

THE BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST

CHRISTMAS

GOD’S SOVEREIGN POWER MANIFEST IN THE BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn”.

(Luke 2: 1-7)

In December of every year we remember the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is not that Christ's birth really took place on December 25, so many centuries ago. We remember the *fact*, not the *day* as such, and the church celebrated the fact on December 25 already since the fourth century. It is not the intention here to deal with the reasons why this date was chosen, and whether it was done rightly or wrongly.

We may indeed celebrate the birth of Christ. We should be reminded of what the angel said to the shepherds in the night when Christ was born, "Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy" (Luke 2: 10). It *is* a celebration, isn't it? Is the birth of Christ not the central event of history? Does it not mean for the church of all ages a time of great rejoicing?

But is there not also in Christ's birth the element of humiliation and suffering? Yes, there is, and we will not overlook it. But the main emphasis on this day must be on the joy and gratitude which God prepares for us and asks of us because of this great and mighty wonder! It is a birth which has world-wide, eternal significance for peoples everywhere.

You see, this is the *context* in which Luke describes the birth of the Lord Jesus. He gives us a very sober and simple account, but there is throughout the description of the events an underlying sense of a joy of great magnitude. Luke, who wanted to give an accurate description of the facts, sees the wider *historical* context and meaning of this birth, and realizes how it will come to affect all the world. When Jesus is born, then the great Son of David, the long-awaited Messiah, appears in the flesh on the scene of world history. Here is the Redeemer of the world, the King of kings, the Son of God Who became man, and that fact must be proclaimed and is being proclaimed throughout the world. That is why Luke follows up His description of the Gospel with the book of Acts, in which we read how the Gospel of Jesus the Lord reaches Rome.

Rome. The centre of the empire. Luke 2 begins with Rome, and the book of Acts ends with Rome, where Paul is preaching the Gospel openly and unhindered. We may celebrate Christmas, indeed, when we see it in this wider and beautiful context.

I may summarize the contents of Luke 2: 1-7 as follows: God shows His sovereign power in the blessed birth of His Son Jesus Christ. Two main aspects will have our attention. First, we note how an imperial decree serves a heavenly purpose. Secondly, we see how an obscure beginning serves a glorious end.

AUGUSTUS AND QUIRINIUS

Luke begins the story of our Lord's birth by giving us a specific historical setting. Verses 1 and 2 state: "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world was to be enrolled. This was the first enrolment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria."

We find here the names of two important figures: the emperor Augustus, and the governor Quirinius, a keen and honoured Roman general and diplomat. Two

men of great power and fame. These were the ones who had the authority and the power to make the laws and enforce them in no uncertain terms. They are two representatives of the supreme and central authority of the vast Roman empire. And immediately the question arises, what influence can the birth of a Jewish infant in distant Bethlehem have with respect to these great power-brokers, Augustus and Quirinius?

We should pay close attention to these two persons, so that we know why Luke mentions them. The first, Augustus, whose real name was Octavianus, was a grand-nephew of the almost legendary Julius Caesar. Octavianus had managed to end the civil wars among the Roman factions and unite the empire under one throne. He came to power approximately 30 years before Christ was born and ruled until A.D.14, covering a span of 44 years as emperor. This was certainly no small feat.

In the year 27 B.C., he took the title “Augustus,” which means: the mighty one or the elevated one. Augustus did so for a very specific reason. He wanted to assume total, almost godly power over the entire empire. In order to create an aura of divinity around the emperor and to establish his power as almighty, this title functioned excellently! Augustus presented himself as the god-king, the one destined by the deities of Rome to rule the entire world. Imperial decrees were treated as orders coming almost from the gods themselves. Here lies the beginning of the emperor-worship which would later become a main cause for Christian martyrdom.

To be sure, Caesar Augustus really tried to live up to his name. He united the empire under a solid structure of Roman law, and set up a smooth imperial organization. There was law and order, a common currency, a good system of roads and transportation, and a flourishing world economy. Augustus was an autocratic despot, shrewd and tough, but revered by many.

He also followed a careful foreign policy in the lands under Roman occupation. Mostly he let local rulers govern over their own people, as long as they submitted to him and paid proper tribute. So, for example, the land of Israel was governed by the family of Herod the Great. The Roman garrisons intervened only when the local authorities could not keep things under control, but then they acted swiftly and without mercy.

At this time the general area of Palestine was under the supervision of Quirinius, who had his residence in Antioch. Quirinius had been commander-in-chief of the Roman forces in that area already in the year 9 B.C., and later officially became governor. He was the man immediately and directly responsible for law and order in Palestine.

It is important to know that the Middle East was one of the most difficult areas for the Romans to control and govern. There were many zealots who constantly rebelled against Roman authority, and one cause of these rebellions was the severe Roman taxation. Judea was not a highly desired posting for a Roman

diplomat. Many governors could not handle the population and the problems, and their terms in Palestine were generally short.

But Quirinius is known as a man of great efficiency and organizational talents. Shrewd and ruthless, he managed to enforce the policies of Rome. Quirinius was the real power-broker in the area, not king Herod, who often had problems with the emperor.

Why elaborate on these two characters? So that we may see whom and what the Lord Jesus faced when He had come into the flesh. The dynamic duo of Augustus and Quirinius was virtually invincible. It seemed that the political scene had been carved in stone, never to be changed, certainly not by the birth of child who claimed to be of the house and lineage of David. Augustus did not know of or reckon with the counsel of the Lord most high. He did what pleased him and whatever furthered the cause of his empire.

AN IMPERIAL DECREE

For we read that “in those days” (namely, after John the Baptist was born), “a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled.” Let us call it a “census.” Everyone was to be properly registered.

The purpose of this enrolment or census is clear. Augustus needed money to run his massive empire, and money is raised through taxation. In order to determine the amount of taxes from each region, everyone had to be registered, filing his income or net worth, so that a suitable tax amount could be determined. Therefore an imperial decree was issued that everyone was to be registered for taxation purposes. Who could oppose it?

We read in verse 3 that “all went to be enrolled, each to his own city.” Everyone had to go to his place of birth to be registered there. Now this rule may not have functioned throughout the empire, but it was necessary especially in the land of Israel. There are some simple reasons for this.

First, many Jews were scattered about, not only in Palestine, but also throughout the empire, and it was hard to determine their net worth, unless they went to their own villages and towns. Secondly, many Jews, though living elsewhere, still had an inheritance or land in their area of birth, and this could only be sorted out when everyone was in the right place at the right time. Someone’s real net worth in Israel was determined within the framework of the family inheritance. So this measure was put in place, and a decree issued: everyone must go to his own city.

Augustus did not care that this measure caused much hardship for many families. He did not consider the upheaval and displacement a significant factor. He simply gave the command, an imperial decree of the highest order, and woe to anyone who disobeyed. We can imagine that especially the Jews, who considered themselves a free nation under God, were incensed at this imperial decree. They also hated the taxes. Remember how they later asked Jesus whether it was lawful to

pay tax to Caesar? Because of its connection with taxation they hated the census even more. Many Jews tried to avoid it, and some zealots even attempted armed resistance. But to no avail. The imperial decree stood and would be fully enforced.

A HEAVENLY PURPOSE

This decree, issued in Rome, also affected Joseph and Mary, living in Nazareth. We read in verse 4, “And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David.” Joseph’s ancestral area was Bethlehem in Judea, so that is where he, according to the imperial decree had to report for the census.

We do not know whether Joseph and Mary had ever lived in Bethlehem before. Nor do we know how or why Joseph wound up in Galilee, in Nazareth, so far away from his home turf. It does seem a bit odd, doesn’t it, that he should leave his ancestral territory. Many explainers suggest that Joseph and others of the “house of David” had left the area of Bethlehem because it was too dangerous for them to live there. The Romans as well as King Herod were much afraid of any competing claims to the throne of Israel. To be a known descendent of David, perhaps even an heir to the throne, could mean being arrested and executed. Therefore, perhaps, the remainder of David’s descendants had fled to the far north, to Galilee (see also Matthew 3: 22).

But now Joseph is forced to return to Bethlehem. The imperial decree issued in far-away Rome affects even a poor carpenter in little Nazareth. When the emperor decrees, people move. But notice in what triumphant terms Luke describes the reason for Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem, verse 4: “because he was of the house and lineage of David.” House and lineage! He not only belonged to the “royal family” generally, he was directly in line to the throne particularly! The line to the throne of David went via Joseph.

We know that the great Son of David, the Heir of the royal house, had to be born in David’s city. Thus his rightful claim to the throne of David would be even more clearly established. And that is the real reason behind Joseph’s trip to Bethlehem. The imperial decree serves a *heavenly purpose*! The whole empire is set in motion, and the emperor in Rome has his own motives for this, but God’s purpose is: to have the Son of David born in the city of David! Augustus and Quirinius have no idea of the fact that they are really subject to the sovereign power of Almighty God and are fulfilling His purpose.

GOD’S EDICT

We therefore see in these verses a clear antithesis and a mighty claim, which had sounded forth many centuries before in Psalm 2, by David: “O peoples, listen to the LORD’s *decree*. . . : ‘Thou art My Son, I have begotten thee. . .’. Take heed, O rulers of the earth, and hear; Be wise, O kings, and let His *edict* warn you” (from the rhymed version).

God's sovereign decree and His heavenly edict supersede the imperial decree from Rome. Mighty men are unwittingly serving the purpose of Almighty God. That is why we can say: on Christmas, God shows His sovereign power. Not Caesar determines where people go, but God does. He moves rulers and nations so that everyone is in the place which He has determined in His eternal counsel of redemption!

Here also the real *stage* is set: the battle will ultimately be waged over the whole world. God will set His kingdom over against the empire of Rome. Christ will be victorious from Bethlehem on, where He is born as Son of David. Luke specifically places the birth of Christ in this wide historical context, and proclaims in that way: here the Saviour of the *world* is preparing to be born; here, in His own city. Luke 2 is not the endearing story of the birth of a poor child with royal aspirations, but the mighty proclamation of the official arrival of the King of kings. Here the battle lines are drawn with a decree from heaven, "Thou art my Son, I have begotten Thee / This very day. To Thee I'll give the nations" (Psalm 2, rhymed version) The Almighty God shows His sovereign power in the birth of His Son there where He wants Him to be born.

We see this more often in the history of salvation. Time and again worldly rulers and mighty powers are used by God to serve His purpose. The Pharaoh of Egypt, the kings of Babel and Persia, and the emperors of Rome could do only one thing: serve the purpose that God has set. Is it any different today? No, it is even truer today. For Christ has been born, and died, and arose from the dead to ascend into the glory of heaven. Seated at the Father's right hand He, as Head of His church, governs all things.

AN OBSCURE BEGINNING

Luke shows the heavenly purpose in Jesus' birth at Bethlehem. At the same time, he does not hide the *obscure beginning* which is made in the birth of this child.

The word "obscure" means something that is not clear. It is covered, and its real impact is not yet seen. The true meaning of the event is not readily understood. Light is needed to make clear what is really happening here.

The question has been raised why *Mary* went along with Joseph to Bethlehem. Officially, in the case of a census, the wives did not have to come along but could stay at home. Did Joseph know of God's underlying purpose? Surely he did know from Mary the words of the angel Gabriel that the child would receive "the throne of His father, David" (Luke 1:32). Furthermore, Joseph himself had been addressed in his dream as "son of David" (Matthew 1: 20). So surely Joseph must have made some connection between the birth of the child and the city of David.

Maybe this is why he took Mary along. Some explainers suggest, however, that the real reason was her condition. She is called here by Luke, "Mary, his betrothed, who was with child." From Luke's phrasing it is not clear whether

Joseph and Mary were at this point officially married. Matthew's description gives us the sense that this was indeed the case. In any event, we do get the impression that it would not take long anymore for the birth to take place, and it would not do to leave Mary behind to have her child without Joseph being present. She might be open to ridicule and danger. Joseph and Mary will have talked about the matter: to go or not to go.

It could be a dangerous journey. Although the distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem is not much more than 100 kilometers, the road goes through difficult territory. The journey, by foot, would be long and slow, especially for a pregnant woman. One would think that Joseph may well have hesitated before making a decision. But the point is: Mary does go along!

NO ROOM IN THE INN?

As it turned out, the trip apparently did not cause great problems for this young couple. They arrived safely in Bethlehem. We read in verse 6, "And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered." This may give the impression that they had been in Bethlehem already for a while, before the time of birth came. But, in view also of verse 7, where we are told that there was "no place for them in the inn," I rather conclude that relatively shortly after the arrival in Bethlehem, Mary went into labour. This, of course, complicated the search for a place to stay, for not everyone can accommodate a woman who is about to give birth!

There has been much ado about the words that there was "no room for them in the inn." Some modern explainers suggest that this information about lack of room simply cannot be true. The ancient world, and especially ancient Palestine, was noted for its hospitality. The Jews always opened their houses to travellers and refugees, especially to those in need. Therefore, some say, this text is probably proof of the "anti-semitism" which is said to have been present in the early Christian church. And "anti-semitism" (hatred of Jews) is wrong, of course.

One explainer suggests, however, that there may not have been room in the official *inn*, but that certainly some family took Joseph and Mary in and even gave them the main lodging room, where also some of the animals were kept during the colder months. We should therefore not conclude that this text gives proof for the idea that the people of Bethlehem (Israel) were inhospitable and at this point already rejected the Christ.

I think that there is truth in these remarks. No one knew that the child to be born was the Messiah. To say that the Jews in Bethlehem were inhospitable because they hated Jesus at this point is incorrect. It is true that Jesus was rejected, as John writes, "He came to His own, and His own received Him not." But here the beginning is still so obscure that no one really knew "what child this was"!

We have to look at it this way. The "inn" was not as we might imagine it today, something like a fancy motel. It was a gathering place, an open place, possibly at the outskirts of the town, where the travelling caravans and merchants stayed for the

night. It was near the mountain just outside Bethlehem, against the cliff walls, where there were also many caves.

Now Joseph and Mary upon arrival probably went to this “inn,” this lodging area, where there was a fire and water. There they found some room and comfort.

But when Mary went into labour, it was not possible anymore for them to stay in that public place. A child cannot be born in a public square where people are milling about, coming and going! In that sense there was no room for them in the “inn.” So Joseph hastily had to seek another place. Where did he go? He retreated with Mary into one of the caves adjacent to the public area.

A CAVE AND A MANGER

It should be noted here that the oldest tradition claims that Jesus was born in a *cave*, just on the outskirts of old Bethlehem. That is where today a famous monument stands to mark the place of birth. About those caves we can also note the following: they were used by the shepherds of Ephratah as sheepfolds to keep their flocks in the cold season. These shepherds had built “mangers” in these caves, troughs dug out in the cave walls. It is in one of these troughs that Jesus was laid.

When we look at the verses in this way, many things fall into place. Now it also is clear why the shepherds knew exactly where to go, when they heard from the angel that the child would be found lying in a manger! They simply went to the caves where they sometimes kept their sheep. They knew the place quite well, and the last thing anyone would expect was to find a baby there, lying in one of those mangers! It was a clear sign to the shepherds that the angel spoke the truth (Luke 2: 12).

Christ started His life in a dark cave. The great Shepherd was born in a lowly sheepfold. It was a very *obscure* beginning indeed. Who could ever see in this child, in that dark cavern, the King of kings? The shepherds came and saw because of the *light* which the angel had cast on the event; otherwise they, too, would not have known. Special revelation was needed to understand Who this child was!

Indeed, it was an obscure beginning. Somewhere, just on the outskirts of the city of David, in a cave where normally sheep were kept, the Saviour of the world was born. And no one knew, except Joseph and Mary, and some shepherds later! We ourselves would not have known if Luke had not written about it.

A GLORIOUS END

Christ was born in a cave. He was also buried in a cave. He was laid in a sepulchre owned by Joseph of Arimathea. It ended as it began, in a dark and damp cavern.

But the obscure beginning did serve a glorious end! The child was born alive and in good health. He could grow up to fulfill His earthly task. He came out of that cave to reveal Himself mightily to His people. And He went from that sepulchre to the throne in heaven, after He had comforted His church.

An obscure beginning. Many did not and do not see the real meaning of this

birth. They refuse to see it in the light of God's full revelation. Jesus had a tragic life, they say, with a sad ending. And they refuse to see his *death* in its true light. Therefore they cannot properly celebrate Christmas. It is for them not a true celebration.

But we may see from Scripture itself how an obscure beginning did lead to a glorious end! We see in Him and receive in Him our great Lord and King, our Saviour and Redeemer. This obscure beginning was not without reason. It was no fluke. God wanted it this way! The reason is that our faith should not rest on outward pomp and circumstance but on the real meaning of the ministry of Jesus Christ; that we should see His true glory.

It is a matter of faith that this baby, born in a cave, laid in a trough, is the one and only Saviour of the world. He rules the world by His almighty power. It is obscure no more. It is fully clear from the Scriptures. The real meaning of Christmas is unclear only to those who do not know the Bible.

We may rejoice that in the light of the Scriptures we may fully understand the work and the glory of this Saviour.