



# CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

## SERIES I

### THE GOSPEL OF LUKE AND ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Lesson 4 Commentary Luke 2:1-20

Lesson 5 Questions Luke 2:21-40

### THE BIRTH OF JESUS AND HIS FIRST EIGHT DAYS

Luke 2:1-20

#### THE BIRTH OF MARY'S FIRST-BORN SON (Luke 2:1-7)

##### A. A Savior Who is Christ the Lord

**1. The Date.** Luke knows that Jesus' birth has world significance, has significance for all until the end of time, so he carefully pinpoints this important date. It changed the way we count our time: "Ad Dominum—the Year of THE LORD. (Today A.D. is replaced here and there by C.E. [the Common Era] or B.C.E. [Before the Common Era]). To us, this C.E. can mean Christian Era.

So Luke refers to the ruler of the whole known world: Augustus Caesar, the emperor of Rome from 30 B.C. to 14 A.D. His time is called the PAX ROMANA, a time when peace was not disturbed by war because no conquered nations dared to take on the Roman Empire. Yet a baby born in weakness and poverty will conquer Rome without a shot. The governor of Syria, the province of the Jewish lands, is also given his place in history. The most probable explanation for the census is that it was ordered in view of taxation. It began in

Palestine as early as 8-6 B.C. as part of a general census of the empire. Quirinius, governor of Syria, concluded it in 6 A.D. Jesus was certainly born before Herod's death in 4 B.C., possibly in 8-6 B.C. A monk in the 6th century called Exiguus, dated "the Christian era" through a false calculation. More exactly, it began around 4 B.C.

Mentioning the Syrian Province in his account of Jesus' birth might have brought the event closer for Luke's readers in Antioch in Syria, which was the center of the Church's missionary thrust in Luke's time. It was here that the disciples of Jesus were first called "Christians" (Acts 11:26).

**2. The Place.** There is great theological importance to the fact that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, called here the city of David. Luke's intent is to show his readers that Jesus is the Son of David, a term for a descendant; as 1 Samuel shows in Chapter 16:1-13, when the prophet Samuel anoints David as the king of Israel chosen by God. In Micah 5:14 is another important prophecy that identified Jesus. Luke 18:37-39 tells of a Jew calling Jesus "Son of David."

**3. The Event.** Jesus' birth is that of a poor man, a simple and humble event contrasting with the political world about Him. Jesus' messianic royalty has nothing to do with worldly aspirations and ways of ruling. See 22:24-27 in Luke. How do each of us, the Church of today, fit these words of our leader, Jesus?

Jesus, Mary's son, was also a FIRST-BORN. This is a major title of Jesus and refers actually to the Father. The passion-resurrection is thus in the birth story as the New Testament writers teach: Colossians 1:15-18, Hebrews 1:6-8, and Revelations 1:5. Among the Jews, "first-born" meant the preferential status of the eldest son rather than implying other children; it could mean the only son. Authority, responsibility, succession, belonged to the first-born; he belonged to God, was "holy," and had to be redeemed back to the family (See Numbers 3:47f).

So Luke shows us Jesus as conceived by the Holy Spirit; reigning without end, transcending history; Jesus as Savior, Messiah, Lord. Mary's Son is the first-born from the dead (first one to rise from the dead), LORD of the universe. This is what we must teach the children and remind ourselves, at Christmas.

**B. Swaddling Clothes.** When a Jewish mother welcomed a new-born she wrapped him in long strips of cloth customary in Palestine, so that the child would grow straight and strong. What other time did Mary help wrap Jesus in a long cloth, that ties Bethlehem to the Savior role? Here, these clothes illustrate the poverty and humility of Jesus' birth. Yet there is a subtle reminder of His royalty—a parallel to the birth of King Solomon: "In swaddling clothes and with constant care I was nurtured, for no king has any different origin or birth" (Wisdom 7:4-5).

She "placed him in a manger," a feeding trough for animals in the caves, indicating that David's city was not able to offer hospitality to the new king. The Greek word used by Luke

"kataluma" is the same word he used for the room of the Last Supper. So this small cave room points to the room which became the place of the betrayal, evoking again the Passion. Would we ever see these subtle meanings Luke must have thought of, if we did not study as we are doing? Jesus later was to say, as a man, "The Son of Man has no place to lay his head." So He went on to other towns, finally to the Father, His ultimate destiny—and ours.

**C. Shepherds and Angels.** Of all the people on the earth, heaven sent God's messengers to the lowest class among the People of God. The shepherds were generally poor and to some extent outcasts, considered by the "respectable" to be ignorant, dirty, and lawless. Like the hated tax collectors, Jesus chose them over others, and they were ready for the Good News.

The "glory of the Lord" shone around them and His angel stood over them. They were terrified, but from the skies came a melodious voice, "Be not afraid... good news... great joy..., a joy to be shared by all people!"

What was this "glory of the Lord"? In the Old Testament it is associated with the great redeeming acts of God (Exodus 40:34-35). Likewise, God's messengers always had to quiet the fears of these mortals in the presence of greater powers than theirs. Luke is fond of mentioning this religious awe: Luke 1:29-30; 2:9-10; 5:8-10; 7:15-16; Acts 2:43.

#### **D. Parallels Between the Annunciation to Mary and to the Shepherds**

<u>To Mary</u>	<u>To Shepherds</u>
Angel(s) appeared: 1:26	2:10
said to her: 1:30	to them: 2:10
Do not be afraid: 1:30	2:10

You will bring forth: 1:31    There has been  
born: 2:11

Jesus, Savior: 1:31            A Savior: 2:11

Son of the Most High: The        Messiah,  
1:32                                Lord: 2:11

The “good news” (Greek, *euaggelizo*) alludes to Isaiah 40:9 and 52:7. Also the role of John the Baptist in the Messiah’s salvation.

“The Messiah has been born for you;” the contents of the Gospel are now revealed; the promises down through generations about a Davidic Messiah, the Lord’s anointed, who is himself Savior and LORD, are realized. For Luke, the most significant title is **SAVIOR**, for the saving of our race is one of the main themes of his Gospel. He alone of the Synoptic writers uses the title and the noun “soteria”—he uses the verb save 30 times in his Gospel and Acts—more than the combined number in Matthew and Mark.

**E. Sign.** “Let this be a sign to you... (verse 12) in a manger you will find an infant in swaddling clothes.” When the shepherds found this, they understood that God had sent a new birth, a Savior, and told them first. They knew that this Infant was a Savior for all. The reality behind a manger, a place for food, meant that this child is to be offered as nourishment for a flock. He feeds us even with His Body in the Mystery of the Eucharist; we are Jesus’ “flock.”

For Luke, the shepherds themselves are a SIGN. They represent the disciples of the Lord, the early Christian community. How?

**F. The Shepherds.** The shepherds are the first to hear the gospel. It comes to them from heaven just as it did at the annunciations to Zechariah and Mary. The shepherds are also the first to respond to the gospel. They go, they see, and understand. They experience Jesus.

The shepherds are the first to proclaim the gospel, and all who heard them were astonished at what they were told. The good news was for everyone.

The shepherds glorify and praise God for all they saw and heard. Their response is an echo of the angels’ praise. It anticipates those who would later hear Jesus, as in Luke 4:15. It was a disciples’ response (Luke 19:37) and the response of the centurion who saw Jesus die on the cross. It was the response of the early Christians (Acts 2:47).

The shepherds’ flock is related to the Church. Jesus calls his disciples “little flock” when He tells them not to fear. Paul uses this image twice when he leaves the elders at Miletus and speaks to them lovingly. The shepherds and their flocks call to mind the Church and its “elders,” the Pope and Bishops, and the Bishops’ assistants, the priests. The shepherds’ story is the story of the Church in miniature. Can you find yourself in what the Shepherds did as soon as they heard the Good News?

**G. The Manger.** When Mary places her Son in the manger, she offers Him as nourishment for the flock, a symbolic expression of the good news that a Savior, Christ the Lord, has come for all. She thus summarizes her role as servant of the Lord (Luke 1:38). The manger here reveals Jesus’ entire life, presence, and teaching, as nourishment for the Church.

Since wood was scarce in Palestine, stone was the common substance, and the art of cutting and trimming it was highly developed; wood, then, was too expensive for an animal trough; again Jesus came as a poor child, though He could have had all the best the world can give. This might be good to teach children of today who have too much and can not appreciate it or care for it. Everything Jesus does in His life, even as an infant, is to teach us, to lead us to follow Him.

It was by giving His life that Jesus saved us; it is in giving Himself in nourishment that He cares for us. At the end of Acts, Paul's words to all on board the ship during a great storm, present the relationship between the breaking of bread and salvation (Acts 27:33-35). "Until the day began to dawn, Paul kept urging all to take some food. He said, 'Today is the fourteenth day that you have been waiting, going hungry and eating nothing. I urge you, therefore, to take some food; it will help you survive. Not a hair of the head of anyone of you will be lost.' When he said this he took bread, gave thanks to God in front of them all, broke it, and began to eat."

**H. Mary.** Twice Luke mentioned that Mary treasured the words and events of Jesus and pon-

dered them in her heart. All who truly love the Scriptures, the words and deeds of God, will do the same. They nourish themselves as faithfully on God's word, as they do on earthly meals, regularly. Mary models what we need to do with the word of God we hear and read, so that it may be made flesh in us and we can be formed into the image of Jesus. (See 2 Corinthians 3:18 and Romans 8:29.) Mary is our model for prayer as she ponders in her heart. The early desert Christians, fleeing the corruption of Rome and its empire, went to quiet, deserted places, and "descended with the mind into the heart." We too, could find answers to our problems, discover the goodness of God, grow in courage and goodness, and become happy no matter what happens. "Great joy to be shared by all!"

\* \* \* \* \*



- d. As you reflect on these incidents in Jesus' life, what do they say for your life?

Day 4 Read Luke 2:25-32, Isaiah 46:13.

- a. What was special about Simeon's holiness?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- b. What does this holy man of the Old Testament announce about the child he held in his arms? Whom does he include besides Israel in the Salvation the Child will bring?

Day 5 Read Luke 2:33-35, Romans 9:33.

- a. How do you interpret Simeon's prophecy to Mary in Luke 2:34?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- b. Read Luke 2:36-38. In Anna's response to Jesus, what shows us that she may be the first one to announce Christ to others?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- c. Consider if you would have done as Anna did. Can you share a time or a way you were Anna in some way?

Day 6 Read Luke 2:39-40.

- a. What do you understand by "wisdom"? (See book of Wisdom 1:4, 6-7.)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- b. In this week's Scripture readings, give one verse that helped you. How?