

The Birth of Jesus

Luke 2: 1-7

DIG: In light of the promises of Luke 1:30-35, how might Mary feel as she awaits delivery of her baby in a stable? How does this tie in with God's plan (Micah 5:2)? What does this story say about the LORD's control over political affairs?

REFLECT: When did ADONAI last take a situation that appeared hopeless to you and use it for His purposes? What aspect of Messiah's birth is most amazing to you? Why?

In Rome, **Caesar Augustus** learned that many of his subjects were dishonest. He ruled the known world, but the amount of taxes was not commensurate with the number of subjects. He held a council and his advisers told him that he could not levy an equitable tax until he had an accurate count of the populations of all his provinces. Therefore, in those days of economic oppression by a corrupt empire, political tyranny under a man who thought he was god, and increasing terrorism by hotheaded zealots, families had to report to their ancestral towns to register for the **census**.¹⁰⁶

Caesar Augustus was born Gaius Octavius. The Roman senate bestowed on him the title **Augustus** in 27 BC. This title had a religious significance. It was an attempt to deify himself. He ruled until AD 14 and was succeeded by Tiberius (Luke 3:1). Like Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus, **Augustus** is seen as a tool in the hands of God, who used the pagan ruler of the civilized world to unconsciously guarantee that the **Messiah, the Son (descendent) of David**, would be born in **Bethlehem**, even though His mother was living in **Nazareth**.¹⁰⁷

Caesar Augustus issued an imperial decree that a census should be taken of the entire inhabited earth (Luke 2:1). In the provinces people had to report to a censor, who evaluated the character and conduct of others as a part of his tax-gathering duties. This gave him ample opportunities for corruption. So for righteous Jews it is hard to imagine just how offensive this was to them. **Caesar's decree** required Jews, whose only King was ADONAI, to stand in front of a Roman official to give an accounting of their moral health.

It is the irony or ironies that **Caesar** wanted to make himself a god known throughout the world. He wanted to be worshiped. So he signed a decree that caused people in **Nazareth** to travel to **Bethlehem** to enroll. One of the women who came in those days was carrying the **Son of God** in her womb. The irony is that today no one worships **Caesar Augustus**, but the fetus in **Mary's** womb is worshiped around the world. **Augustus** thought the **census** would give

him greater control over the world, but in the end, all he did was run an errand for God and fulfill this prophecy: **But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for Me, One who will be ruler over Isra'el, whose origins are from old, from ancient times (Micah 5:2).**

In another vital proof of Yeshua's messianic qualifications, Matthew tells his readers that this **son of David** was also to be born in the city of **David. Bethlehem** was chosen as the city of this beloved ruler of **Isra'el**. Although not much more than a village just five miles outside of Jerusalem, the town took on even greater importance as the revelation came through **Micah** that it would be at **Beit-Lechem** that **Christ, David's greater Son**, would be born. **This was later affirmed through rabbinic tradition, as one translation of this verse actually uses the Aramaic word for Messiah in Micah's prophecy (cf. Tractate Berakhot II.4; Targum Jonathan on Micah 5:2).**¹⁰⁸

This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria (Luke 2:2). Some scholars have debated Luke's facts, pointing out that **Quirinius** didn't become the **governor of Syria** until AD 6 and that Herod the Great died in 4 BC. But archaeological evidence strongly suggests that **Quirinius** had been in **Syria** on a military mission for **Augustus** from 10 to 7 BC and that, with Herod's increasing mental illness, the emperor was preparing the region for direct Roman control. Therefore, this would have been **the first census** taken while **Quirinius was governor**.¹⁰⁹

And everyone went to the town of their ancestors to register (Luke 2:3). There was no evidence that the Romans required a return to ancestral homes for tax purposes, but while that was generally true, **Judea** was a client kingdom of Herod the Great, and so a census may have been conducted in a Jewish, rather than in a Roman manner.¹¹⁰ This, of course, would put a hardship on millions of people. It would make life more difficult to travel to distant cities, but it had to be done. **The census** would be taken in many languages, and in places along the Rhine River, the Danube, in North Africa, Portugal, Syria, Belgium, Egypt, Palestine and all along the north Mediterranean shore.

Many were angry when **the decree** was proclaimed, claiming **Caesar** to be a tyrant. This was especially true in **Nazareth**. **Joseph** probably sought out the local tax collector and asked if women in the latter stages of pregnancy would be exempt, but he was told no one would be excused. Even the lame and the blind had to report to the cities of their fathers, and many would have to be carried on pallets. This decree forced **Yosef** to leave **Natzeret** while **Miryam** was still pregnant and take her with him to **Bethlehem** for **the census**. It would be a seven-day journey if they went directly through Samaria. But there was nothing to fear, as it turned out, for **God** arranged everything ahead of time.

So Yosef, who appears without introduction, also went up to the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Beit-Lechem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David (Luke 2:4). Bethlehem was south of Galilee. Due to the height of Bethlehem (2,654 feet above sea level), travelers would go up from Nazareth (1,830 feet above sea level) on the journey to Bethlehem.¹¹¹

Mary was also from the line of David, although apart from Jeconiah (see Ai - [The Genealogies of Joseph and Mary](#)), so she also needed to be there for the census. He went there to register with Miryam, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child (Luke 2:5). They probably knew she would have the baby during the trip, and both of them knew that the child was the Messiah who was to be born in Beit-Lechem.

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, there was no room at the inn (Luke 2:6 and 7d). The inn, *katalyma*, was probably not an ancient hotel, since a small village like Bethlehem would not have had such accommodations. Luke 10:34 uses a different word, *pandocheion*, for a roadside inn. The word *katalyma* usually means an informal public shelter where travelers would gather for the night. Shaped in the form of a square, it had a large area in the middle where the pilgrims could tether their animals. Ancient near Eastern rules of hospitality required the local residents of Beit-Lechem to open their homes to visitors, but they were overwhelmed in a short amount of time. There was no room anywhere. People were sleeping beside the road, outside in the fields and against walls. More than likely, Yosef and Mary intended to stay with relatives, but found Bethlehem overrun with travelers. They did not realize that there were so many who belonged to the house of David.

Consequently, they would have tried to find an inn. After searching desperately, however, the only place Joseph could find with any privacy was a cave, hewn out of rock. There isn't much wood in Palestine, and caves were commonly used to shelter livestock. It wasn't much, but at least Mary would have some privacy to deliver the baby. And there, in the darkness, she gave birth to her firstborn, a Son. Joseph helped as much as he could. If Luke wanted to indicate that Jesus was Miryam's only son, he would have used the Greek word *monogenes*. Luke probably used the word *firstborn* instead of *monogenes* because he knew of Mary's other children.¹¹²

The **bread of life** (John 6:35) was born in Beit-Lechem (Luke 2:7a), which means *the house of bread*. There were no trappings of royalty, no purple robes, and no signs of wealth or position, although Jesus was born to be King of kings and Lord of lords.¹¹³

But make no mistake . . . **He** was no ordinary baby. **Yeshua's** closest friend in this world, **John**, described **His** birth this way: **In the beginning was the Word, and the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. And the Word was with God, and we have seen His glory, the glory of the One and only Son, who came from the Father. And the Word was God, full of grace and truth (John 1:1 and 14).** In the weakness of human flesh, **He** came to earth. However, when **He** became a man in the person of **Yeshua Messiah**, **He** did not cease to be **God**, nor did **He** lose **His** divine attributes, such as being ever-present and all-powerful. **He** merely laid them aside for a time. This choice is called *kenosis*, which comes from a Greek word meaning *to empty*.¹¹⁴ Rabbi Sha'ul put it this way. **Jesus Christ who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:7-8 NASB).**

The cave that **they** stayed in served several purposes. It provided **them** safety and privacy, but it was also the place where bodies were prepared for burial. And as such, **strips** of burial **clothes** were stored there. **Miryam** used what **she** had, and **she wrapped Him in strips** of burial **cloths (Luke 2:7b)**. This was important, because it was the way the shepherds were supposed to recognize **Him (Luke 2:12)**. **And picturing His** humble beginnings, **she placed Him in a manger (Luke 2:7c)**, this was no doubt a feeding trough for animals. The destiny of the entire world lay in that **manger**.

Because of what **Luke** says, it is possible to determine, with a fair degree of accuracy, when **Jesus** was **born**. We know **He** had to be **born** before the year 4 BC for the simple reason that in 4 BC Herod the Great died and **Christ** was born when Herod was still living. Next, the decree of Quirinius came in 8 BC, so we can conclude the **Yeshua** was born some time between 4 BC and 8 BC. Josephus, the Jew who became a Roman historian between 80 to 90 AD, wrote that Herod the Great left Jerusalem in 5 BC and went to Jericho and remained there until his death. Since the Magi saw Herod the Great while he was still living in Jerusalem, we can deduce the **Messiah's** birth had to be 6 BC or earlier. So that leaves sometime between 8 BC and 6 BC. However, Josephus tells us that during the entire year of 8 BC Herod was outside of Jerusalem fighting a war. Therefore, **Christ** was probably **born** sometime between 7 BC and 6 BC.¹¹⁵

In the final analysis, we just don't know exactly when **Jesus** was born. I do not think **He** was born on a Jewish holiday like the Feast of Tabernacles or during Passover. If you notice, if **Yeshua** did or said anything on a specific Jewish holy day, the writer always mentions it. It would seem, then, that if **He** had been **born** on any Jewish holiday, **Matthew** and **Luke** would

have mentioned it, as both of them deal with the birth of **the Messiah**. This would especially be true of **Mattityahu**, who was writing to a Jewish audience. The total silence of both **Matthew** and **Luke** in connecting **Christ's** birth with any Jewish holy day suggests to me that **the Savior** was **born** on a normal day. For this reason, the Gospel writers do not make mention of the date.