



# BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96 (95); Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

## Glory to God in highest heaven and peace on earth

Luke 2:1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Luke 2:8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 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 heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!"

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The birth stories are found only in Matthew and Luke, as is well known. Like all Gospel stories, they are written in the light of the resurrection. Like the Prologue of John, they serve to provide a Christological key to the identity of Jesus in the rest of the narrative. Again, like the Prologue, they establish a significant level of continuity with the revelation to

God's first chosen people.

Both Matthew and Luke write in dialogue with patterns and personalities from the Old Testament and, to a high degree, the writing is determined by those earlier models. While there is indeed a historical core (the Holy Family, Nazareth, Bethlehem, Jerusalem), nevertheless these accounts are "parabolic" in nature rather than history as we would understand it today.

### OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

I was nursed with care in swaddling cloths. (Wis 7:4)

The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. (Is 1:3)

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 origin is from of old, from ancient days. (Mic 5:2).

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Is 9:6)

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." (Is 52:7)

### KIND OF WRITING

In the context of the culture, this is "historical" writing, mirroring the conventions and practices of the time. In such cases, the writers use commonplaces, to express the significance of the person being written about. The goal is to proclaim the present, living Jesus and not merely to present the past.

### Thought for the day

The birth of any child is always a source of wonder, when we feel nearer the mystery of life and closer to God. In the birth of Jesus, we see our God made visible and so are caught up in love of the God we cannot see. The thrilling reality of the Word made flesh is both gift and call. In the words of the first letter of John, Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:11). We are challenged to love the God we cannot see in the neighbour we can see. There can be no separation of these two realities: to love God is to love your neighbour and to love your neighbour is to love God.

### Prayer

Today love itself became flesh like one of us, so that you, O God, might see and love in us what you see and love in him. May we might see you and love you in our brothers and sisters.

Two backgrounds needs to be considered, Jewish and Greco-Roman.

(i) *Midrashic* commentary was a form of filling in the gaps, answering questions that the Scripture itself did not make clear. Accordingly, we might consider certain of the apocryphal writings under the same rubric.

The Greek works of Philo and Josephus (esp. Jewish Antiquities) also expand the biblical text, fill in gaps, allegorise, and otherwise interpret the Bible in ways reminiscent of the rabbis. Many of the traditions that these Jews quote in their interpretations of Jewish Scripture find parallels in rabbinic *midrash*.

Neither Mt 1-2 nor Lk 1-2 is strictly *midrash*, a type of rewriting and filling out of biblical narratives, found at the time. However, the strong links to biblical models and motifs lend a kind of *midrashic* air to the writing.

(ii) In Greco-Roman culture, the birth of a ruler is sometimes celebrated with a list of his (future) benefit to all humanity.

E.g. the Priene Calendar Inscription:

*Since providence, which has divinely disposed our lives, having employed zeal and ardour, has arranged the most perfect culmination for life by producing Augustus, whom for the benefit of mankind she has filled with excellence, as if she had granted him as a saviour for us and our descendants, a saviour who brought war to an end and set all things in peaceful order, and since with his appearance Caesar exceeded the hopes of all those who had received good news before us, not only surpass those who had been benefactors before him, but not even leaving any hope of surpassing him for those who are to come in the future, and since the beginning of the good news on his account for the world was the birthday of a god...*

#### NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

“You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. (Acts 2:22–24)

#### ST PAUL

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, to all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom 1:1–7)

#### BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 1** Augustus was the grand-nephew and adopted son of Caesar, and therefore *dei filius*. On his death in 14 ad, Tiberius became emperor. There was no worldwide census in the time of Augustus. Luke is mixing up a census of Judaea only, which took place before the death of Archelaus in 6 ad and not before the death of Herod in 4 bc. The

solemn beginning resembles 3:1. Augustus was regarded as the saviour of the world and the bringer of the *pax romana*. Luke challenges that especially in v.14.

**Verse 2** Publius Sulpicius Quirinius was a real historical figure, from Lanuvio near Castelgandolfo, who was made legate of Syria in 6 ad with the special task of restructuring Judaea as a Roman province.

**Verse 3** There is no evidence for such a disruptive practice.

**Verse 4** City of David would normally be taken to Jerusalem; Bethlehem was in Judaea.

**Verse 5** This is a quick summary of Luke 1:26–38.

**Verse 6** Cf. Gen 25:24 and Lk 1:57.

**Verse 7** “Firstborn” meant a particular status in the Jewish Law, without prejudice to other children being born. The old word “swaddle” is a direct echo of Wis 7:4 (where the whole context is interesting). The reference to the manger was filled out in the iconographic tradition to cause an unkind echo of Is 1:3. It can mean a variety of things: a private home, a room, an inn, a space in a stable.

**Verse 8** The shepherd echoes the David tradition. This has also been used to date the actual birth of Jesus to between March and November, when shepherds would be out in the fields. Shepherds were considered outcasts. Bethlehem: cf. Mic 4–5, esp. 5:2 (above).

**Verse 9** Glory: cf. Luke 2:9, 14, 32; 4:6; 9:26, 31–32; 12:27; 14:10; 17:18; 19:38; 21:27; 24:26. Shone: cf. the conversion of St Paul in Acts 26:13.

**Verse 10** “Do not be afraid” is a commonplace of angelic appearances. The long English expression “bring good news” is a single verb in Greek, “I gospel you”.

**Verse 11** “Today” is a favourite expression of Luke. Cf. Luke 2:11; 4:21; 5:26; 12:28; 13:32–33; 19:5, 9; 22:34, 61; 23:43. Saviour is unexpectedly rare in the Gospels and Acts (0-0-2-1+2.Cf. Luke 1:47; 2:11; John 4:42; Acts 5:31; 13:23). Christ the Lord (common in Paul) is rare in the Gospels and Acts (0-0-2-0+1).

**Verse 12** Jesus, not Augustus, is the saviour. Cf. Is 9:6 and 52:7.

**Verse 13** Luke underlines praise of God: 0-0-6-0.

**Verse 14** **Glory** is the visible manifestation of divine majesty and a strong contrast with the new-born baby. Highest heavens, i.e. in to the further reaches of heaven, so to speak.

#### POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Bring to mind a time when the birth of a child made a huge impact on you. Use the experience to meditate upon the incarnation.

2. There is great joy in the Gospel tonight. Have you even felt such spontaneous, exultant happiness? A prayer of praise and thanksgiving.

#### PRAYER

Good and gracious God, on this holy night you gave us your Son, the Lord of the universe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, the Saviour of all, lying in a manger. On this holy night draw us into the mystery of your love. Join our voices with the heavenly host, that we may sing your glory on high.

Give us a place among the shepherds, that we may find the one for whom we have waited, Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, in the splendour of eternal light, God for ever and ever. Amen.

#### FIRST READING

*Isaiah 9:2–7*

What do we hope for? This passage from the prophet Isaiah helps us to recognise the longings of the human heart in a grand progression of metaphors: darkness, harvest, slavery, battle, birth, kingdom and justice.

#### SECOND READING

*Titus 2:11–14*

This reading has been chosen chiefly perhaps for the opening sentence. What is being offered? Who is being addressed? How should we act, therefore?

#### GOSPEL

*Luke 2:1–14*

The heart of the Christmas proclamation is here. And yet, familiar readings can be hard “to hear again for the first time”! There is a big contrast between the powerful figures of the Roman Empire and the humble birth of the Son of God.