

Investigating the Mystery of Christmas

A Cross-Examination of Luke's Ancient Account of the Birth of Jesus

Part Four: Where? Luke 2.1-20

David Henderson

For the past several weeks we've been taking an in-depth look at the familiar account of the birth of Jesus that was recorded for us in Luke's ancient biography.

It's so familiar to us and we've heard it so many times that we can just skim over the words and not really take them in. But this words are worth our stopping and investigating.

Because if what Luke says is true, it has the potential to change the way we think about our lives and why we're here. But if what he said is false, that would mean that the whole supernatural way we understand Jesus as someone who both was a man but was also more than a man would be false as well.

So we're using five basic questions to take a closer look at the passage. This morning, the question we're asking is "where?"

There are all kinds of place and location words in Luke chapter 2:

The "Where" Words in Luke 2

¹ the entire Roman world. ² Syria ³ their own town ⁴ the town of Nazareth, Galilee, Judea, Bethlehem, the town of David ⁵ there ⁶ there ⁷ in a manger, guest room, in the fields nearby ⁹ to them, around them ¹⁰ to them ¹¹ in the town of David, to you ¹² to you, in a manger ¹³ with the angel ¹⁴ to God, in the highest, on earth, to those, on whom ¹⁵ into heaven, to one another, to Bethlehem ¹⁶ went off, found, in the manger ¹⁷ to them ¹⁸ to them ¹⁹ in her heart ²⁰ returned

Which of these should we focus on? Well, the obvious place to zoom in on is Bethlehem

Luke 2.4-7

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. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 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.]

. . . where, after a four or five day, ninety mile stroll through the wilderness from Nazareth, all the action in this chapter takes place – the census, the failure to find a room, the birth of Jesus, the appearance of the angels, the visit of the shepherds.

But I don't think Bethlehem is the most significant place that's mentioned in this passage.

I think that honor goes to the two places mentioned a few verses later, when the angelic company joins the messenger who has been talking to the shepherds. .

Luke 2.13-14

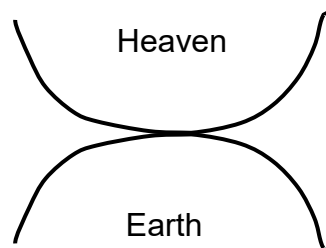
Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

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

Luke tells us that, in its broadest view, this is the story of something that happens not just in a town called Bethlehem, but at pinpoint intersection between two vast realms: heaven and earth.

A map helps us think about places. So one simple way to map this passage is like this: in a moment, at the moment of Christ's birth, heaven and earth touch.

Mapping Luke 2: Two Realms



I think it is important to point out that in biblical times there were two overlapping ways to think about these two realms that we call “heaven and earth.” One meaning of heaven is just whatever is over your head, the physical heavens: the sky, the clouds, the sun, the stars, as opposed to the earth, this physical realm that surrounds us here below, the ground, the fields, the mountains, the seas. That's the meaning of the word pair in passages like Genesis 1.1, which says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

But there was another way to think about these two realms, one that had more to do with whose domain was whose. It made the distinction between heaven, which is the invisible realm where God lives and rules, surrounded by his angels, and earth, which is the visible realm where humanity lives. That's the sense that's captured in Psalm 115.16: The highest heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he has given to

mankind.” And in Ecclesiastes 5.2: “God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.”

When the angel says

“Glory to God in the highest heaven [literally it just says “in the highest”]
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

he’s talking in terms of this second understanding, the domain of God and the domain of humanity

According to the angel, a baby is born in Bethlehem and there are two outcomes:

In the spiritual realm, glory comes. God will be praised and honored and extoled and magnified.

And in the human realm, peace comes. God’s purposes will prevail, and human beings will flourish and find fulfillment and peace.

Glory comes to God and peace comes to humanity.

Why? Because a child is born.

Why? Because this child is like no other child.

Every other birth that has ever happened, or will ever happen, is a birth into the earthly realm of an earthly being.

But the birth of Jesus is the birth into the earthly realm of a *heavenly* being.

In that pair of words you sum up the essence of the entire Christian faith, don’t you?

Heaven came to earth.

Why is that important?

We were made for relationship with God.

And that’s how things began. Heaven and earth were not separate realms. God walked on earth. Heaven and earth were a single realm.

But then we broke our relationship with God, mutinying against our creator, pushing God off the throne and taking his place. As a consequence, heaven and earth were torn apart and separated from each other, the realm of God separated from the realm of earth,

Every religion of humanity is an effort in some way to close that gap between the realm of humanity and the realm of God.

But then, in an utterly unexpected move, God closed the gap from the other side. Heaven came to earth, the highest descended to the lowest.

Jesus is Emmanuel: God *with us*.

His name answers the deepest “where” question we can ask as human beings: Where is God to be found? As that a question you’ve ever asked? Where is God to be found?

The name of this baby answers the question: he is here *with us*.

As the angel says to Joseph in chapter one of Matthew’s gospel:

²⁰ “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. ²¹ And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

²² All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through his prophet:

²³ “Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel which means ‘God is with us.’”

This is the heart of the message of Christmas. Not Mary and Joseph coming to Bethlehem, but Heaven coming to earth. What better way to sum up the central claim of the entire Christian faith?

Heaven comes to earth in order that we might come to heaven, so that the heavenly realm, the realm where God lives and rules, might again be the realm where we live and enjoy God for eternity.

In the 1300s a devout and brilliant woman named Catherine of Siena wrote a book called *The Dialogue*, in which she imagines how God might explain the significance of this meeting of heaven and earth that took place in Bethlehem.

I have made a bridge of . . . my only begotten Son. . . . By Adam’s sinful disobedience the road was so broken up that no one could reach everlasting life.

I had created [men and women] in my image and likeness so that they might have eternal life, sharing in my being and enjoying my supreme eternal tenderness and goodness. But because of their sin they never reached this goal . . . for sin closed heaven and the door of my mercy.

With sin came at once the flood of a stormy river that beat against them constantly with its waves, bringing weariness and troubles. . . . You were all drowning, because not one of you, for all your righteousness, could reach eternal life. 58

But I wanted to undo these great troubles of yours. So I gave you a bridge, my Son, so that you could cross over the river, the stormy sea of this darksome life, without being drowned.

My only-begotten son is a bridge, as you see he is, joining the most high with the most lowly. 68

[So] the height stooped to the earth of your humanity, bridging the chasm between us and rebuilding the road. And why should he have made of himself a roadway? So that you might in truth come to the same joy as the angels. But my son's having made of himself a bridge for you could not bring you to life unless you make your way along that bridge. 59

There is no other way you can come to me. 60

Heaven has come to earth in the person of Jesus. He is the one who opens the way. Have you walked across that bridge? If not, what is keeping you?

Now we come to other important place in this passage: Bethlehem.

Luke 2.4-7

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. [He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 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.]

By the time Jesus was born, Bethlehem was already a storied place with a thousand years of significant history for God's people.

According to the Old Testament book of I Samuel, this is the town where the most important of Israel's kings, King David, was born (17.12). It was in the fields surrounding this little town that David shepherded flocks of sheep when he was a young man (16.11, 17.15). And it was here that the prophet Samuel came to David and anointed him to be the next king (16.1-13).

Because of that association with David and his line, Bethlehem is not only important looking back. It is also important looking forward. It stands at the center of expectations concerning where the promised Messiah will be born. In II Samuel God gives this promise through Nathan to David:

II Samuel 7.8-16

Now then, tell my servant David, “This is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. . . . When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you. . . . Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.”

Hundreds of years later, God echoed this promise, this time through the prophet Micah.

Micah 5.2

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 Israel,
 whose origins are from of old,
 from ancient times.

If you are at all familiar with the New Testament, you know that when the wise men came to visit King Herod to find out where the new king was to be born, this was the passage his counselors opened to.

So what do we know about Bethlehem at the time of Jesus’s birth? Until recently, almost nothing.

I mentioned in my last message that some people have called into question the reliability of Luke as a historian, but again and again his historical record continues to bear out his facts.

That’s true related to the city of Bethlehem as well.

Some people wondered if the town of Bethlehem was just made up. It wasn’t until ten years ago that we had any confirmation outside of the Bible that the town of Bethlehem even existed. That was when archeologists found an inscription referring to the city on a piece of pottery that dated to the 700 or 800s BC.

And it wasn’t until just seven years ago that there was conclusive evidence that the town was inhabited at all during the time of Jesus. Because the only pottery that was found up until that point dated either to five hundred years earlier or three hundred years later, some people wondered if the village was abandoned and the whole birth narrative had been made up. But then in 2015 someone found a whole cache of pottery from the time of Jesus right near the traditional birth site.

Turns out, once again, that Luke knew just what he was talking about.

The word that is used to describe Bethlehem is one that was used to refer to the smallest of towns. It means hamlet or village.

Ancient Bethlehem



Some archeologists estimate that there were only about 300 people living in Bethlehem at the time when Jesus was born.

This is a rendering of what Bethlehem might have looked like at the time of Jesus' birth.

The Luke 2 passage gives us two important clues about where in Bethlehem Jesus was born. Both are found in verse 7.

Luke 2.4-7

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First, it says that there was no guest room available for them.

For a long time that word was translated "room in the inn," but the word just means "upstairs room." It's the same word that was used at the end of Luke's gospel to describe the room in Jerusalem where the last supper was held.

Just like today, inns in ancient times were only found in larger cities. In small towns there were no hotels. Finding a room depended on the hospitality of those who were residents there, who might make one of their rooms available to travelers. No such room was available to Mary and Joseph.

We're also told that when Jesus was born he was laid in a manger, which is a feedbox for large animals. It's interesting that the passage doesn't actually mention a stable, but it makes sense to conclude that's where they were, because that's where you'd find a manger.

Two things about stables in ancient Bethlehem. First, because the village was located in a hilly area with lots of caves, those caves were found to be a convenient place to shelter animals.

A number of years ago I had the chance to go to Bethlehem and we went into a couple of those caves.

Stable in Bethlehem



They were musty and dark, the floors covered with layers of sheep manure and the ceilings coated with soot from hundreds of years of campfires. Each one we went into had a manger, either carved into the rock floor or built of rough stones and lined with plaster.

There's actually a high likelihood that Jesus was born in a cave. Not just because there are so many of them around Bethlehem, but also because the very first mention of the birthplace of Jesus outside of the New Testament is found in the writings of Justin in about 150AD, when he went to visit the birthplace of Jesus and was taken by the local residents to see a cave that was revered there as his birthplace. The next two historical references to his birthplace also refer to a cave.

Because of its unique location on the slopes of a cave-covered hill, Bethlehem had some unique architecture. It was not uncommon for houses to be two stories high. The ground floor, which was sometimes just a cave, was the place where the animals were kept, and the upper floor was the living area.

So we don't know if Mary and Joseph were in a cave that was part of a house and more in the village, or in a free standing cave that was farther out in the fields.

Either way, it would have been a dark and dirty hole that would have provided needed shelter but little more.

Which brings us to another important place in this story – one that isn't mentioned by Luke, but which would have been in the minds of anybody who heard the story and knew the area.

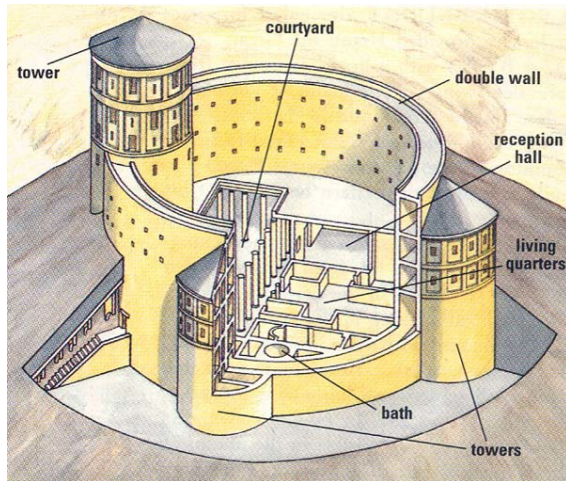
The Herodion



Just three miles away from Bethlehem, easily seen on the horizon from the village, looking like a land-locked Mont St Michel, was one of the most luxurious of King Herod's fifteen palaces called the Herodion..

The Herodian was built on a natural mound, on top of which slaves piled millions of buckets of additional rock and soil to make a man-made mountain. On top of that massive mound Herod built a huge circular palace.

The Herodion Palace



The palace had a thick double wall surrounded by four towers, the highest of which, holding Herod's extravagant living quarters and guest rooms, was seven stories high. Inside the palace were a huge bath complex with cold, warm, and hot bathing pools; a peristyle garden with exotic trees and plants; a full size Roman theater; banquet rooms; and administrative offices. Lavish mosaics covered every floor.

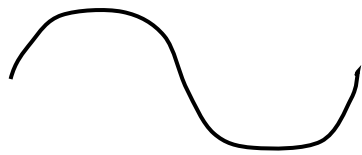
Around the base of the artificial mountain were gardens and pleasure grounds that included a pool that was half again as big as an Olympic size swimming pool, holding a million gallons of water and complete with a colonnaded artificial island,. Because it was built out in the middle of the barren wilderness, every drop of water used at the palace was brought in from mountain springs miles away.

I got to climb up to the top of the Herodian and explore the ruins of the palace and walk around the base and into the swimming pool too, and I saw one of the gorgeous mosaics they were just uncovering in the grounds surrounding the palace. There isn't really any way to communicate either the extravagance of what Herod built or the chasm between this and the stark simplicity of the caves in Bethlehem where another king arrived just a few miles away.

So another way to map the places we come across in this passage is like this . . .

Mapping Luke 2: Two Palaces

The Herodian



Bethlehem

How utterly unexpected, that the highest would reach down and touch the lowest, that the Most High God would step from heaven to earth.

But how equally unexpected that when the coming king arrived, his bed was a feed trough and that his palace was a filthy soot-covered cave, instead of the grandest and most opulent halls just a few miles away within sight of all.

I'm convinced it's not a coincidence that, more than any other biblical writer by far, Luke refers to God as Most High God:

God is the Most High God (Acts 7.48)

The Holy Spirit is the power of the Most High God (Luke 1.35)

Jesus is the Son of the Most High God (Luke 1.32, 8.28)

To God Most High be glory, but on earth, where the Most High God stepped, there is no glory at all. The Most High has become the lowest.

As Paul wrote in Philippians 2:

Philippians 2.6-7

Christ Jesus, being in very nature God,
 did not consider equality with God something to cling to;
 rather, he made himself nothing
 by taking the very nature of a servant.

Make no mistake. This was no oversight.

Had he wanted to, God could easily have arranged for Jesus to have arrived in the lavish tower suite in the Herodian rather than in a dank cave a stone's throw away.

What does it mean that Jesus, the son of the Most High God, occupied such a low place?

And what does it mean for us, his followers, that he did?

According to Luke, we too, as disciples of Jesus are called the sons of the most High God (Luke 6.35, Acts 16.7)

What does it mean that our King and Master, who directs us as his followers to pattern our lives after his example, was born into such a lowly place, and continued to occupy it all his life?

What does it say to our pursuit of position or power or privilege?

What does it say to our bent toward self-importance and entitlement?

When we frame the Christian life in terms of rights and privileges, is it possible that we sons and daughters of the Most High God have we misunderstood something?

According the Scripture, our call is to join Jesus in his outward, downward life.

In Luke 14, Jesus tells his disciples a parable:

Luke 14.7-10

“When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor. . . . But when you are invited, take the lowest place.”

For even the son of the Most High did not come to occupy the highest place.

Mark 10.45

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.

Starting back a few verses in Philippians, Paul writes:

Philippians 2.3-7

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to cling to; rather, he made himself nothing.

The Most High God came to earth on a downward trajectory in a life not of self importance but of self sacrifice. Jesus models a downward life for us. Is his life the pattern of yours? If not, what is keeping you?

RESPONSE – HIGH KING OF HEAVEN/JESUS WE LOVE YOU

How, oh how could it be
Oh, oh sacred myst'ry
The high King of Heaven
Born low to save me