

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Messiah Born in Bethlehem, Right on Time

by Dan Trygg

“But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.” Micah 5:2

“Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. ² This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governing Syria. ³ And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. ⁴ 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 family of David, ⁵ in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. ⁶ While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” Luke 2:1-7

Luke sets the stage for Jesus' birth by describing one of those “certainties of life” that we are all familiar with, taxes. Actually, the Greek word meant an enrollment, a written registration or record of everyone, a census. Everyone knew what that meant. Registrations were not just for curiosity's sake. **A census was a thorough and systematic numbering of all the people. Such an enrollment was used for military conscription, for taxation, and for the planning and allocation of governmental resources.** Instead of sweeping through and counting where people currently were living, the Romans felt that a more accurate number could be obtained if **people were required to register at the city of their birth, or their ancestral home**, where birth records were kept. (Egyptian papyri have documented this practice, vindicating Luke's accurate reporting.) The countries of the Roman Empire were all occupied by Roman troops, and there were often checkpoints where proof had to be shown that a person had been properly registered. It was incumbent upon people, therefore, to comply with the law. Rome was known to deal harshly with lawbreakers. **This was the immediate cause that motivated Mary and Joseph to leave their home town of Nazareth and travel nearly 100 miles during the end of Mary's pregnancy.** They were both of the “house and lineage of David”, so they had to go to the “city of David” to be enrolled. The family records were kept there in Bethlehem, the city of David's birth (I Sam. 16). There must have been a window of time where they were required to register. Unfortunately, so it seemed, this time frame required that they travel when she was heavy with child.

It is unclear what Mary and Joseph thought regarding the verse from Micah. Probably they were not really thinking that their child was the One concerning whom this verse was prophesying. They probably had no intention of leaving their home in Nazareth to visit Bethlehem in an attempt to fulfill some prophecy. The language is clear that, to Joseph and Mary, the census was the main reason for the trip.

Usually, when a couple was betrothed, the husband-to-be would be preparing for his wife by building a house. Normally, it was the completion of the house that would precipitate the bridegroom coming to take his bride to their new home for the wedding. In Joseph's and Mary's case, however, this did not quite happen that way. **Mary's return from Judea three month's pregnant forced the issue. Joseph took her to his home immediately, as the angel in the dream instructed him, whether the house was finished or not (it probably wasn't).** It may be that the unfinished state of the house, plus the preparations for the baby, in addition to trying to make a living had filled their days from morning to night. They probably did not have a lot of time to be thinking ahead. Suddenly they realized that they had neglected to enroll for the census, and the deadline was drawing to a close. Or, possibly they received word that the census takers would be in Bethlehem from such and such a date, and would only be there so long. In any case, **they were forced by circumstances beyond their control to make a nearly 100 mile journey at a very inopportune time.** They abruptly left Nazareth and set out on their way to Bethlehem, along with many others who also had to enroll. **Whether they received short notice, or they had put off the trip, it is clear that they had not made adequate plans for their journey.** Even though they had family in the Bethlehem area, there was no one who could, or would, take them in. Because of the crowds there for the census, everyone's house was full, and even the inn, where they most likely would have had to *share* a room, was filled to capacity.

Mary began to be in labor, however, so they were brought out to the stable, which was in a rocky cave nearby (according to early second-century church father, Justin Martyr, who visited the site). **This provided some measure of both privacy and shelter**, ...as well as the comfort of the hay, instead of the hard floor. **So it was, that the Creator, the future ruler of Israel and of the entire world, entered this world as a human baby in the humblest of circumstances.** He was wrapped in cloths, and placed in what was a makeshift crib, a feeding trough filled with hay.

Luke is the only gospel writer to make a point of tying his writing to historical events of the larger world. He clearly stated that he had carefully investigated everything, talking especially to eyewitnesses, in order that he might compile an accurate, orderly account of what took place during the lifetime of Jesus (Lk. 1:1-4). From chapter one, we find out that **Herod was king of Judea** (vs. 5). This is corroborated by Matthew, and is significant because Herod died in the spring of 4 B.C. Therefore, Jesus had to have been born previous to this. (Yes, the present calendar system was not devised for about 525 years *after* Jesus' birth, and the calculations regarding the birth of Jesus were in error by several years.) In chapter two, we are given three other important pieces of information. We are told that **Caesar Augustus was in power** (27 B.C.-14 A.D.), **and Quirinius was governing Syria**. Furthermore, we are told that **a census was ordered** by Augustus. The historical accuracy of Luke's record has been challenged by skeptics repeatedly, but Sir William Ramsey, a 20th century archaeologist, discovered that Luke was amazingly accurate. In fact, he himself was an unsympathetic skeptic who came to believe in Jesus, as he saw the Bible repeatedly vindicated by the relics, inscriptions, and writings of the period discovered by excavations he personally conducted. Again and again, the arrogant and cynical claims and theories of mocking archaeologists were dashed to pieces and buried by the findings of their own shovels. At first, cynics claimed that the Bible must be in error, because the writings of Josephus, a first-century Jew, indicated that Quirinius was governor of Syria in A.D. 6. This would be too late for Jesus' birth. Ramsay, however, found papyri and inscriptions that show that Quirinius was indeed ruling Syria on *two* occasions, the first of which was from 8-5 B.C., and that Augustus had ordered several censuses during his reign, including one initiated in 8 B.C. This would have taken 2-3 years to implement and fully carry out, which means that the census enrollment would have continued until 6-5 B.C. **When all this is taken together, it is clear that Jesus had to have been born about 5 B.C.**

This date is further corroborated by John 2:20, where, early in Jesus' ministry, the Jews mention that the temple had been under construction for 46 years. We know from records that Herod had begun this temple refurbishing project in approximately 20 B.C., meaning that Jesus' started His ministry as a 30 year old man in 25-26 A.D. (cf. Lk. 3:23). **Working backward from there, He had to have been born approximately in 5-4 B.C.**

Amazingly, **there is one other cross-check to the time of the Messiah's coming. This one is a prophetic word.** Instead of working backwards from some known event later in Jesus' life, **this requires that we count forwards from some known event in the past.** In **Daniel 9:25**, the angel Gabriel (the same angel that later visited Zacharias and Mary – Lk. 1:8-19,26-38) told Daniel that “So you are to know and discern *that* from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince *there will be* seven weeks and sixty-two weeks” [of years]. Jerusalem had been destroyed years before. Daniel was an official in the government of Darius the Mede. There were still other rulers who would come to power before these words would be fulfilled. In 458 B.C., Artaxerxes I was the Persian king who eventually gave the decree prophesied (Ezr. 7:8). When you add the 483 years of the prophecy to this date, you come out to 26 A.D. when Messiah would appear in Israel. Of course, this coincides with the time frame provided by John 2. It coincides with the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. **Do we have any other candidates for Messiah who publicly appeared on the scene in 26 A.D.?** Is there anybody else from that time period who has affected world history as He has? **Of course, if He appeared publicly to Israel in 26 A.D., and He was 30 years old, then He must have been born in 5-4 B.C.**

The prophecy from Daniel is amazing, isn't it? **God did not want us to miss who the Messiah was!** If we accept the prophecy at face value, and then take into account a few other prophecies concerning the Messiah, the list of contenders narrows dramatically. What other famous person from 26 A.D. was also the “seed of the woman” (Gen. 3:15)? Was this an allusion to the virgin birth? Who else was the “seed of Abraham” through whom “all the families on earth would be blessed” (Gen. 22:18)? Who else was a descendant of the tribe of Judah, a “son of the house of David” (Gen. 49:10; II Sam. 7:12,13; Isa. 11:1-5)? How many others who fit all of these qualifications were also born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2)? Who of them were ever called Son of God (Psa. 2:7,8) and Son of Man (Dan. 7:13; Mk. 8:38)? Who else was pierced through (Isa. 53:5; Zech. 12:10)? Who else is the Spirit-filled Servant of Yahweh, who will not crush the broken, but will establish justice (Isa. 42:1-4)? These are but a few of many prophetic glimpses of the Messiah, given by God to people hundreds of years before they came to pass. They were given so that we might recognize Him when He finally came to this earth. God spoke of His unusual conception, His lineage, His birthplace, His life, His mission, His death, resurrection and return in power, all so we would see, understand and acknowledge Him as our King. **Unbeknownst to them, Mary and Joseph were caught up in a much larger plan** than they could have conceived. God was bringing His promised Savior into the world. He was moving in the circumstances to fulfill the signposts which He had given. **He moved in the emperor's heart** (Prov. 21:1) **to bring this couple back to Bethlehem at the right time, so that He could be born as God had indicated would take place.**

Do you know the same God is at work in your life? He has intentionally placed you in the right setting, and directs circumstances in your life to enable you to bear fruit and do His will (Jn. 15:16; Eph. 2:10).