



# The Birth of Jesus Christ: Bethlehem, The Manger & Shepherds

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The birth of Jesus Christ is rich with fulfilled prophecy and detail that carries deeper meaning when studied closely.

Luke 2:1-20 provides a historical account of Joseph and Mary's journey to Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus Christ, and the visit of the shepherds in the surrounding fields.

In this study, the aim is to draw attention to key details within the passage that go beyond the familiar nativity scene.

## The Decree & Bethlehem

Luke begins the account with Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor, who issued a decree that all the world should be taxed, setting in motion the events that brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem.

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And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. — Luke 2:1

Other translations render this as 'census' or 'registered.' Since enrolment was typically with a view to taxation, the best understanding is that a lawful decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the world was to be registered, likely for taxation purposes.

To be registered properly, everyone was to go into his own city, and so Joseph went up with Mary to Bethlehem, being his ancestral town.

Bethlehem sits at approximately 809 metres (2,654 feet) above sea level in the hill country, so when Luke says they "went up" to Bethlehem, it is a literal ascent in elevation, adding physical strain to the journey, especially with Mary being heavily pregnant and near the time of delivery.

### **Bethlehem and Prophecy**

Bethlehem was also called the city of David, and in 1 Samuel 16 it is where David was anointed to be king of Israel.

Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brethren: and the Spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward. So Samuel rose up, and went to Ramah. — 1 Samuel 16:13

The prophet Micah also records in 5:2 that in Bethlehem would come the ruler in Israel.

But thou, Beth-lehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting. — Micah 5:2

These passages show that Bethlehem was foretold as the birthplace of the Messiah.

### **The Birth**

Now the time has come for Jesus to be delivered, and likely due to the number of people who had travelled, there was no room in the inn.

Instead, Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes, which would have been thin cloth, wrapped tightly so that the baby Jesus would stay warm and his limbs be supported.

Jesus was then placed in a manger, which would not have been a glamorous setting like what is often seen in nativity scenes, but a feeding trough or stall for animals. This was because there was no room in the inn, or guest room.

## **The Shepherds and the Angelic Announcement**

From verse 8 we read that shepherds were nearby tending to their sheep when an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them.

God consistently uses the imagery of a shepherd throughout Scripture. David, a shepherd, speaks of the Lord as his shepherd. Christ later reveals Himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep.

In Luke 2, it is fitting that the first to receive the announcement of His birth are shepherds in the fields.

As with other divine encounters, those present were afraid.

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. — Luke 2:10-11

The angel brings good tidings of great joy. The phrase “bring you good tidings” comes from the Greek word *euangelizō*, meaning to announce or proclaim good news. From this we get *euangelion*, meaning “good news” or “gospel.” This is an announcement that brings great joy.

“Which shall be to all people” is spoken in the immediate context of Israel, as the Messiah is the promised Saviour of the house of Israel, but it points forward to the wider revelation of salvation extending to the Gentiles.

The angel’s message is that the Saviour has come from the city of David, and will be found in a manger, which is given as a sign to the shepherds.

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This aligns with Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah, such as Isaiah 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. — Isaiah 9:6

### **The Heavenly Host**

Once the message has been given, Luke records that there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God (Luke 2:13-14).

This shows the immediate heavenly response to the birth of Christ. Later in Revelation, the heavenly host are again seen praising the Lamb, now seated on the throne (Revelation 5:11-12).

### **The Shepherds' Response**

The shepherds made haste and went to find Mary, Joseph, and the baby. When they had seen him, they made known abroad what had been told them concerning this child, and all who heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart (Luke 2:19). This shows a quiet, internal reflection on what God was doing.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.