

## Luke 2, The Shepherds' Encounter

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Paul writes of the coming of the Lord Jesus,

2Co 8:9 ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.

Luke 2 shows us the reality behind that description. How unlike the birth of an ordinary king was that of our Savior!

1. His parents were not royalty, but peasants.
2. His country was not free, but under a powerful foreign ruler who taxed his people.
3. He was born, not in a palace, but in a stable.

Luke highlights this contrast by building his story around two announcements (Table 1, chart). The first is made by Caesar Augustus (v. 1), the most powerful earthly ruler at the turn of the era. The second is made by the angel of the Lord and the heavenly host, the court of heaven (vv. 9-14). The first announcement shows

Announcement	2:1-2, Caesar's Decree	2:8-14, Angels' Announcement
Result: people move	2:3-7 Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem	2:15-20, The shepherds, to Bethlehem and beyond

Table 1: Parallels in Luke 2

how lowly our Lord was at his birth was; the second glorifies him. The first sends a peasant family on a difficult journey in meager circumstances. The second sends people out to tell others about the birth of the Messiah. Luke's contrast places the authority of heaven in direct confrontation with earthly rulers, and thus introduces the Lord's claim to be king.

### 1-2: Caesar's Announcement

**Luk 2:1 And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. 2 (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)**--The Greek word actually means "enrolled," and while such an action might lead to a tax, it could also be a statistical enterprise to assess the demographics of the empire. The worldly nature of this enterprise is seen from 1 Samuel 24, where God was displeased that David undertook a census of this sort.

### 3-7: The Results of Caesar's Announcement

**3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) 5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.**--Luke use of "city of David" for Bethlehem is curious. In the OT, the title appears for the first time when David, as king, conquers Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 5 (chart),

2Sa 5:7 Nevertheless David took the strong hold of Zion: the same is **the city of David**.

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Most of its 44 instances describe the burials of the kings of the Davidic dynasty, e.g.,

1Ki 2:10 So David slept with his fathers, and was buried in the city of David.

1Ki 11:43 And Solomon slept with his fathers, and was buried in the city of David his father:

1Ki 14:31 And Rehoboam slept with his fathers, and was buried with his fathers in the city of David.

The one instance that Luke might have in mind takes place after David has been anointed king, but before he assumes the throne. He is a member of Saul's court, but has reason to suspect Saul's motives toward him, and arranges a test with Jonathan.

1Sa 20:5 And David said unto Jonathan, Behold, to morrow is the new moon, and I should not fail to sit with the king at meat: but let me go, that I may hide myself in the field unto the third day at even. 6 If thy father at all miss me, then say, David earnestly asked leave of me that he might run to **Bethlehem his city**: for there is a yearly sacrifice there for all the family.

Bethlehem is "the city of David" only between his anointing as king and his enthronement, which is exactly the position of the Messiah in this chapter.

**6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. 7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.**--The word for "inn" (καταλυμα, Strong 2646) is not specific to a rented lodging, but can refer to any temporary dwelling.<sup>1</sup> It might be an inn, but Luke's usage gives us pause. He uses the word only here and in the account of the last supper, paralleled by the only other NT use of the word, at Mark 14:14 (chart):

Luk 22:11 And ye shall say unto the goodman of the house, The Master saith unto thee, Where is the **guestchamber**, where I shall eat the passover with my disciples?

The ease with which the Lord gains entrance suggests that the upper room is not part of a commercial establishment, but in the home of one of the Lord's followers.

Luke does talk about an inn, in the parable of the good samaritan, but using a different word:

Luk 10:33 But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, 34 And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

In Luke 10:33, "inn" represents παραδοχειαν (Strong 3829), not καταλυμα.

We are accustomed to thinking that it was an impersonal inn-keeper who put Joseph and Mary out in the stable, but it may well have been a family member whose guest room was already occupied. If Joseph had been a prosperous member of the family, no doubt arrangements could have been made, but he came from Nazareth, a despised backwater:

Joh 1:46 And Nathanael said unto him, **Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?**

Joseph is "the country cousin," upon whom his Judaeans look down. With many visitors, the guestroom fills up quickly, and they relegate him to the stable.

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<sup>1</sup> See notes

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By using the word in these two settings, Luke brackets our Lord's life with emphases on his poverty. Neither at his birth, nor approaching his sacrifice, did he have a home of his own. He was dependent on the hospitality of others, and sometimes even that failed.

Thus the first cycle of announcement and travel emphasizes the lowliness of our Lord.

### 8-14, God's Announcement

The angel's announcement recalls v. 1 (Table 2, chart). In both cases a ruling authority (Caesar vs. the Lord) sends a message (decree vs. good tidings) to a universal group about an event, which in one case is onerous, but in the other a blessing.

Luk 2:1 And it came to pass in those days, that there went out <b>a decree</b> from <b>Caesar Augustus</b> , that <b>all the world</b> should be <b>taxed</b> .	Luk 2:9 And, lo, <b>the angel of the Lord</b> came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. 10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you <b>good tidings of great joy</b> , which shall be to <b>all the people</b> . 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David <b>a Saviour</b> , which is Christ the Lord.
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Table 2: Two Decrees in Luke 2

**8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.**--One hint to the demographics of these shepherds comes from the OT (chart):

1Sa 16:11 And Samuel said unto Jesse, Are here all thy children? And he said, There remaineth yet **the youngest**, and, behold, he keepeth the sheep. And Samuel said unto Jesse, Send and fetch him: for we will not sit down till he come hither.

Watching sheep is not a complicated task, and could be assigned to a relatively young child.<sup>2</sup> David was likely between 10 and 15 years of age at this point. The band of Christmas shepherds might well have included children no older than some of ours.

In view of the royal overtones of the first part of the chapter, Luke may mean us to interpret the shepherds and the angels in terms of court. The angels, "the heavenly host," are the courtiers in heaven's throne room—recall the scene in 1 Kings 22,

1Ki 22:19 And he said, Hear thou therefore the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all **the host of heaven** standing by him on his right hand and on his left.

But while on earth, the Lord's attendants were people like these shepherds, peasant folk. From this perspective, the Lord's heavenly attendants are introducing him to his earthly court.

**9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them,**--Often in the OT, "the angel of the Lord" is an appearance of the Lord Jesus. But this is not always the case; in Hag 1:13 the title (translated in the KJV as "the Lord's messenger") is applied to Haggai, and in Luke 1:26, six months before the conception of our Lord by Mary, it is applied to Gabriel (cf. 1:36).<sup>3</sup>

**and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.**--Fear in the presence of God or his representatives is ubiquitous in Scripture. It goes back to Gen. 3:10, the first instance of fear in the Bible, when Adam and Eve hid themselves from God because they

<sup>2</sup> Anita and I saw pre-teen boys caring for sheep in Jerusalem. Du Xiaofeng tells me that the Chinese word for "shepherd" means "young person, adolescent."

<sup>3</sup> See notes

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were afraid. Fear results from our sin. The shepherds are afraid in the face of the heavenly visitors because they, like all honest people, are conscious of their own sin. Perhaps these angels have come to punish them.

**10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not:**--Not only are they not bringing judgment, but in fact they are announcing the solution to the problem of man's fear of God in every age, a way for man's sin to be forgiven.

**for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy,**--"Bring good tidings" is one verb, which we know elsewhere in the NT as "evangelize," "preach the gospel." When we preach the gospel, we are carrying on the message of Christmas.

**which shall be to all [the] people.**--This phrase is commonly read as describing the preaching of the gospel to all nations: "the good tidings that I bring you are for everybody." This is a true statement. We must carry the good news to everybody. But the presence of the article (not reflected in the KJV) indicates that at this point the Jewish nation is in focus. As in Matthew, the gospel comes to the Jew first, and only later to the Gentiles.

Contrast the blessing of Simeon later in the chapter:

Luk 2:30 For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, 31 Which thou hast prepared before the face of **all [the] people[s]**; 32 A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of **thy people** Israel.

He refers to "all the peoples" (plural), and goes on to enumerate the two categories: the Gentiles, and Israel (whom he, like the angel, calls by the singular "people").

**11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David**—It is interesting that the child is said to be born, not to its father, but to the shepherds. Compare Luke 1:13, when the angel says to Zacharias: "she shall bear to you a son." He is the one who has been awaiting the birth. Even today we talk about "proud papa," reflecting the joy that a man finds in having a child.

But though the Lord Jesus is God's son, he is never described as being born "to God." Rather, he is born "to you," to his people. The angel is referring to Isaiah's promise,

Isa 9:6 For **unto us a child is born**, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

We are here at the crux of John 3:16, "God ... gave his only begotten son." The child who should have been for his pleasure, is for our great joy. He is God's gift to us, to save us from our sin.

**a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.**--These three titles emphasize three different aspects of our Lord's person and work.

*Savior:* We are sinful, and under God's judgment. He is our Savior because he takes our sin on himself, bears our punishment in our place, and gives us his own righteousness.

*Christ:* This is the Greek form of the Hebrew "Messiah," meaning anointed one. People were anointed to three offices in the OT: prophet, priest, and king. The Lord Jesus fills all three:

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prophet, declaring the word of God to us; priest, securing our forgiveness from God; and king, ruling us and receiving our homage.

*the Lord*: In the LXX, the name YHWH, the personal name of God. The promised Messiah, the one who will save us from our sin, is also God.

**12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.**--The sign indicates both the age and location of the baby. Swaddling clothes immobilized the hands and legs of the baby to keep it calm, and would not be useful once a child is ready to start crawling around. So this must be a newborn baby. In addition, it would be very unusual to find a newborn in a manger—but in fact the shepherds would have more access to the town's stables than to the houses, where most babies might be found.

**13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.**--The declaration is chiasmic (Table 3, chart). The heavenly host expands the scope of the decree made by the angel of the Lord. Now the blessing is not just to the land of Israel, but "upon earth"; it is not just for "the people," but "among men" in general.

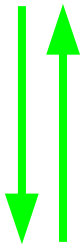

<i>Gift</i>	Glory		Peace		Good will
<i>Location</i>	In the highest		And upon earth		
<i>Recipients</i>	To God				Among men

Table 3: Chiasm in Luke 2:13

The angels are announcing something that has been accomplished, not something that will happen. In the light of this, what does "on earth peace, among men good will" mean?

- Does it refer to God's peace and good will toward his OT saints? That would not be news. God was always gracious and favorable to his people in the OT.
- Does it refer to the peace with God that will be made available when Christ dies and rises again? That is still in the future.
- I suggest the following meaning: There is now, for the first time since Adam, one on earth and among men who is at peace with God, who enjoys God's good will. Cf. Luke 3:22, "Thou art my beloved Son, in thee I am *well pleased*" (ευδοκεω; the verbal cognate of the noun "good will" ευδοκία in 2:14). We enjoy peace and favor only as we are "in him," and then we become "accepted in the beloved," Eph. 1:6.

## 15-20, The Results of God's Announcement

We can gain practical lessons by observing the behavior of the shepherds when they had met the Lord.

**15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another,**--They discussed *with one another* what the Lord had revealed to them. This simple interaction is a fundamental dynamic among God's people. Mal 3:16 tells us of the Lord's pleasure when "they that loved the Lord spake often one to another."

**Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.**--The shepherds made a *decision*: "Let us now go." The angels told them the gospel, the good news, but they had to make a decision. So we can enjoy forgiveness of sin and peace with God only if we decide to receive the Lord Jesus.

**16 And they came with haste,**--Their decision led to *prompt action*. It is not enough to decide to turn from our sin and receive Christ. We must actually do so. We must ask him to forgive us and help us to serve him.

**and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.**--God *rewarded* their obedience. God has promised, "You shall seek for me, and you shall find me, when you seek for me with all your heart." "He who comes to me, I will in no way cast out." "Whosoever will, let him come and drink of the water of life freely."

**17 And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.**--They *bore testimony* to what they had seen. When we have received the Lord Jesus, we should tell others about our faith in him.

Luke concludes with three responses to the events: by those who heard the shepherds, by Mary, and by the shepherds themselves. It is worth comparing the verbs that Luke uses in each case.

**18 And all they that heard it wondered θαυμάζω at those things which were told them by the shepherds.**--Some "heard" what the shepherds said and "wondered." Wondering θαυμάζω expresses surprise. It was the response of the relatives of Zacharias when he gave his son a name otherwise unknown in the family (Luke 1:64), and also of the crowds at Pentecost when they heard Peter and the other disciples speaking different languages (Acts 2:7). Both verbs are aorists, simply stating the fact. Throughout the gospels, people "heard" what the Lord said and "wondered" ("marveled") at his words and deeds, but with varied degrees of commitment.

**19 But Mary kept all these things, and pondered συμβάλλω them in her heart.**--Mary didn't just hear what the shepherds reported to her; she "kept" all these things. And she went beyond surprise to "ponder" them, turn them over in her mind, meditate on them. Neither of these verbs is an aorist; the first is imperfect, the second a present participle. These verb forms indicate a durative aspect, something that continues through time. Luke is contrasting the dramatic but momentary response of the many with the continuing, deliberate response of Mary. She is like the godly person of Psalm 1, "meditating day and night."

**20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.**--The final response of the shepherds is "glorifying and praising God." Both are present participles, again emphasizing ongoing activity. This is the natural and appropriate response to inward contemplation of the truth. It shows itself in worship and adoration of the Lord.



## Notes

### The Inn

The noun καταλυμα appears only three times in the NT, twice in Luke (discussed in the text) and once in Mark (parallel to Luke's second instance). In the LXX, it is not a technical term for "inn," but refers to any temporary lodging.

It might refer to rented lodging: Moses stayed in one on his way back to Egypt (Exod. 4:24). LXX also uses the noun in this sense in Jer 14:8: O the hope of Israel, the saviour thereof in time of trouble, why shouldst thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man that turneth aside **to tarry for a night** [LXX εις καταλυμα]? The cognate verb καταλυω describes the stops of Joseph's brothers on their way back from Egypt to Canaan (Gen. 42:27; 43:21).

Notably, it describes God's dwelling with his people: the tabernacle in 2 Sam 7:6 (KJV "tent") and 1 Chr 17:5 ("tabernacle"). It describes the "parlor" where Samuel entertained Saul before anointing him (1 Samuel 9:22), which was located at the "high place" (v. 19)--perhaps a reference to a sanctuary?

It describes a lion's den in Jer 25:38 (LXX 32:38).

We should give precedence to Luke's usage.

### "Angel of the Lord" in the NT

The "angel of the LORD" מלאך יהוה is a common figure in the OT, often identified with the Lord, and commonly understood to be a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ. However, the same Greek expression αγγελος κυριου that translates the OT expression in the LXX also appears in the NT, even after the coming of the Lord Jesus: Matt. 1:20, 24; 2:13, 19; Lk. 1:11; 2:9; Acts 7:30; 12:7, 23. The expression is regularly anarthrous in Greek unless there has been a previous appearance of the angel in the context: Gen 16:7 vs. 8,9,10,11; Jud 2:1 vs. 4; 13:3 vs. 13, '6, 18, 20, 21; Matt 1:20 vs. 24. This is a translator's interpretation in the OT, since the Hebrew construction is definite by means of the proper name and so cannot take the article, and sometimes the LXX translator makes it definite at the first reference: Jud 5:23; Zech 1:5; 3:12.

Though often used of God in the OT, the title can be applied to others. One identified simply as "an angel" in 1 K 19:5 becomes ο αγγελος κυριου in v. 7. And the title can be applied to a human prophet:

Hag 1:13 Then spake Haggai the LORD'S messenger מלאך יהוה in the LORD'S message unto the people, saying, I am with you, saith the LORD.

An important reference in this regard is Luke 1:11, where the one who appears to Zechariah in the temple is called αγγελος κυριου but later identifies himself (v. 19) as Gabriel. Importantly, this event appears before the conception of John the Baptist, who was born six months before Jesus (Luke 1:26, 36). So this is pre-incarnate use of the title, and shows that such uses are not exclusively messianic.

So while the one whom God sends in the OT is often identified with himself, the title can be applied more broadly to any messenger sent by the Lord.

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