

Investigate the Mystery: Luke's Account of the Birth of Jesus

Part Two: When?

Luke 2.1-20

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For most of us, especially those of us who grew up in the church, or grew up watching the Charlie Brown Christmas Special, the classic passage in Luke's gospel that tells the tale of the first Christmas has become so familiar that we no longer really hear it.

"In those days, Augustus, name that starts with Q that's hard to pronounce, Bethlehem, no room in the inn, don't be afraid, glory to God, peace on earth."

That's why, this Christmas, we are revisiting the passage each Sunday from a different angle, opening it up in a fresh way by asking a different question about it each time.

In his book *Just So Stories*, Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem that says:

I keep six honest serving men
(they taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.

This Advent, Kipling's faithful friends will help us investigate the Christmas story a little more closely, and hopefully help us hear it again in a fresh way.

Last Sunday, kicking off this year's Advent season, Brently walked us through the story asking the question "what?" What happened first, and what happened next?

This morning, we'll go back to the passage, this time asking the question, "when?"

Listen to the passage, and see what you notice related to the question "when?"

Luke 2.1-20

¹ In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

Luke 2.1-20

⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the

baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Luke 2.1-20

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Luke 2.1-20

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

Luke 2.1-20

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” ¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

Luke 2.1-20

¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

Luke 2.1-20

²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

There are all kinds of things to explore in this passage related to the word “when?” and I hope you will.

Luke 2.1-3 (NIV)

¹ In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

But for me, I had a hard time getting past those first three words: “in those days,” and I want to focus there. In what days exactly are we talking about?

Two different problems surface as we open up those words a bit: the problem of the *census*, and the problem of the *senses*. Let’s have a look.

The first problem is the problem of the census.

How many of you have heard about the contradiction between what Luke says in his biography and the historical information we have from other ancient sources about Quirinius and the timing of his census?

It’s pretty important to be aware of this, because when people try to show that the Bible is not historically accurate, this is usually the first passage they point to.

Here’s the basic problem that calls into question the historical reliability of Luke’s gospel, and therefore, of the bible as a whole. It’s the timing of the census compared to the timing of Jesus’s birth.

1. Both Luke and Matthew tell us that Jesus was born while King Herod, the King of the Jews, was still alive (Matthew 2.1, Luke 1.5)
2. We know from other sources that King Herod died in 4 BC, and that when he died, the Jewish kingdom was divided between his three sons, with Judea and Samaria going to Herod Archelaus
3. Then, ten years later, in 6 AD, the Roman Emperor Augustus removed the Jewish King Herod Archelaus from the throne in Judea and Samaria because he was so incompetent, and sent him into exile. In his place, he established the Roman military leader Sulpicius Quirinius as governor.
4. And then, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, the newly appointed Governor Quirinius carried out his well-known census in 6 AD

So if what the NIV has is a good translation of Luke 2.2, that

“this was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria” that means the census that brought Jesus to Bethlehem to be born happened when Jesus was already ten years old.

Which would mean Luke made a huge mistake.

But Luke himself tells us he carefully researched the facts and was committed to giving an accurate record of them.

As he says in the opening lines of his biography of Jesus, in Luke 1.1-3

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account.

That would be a pretty huge blunder on Luke's part if he was committed to an accurate account.

It's also important to realize that over the years, as archeological evidence has been turned up, Luke has shown himself to be very reliable on other historical information:

In fact, as investigative journalist Lee Strobel says in his book *The Case for Christ*:

Over the years, scholars have asserted that Luke was mistaken about certain historical facts only to be proven wrong by archaeological findings. For example, many scholars saw Luke's reference to Lysanias as the tetrarch (or governor) of Abilene in 27 AD as a disqualifying error—Lysanias ruled Chalcis 50 years before; he was no tetrarch. An inscription found on a dig, however, later proved Luke right. One study from the early '90s reviewed each of Luke's references to physical places and found not a single mistake.

So what do we do with this specific passage?

It's actually really easily solved. It all comes down to the Greek word *protos*, which the NIV translates "first" – "this was the first census."

Two things about this.

First, if Luke thought there was only one census, he would not have had any reason to include that word.

And second, the Greek word *protos* actually has two related meanings. It can mean "first" or it can mean "earlier or former or previous." (FF Bruce)

So while the verse could be translated along these lines
This census was the *first* one that Quirinius made

It could also be translated in this sort of way
This census was the *previous one* to the one that Quirinius made

As we've made more archeological discoveries over the years, we've learned that regular censuses were actually common across the Roman world during the time that Augustus ruled as Emperor. Each region did its own regular census taking.

But of all those censuses, there was one that was so well known to the Jewish people that it was called simply “*the census*.”

Outside of the Christmas story, most of us have never heard of Quirinius. He’s just the guy whose name we hope we don’t have to pronounce during the Advent readings. How thoughtful that Luke left out his first name – Sulpicius.

But every Jewish person in the first century would have known exactly who Quirinius was and when his notorious census took place.

That’s because the census he took when he took office as Governor of Syria and Judea was taken to determine the value of property held by the Jewish people so he could begin to levy taxes against them that would be paid into the Roman treasury.

That census and the heavy taxes that followed were the first bitter taste of Roman occupying rule. In fact, that specific census was what gave birth to the Zealots, the radical group of Jewish patriots who used violence to try to drive out the Roman forces.

So *everyone* knew about the census of Quirinius. It was known simply as “*the census*.”

That is actually how Luke tells us the Jewish rabbi Gamaliel spoke of it twenty five years later:

In Acts 5.37: Gamaliel says

Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He was killed, and all his followers were scattered.

I’m convinced that Luke researched this carefully, just as he did all the other details of the story, and he knew exactly what he was talking about.

He’s saying,

“This was the earlier census, the one taken before the later, well-known one, that happened when Quirinius was the Governor of Syria.”

Or as the *New Testament for Everyone* translation puts it:

Luke 2.1-3 (NIV/NTE)

¹ In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census, before the one when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

When we turn to the ancient biographies of Jesus that we call the gospels, we can do so with confidence that they are reliable.

That addresses the problem of the *census*. What about the problem of the *senses*?

Here's what I mean by that. Most of us, when we think about the different seasons of our lives, and we try to make sense of the times in which we live, look at them through our *senses*. We try to interpret our days through the lens of what we can *see*, what we can *hear* – in other words, what we experience through our senses. That was the time when I went to that school or had that job or lived in that neighborhood or faced that challenge.

But this passage calls us to look at our lives and the times in which we live in a completely different way.

Luke 2.1-3 (NIV/NTE)

¹ In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census, before the one when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

As we saw, this passage begins with the phrase, “in those days.” Which days? What days are we talking about?

Well, it's pretty clear that to answer that question you have to look at the protext, and the chapter that came before. What days are we talking about?

A quick look back and a quick read through and you see lots of time references in chapter one. You learn that these were the days when Herod is the Jewish King and when Augustus is the Roman emperor. More specifically, this is during the lifetime of a man named Zechariah, who served as a temple priest, and even more specifically still, during the time when his cohort was serving in the temple in Jerusalem, and when it was his turn to go into the holy of holies in the temple, which also happened to be a time when he and his wife were struggling with infertility.

When were those days Luke refers to? If we look through the senses:

- from a national or political perspective this was a time of great upheaval and unrest, as the Herodians were losing power and the Romans were on the ascendancy
- from a religious perspective this was a time when the Jewish people were beginning to experience persecution and hardship
- from a work perspective it was the time when Zechariah and his unit were on active duty, and when he himself was to serve in the holy of holies – the crowning moment of his career, filled with all sorts of performance pressure
- from a relational perspective it was a time when Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were dealing with the whole swirl of painful emotions that comes with dealing with infertility – loss and disappointment and sadness and fear

But none of those things are what Luke has in mind when he says, “in those days.”

What he has in mind is something that Zechariah prays toward the end of Luke chapter one, when he gives God thanks for the miraculous gift of a son given to him in his old age – a baby who would come to be known as John the Baptist. And then he says to his newborn son . . .

Luke 1.76-77

⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
 for you will go on before the Lord [that is, the promised Messiah] to prepare
 the way for him,
⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation
 through the forgiveness of their sins,

Luke 1.78-79

⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
 by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness
 and in the shadow of death,
 to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

You may be aware that in the New Testament there are two different words for time. *Chronos* is the word for the regular little chunks of time that get marked off by our time keeping devices: minutes, hours, days, months, years. But *kairos* is time seen through the lens of what God is up to. It is time seen as seasons that come filled with the redemptive purposes of God.

When Luke refers to “those days,” he’s not speaking of the *chronos* markers of this day or this month or this year or this circumstance, he’s speaking of the *kairos* time of God working in human history.

Zechariah is not telling time by his circumstances, by clocks and calendars, but by what God is doing redemptively in this season.

Zechariah is telling *kairos* time, time told by the light of the Son – the son of God, Jesus, for whom his own son John will be the herald and forerunner.

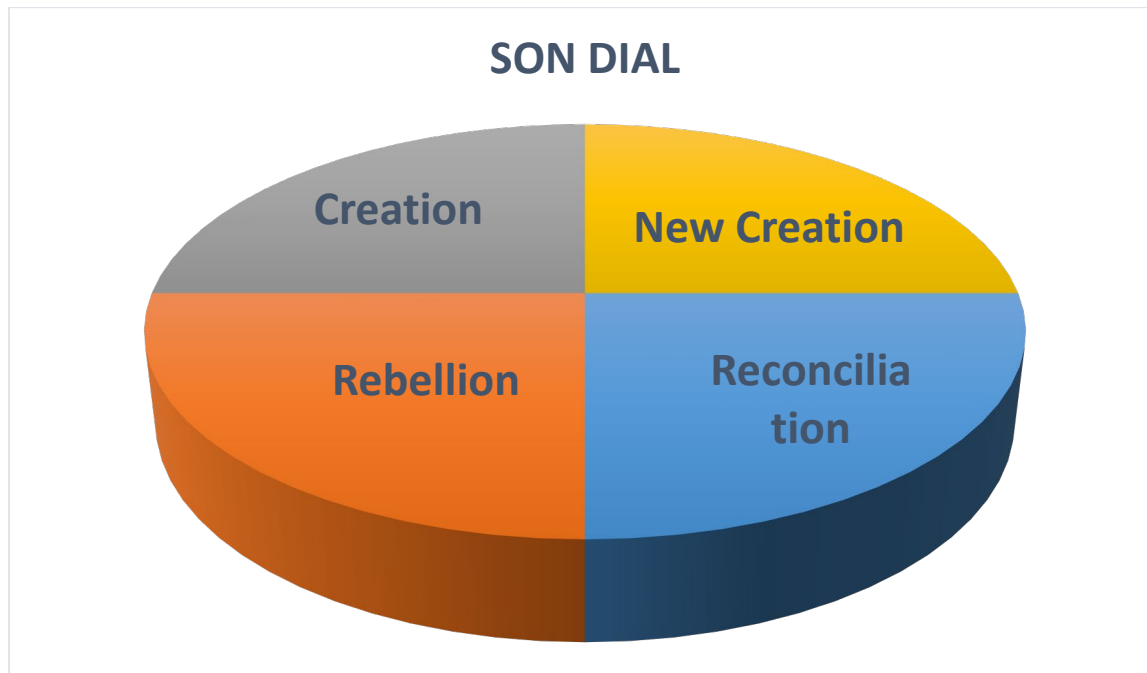
It has been a long spiritual night. But now, says Zechariah, now is the time when the sun from heaven is just about to crest the horizon, rise, and begin to shine on those living in a land blanketed in spiritual darkness.

That’s what Luke means when he says, “in those days.” At that moment, on the cusp of a new spiritual era.

[sundial held in my hand] This is a sundial. Have you ever used one? They seem complicated, but they're really simple. You put them out in the sun, and the direction the sunlight falls across the dial tells you the time.

I think it's helpful to think of redemptive history like a sundial, with four major eras, each one determined by the location of the Son of God.

Son Dial



From the perspective of redemptive history, there are four crucial eras:

creation, rebellion, reconciliation, and new creation

and each of them is introduced by some dimension of the ministry of the Son of God.

The first era is **creation**. It begins when God creates all things from nothing, an act in which the Son of God participates as co-creator.

I Corinthians 8.6

There is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

Creation is marked by *shalom*, the design and purposes of God finding their perfect fulfilment in every part of creation, and humanity experiencing wonderful intimacy with God in the beauty of creation.

Then comes the era of **rebellion**, when humanity mutinies against the Creator who made them for his good and loving purposes. Nonetheless, even at the moment the world plunges into spiritual darkness and separation from God, God speaks the first of many promises that his son will come and shine in this dark world. So though this is a time of pain and brokenness, it is also a time of hope.

Here are just two of the many promises about the son of God that were made during these long centuries of spiritual nighttime.

Isaiah 9.1-6

The people walking in darkness
 have seen a great light;
 on those living in the land of deep darkness
 a light has dawned.

For to us a child is born,
 to us a son is given,
 and the government will be on his shoulders.
 And he will be called
 Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Malachi 4.2

But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in his wings.

The third era of redemptive history is the period of **reconciliation**, the new day after the long night, which begins with the birth of a little baby, long promised, miraculously conceived, carried to Bethlehem by a young mother named Mary, and delivered there in a stable, fully God, and yet a tiny vulnerable baby, who must have looked something like this cute little guy

Baby Eli



Yes, that's is a picture of Eli Cain, the grandson of Tony and Michelle Cain and David and Sharon Henderson, taken on Thanksgiving Day, when he was just three days old.

Though the Son of God does not put all things right, not all at once, through his life and death he puts the most important thing right, reconciling us to God and allowing us to experience his grace and mercy, even as this world remains broken and we wait for its full redemption.

Earlier in his prayer in Luke chapter one, Zechariah tells us why God is sending his son. Jesus will come, as Zechariah says,

Luke 1.76-77

⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

⁷⁷ **to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,**

To forgive our sins and reconcile us to God

Luke 1.74-75

⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and **to enable us to serve him without fear**

⁷⁵ **in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.**

To equip us to live lives in God's service that reflect him and are pleasing to him

Luke 1.78-79

⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
 by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness
 and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

To bring us into a life of peace and purpose.

And finally will come the ***new creation***. One day Jesus will return, and all will be made new. Human history as we know it will come to an end, we who belong to him will be raised with new bodies to live in a new creation, and as it says in Revelation 11.15:

The kingdom of the world has become
 the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah,
 and he will reign for ever and ever.

God's son will reign forever, and we will enjoy a relationship in his presence for all eternity.

What time is it? We live in the third era of redemption, between the first and second comings of the Son of God to earth.

Here's how I think this can inform us and help us today.

I think we can be tempted to try to make sense of our lives and the times in which we live based on our circumstances: to think of “these days” in terms of who's in power, or where we work, or who we are in relationship with, or what our immediate struggles or challenges are.

I think Luke chapter two presses us to think in different terms altogether. To live in constant mindfulness of the redemptive era we are in, and to think of our circumstances not in and of themselves but with reference to God and his redemptive purposes in them.

Is this the time when covid hit, or the economy went bad, or I lost my dad, or gave birth to my son? The time when my best friend moved away, when I got diagnosed with cancer, when I moved, when I retired, which I got married?

If we follow Luke's lead, I think we are called to live in the world of time differently, to think: this is the time, these are the days, when Jesus has come and is working on my behalf, to reconcile me to God, and equip me to live a life in God's service that is pleasing to him, and to bring me into a life of peace and purpose, while I am working at this place, or married to this person, or facing this challenge, or dealing with this loss.

I came into this fall on the end of a surprising string of health challenges – a herniated disc followed by covid followed by a bronchial infection followed by a kidney stone – and that string of challenges had me come into the fall feeling so far behind.

At that point I had a choice. How do I read the times? Is this the time when, are these the days when, health challenges have made me so far behind? Or is this the time when Jesus has come and is working on my behalf, reconciling me to God, equipping me to live a life in God's service that is pleasing to him, forming his likeness in me, and bringing me into a life of peace and purpose, while I am working at this church and facing health challenges and coming into the fall feeling behind. It's amazing the difference it makes when I tell time based on what God is doing rather than on the basis of what I am doing.

How do you think about "these days"? How do you understand the *kairos*?

What would it look like to see your every circumstances with reference to God and his redemptive purposes in your life?

God assembles Mary and Joseph and the angels and the shepherds all at one place in a time to usher in a new day, and to invite us into it.

Until Jesus returns, each new day is a continuation of that day when God's Son was born into our midst and began fulfilling his redemptive purposes for us.

Today is the day when the new day dawns.

Today is the day when Jesus comes. Today is the day when he is working on my behalf, reconciling me to the Father, equipping me to live a life in God's service that is pleasing to him, forming his likeness in me, and bringing me into a life of peace and purpose.

May God give me grace to live each new day in the light of his redeeming grace.