



WORLDVIEW MADE PRACTICAL
Volume 10 Number 46
December 9, 2015

Searching for the King! Part 1
The Shepherds: "Let Us Go and See!"

By Tal Davis

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. 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. (Luke 2: 1-20 NASB)

"Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?!"

2015 is the fiftieth anniversary of the premier of Charles Schultz's classic Christmas TV special "A Charlie Brown Christmas." The above quote is the famous cry of poor Charlie Brown as he lamented the commercialism and glitziness of Christmas that he saw all around him – even in the Christmas play he was asked to direct. He was answered firmly by his wise young friend, Linus, who went to front of the stage and recited Luke 2:8-14. "That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown."

And so it is. Luke 2:1-20 is the well known story of Jesus' birth we all learned as children. Verses 1-7 contain the account of Mary and Joseph going from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register for the census called by Caesar Augustus. Joseph, of course, was from the house (i.e. descendant) of King David. So he and his pregnant wife went down from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea. Bethlehem is Hebrew

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for "House of Bread," and was the childhood home of David's family. Jesse was his father. While they were there Mary gave birth to Jesus and she laid him in a manger (feeding trough).

This was all in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Micah 5:2 says: "[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." (NASB)

However, in verse 8, Luke shifts the scene from Bethlehem to the nearby Judean hillsides. There, a group of Shepherds were guarding their sheep against the dangers of wild animals or thieves. Today, we don't think much about people being professional shepherds. Years ago, the Candid Camera TV show pulled a hidden camera prank on a couple of high school senior boys. Their school guidance counselor called them in to his office, supposedly to give them the results of a career proficiency test they had taken. The counselor sat them down, and with a straight face said, "The results of your tests indicate that you boys are best qualified to work as shepherds." You can imagine the shocked look on the boys' faces.

In Bible times shepherds were common in the agrarian society of Judea. Remember, King David had been a shepherd before God chose him to succeed Saul as king (see the 23rd Psalm). In this account, Luke described the announcement, to the shepherds, of the birth of the Messiah King, and how they reacted. Two things about the shepherds made them very special.

First, the shepherds were the first people to hear that Christ was born in Bethlehem. In verse 9, we are

told that an angel of the Lord appeared to them while they were out in the field. Luke says they were "terribly frightened." Think about it, wouldn't you be afraid? Let's face it, its not every day you see an angel. That was just as true then as it is now. Some people read the Bible and think that angels came and went all the time in those days. Actually, visible activities of angels in biblical times were quite rare, often hundreds of years apart.

Have you ever wondered just why God chose to announce the Savior's birth first to lowly shepherds? Why did He not initially inform the priests, kings, or philosophers? Those would be the most natural ones to address, wouldn't they?

There were good reasons for God to go first to the shepherds. One explanation lies in the kind of king Jesus was going to become. We hear a lot of talk in pop culture reports about Prince William and his wife Kate. William is now second in line to ascend the throne as King of England when his grandmother, Queen Elizabeth II, and his father, Crown Prince Charles, both pass away. Obviously, the Kings and Queens of modern England do not have the political or military power their pre 20th Century predecessors possessed. Nonetheless, they remain a symbol of the power and greatness of that nation.

Jesus did not come to be a political or military ruler. He came to be the Savior for all people, from their sins. His kingdom is not of this world. Thus the shepherds represented the common people for whom Jesus came to give His life.

Another reason the angels went to the shepherds was because of the kinds of people they were. Shepherds were often regarded as despised and morally unclean. They were considered untrustworthy, were shunned socially, were badly paid, and were just plain

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poor. They were considered ritually unclean and so were not even allowed to enter the Jerusalem temple. Despite their social standing, the angel, nonetheless, spoke to them and reassured 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." (vs. 10-12 NASB)

The shepherds then saw multitudes of angels praising God. What they were saying is stated in Verse 14. You may have wondered why various English translations report it differently. The best known traditional wording is what Linus quoted from the King James Version (and is in the New KJV): "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

Most newer versions have a different emphasis in the translation. The New American Standard Bible says: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

The New International Version has it this way: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

The Holman Christian Standard Bible says: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people He favors!"

So why the difference? The footnotes from the online New American Bible (revised edition) explain it this way. "'On earth peace to those on whom his favor rests' (or 'whom He is pleased'): the peace that results from the Christ event is for those whom God has favored with his grace. This reading is found in the oldest representatives of the West-

ern and Alexandrian text traditions and is the preferred one; the (late) Byzantine text tradition, on the other hand, reads: 'on earth peace, good will toward men.'"

(<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+2%3A14&version=NABRE>)

The issue focuses on the syntax form of the Greek word *eudokia*, translated "good will" or "favor." The question is whether it is a nominative form, as used by the KJV and found in some late manuscripts (*eudokia*), or the genitive form used in most modern versions and found in earlier manuscripts (*eudokias*).

Regardless of which rendering is correct, the point is that the Judean shepherds were privileged to be first to hear of Jesus birth, and to go see Him. Jesus came to bring salvation to all people, no-matter what their social, economic, or religious status. But that is not the only reason the shepherds were special.

The shepherds were the first people to tell others the Gospel (the Good News) of Jesus Christ. After the shepherds heard the angel's announcement and praises, they immediately ran to the place they were told the child would be found. There they found the new born Jesus lying in an animal feeding trough.

Mary and Joseph were probably surprised to see shepherds in Bethlehem. The herdsmen told them what the angel had said about Jesus, so they worshiped Him. But that's not all they did. "The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them." (vs. 20)

The shepherds could not be silent about what they had seen and heard. They felt a great compulsion and responsibility to proclaim what they had witnessed. The same re-

sponsibility is given to us. God wants us to tell others about Jesus.

Its sad to say, but we live a time of "Politically Correct Christmas." We all know how restrictions are put on businesses and schools to make them ignore the spiritual basis for Christmas (or the "Winter Holidays" – whatever that means). Thus, Christmas is a strategic time to share about Christ with adherents

of non-Christian faiths, as well as our secular friends, co-workers, school mates, and family members. Like the shepherds proclaimed, and Linus told Charlie Brown, we need boldly to say, "That's what Christmas is all about!"

In the next installment, we will examine the significance of the visit of the Wise men (Magi) who came to see the child Jesus.

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