

The birth of Jesus Christ: the history, and the mystery

On behalf of the congregation and leadership of Lighthouse Bible Church,
Merry Christmas to you and your loved ones!

You can't have a Christmas service, really, without reading the gospel of Luke. There is no better passage to read in a Christmas service than Luke 2:1-20. And we will be there in a little while. It's where Linus got his material to explain to Charlie Brown what Christmas is all about. <picture>

Why not let Linus fill us in:

<video>

This year we will look at two aspects of the birth of Christ. And we will spend most of our time in the gospel of Luke.

/The birth of Jesus Christ is a matter of history, and mystery.\

It's grounded in fact, and full of wonder.

Luke did a marvelous job, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, of blending both aspects together.

/Luke was a historian, after all, but he also was a marvelous storyteller.\

We begin with a history lesson.

You see, if the birth of Jesus was not an actual event in human history, it has little more to recommend itself than a Greek myth or one of Aesop's fables.

But it DID happen. We have the records in the gospels of Luke and Matthew.

Luke was a careful historian. He makes that clear at the very outset of his gospel:

Luke 1:1-5

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, I just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,

3 it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; 4 so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

5 In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

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The gospels of Luke and Matthew secure the historic fact of the birth of Christ in three ways.

/They include His genealogy, the actual narrative of His birth, and the ways in which the birth fulfilled prophecies made hundreds of years before.\

The first is the genealogy of Jesus Christ. This was meticulously researched, detailed, and complete.

/Luke's genealogy of Christ appears in Luke 3: 23-38. He works backwards from Jesus all the way back to Adam. He includes 64 names, in order.\

I daresay that there's no one alive today, who has anything like it.

/Matthew was every bit as meticulous as Luke.\

Matt 1:1

The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham:

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/Then, beginning with Abraham, who lived 2,000 years before Christ, Matthew lists the forebears of Jesus in every generation - 42 names in all.\

Matt 1:17

17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

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This work was only possible because the Jews kept meticulous records of the genealogies, and we find them in the historic record of `1 Chronicles.

/Second, the gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus include specific historic information.\

/This material is confirmed by the writings of contemporary secular historians including Plutarch (a Greek Roman citizen who lived from AD 46-AD 127), Suetonius (Roman historian, AD 71 – AD 135), Tacitus (Roman historian AD 56-AD 120) and Josephus (Roman – Jewish historian AD 37 to AD 100) .\

Let's see a few of these now, shall we?

In fact, we already saw an example of this in Luke 1:5.

Luk 1:5 In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

/Luke tells us who was the king of Judea at the time: Herod the Great.\ Herod died in the spring of 4 BC. This fact along with others makes it possible to determine the time of the birth of Christ to within a few months.

Now turn to chapter 2 of the gospel of Luke.

Luke 2:1-7

1 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 governor of 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.

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This is chock full of verifiable historic detail.

/We know who the emperor of Rome was at that time: Caesar Augustus.\

/We know that Jesus was born in the year that Augustus decreed that a census be taken of the known world. We know the name of the governor of Syria back then: Quirinius.\

Again, this can be confirmed by independent sources.

We know that each citizen had to go to his ancestral home to be counted. Joseph, the stepfather of Jesus, was of the house of David, and thus had to journey to Bethlehem.

/The third category of the historic record is the fulfillment of prophecy.\

/The prophet Isaiah lived about 700 years before the birth of Christ.\ This is corroborated in the book of 2 Kings which itself is a reliable detailed record of the history of the kings of Israel and Judah.

And the prophet Isaiah made predictions which were fulfilled when Jesus was born.

*/Isa 7:14 "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. *

This was fulfilled when Jesus was born, as Matthew 1:23 states.

Matt 1:21-23

She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." 22 Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US."

The same is true about another prophet by the name of Micah.

Mic 5:2

*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."*

/This prophecy came true also when Jesus was born, as we learn in Matthew 2:\

Matt 2:1-6

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, 2 "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet:

*6 'AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH,
ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH;
FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER
WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.'"*

Compare this wealth of historic information about the birth of Jesus with that of the births of other famous individuals in history.

So the birth of Jesus is a well-documented historical fact.

/We can narrow down the date of His birth to sometime between late 5 BC and early 4 BC - probably December 5 BC or January 4 BC.\ So Jesus could very well have been born on December 25th, although there is no way of verifying that.

/But the birth of Jesus isn't simply a matter of history. It is, more importantly, a great mystery.\ His birth is a wonder and a treasure, full of the glory of God.

We have angels announcing the coming of the Christ child. We have a virgin by the name of Mary who is with child. The Holy Spirit came upon her, and the Power of the Most High overshadowed her...and for that reason, the holy Child would be called the Son of the Most High – the Son of God.

This child was the Savior of the world. He came to save the people from their sins. And because of that, an angel instructed the woman, Mary, and her fiancé, Joseph, the name that Child Jesus.

This child will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end. The LORD God will give Him the throne of His father David.

And so we end up where we started, with the miraculous and wonderful story of Luke 2. We pick up where we left off, in verse 8:

Luke 2:8-20

8 In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; 11 for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 "This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

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

*14 "Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."*

15 When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. 17 When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. 19 But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20 The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

And now, here, once again at Christmas time, we have heard these wonderful things. It remains for us to glorify and praise God for all that we have heard, just as has been told us.