



The Synoptic Gospels: A Journey Into the Kingdom

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*Volume I:
From Bethlehem to
the River Jordan*



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THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS: A JOURNEY INTO THE KINGDOM: VOLUME I: FROM BETHLEHEM TO THE RIVER JORDAN.
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From Nazareth to Bethlehem

Matthew's infancy narrative has little to say about the events immediately surrounding the birth of Jesus. Its larger themes are found preceding and following the birth itself, covering a vast expanse of time and distance. A wealth of interpretive material is found in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus; Joseph's dreams; the author's mystical links to Old Testament prophecy; and the coming of the Magi. Each offers a lens through which to view the unfolding story of the Messiah. At the same time, Herod's evil-doing is embedded in the material, as circumstances foreshadow Matthew's "conflict of kingdoms" theme. Later in this chapter, we will see just how these events begin to play themselves out.

For now, we will return to a more tranquil, even pastoral, setting in the Gospel According to Saint Luke. Here, the events describe, more immediately, the birth of Jesus. Even in their sparsity, they tell us something about what his ministry and mission will ultimately encompass. Luke builds upon the

foundation he has already laid in the *Magnificat* and the *Benedictus*. He marshals pieces of the story that draw attention toward a powerful concern for the poor and the outcast. By this process, Luke, like Matthew, foreshadows much of the rest of his work.

† LUKE 2:1–7 The Census and the Journey

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph 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. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And 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.

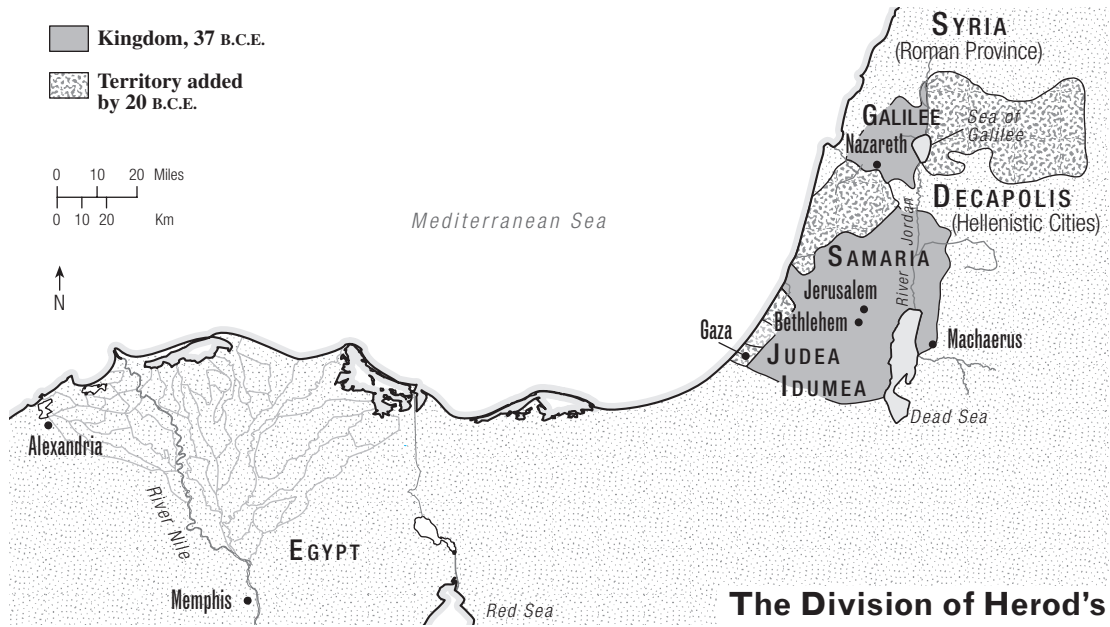
Here are some thoughts about the biblical text to consider while reviewing the commentary that follows:

1. Luke provides points of reference concerning the time and circumstances of Jesus' birth. What might be his purpose?
2. The situation that confronts Mary and Joseph is difficult. Is Luke trying to tell his audience something when making this point?



As we have already seen, in each passage of his birth narrative, Luke tells the careful and informed reader much more than meets the eye. To better understand his narrative, it helps to limit the number of verses we consider at a time. It also helps to integrate what we have examined minutely with the rest of the work, so that it becomes part of a more unified whole.

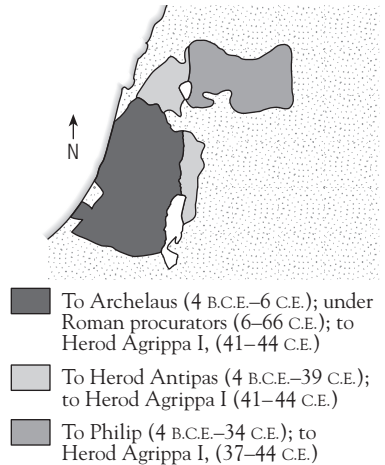
The Kingdom of Herod the Great (37–4 B.C.E.)



The Division of Herod's Kingdom after his Death (4 B.C.E.)

An Occasion for a Trip to Bethlehem

Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph's trip to Bethlehem was required by a Roman registration. This type of mandate was more than a census for administrative purposes; it also provided tax-collecting data. Rome periodically used such means to fund its vast empire, which Luke calls "the world." Yet, historical records dating back to the days of the empire itself have presented serious, even insurmountable, problems to those scholars who have attempted to date the birth of Jesus by using such secular tools.¹ The point of Luke's story, though, is not to write a detailed



¹Professor R. Alan Culpepper, who is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, is the dean of the Mercer University School of Theology. He outlines these problems at pages 62-63 in his commentary on Luke in *The New Interpreter's Bible* series.

history of Roman bureaucracies, but an “orderly account” in which he proclaims a gospel: good news of God’s saving action. The historical accuracy of the details he gives are not as critical to the birth narrative as is their theological meaning. But it would still be a mistake to rush straight to a solely theological interpretation without first exploring what the historical setting has to tell us, and recognizing in the process the shortcomings that arise when taking an entirely historical approach to the Bible.

First, let us consider the broad historical context. Augustus, having emerged victorious from the struggles to control the vast expanse of Rome’s domain, reigned over the empire from 27 B.C. to 14 A.D. Quirinius, a comparatively minor figure to whom the pericope also makes reference, became governor of Syria in 6 A.D. The great administrative province of Syria included Nazareth of Galilee, which was in the northern part of Palestine, and Bethlehem of Judea, which was in the south. The year 6 A.D., then, serves as one reference point from which to attempt to date the birth of Jesus.²

There are other reference points, as well. Earlier, Luke told us that his narrative begins “in the days of King Herod,” when Gabriel appeared to Zechariah in the temple. Within a few months of this appearance, both Elizabeth and Mary became pregnant. Herod’s reign ended in 4 B.C. Matthew’s story also places the birth of Jesus during the time Herod was king.

These historical markings, grouped together, have created a puzzling problem for scholars. It is impossible that Jesus was born both while Herod was king of Judea, and while Quirinius was governor of Syria, as there was a ten-year lapse between the end of one’s administrative period and the beginning of the other’s.³

To resolve this issue, scholars tend to give the greater nod of historical accuracy where Matthew and one of Luke’s reference points agree, dating the birth of Jesus at around 4 B.C.,

²The traditional Christian calendar was devised in 525 A.D. by a Roman abbot. In it, the Church designated its estimate of the year Jesus was born as “1 A.D.”—the first year of our Lord. It has since been determined that this early estimate was erroneous. The estimates described in this chapter more closely approximate when Jesus’ birth occurred, given what later scholarship has disclosed about the Roman and Jewish political situations which mark the time around his birth, his death, and the gospel accounts of his age at the beginning of his public ministry.

³Some scholars attempt to resolve the discrepancy by dating Luke’s reference to Quirinius at an earlier time during which he had served Rome in the province of Syria as viceroy, rather than as governor. However, that approach does not “correct” other historical problems, and therefore merely substitutes one error for another. Either way, the gospel account contains a factual misapprehension.

Yet, this observation does not suggest, much less require, that we toss Luke’s birth narrative into the dustbin of religious history on the grounds of technical error. Rather, it requires us to examine the texts as works that are not *primarily* historical. Such references have, at most, a secondary significance. They are intended to put us in some general chronological time frame in order to follow the narrative. *Primarily*, the purposes of the birth narratives are to tell us of something remarkable, and to invite us to draw some theological inferences about Jesus’ identity from the circumstances they describe.

very late in the reign of Herod the Great. As Luke and Matthew both attest to the birth taking place during that reign, it is that time period which draws our attention and casts light on the story of Jesus. We see that, from the beginning, the shadows of Romans and Herodians are present, projecting danger over the gospel stories. God's action, even in their presence, is of greater importance than the details about exactly when the story begins.

Having established that complete factual accuracy is less important to Luke than theological meaning, we now need to address other historical problems with his birth narrative so we can read how his story develops with more of a literary than a literal eye. The Gospel According to Saint Luke contains our only record of a census having been taken in Syria during Augustus' reign. Such censuses became fairly regular events in Syria and other provinces ten to twenty years after the birth of Jesus. But Luke, writing as much as 100 years after the birth, composes a setting that includes a Roman census. Over the years preceding the composition of his gospel, the *L* tradition likely developed a certain set of ideas around Jesus' birth being in Bethlehem that eventually came down to Luke in some form. In this book, the "why" of that Bethlehem tradition is discussed later in connection with Matthew's story of the visit of the wise men. The "how" of it is found, at least for Luke, here in the story of the census.

The logistics of the Roman census were different from Luke's description. For instance, people were not sent to ancestral homes to be registered. That process would create an administrative nightmare, involving travel to places one's family might have occupied only in the distant past. The productive time lost during such travels would not advance the empire's agenda. It would add to administrative burdens while diminishing the agricultural and commercial activity that supported the economy. That, in turn, would impair the tax base Rome was trying to enhance. Moreover, requiring such travels would pose risks to the *Pax Romana* as people resentfully moved away from the peaceable routines of life in their own locales, and toward places that might be charged with rebellious fervor grounded in religion and nationalism. Places like Jerusalem, for instance. Not surprisingly, historical records reflect that subjects of the empire registered in their current communities, rather than their ancestral lands.

One aspect of the registration process that may have influenced the oral tradition and Luke's composition is that it could, and did, involve travel of some distance in certain circumstances. When the people to be counted were tradesmen living in one place and working in another, they were required to return to their own homes to be registered. In this situation, both accuracy (getting people counted in their own home regions where their taxes were to be paid) and efficiency (requiring only a relatively small group to travel) balanced out and served to maximize revenue to the Imperial treasury. We might even speculate that Joseph fell in this camp. Perhaps, as a carpenter, he left his home in Bethlehem of Judea to

work in the large metropolitan area of Sepphoris of Galilee, just a few miles from Nazareth. If so, he would have been required to return home to Bethlehem to participate in the census. But again, this idea is speculation.⁴

Yet, even with these historical problems, the story remains pertinent. We are studying faith documents, not trial transcripts. And in his Prologue, Luke has told Theophilus that he relied on the oral tradition to provide an orderly account, not a tedious report, of the grand story he imparts.

Luke's version also tells us something about the shadow Rome casts; its primary purpose is to serve itself. Even the *idea* of a pregnant woman and her intended being forced to travel, by foot at worst and donkey at best, over an eighty-some mile distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem, simply for purposes of satisfying the requirements of a bureaucracy bent on collecting money from the poor, is an indictment of the Roman power structure. Luke portrays Rome in its might as freely making people, such as Mary and Joseph, comply with the priorities of an occupying force, regardless of risk or cost to the peasantry. That arrogance will be brought to a sharp point in Holy Week.

1. Luke tells a powerful story, where the geopolitical forces converge to put Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem at the time of the child's birth. We will soon see characters in Matthew speaking of a prophecy that involves the Messiah coming from Bethlehem. If literally true, does the convergence of events leading to Jesus Messiah's birth in Bethlehem say something about God's will, power, and sovereignty? If figuratively true, but not historically accurate, does the story still say the same thing? How have you seen God's hand at work in your life, including the places you have traveled?

⁴Matthew's birth narrative seems *partially consistent* with this idea. Matthew has Joseph living in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth, only later moving to Nazareth. If this were the case, theoretically, Joseph could have been working and staying temporarily in Nazareth earlier, at the time of a census, but been required to return to Bethlehem, his actual home, to register. That would also explain why, when the time came, Matthew's Joseph determined to move the family to Nazareth, instead of some other place. Yet, Matthew would be *inconsistent* with Luke's story to some extent as well. Matthew has no tradition of a journey to Bethlehem to be taxed, and no textual suggestion of a Nazareth residence prior to the birth of Jesus. Moreover, other chronological issues resist being reconciled. Matthew has Joseph wed Mary shortly after being directed to do so in a dream. The marriage is clearly before the birth of the child. Luke, however, at least implies they were merely engaged at the time of the birth.

No matter how we view the two versions, we cannot package them neatly together. Studying Scripture bears little resemblance to a controlled laboratory experiment. It is a little messier—like life itself.

2. In this segment, we see the political and economic priorities of an empire brought to bear for no greater purpose than its self-preservation. Does advancement of that agenda nonetheless serve the purposes of the Kingdom of God, at least indirectly? If so, what does that reality say about the relationship between our worldly striving and God's higher purpose? Can you think of times when meeting a secular requirement opened a spiritual door?



† LUKE 2:5–20 The Birth of Jesus

⁵[Joseph] went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And 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.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them,

"Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"¹⁴Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another,

"Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Let us first ponder the following:

1. These words are so familiar. We read them each Christmas and hear them recited in children's pageants. Consider rereading them, and see if anything new comes to mind.
2. The shepherds were terrified. Why?
3. The first words of the angel are, "Do not be afraid." In Scripture, angels speak words such as these time and again. What message remains for us, 2,000 years later?

An Old Story

There once was a child named David keeping the family sheep around Bethlehem of Judea. While he was away in the fields, a man named Samuel visited David's father, Jesse. Samuel was not just any man; he was a prophet, and judge over the Israelites. Samuel did not visit Jesse to pass the time of day with idle talk. He was there for a solemn, wonderful, and secretive purpose. He had come to anoint a future king who would replace the one that had fallen out of favor with Yahweh, the God of his people.

Samuel insisted on meeting each of Jesse's sons. Guided by the Spirit, he passed by the strong and tall older brothers. Finally, he settled on young David, handsome, ruddy and bright eyed—David, who had so little hope of being tapped by the prophet that he had been left in the fields near Bethlehem, tending the sheep, while his brothers were presented to Samuel. In the end, David was summoned. And it was young David that Samuel anointed. He became the shepherd who God raised up to lead his sheep, the people of Israel, to glory.⁵

⁵See 1 Samuel 16.

One shepherd was regarded in this manner 1,000 years before Jesus was born. If we leap over that span, and two more millennia as well, we arrive in our modern culture. We now regard shepherds (romantically, perhaps) as simple, humble, appealing folk with good, solid, salt-of-the-earth values. It is a favorable impression, albeit a different one than David left.

But if we focus on either the Davidic or the modern picture, it would lead us in the wrong direction when trying to understand this section of Luke's gospel. To Luke's contemporaries, living 1,000 years after David and nearly 2,000 years before us, the shepherds would not have enjoyed any sort of favorable reputation.

The God of the Lowly

In Luke's time, Israelite shepherds were virtual outcasts. They were ceremonially unclean because their job did not allow them to observe those standards of ritual purity which the power structure considered central to Jewish religious observance in the first century C.E.⁶ For instance, if a sheep strayed on the Sabbath, might the shepherd be compelled to follow it, and so breach the regulations prohibiting work on that day? If a sheep came in contact with something "unclean," might the shepherd be defiled in retrieving it? Moreover, the ethics of the shepherds' vocation were questioned. They were frequently suspected of grazing their sheep on others' land. They were considered low-class, no-count scoundrels. We might compare them, at best, to day laborers on the fringes of American cities, working when they must in order to get by. At worst, they were more like petty criminals.

What is Luke telling us by having the birth of the Messiah announced to people such as these? As so often occurs in Luke, God identifies with, and reveals himself to, the simple, the outcast, the poor, the downtrodden. It is not the respectable people who receive the first news of the birth of the Messiah, but the reviled.



⁶We will study this purity system throughout this series and examine its sharp contrast to the early Jesus movement. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not a purity system, with first, second, and lower-class tiers of citizens. It is good news of inclusion, where filthy Gentiles and other sinners are radically deemed acceptable to God despite their "sins" of genetics, environment, and behavior. They are recipients of a grace that abolishes religious ideas of virtue and vice, and embraces them in God's reconciling forgiveness and love.

A New Story

In my own church, we are challenged by a mission involving society's "unclean"—like shepherds of our day. We provide worship space for a homeless congregation, charging nominal rent, which is set in order to make our participation in that ministry more than simply a "handout." The worshiping community that gathers there is called the Church of the Advocate. Another parish pays the lion's share of compensation for the clergy who serve it. The Church of the Advocate is ultimately part of the greater Diocesan community and ministry.⁷

With some exceptions, our congregation does not know exactly how to approach these differently and difficultly situated people. It is much easier to minister to them, by providing dollars, than with them, by providing more personal contact and including them as ministers in our own mission. Yet, we take little steps in the direction of relationship. How will the faith community called the Church of the Advocate affect its members? How will it affect the broader community of Episcopalians and other Christians in Western North Carolina?

To Luke, it is clear that people such as these, people who were "living in the fields" (in the words of chapter 2, verse 8), are central participants in the gospel story. The shepherds are entrusted with the message of the coming of the Messiah. They proclaim it to others, and are the first evangelists.

When telling of the announcement to the shepherds, Luke makes some subtle points. There will be a "sign," the angel proclaims. We might expect that the promised sign of the Messiah would be the appearance of the heavenly host in the sky. Yet, these angels do not claim that role, instead saying that the sign the shepherds will "find [is] a child wrapped in bands of cloth"—"swaddling clothes" according to the King James Version—and "lying in a manger." Unlike receiving angelic visitations, the act of clothing an infant in this sort of garb was utterly *unremarkable*; it was the way most mothers of the time and place wrapped their newborns. In this "sign" we see humility on the occasion of the Savior's entry into the world. And it is that humility, not the choir of angels, toward which the shepherds must look for a

⁷I will also allow a footnote to brag on Judith Whelchel, who was ordained in my parish and later became the first vicar of the Church of the Advocate. Her vision and energy led to the formal founding of this worshiping community, which continues to be a vibrant ministry, even after she moved on to other callings.

sign. If we wish to find the presence of God in the world, we need to seek the small, the weak, the unremarkable, the ordinary.

And finally, there is the “where” of Jesus’ birth to consider. Scholars are uncertain about the intended use of the word “inn” in this context. The place where there was no room may have been an area of someone’s personal home, which was typically rented to travelers. The place may have been one where peasants could seek shelter while in transit, but happened to be occupied on this particular night. Either way, there is no room in the inn.

We are left with a phrase that has borne a powerful image throughout Church history: the closing of our hearts and lives to God. Instead of finding rest in the best—or even the most ordinary—of places, the Messiah finds it in the lowest: a trough, located in some crude stable or cave, where animals feed. His parents are strangers in the land. His attendants, marginalized characters that the culture considers unclean. His country, a place at a shabby fringe of the mighty Roman Empire.

1. If you envision the birth of the Messiah being announced first to the outcasts of society, do you gain a new perspective on Luke’s nativity? On how God regards those we look down upon? Are there ways we can live our lives that help us overcome our prejudices?
2. Mary is said to treasure the words spoken to her and to ponder these matters in her heart. Is this an abiding image of Mary? We will later see her questioning the way Jesus lives out his mission. How does that later image fit with this early one?
3. The shepherds are explicitly depicted as following the angel’s directive, and in proclaiming the good news they have been told. What on earth is God doing, selecting such poor role models as evangelists? Doesn’t he know that he can’t entrust the “good news of great joy” to people who wouldn’t be invited even to a reception honoring a local luminary, much less a universal one? Doesn’t God know he can’t rely on people who would not be caught dead sporting some first-century equivalent of the bumper sticker: “Morals Matter, Character Counts”? And what does all this mean to you?

