



## **Luke 2:1-21**

### **“Raising Questions At Christmas”**

Who is the world’s ruler?  
Who’s invited to the party?  
Is Jesus a Jew?

December 24, 2013 (Christmas Eve)

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### **“Following Christ From City Center!”**

LUKE 2:1-7, 8-20, 21 "RAISING QUESTIONS AT CHRISTMAS"

Red = Echoes Of Roman Imperial Theology

1) vv.1-7 GEOPOLITICAL EVENTS: SIGN OF BIRTH FULFILLED (See prophecy of 1:30-31).

1 It happened IN THOSE DAYS that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus d. 14 AD, (Gk. Sebastos = MAJESTIC)
that ALL the world should be enrolled./ Ps. 87:6, Oikoumene (Roman coins), Census//1:5, Taxes, Enrolled (4x)
2 This was the enrollment before Quirinius was governor of Syria.// (Garland: 118), Augustus (44/42 B.C.-A.D. 14)

3 a And ALL went to be enrolled, each to his own city. Year-long, Acts 5:37 For Hostile Response, Psalm 87:6
4 b And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, 1:27,32,69,2:11
b' which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 1:32, Mic. 5:2 (Place/Lineage)
5 a' to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 80-85 Miles, Not Zealots, Comply
Uprooted, 6 Uses Of All (vv. 1, 3, 9, 18, 19, 20)
6 And it happened that while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. No Late-Night Or Innkeeper
7 And she gave birth to her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, 2:22-24, 23:53, Wisd. Sol. 7:4
and laid him in a manger (i.e. feeding trough, 3x), 9:58, Odd, Lower Of 2-Level House, Is. 1:3(LXX), //13:15
because there was no room (space, topos) for them in the inn/guest quarters. Gk. kataluma = Above Home, //22:11
Brevity, House Filled With Higher Status Family

2) vv.8-20 SHEPHERDS' TREK AND ANGELS' CHORUS. Much Great Art

a) v.8 Shepherds In The Field. Dishonest/Outside Law (b. Sanhedrin 25b), Friend Of Sinners
8 And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, 4:18-19, Marginalized
keeping (the) watches over their flocks by night. Association With David As Shepherd
Humble Birth, Glorious Announcement!

b) vv.9-11 Angelic Message To Shepherds (Emperor Language: Birthday/Benefits).

9 And the angel of the Lord appeared to them, The Invisible World/Glory Intrudes
and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, Is. 9:2, 6, Not In Jerusalem But Here! 1:78
and they were filled with fear. (10) And the angel said to them, Is. 6:1-5 For Fear
"Do not be afraid, 1:13, 30, 1:32-33 (v.11)
for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to ALL the people: //2:30-32
11 for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Christ, the Lord." 1:32-33, 47; 3 Titles, Is. 9:6
Emperor's Birthday: Below (9 B.C.)

c) v.12 Manger Sign Given By Angel. Invitation To Action, Adventure

12 And this will be a sign for you: Prophecy/Fulfillment
you will find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Bringer Of Peace, Not Augustus

d) vv.13-14 Angels Sing The Meaning/Future Of Salvation.

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host (army),
14 praising God and saying (singing), Angels Sing Of Present & Future
1 "Glory to God (Benefit No. 1) //19:38
2 in the highest, Cosmic Glory & Peace From God
2' and on earth Peace = Shalom, Eirene (4 Dimensions)
1' peace among men (those) with whom he is pleased." (Benefit No. 2) Zech. 1:79
(Anthropois eudokias = "men of favor"), 3:22, 12:32, Acts 10:36

c') vv.15-16 Manger Sign Confirmed By Obedient Following. Fulfillment

15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another,
"Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing which has happened (accomplished word),
which the Lord has made known to us." God Keeps His Word
16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.
The Angels Are Truth-Tellers

b') vv.17-19 Angelic Message Shared By Shepherds. Model Evangelists

17 And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning the child;
18 And ALL who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. Testimony, Worship
19 But Mary kept ALL these things (words), pondering them in her heart. //1:66, 2:51b (Reflective)
Full Significance Not Yet Clear, Mary As Thinker

a') v.20 Shepherds In The Field. Model Worshipers

20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for ALL they had heard and seen, Acts 4:20
as it had been told them. Revelation, Spiritual Afterglow! Sinners As Evangelists!

Identity 1') v.21 JEWISH INITIATION: SIGN OF NAMING FULFILLED (See prophecy of 1:30-31).

21 AT THE END OF EIGHT DAYS, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, Obey: Gen. 17:9-14, Lev. 12:3
the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. 1:26-38, Inducted Into Covenant, Parent's Faith

## I. LUKE AND THE PERVASIVE ROMAN IMPERIAL THEOLOGY AND PROPAGANDA.

**Prience Inscription, Augustus Caesar As World Savior, 9 B.C., Birthday Inscription:** “Providence... has brought into the world Augustus and filled him with a hero’s soul for the benefit of mankind. A Savior for us and our descendants, he will make wars cease and order all things well. The epiphany of Caesar has brought to fulfillment past hopes and dreams.”

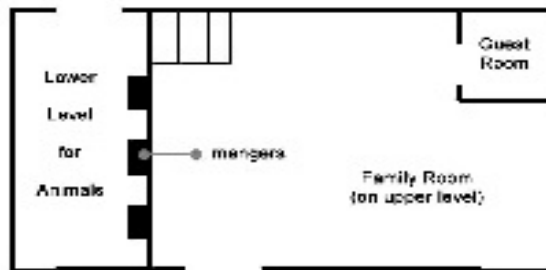
**Myra Inscription:** to the “divine Augustus Caesar, son of a god, imperator of land and sea, the benefactor and savior of the whole world.”

Thus, there is proclaimed on the birthday of Caesar (in these and other inscriptions) the he fulfills ancient hopes, is the focus of divine Providence, is son of God, as *Augustus* is worthy of worship, is titled *Savior*, has an epiphany or manifestation, and brings peace to all the world as the benefactor of all. His birthday (Sept. 23) was later made the beginning of the new year. Luke believes that such claims about Augustus are idolatrous, but in Jesus they are true. Each claims to bring a “gospel about the creation of a peaceful world.” Their means of doing it are not the same. One is through violence and victory, the other through justice and the inbreaking power of God’s kingdom. Jesus gave non-violent resistance. They are rival political and religious claims, then and now. Hitler is not Feuhr (leader); Jesus is!

## II. LUKE AND THE REALITIES OF JEWISH VILLAGES AND CLANS.

<u>Christmas Myths</u>	<u>Luke’s Presentation From First-Century Middle Eastern Culture</u>
1. Lonely journey	Crowded roads, everyone on the move to ancestral towns for census
2. Travel by donkey	Don’t know, likely on foot
3. Late arrival in labor	“And while they were there” implies a more extended stay before labor
4. Family as strangers	Joseph’s ancestral home, many kin, “I am Joseph son of Heli, grandson of Matthat, of the family of David;” hospitality is highly valued in that culture.
5. Mean innkeeper	In house of family members, but not in guest “upper” room ( <i>kataluma</i> , 22:11)
6. Joseph delivers	Village midwife delivers, as was customary in Jewish villages,
7. Rejected at birth	Welcomed at birth, rejected later at death.
8. Manger as wooden cradle	Manger as place cut out in a stone wall at feeding height for sheep, a niche.
9. Born in a cave	Lower level of village house. The guest room was normally on the roof.

Lower level = animals at night  
Upper level = family space  
Roof = Guest Room (*kataluma*)



Reading the text on the basis of Middle Eastern culture, the story falls into place: Joseph and Mary went to the house of relatives. When the time came for the birth, Mary delivered her firstborn and laid him in the trough. In case anyone should ask why these guests were not in the guest room, Luke says, ‘because there was no room in the guest room.’ Jesus is born, not in a palace, not in his family’s own home, not even in the guest room of his relatives’ home, but in the common room of a peasant home in a small town in an out-of-the way corner of the world. Such homes were designed so that the ground floor area just inside the door was used as a place to keep livestock at night. The people in the house lived in an adjacent single room, built a few feet higher. The people would keep it clean by sweeping everything down into the “stable,” and the animals could be easily fed by cutting niches into the edge of the platform that constituted the people’s living space. These niches were the mangers. Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem weeks or days before Jesus’ birth, stayed with relatives, moved down into the stable portion of the house for the delivery, because the guest room (the “inn”) was occupied- probably by other relatives of higher social status. The angels revealed the birth to shepherds before anyone else, for the very reason that shepherds were a socially disreputable group, like those the grown-up Jesus would spend much of his time with. Joseph probably took Mary to Bethlehem not because she needed to be physically present for the census, but because she could have been harmed or killed by fellow Nazarenes incensed by her premature pregnancy (Adapted from Kenneth E. Bailey, “The Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2:7,” *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 4:2:1980).

## A Brief Treatment Of Luke 2:1-21

Luke's so-called *Christmas story*, when v.21 is added, stands in parallel to John the Baptist's birth in 1:57-80. Their conceptions, through different, are parallel (1:5-25// 1:26-38), as are their births and early ministries (3:1-22 // 3:23-4:15). Jesus does not just appear; his is a highly prepared arrival. The surface structure of 2:1-21 is a 9:1 concentric pattern with vv.13-14, the song of the angels, at the center (1, 2a-b-c-d-c'-b'-a', 1'). The outer components 1. (vv.1-7) // 1' (v.21) each contain a major dating, the first about geopolitical events, the second about Jesus' initiation as a Jewish male through circumcision and naming. In both cases prophecy is fulfilled: he is a son born as a Davidid in Bethlehem, and he is called Jesus, the name given to Mary by Gabriel (1:30-31). The central section (2. vv.8--20) is yet a third angelophany (1:5-25, 1:26-38), this time offering revelation to a band of local *unlikelies* (i.e. shepherds) to demonstrate, as later in the gospel, that Jesus is indeed *the friend of sinners*.

A pattern emerges. Gabriel comes and goes on divine errands; Zechariah goes on pilgrimage to the temple and back; Mary goes on a pilgrimage to the Judean hill country and back; the holy family goes on pilgrimage to Bethlehem and back, and now the shepherds go on a pilgrimage to Jesus' birthplace, then back to work. To be caught up in the work of God, travel is required! Except for trips to the Holy Land *to walk where Jesus walked*, Protestants have largely abandoned pilgrimage as a spiritual discipline, but Scripture- and particularly the birth narratives- are full of such. A pilgrimage is a break from routine that puts one in a liminal state, enabling a fresh openness to of God along the way. About every two years I need to leave the U.S. to have my soul *de-toxed* in a mission trip. I go in hope, and come back with a new set of eyes. Away from the props and securities of life, I am forced to stay alert to the approaches of God.

Luke delights to paint the story of Jesus' arrival against the backdrop of the world's pyramid of power. Caesar proposes, but God disposes. The world's true ruler is moved around on a chess board and by providence lands in David's city for his birth. The holy family are not Jewish political radicals, but quietly obedient to the inconveniences of living as an occupied people. Jesus is political in a much larger more lasting sense. He is born among family, tended by village mid-wives. Jesus sleeps in a trough on the lower level of a family house because the guest room on the roof is full of older relatives. He was not rejected but welcomed at birth. Mean inn-keepers and late night arrivals in caves are not part of the story.

Romantic notions of shepherds do not match first century reality. Think *sheep-rustlers* and *unauthorized-grazers* for an accurate picture. It was to working stiffs on the night watch that the Lord's angel appeared reflected in heaven's light. Someone later asks, "And what were you drinking that night?" The telegram from God is that the Messiah has been born close enough for them to find him if they look for the right sign, a wrapped baby in a feed trough. What is ultimately for *all people* starts with *some people*, and those are the shepherds. When the heavens open further, the sky is filled with more luminous creatures, all praising God and singing of the new union between God's glory and human welfare. It is to Jesus (3:22) and his followers (12:32) that the promises are made because it is among them and with him that the new arrangements are being practiced at ground level. The church is God's peace laboratory. When heaven is zipped back shut, the shepherds first convene for a discussion, then go to confirm the sign. Do the sheep go with them? They eventually find the home, get the names of the family, and share what happened on the hillside. Apparently, God cannot keep a secret this good! The confirmation of prophecy is a cause for joy and reflection all around, with Mary portrayed as a deep thinker. On the eighth day Jesus spills his first blood. Whatever is ahead, one thing is clear: Jesus is a Jew.

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## RAISING QUESTIONS AT CHRISTMAS

*“Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing which has happened.”*

The shepherds follow up on angelic revelation.

LUKE 2 : 1 5

If you're ever in a tight spot, one in which bottles and fists are about to fly, there's something you should remember: you can always sing a Christmas carol. Country music star Travis Tritt claims it saved him many a time. Like many who eventually made it, Tritt started on the honky-tonk trail. Many of these establishments are dangerous places where intoxicated fans start fights over the smallest matters. But Tritt found a way to keep the peace in such situations. In an interview he says:

*"Silent Night proved to be my all-time lifesaver. Just when bikers were reaching for pool cues and red necks were heading for the gun rack, I'd start playing *Silent Night*. It could be July; I didn't care. Sometimes they'd start crying, watching me sweat and play Christmas carols."*<sup>1</sup>

Something about Christmas, isn't there? A deep longing in the center of your chest for a better you and a better world. Joy in the face of a child and perhaps a memory of when you were that child, a hope that one day all small fights and big wars will be silenced by the sounds of *Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright...* When Tritt sang to save his life, he also stirred a memory, a deep one.

It was a tough world in which Jesus was born. His Jewish homeland lost its freedom sixty years earlier when the Romans marched in with heavy boots and even heavier taxation through client kings. Infant mortality was high and the average life span not much beyond thirty. Many young women died in childbirth, but village midwives like the ones in Bethlehem did the best they could, and with this one they were successful: a healthy baby Jesus, a healthy momma Mary. It was not in the privacy of a cave that Jesus was born

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<sup>1</sup> PreachingToday.com.

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but in a village home.<sup>2</sup> So many older family were already present there was no room left in the guest quarters, likely a room on the roof. Our translation of the word as *inn* is confusing since it implies a free-standing public accommodation, which it was not. There was no neon sign flashing *No Vacancy*. A better translation that fits with what we know of Jewish villages is *guest quarters*. There was no late night arrival, no mean innkeeper shuffling them out back, no last-minute arrangements, just members of the house and lineage David as the recipients of village hospitality.<sup>3</sup> Finding a place was not a problem.

So when the time came, the men left while mothers and mid-wives sat Mary on the birthing stool and coached her through the fright of her first delivery.<sup>4</sup> She and Joseph has been there a while, as noted in the phrase *And while they were there the time came for her to be delivered....* One of the feeding troughs cut into the floor and lined with fresh straw made a good bed. The lower level was where the animals came in at night; the upper terrance was where the family cooked and lived and slept; the guest room was already occupied by older family members of higher status, and in that world age mattered. The home was full of people for the census, and Mary delivered in the living room. The custom was to wrap the newborn in strips of cloth for security and warmth. Jesus was not rejected at his birth but welcomed into his noble clan, the house and lineage of David. No glow, no halo, just one more messy birth full of danger and promise. So absolutely ordinary. His father Joseph supplied the legal lineage, and far away the decree of Caesar Augustus supplied the motivation to get them to David's original city, not Jerusalem but Bethlehem.

To hold an Empire together requires a publicity campaign. One way to do that is by starting a new *worship-the-Emperor* religion complete with billboards; in those days they were called *inscriptions*, and so all over that end of the world Caesar's birthday of September 23 carved in stone with all sorts of fantastic claims: his birth means good news for everyone; he is the fulfillment of ancient hopes and dreams; he is the source of all good

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<sup>2</sup> *Protoevangelium of James*, 17-19. From this 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christian fiction come the following traditions: Joseph as an older widower, a late arrival, the birth in a cave, the midwife's surprise that Mary remains a virgin after Jesus' birth. This legendary material eventually makes its way into Roman Catholic teaching on Mary and highlights the difference with Protestants over the proper foundations for doctrinal teaching.

<sup>3</sup> For the fascinating research, see Dr. Kenneth Bailey, "The Manger and the Inn," *Bible and Spade*, Fall 2007.

<sup>4</sup> On birthing practices, see Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of the Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 276-277.

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things as our Savior, and to him we pay ultimate. Since his adopted father Julius Caesar has been declared divine, then Augustus, conveniently, is *the Son of God*. Luke acknowledged that God used Caesar's decree to get Jesus to the right town, but he also wanted to poke fun at Rome's marketing department by apply to the infant Jesus all the language applied to Caesar which, when you think of it, is a dangerous political challenge so you do it discretely for insiders only. Rome brings peace and gets rich through violence and subjugation. Jesus' brings another kind of peace, peace with God which has power to creep out and change everyone. So who is the world's rightful ruler? One who conquers with a sword, or one who conquers with a cross? What a writer Luke is, to put the world's most powerful despot and a powerless newborn in the same paragraph in order to ask, Who most impresses you because the one you honor is the one you follow? When Jesus is born, the Marine band play *Hail to the Chief* because Luke wants us to ask the question about where power lies. Jesus, the one who will grow up to announce God's kingdom and for it be crucified by cronies of Caesar, is the world's rightful ruler, and one day he will displace the others, so the best advice is to line up with him now, even if it means living out of step with everything around you. Our faith is a political statement about who has the character to rule us unruly human beings, and it's not any of us!

But who's God going to tell first? I'm glad you asked. The problem with the starlight shepherds of Bethlehem's fields is that they've gotten so much good press we've forgotten their reputation at the time. Don't think noble shepherds, think rustlers and hustlers, sheep stealers and free grazing on other people's land. Disreputable, not allowed to offer testimony in court. And this was not the first but the third shift. It's not a job you aspired to but perhaps the only one you could get. And why them? Because from the start Jesus is the *friend of sinners*, so he starts at the bottom of the pyramid of respectability and status. There they were, bored in the middle of the night, when God unzipped heaven and blasted them with light. The revelation came to a bunch of unlikelies as the Lord's top messenger mocked imperial propaganda by tracing an inscription across the heavens:

“Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people: for to you is born this day in the city of David a *Savior* (title No. 1), *Christ* (title No. 2), the *Lord* (title No. 3), and to see him you don't go to Rome but just down the hill to your own back yard where you'll find a newborn boy wrapped in cloths- which is nothing new- but lying in a feed trough- which is odd indeed. It's how you'll spot him.”

There was more than one of them is good because a vision given to a lone shepherd would be mocked with the words, “Angels never appear to the likes of us.” But when all

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on the graveyard shift see it, there's no denying it. It was a group revelation, like many of the appearances of the risen Jesus. The last word they hear before the vision fades is heaven's mass choir singing about the connection between what glorifies God and what's good for people. So what do you do then? You go check it out. Divine revelation is an invitation to a journey. They find it as told and with great exuberance- I imagine- tell of their encounter with the heavenly host. A delivery room turns into a testimony meeting with the shepherd's surprise arrival. Don't you love it? Angels appearing to the third shift at the packing plant; men leaving their work and knives to walk around on old Greenwood mill village till they find the right house, not with one front door but two, the one with lamps flickering in the night. And when they knock, they're welcomed in. They told the story of that night the rest of their lives. I wonder if Luke interviewed several. Talk with those who saw the risen Jesus, talk with those who heard the angels sing. Why not if available? You can talk to people whose lives Jesus has changed today. They're all around you; his witnesses are everywhere. Jesus is the *friend of sinners* and *friend of the poor*, he hangs out with those with addictions and police records, those with no job or else jobs no one else wants. And he remains the friend of whoever gives him their losses and their pains and their shame as he gives to them a new life in the right direction.

Which brings to our final question. Is Jesus a Jew? I love the story Ethelyn Pearson tell about her 5-year-old daughter who was helping set the table one Sunday near Christmas. She stopped for a moment and announced, "Jesus was a Swede."

More than a little surprised by the outburst, her mother corrected her, "Oh, no, dear, Jesus was Jewish. I'll read it to you from the Bible after lunch

In deep thought, she laid out the silverware. Then her face brightened. "Mommy, I can prove it! We sang about in Sunday school this morning, 'Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus lay down *his Swede head*.'"

She was right, and she was wrong. The Son of God assumed humanity in Jesus, and this means Jesus is Swedish and Nigerian and Kazak, whatever your DNA mix and skin tone may be. His birth embraces all humanity and all the cultures we create. But his tribe is Jewish, and on the eighth day he was cut and bled in circumcision as he entered the covenant of the people who flow from Abraham's faith and to whom we owe nearly all that is best about being human. One holy God of love and justice, Ten Commandments to live by, the prophets of Israel to call us back, and finally the holy family. The world's true ruler, the one who will finally vanquish all his enemies, is the Jew Jesus, and the very best news is that he is the friend, the very best friend, of all us sinners, because only he has the credentials to do what needs to be done to bring us home to God. You are all welcome at his manger and his table this evening. Start worshiping and following Jesus tonight!

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