.

Simeon's hymn also discloses threads that tie back to Isaiah's four Servant Songs, situating Jesus as the righteous servant of God who is to usher in a period of righteousness.⁶ First identified by Bernhard Duhm in 1892, these songs point expectantly to God's servant who will bring a reign of righteousness with Him as well as bear away the sins of His people. Hence, the Lord's servant functions as both King and Messiah, aspects that fit within Luke's larger purposes. This explains why Simeon's hymn was important to record. Jesus truly is “set for the fall and rising again” (verse 34) of each of us—the extent to which we will fail or succeed in eternity is entirely dependent on our willingness to follow the Christ. The word for “rising again” (Greek *anastasis*) is also one of the more common words in the New Testament for resurrection, a gift also provided through Christ. Simeon's prophecy turns poignant and personal when he addresses Mary in verse 35. We can imagine the sword of sorrow that pierced Mary again and again as she saw her son abused, rejected, and finally killed. As difficult as it must have been for God to send His Son to face such horrors on our behalf, we may sometimes forget how painful these things must have been for His Son's mortal mother too.

Luke 2:36–38. Anna

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 159–160.

The temple serves as the anchor in the series of stories that begins with the visit of Mary and Joseph to perform the required sacrifices and to offer the redemption gift following the birth of Jesus. Those accounts finally lead us to Anna, who is known openly in the city as one associated with the temple and its services. Luke's record, of course, will bring temple-related activities to a conclusion in chapter 2 with the story of Jesus's Passover visit at age twelve (Luke 2:40–52). But a major focus of this chapter rests on

events during one momentous day, one on which Jesus's parents present the Christ child at the temple. Before the end of that day, God leads both Simeon and Anna to the child and inspires them in their praise. Anna's known gift of prophecy (2:36), here manifested within the temple complex, confers on the infant Jesus a visible, palpable stamp of divine approval. To be sure, other events will do the same, but Anna's arrival and subsequent witness borne to others will carry weight in the minds of bystanders.

As with Simeon's, Anna's praise arises within sacred precincts, linking the unfolding story of the Christ child more tightly to holiness. Her praise, too, rounds off the sense of promise and fulfillment that weave their way through the songs of Mary, Zacharias, and the angels. Further, her status as a respected woman elevates the unfurling events, conferring on them a dignity and a feminine quality that they otherwise would lack.

Anna's name brings us back to the question of whether the story of Hannah influences Luke's narrative. Even if it does, this does not mean that we should see Anna as fictional, as a mere symbol. Even if much in Luke's narrative here links back to Hannah and her son Samuel, it is plain that Anna is a real person who comes by inspiration to where Joseph and Mary are. That said, summarizing statements about Jesus seem to tie to similar observations written about Samuel (1 Samuel 2:19, 26; 3:19). The statements about Jesus read, "The child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him" (Luke 2:40), and "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man" (Luke 2:52). As an additional piece, Mary's song as she enters the home of Elisabeth resembles that of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1–10; Luke 1:46–55). And, of course, both Samuel and Jesus come as children of promise, dedicated to God.

Luke 2:39–52. The Youthful Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 167–169.

Although some commentators see the story of the youthful Jesus's visit to the temple as an independent account that ties to little else that comes before or after it, in reality it stands as a connecting bridge between Luke's first two chapters and what follows. First, the temple as the center of divine activity holds the early reports together. Within the temple complex, the angel appears to Zacharias; the parents of the infant Jesus present Him there; Simeon and Anna find Him there with the aid of the Spirit; and Simeon prophesies there about the infant. This account of the youthful Jesus continues and ties off these temple-centered events. At the other end of the Gospel story, when Jesus comes to the temple as an adult, He is no stranger and, significantly, exhibits unabashed ownership when He takes control of the grounds, rids the sacred precinct of those who have made it "a den of thieves," and calls it "my house" (Luke 19:45–47).

Second, the connections to the story of Hannah and her son, Samuel, persist. As we have seen, this story finds ties in Mary's song (see 1:46–55); in Anna's name; in the fact that Samuel's father "went up

out of his city yearly” to the sanctuary (1 Samuel 1:3) as does Joseph “every year” (Luke 2:41); and in the summary statements about John and Jesus, who both fulfill Luke’s subtle message (see Luke 1:80; 2:52). Moreover, a link to David surfaces in Luke’s words. In his own way, Luke is saying to his readers, “A prophet greater than Samuel has come among us” and “A king more noble than David has stood with us.” Later in the Gospel story, just as Samuel gives a king to his people (1 Samuel 8:5–22), so Jesus gives a king—Himself—to His people (Luke 19:37–38).

Third, the themes of seeking and finding stand out as vivid threads throughout these accounts. For example, Mary senses the implied command that she find her cousin Elisabeth, who will offer comfort and understanding to the young bride-to-be; the shepherds seek and then find the infant by following the unusual “sign” from the angel; Simeon and Anna find the child with the aid of the Spirit; and Mary and Joseph seek and then find Jesus teaching in the temple. Later, during His ministry, Jesus recites a series of parables about seeking and finding, which include the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin as well as the prodigal son (see Luke 15:3–32). Moreover, in a dark reversal, Judas finds Jesus at Gethsemane (22:47–48). In the most important scene of this sort, those who go to find Jesus in the tomb are met by the words of an angel: “Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen” (24:5–6). In this light, the one who finds Jesus finds salvation.

Most importantly, Luke’s story of Jesus in the temple brings the focus of his narrative fully onto this extraordinary youth. From this point on, Jesus is not the object of prophecy or adoration but the subject of Luke’s report. In a few deft words, Luke characterizes Jesus’s ministry as one of teaching. The earlier words of the angel to Mary, “he shall be great” and “he shall reign over the house of Jacob” (Luke 1:32–33), are open to wide interpretation. This account tells readers how Jesus will accomplish this end—in the role of a teacher. As the disciples will later be stunned by Jesus’s revelation that He will die (9:22; Mark 8:31), so Mary and Joseph must be surprised at seeing Jesus teach “the doctors” in the temple and then tie this activity to His “Father’s business.” It is no wonder that His mother, His closest observer, “kept all these sayings in her heart.”

In this final story, Jesus is no longer a passive infant but an active youth, yet He is “subject unto” His earthly parents (Luke 2:51). Because of this latter detail, we should not understand this instance as an episode of disobedience or rebellion on Jesus’s part. Rather, it appears that the confusion is due to misunderstanding. Jesus seems to be aware of something that Mary and Joseph are not: He asks, “Wist ye not that I must be about my father’s business?” (2:49). The Greek suggests a positive answer; Mary and Joseph should realize that Jesus is where He ought to be. As a final note, it is perhaps significant that Jesus is found “after three days” (2:46).

In narrating the return of Joseph and Mary to Nazareth, it does not matter whether Luke purposely passes over the story of the flight to Egypt. Rather, we imagine that the reports from the many witnesses of the special events associated with the births of John and Jesus raise dark questions in the minds of some who hear, bringing a few to “seek the young child’s life” (Matthew 2:20). One of Luke’s points seems

to be that in returning to Nazareth, Mary and Joseph will be able to raise this special child far from the halls of power in Jerusalem, out of the gaze of hateful and influential eyes (Matthew 2:19–23).

We cannot leave chapter 2 without a comment on geography. On one level, we are reading a tale of three cities: Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem. The emphasis on place arises with the mention of the three cities and what Jesus does there or what happens to Him in such places. Naturally, Nazareth is the place of Jesus's earthly origin (and that of His parents), of His nurture and that of His siblings, and of His rejection after He teaches in the local synagogue (Luke 4:16–30). Bethlehem, of course, is the prophesied place of Jesus's birth (Micah 5:2) and the place of Herod's infanticide (Matthew 2:16). Here birth and death emphasize one another by their juxtaposition in time, though not in Luke's Gospel because he does not refer to the reprehensible events in Bethlehem, only to Jesus's birth. The Jerusalem connection is important too. In effect, all that has happened beforehand is confirmed in visits to the city. For example, the family comes to Jerusalem for Mary's purification following Jesus's birth (Luke 2:22). While there, Simeon and Anna bear exalted testimony about the infant and His majestic importance (see 2:25–38). In a second scene, Jesus teaches in the temple (2:47; Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 2:46–47). Reversing this order (almost as chiasmus), Jesus will come the last time—significantly, His mother will be in the city as in the earlier instances—in order (1) to teach in the temple and (2) to redeem sinners. Moreover, Jerusalem is the focused destination of Jesus's journeying in the central part of the Gospel,⁷ for He knows that it is to be the place of His death (9:31; 13:33).

Notes

- 1 See 1 Samuel 16:11; 17:15; 2 Samuel 5:2.
- 2 See Luke 9:22; 19:47; 20:46–47; 22:2.
- 3 See Luke 1:3; Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 3:19; Acts 1:1.
- 4 See Luke 1:6; 2:4–5, 22, 24, 27, 39, 42, 51; and so forth.
- 5 See Acts 13:50; 14:2, 19; 17:5, 13, and so forth.
- 6 See Isaiah 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12.
- 7 Luke 9:51, 53; 19:11, 28.

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