

Christ in all of Scripture

The Gospel in the Nativity Story

Luke 2:1-18

Read the Passage

¹And 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. ⁶So 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.

⁸Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. ¹⁰Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. ¹¹For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."

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

¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest,

And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

¹⁵So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. ¹⁷Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. ¹⁸And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds.



Gospel Preview in the Text

The Gospel writers are aware that the Greek word "graphein" means both "to write" and "to draw." The evangelists recognize that words can be used to draw vivid (graphic) pictures that can tell a "story within a story." By recognizing a passage as iconic, we are alerted to a foreshowing as well as a foretelling of the gospel account of the suffering (cross) and glory (resurrection) of Jesus.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS	THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The birth story is told through the eyes of Mary (of Nazareth) and Joseph (of Bethlehem) (Luke 2:4-5).2. Jesus is born from a virgin womb, which had "not known a man" (Luke 1:34).3. At his birth, Jesus is wrapped in swaddling bands (mummiform) and placed in a rock-hewn manger (like an ossuary or sarcophagus) (Luke 2:7).4. At his birth, angels come from heaven announcing the good news of peace on earth (Luke 2:13-14).5. At his birth, the shepherds are given the "sign" of the swaddling bands and the rock-hewn manger. The people marvel at the report of the shepherds (Luke 2:12-18).	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The resurrection story is told through the eyes of Mary (of Magdala) and Joseph (of Arimathea) (Luke 23:50; 24:10).2. Jesus is resurrected from a "virgin" tomb, where "no one had lain" (Luke 23:53).3. At his death, Jesus is wrapped in shroud bands and laid in a rock-hewn tomb (Luke 23:53).4. At his resurrection, angels come from heaven announcing the good news that "He is not here. He is risen!" (Luke 24:6).5. At the resurrection, Peter sees the "sign" of the shepherds in the shroud bands and the rock-hewn tomb. Peter leaves the tomb marveling at what he had seen (Luke 24:12).

Prophetic Narrative of the Gospel in the Text

1. In the ancient world, names were regarded as prophetic (*nomen est omen*). Although there are two Mary's and two Joseph's in the accounts of Jesus' birth and resurrection, the coincidence of the names would have been taken as providential in antiquity, not as random. These correspondences are a part of a pattern of similarities that, taken together, reinforce the intentionality of the interleaving of the birth and resurrection narratives. The comparison of these four principle characters serves to demonstrate the large embrace of the gospel of Jesus. In the birth account, Joseph of Bethlehem is poor. In the account of the resurrection, Joseph of Arimathea is rich. In the birth narrative, Mary of Nazareth is known for her purity. In the resurrection narrative, Mary of Magdala, we recall, had been defiled by seven demons.



2. There is a clear association in the Bible of nativity and resurrection. Adam's original creation from the dust of the earth establishes the fact that God, who brought Adam forth from the earth in the original creation, can awaken the dead from their dust in a new creation (Dan 12:2). Adam's creation metaphorically makes the earth the womb of man. This figure is developed in Job 1:2 and Psalm 139:13-15. It is elaborately deployed by Paul in Romans 8:22-23, where the earth is described in the throws of labor at the resurrection of the just. The evangelist John similarly describes the resurrection of Jesus in a metaphor of birth in Revelation 12. The woman crowned with twelve stars and arrayed with the sun and moon is in labor to give birth to a child. After his birth, he is caught up to God and his throne, clearly referring to Jesus' resurrection and ascension, not his nativity (Rev 12:1-2, 5). The resurrection as a new birth is a rich metaphor, deeply rooted in multiple texts of Scripture, which is fundamental to the gospel preview of the resurrection of Jesus in the account of his nativity.

Jesus himself compared the grief of his disciples over his death to the labor pangs of an expectant mother. He said that grief would cause them to sorrow but that their sorrow would be suddenly forgotten for their joy at seeing him again after his resurrection (John 16:16-22). The metaphor of the disciples' sorrow was vividly expressed in the sorrow of Mary Magdalene. Mary's inconsolable grief, accompanied with much weeping, expressed the grief of which Jesus spoke, a grief like that of a mother in the travail of labor. But suddenly when Mary recognizes Jesus and sees him standing, her grief is transformed to great joy. Mary Magdalene in the resurrection account imitates the cycle of suffering and glory that had been the portion of Mary of Nazareth at the birth of Jesus.¹

3. The striking correspondences between the appearance of Jesus after his birth and after his death—his body wrapped in swaddling bands and shroud bands, and placed in a stone-hewn manger and a stone-hewn tomb—demonstrate the wisdom and power of God to so orchestrate both events in order to highlight Jesus' power over death. The shepherds see a scene that appears at first glance to be the burial of an infant, but on closer look, the child breathes! Likewise, Jesus whose grave was sealed by the Romans, first appears to the Galilean women standing and alive, though he had been dead. Here is the Savior Seed of the Woman, who comes forth from an undefiled womb and who comes forth from an undefiled tomb. Who has the imagination to do these things but God alone?
4. Angels likewise play a strategic role in Luke's birth and resurrection narratives. At Jesus' birth, angels came from heaven, announcing the good news of peace on earth (Luke 2:13-14). At his resurrection, angels appeared at the empty tomb, announcing the good news, "He is not here, but is risen!" (Luke 24:6).
5. The sign given to the shepherds is noteworthy, too. Mangers in Syro-Palestine were not the wooden crèches we are familiar with in the west at Christmas. Rather they were hollowed out blocks of limestone, like the ones in the stables of Megiddo from the reign of King Ahab. The effect of placing Jesus in the manger would be to see a child wrapped like a mummy and laid to rest in a

¹ In a remarkable providence, Mary of Nazareth receives a son in both accounts! Jesus is given to her as a newborn in the nativity account. In the account of the suffering of Jesus prior to his resurrection, Mary is given another son. Jesus tells his disciple John that from that day on, Mary will be his mother (cf. John 19:26-27).



sarcophagus. The child would have looked dead, but he was breathing and alive! This was the sign to the shepherds. Further, a manger is a feeding trough. The use of a manger for a crib for the infant Jesus was itself prophetic. Even in his birth, it was foreseeable that in some sense he would be “fed upon,” a truth he would make known by his death whereby his body was broken to give the Bread of Life to the world.



*Presentation at the Temple by Giovanni Bellini
(Note the Christ Child in Swaddling Bands)*



Mangers from the Stables of Ahab in Megiddo, Israel

Angels announce the sign appointed for the shepherds in the birth of Jesus. They are told that they will see the child wrapped in swaddling bands and lying in a rock-hewn manger. The shepherds hasten to see this sign. Imagine what they behold! They see an infant, mummiform in appearance, bound by the swaddling bands and lying immobile in a hollowed out block of limestone. But the infant child is very much alive! The shepherds then return to the care of their flocks, filled with wonder at all that has happened.

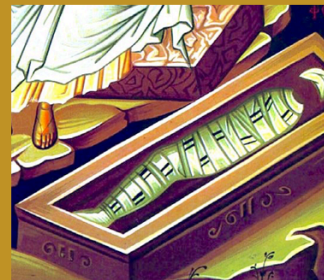


Similarly, angels announce the resurrection to the women at the tomb. When Peter hears the women relate the things announced by angels, he hastens to the empty tomb, and what does he see? He beholds the shroud wrappings lying by themselves in the stone-hewn tomb, the replica of the sign of the shepherds, except that now Jesus is alive and no longer in burial wrappings! Peter, like the shepherds, returns home filled with wonder at all that has happened. It is Luke's version of the restoration of Peter to the office of shepherd for God's people (1 Pet 2:25, 5:1-4). John too will assure us that Peter was restored in his account of the meeting of Jesus and Peter on the shore of Tiberias. Jesus restores Peter to the office of pastor when he charges him to "tend my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

THE BIRTH



THE RESURRECTION



Gospel Takeaways from the Text

The texts of Luke correspond Jesus' birth from the womb of Mary (the mystery of the incarnation) with his rebirth from the grave of the earth (the mystery of the resurrection). The result is a beautiful symmetry to the earthly life and ministry of the Savior.

The story built around these images stretching from the birth to the resurrection of Jesus is designed to house the contours of the gospel that begins as a celebration of the incarnation and climaxes as a celebration of the resurrection. The symmetry of narrative details joining Jesus' birth with his death and resurrection could only be arranged by the providence of God's sovereign hand. These echoing details are the divine signature written into a story of redemption that reaches beyond both the imagination and orchestration of man. Redemption is a story conceived in heaven and begotten upon the earth as the glorious gospel of the Son of God.

This gospel story is given a crowning glory in one other detail that is only set forth in Luke's Gospel. The birth story in Luke 2 is set in motion by the decree of Caesar Augustus that all the inhabited world should be enrolled through a census (Luke 2:1). Caesar was carrying out his program to bring the inhabited world under the authority of his scepter. In truth, however, he was moved by God to initiate his program at that precise moment in history so that the holy family would be compelled to make the journey to Joseph's hometown of Bethlehem just in time for the birth of Jesus. As a result, Jesus was born in Bethlehem just as the prophet Micah had foretold (Mic 5:2). Clearly, the actions of the ruler of the world's greatest empire were being directed by the hand of God to fulfill a larger divine purpose (cf. Prov 21:1).

Caesar's decree to enroll all the world, which opens Luke's Gospel, is matched against the greater decree of the resurrected Christ as the Gospel closes. Jesus issues a decree to his disciples that the gospel of repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in all the nations of the earth. Luke is clearly suggesting that just as his Gospel opened with a decree of Caesar, it will end in a greater decree of the risen Christ. This gospel decree is to be taken to all the nations of the inhabited world, bringing all the nations under the scepter, not of Caesar, but of the royal house of David (Luke 24:47). Consistent with this gospel commission, Luke's account began with Caesar **Augustus** (Lat.) registering the subjects of his kingdom (Luke 2:1) and will end with Paul on his way to Rome in the company of a centurion of the **Augustan** (Gk.) cohort (Acts 27:1), intending to preach the gospel and register the faithful in Rome as subjects of Christ's kingdom. These two proclamations frame the entire Lukan enterprise expressed in Luke-Acts. They show that all events, whether in heaven or earth, are being worked together for the sake of Christ's kingdom and for the benefit of his gospel to the nations! Caesar's *Pax Romanum* becomes Jesus' *Pax Christi*! May it ever be so!

