



THE SEASON OF
A D V E N T

The Forerunner and His Lord

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I. BIRTH OF JOHN (LUKE 1:57-79)

1. In Judea, Elizabeth's full time had come, and John was delivered. Her neighbors and relatives were the first of many to rejoice at the birth of this special child.¹
2. In Jewish tradition the naming of the child took place on the eighth day—when the circumcision was done. This is still an accepted practice amongst many practicing Jews today. It is at this time that he would also be named, and a blessing would be prayed over him for wellbeing.²
 - a. As soon as Zacharias confirmed Elizabeth's choice of John, his tongue was loosed.
3. Zacharias's Prophecy
 - a. Typically considered a song, Zacharias's utterance bears many similarities to the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55). Although he speaks of the unique relationship his son will have with the Coming One (cf. 1:13–17, 76–80), the main focus of the Benedictus is upon the Messiah (1:68–75). The message of God's faithfulness is central to the song as Zacharias "celebrates the fulfillment of divine promises associated with two central figures of scripture, David and Abraham."³

II. BETHLEHEM (LUKE 2:1-5)

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. ³So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. ⁴Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with Child. Luke 2:1–5

A. Going to Judea

1. Pregnancy
 - a. Six months passed and Mary had endured the natural dynamics of pregnancy as well as the ridicule of those dwelling in Nazareth.
 - b. Knowing she had never been with a man, she still felt the moving and kicking of a human Baby within her. What were her thoughts as her stomach grew larger and larger? The wonder must have increased as her body swelled with this mysterious Person within.
2. Call to Bethlehem ⁴
 - a. The decree to travel to Bethlehem was possibly a relief for the couple. It likely gave them some reprieve from the scandal that surrounded them in Nazareth.
 - b. At the very least, it was a three-day journey between Nazareth and the city of David.

B. Bethlehem

1. Lying approximately 4.5 miles southwest of Jerusalem, Bethlehem was a town rich with history. It was there that the story of Ruth unfolded, that David was born and anointed King of Israel (1 Sam. 16:1), and where the well of water that David longed for resided (2 Sam. 23:15–16).

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting." Micah 5:2

2. Alfred Edersheim offers a rich depiction of the final stage of the couple's journey:

A sense of rest and peace must, almost unconsciously, have crept over the travelers when at last they reached the rich fields that surrounded the ancient 'House of Bread,' and, passing through the valley which, like an amphitheatre, sweeps up to the twin heights along which Bethlehem stretches (2,704 feet above the sea), ascended through the terraced vineyards and gardens. Winter though it was, the green and silvery foliage of the olive might, even at that season, mingle with the pale pink of the almond—nature's 'early waker'—and with the darker coloring of the opening peach buds. The chaste beauty and sweet quiet of the place would recall memories of Boaz, of Jesse, and of David.⁵

III. A SAVIOR IS BORN (LUKE 2:6-7)

The omnipotent, in one instant, made Himself breakable. He who had been Spirit became pierceable. He who was larger than the universe became an embryo. And He who sustains the world with a word chose to be dependent upon the nourishment of a young girl.⁶

A. The Nativity

1. Many scenes in the life of Jesus grip the imagination but few as forcefully as the Nativity of our Lord. To the redeemed soul, the picture of Joseph and his betrothed in their mean and lowly estate is seen as grand; their weakness incites trembling. Pressed to its bounds, the mind at last surrenders to the Creator of beauty. While words may compel one to kneel beside the manger in adoration, only speechless love may pick up the Babe and feel the immeasurable weight of His tiny frame.
2. The birth of Christ is a deep well of the knowledge of God from which we must learn to drink. In the obscurity of Bethlehem is hidden the God of humble love. In the cooing of this Child, the Son of God's love for humanity is unveiled.

B. The Christ Event (Luke 2:6-7)

So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. ⁷And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Luke 2:6–7

1. Eastern vs. Western Tradition

- The traditional events that surround the Christmas story are well known to most Christians. The shepherds in a field, wise men coming with gifts and a Baby born in a manger because there was no room in the inn, are all familiar scenes to us. The only problem is the more familiar we become with the biblical story, the more difficult it is for us to see it outside of the way we have always understood it.
- Western tradition has painted a very clean and somewhat euphoric picture of the birth narrative. For many it is nothing more than a story that has no real substance or meaning.
- Eastern tradition is quite different. The scene and details convey a very rich narrative that portrays not only a time of heartache for Mary and Joseph, but also one of deep wonder and amazement.

2. No Room in the Inn

- Sadly, Luke offers only a piece of information in describing this most holy of nights. As Mary and Joseph made their way into the city after this wearisome journey, the need for accommodations pressed upon them and there was surprisingly no room for them when they arrived.
- The word “inn” found here is not the local “Best Eastern.” The Greek word used, *kátálumá* (κατάλυμα), refers to “lodging” of some kind, very likely an upper or a lower room.⁷ The word, *pándōkēōn* (πανδοχεῖον), is the Greek word Luke uses to describe a place for travelers to stay as shown in the parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25-37). It was likely a house where the relatives of Joseph were staying.
- One can only wonder why there was no room. It is important to see that Joseph would not be the only one from his family that would have traveled to Bethlehem to take part in the census. In addition, he would have most likely had many family members that lived in the city, since this was his tribe’s gathering place. Their inability to find housing means family members rejected them—the result of Mary’s pregnancy with a Child that was not Joseph’s.
- From everyone’s perspective Jesus was a mamzer (one of illegitimate birth). Deut. 23:2 states that a mamzer is not welcome in the assembly of the Lord for ten generations.⁸
- Thus, a stable was their place of rest when Mary’s days reached completion. The narrative gives the impression that some short time of unknown duration may have passed in Bethlehem before the hour when her labor commenced.
- Tradition holds that a cave where the Church of the Nativity now sits was the actual location of the event. Regardless of the credibility of the site,⁹ caves were commonly used for that purpose in the Ancient Near East and thus the idea retains plausibility.

C. The Great Mystery

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

1. YHWH Incarnate

- The raw, terrible glory over the mercy seat between the golden cherubim atop the ark of the covenant now lies between two frightened Jewish parents in a stable. As one author notes, “The human birth of the Son of God is a mystery in the strict theological sense: a divinely revealed reality that little ones can understand but not even learned ones can comprehend.”¹⁰
- The One who shook Sinai now shivers in the night air, wrapped in swaddling clothes instead of a flaming cloud of darkness. He who spoke at the dawn of time and framed the heavens is now a screaming Newborn whose cries ascend into the starry sky beneath which He lays.

2. His Heart Displayed

- So many features of this event ought to shock us. The fruit of Mary’s womb would rule all the nations of the earth forever, and He chose to enter the world in a stable. The first home of the King of kings was a stone trough from which animals ate and drank.
- What kind of King with absolute authority decides to come into this earth as a ‘helpless’ little Baby with not even a room or a bed? What does it reveal about His heart?
- This is the very essence of the angel’s words to the shepherd. The “sign” spoken of was a Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Though our contemporary context is quite different from first-century Israel, even then babies were not found lying in a place where cattle fed.

1 It was common for friends, neighbors, and relatives to participate in the weeklong festivities that occurred after the naming of a newborn (cf. Shmuel Safrai, “Naming John the Baptist,” *Jerusalem Perspective* 2.8 [May, 1989], 2).

2 Something rather fascinating is that the practice was not mentioned in written form as occurring amongst Jews during the Second Temple Period until the seventh century A.D. This means that Luke was documenting a Jewish practice that would not be revealed to the world outside of the gospel account for another six hundred years (cf. Safrai, “Naming John,” 2).

3 Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 59.

4 Many jump over the important fact that Luke mentions a census that was called by Quirinius. Josephus mentions the census and highlights how it was a deliberate act of communication to show that Rome was imposing their direct authority in the region of Judea (cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.1–2). Herod Archelaus was currently ethnarch in the land, but it would not be long before he was exiled to Gaul and procurators and prefects appointed by Rome would come to power (e.g., Pontus Pilate). This census was a stepping-stone for that to be established. The fact that Luke mentions this not only gives us a dating of about 5 B.C., but it also is meant to portray a significant event in the land as a violent and volatile culture that began to arise. Judas of Gamla, mentioned in Acts 5:37, arose during this time and began a rebellion in an attempt to prevent Rome from possessing this type of power over Gods chosen people. Judas believed the status of the census amounted to slavery (*Antiquities* 18.4). He would die in this rebellion, but his philosophy would become the driving force that seethed beneath the surface of Judaism and eventually burst forth in 66 A.D. with a national revolt against Rome that interestingly was led by Judas’s descendants.

5 Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 129.

6 Max Lucado, *God Came Near* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1987), 25.

7 Cf. BDAG, *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT*, “κατάλυμα,” 521.

8 As an interesting side note, David was the tenth generation in a line that was begun by a mamzer named Perez, who was the son of Judah and Tamar. Therefore, Ruth lists ten generations at the end of her book: to communicate that David is a rightful heir to the throne and will have the privilege to stand in the house of the Lord.

9 Of all the holy sites commemorated by the Church in Israel this may be one of the most authentic claims.

10 John Seward, *Cradle of Redeeming Love: The Theology of the Christmas Mystery* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 47.