

# Luke's Version of Jesus' Birth

From the Bart Ehrman Blog at <https://ehrmanblog.org/>

Now that I've had several preliminary posts about the accounts of Jesus' birth, I can get into some of the details from the surviving texts. As I've indicated, it is only Matthew and Luke that tell the tales of the infancy narrative, and the annual "Christmas Pageant" that so many of us grew up seeing is in fact a conflation of the two accounts, making one mega-account out of two that are so different up and down the line. And so, the Annunciation to Mary is in Luke, the dream of Joseph in Matthew; the shepherds are in Luke, the wise men in Matthew; the trip to Bethlehem is in Luke, the Flight to Egypt is in Matthew, and so forth and so on. You can compare them yourself, up and down the line, and see the differences. In this post I want to focus on Luke's account. Then I will look at Matthew's. And then I will compare the two in a couple of key points in order to show that the differences between them are not simply different aspects of the same story – the accounts in fact are at odds with one another in rather important ways.

Luke's account begins with the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist to Elizabeth and Zechariah, followed by the Annunciation of Gabriel to Mary that she will conceive without having sex, through the Holy Spirit. Mary visits Elizabeth, breaks into song, John the Baptist is born, and Zechariah speaks a prophecy. All of that is in chapter 1, and a lot could be said about it (and \*has\* been said about it!). But for the purposes of these posts, I'm more interested in what happens in ch. 2.

Starting in 2:1 we're told that there was a decree that went out from Caesar Augustus that "all the world should be registered," and we're told that this was the first registration, and that it happened while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And so everyone went to their own homes to register (presumably this is for a tax). And since Joseph – who with Mary lived in the northern city of Nazareth — was descended from King David, he went to Bethlehem in Judea. The text doesn't say this, but if you do a Mapquest, you'll find that it's a journey of about 60 miles, south.

Mary by this time is fully pregnant, and while she's in Bethlehem, she gives birth to Jesus; and since there was "no room in the inn" she laid him in a manger. We're not told if they are in a stable out back, a cave, or something else.

There is then the scene of the angels appearing to the shepherds, who come to see the savior/messiah who has been born. Eight days later the child is circumcised. And “when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses “came, Joseph and Mary went to the Temple to offer the required sacrifice. This is referring to a law in Leviticus 12, that after 32 days a woman who has been made ceremonially impure by giving birth is to offer a sacrifice for cleansing. Infant Jesus is recognized there by Simeon and Anna. And when they did their sacrifice, they then returned home to Nazareth, where Jesus was then raised.

It’s a terrific story, and it clearly has one overarching purpose: it is to show that Jesus was born in Bethlehem even though – as everyone knew – he actually came from Nazareth. It answers the question: how could Jesus be the messiah of God if he was from Nazareth? Answer: he actually was born somewhere else, the city of David, his ancestor: Bethlehem.

We will see later that this account appears to contradict, in several ways, the story of Matthew, which also has Jesus born in Bethlehem but raised in Nazareth. But for now I just want to ponder Luke’s story. For it has long caused problems for historians interested in knowing what really happened when Jesus was born. And whatever really did happen, it almost certainly is not what Luke tells us. There are enormous historical problems here.

For one thing, there is a major problem with this “first registration” under Caesar Augustus. We have no record of any such thing (first or second), even though we have good documentation about the major events during Augustus’s reign. And this would have been a major event indeed. Luke indicates “all the world” had to register. Well, that can’t be right: he must mean “all the Roman Empire.” But even that defies belief, and not just because it is never mentioned in any historical source. (Point worth making: this is not said to be a local registration, but one for the “entire world”) Are we supposed to imagine that everyone in the Roman empire had to register in the town of their ancestors, the way Joseph did? Joseph’s ancestor David came from Bethlehem, so that’s where he registers. But wait a second. Why does he go to the town where David came from? Why not from the town that David’s great-great-great grandfather came from? Why is he stopping with David? Something odd is going on here.

It’s important to note that the text does not say that Joseph himself was originally from Bethlehem. He registers there because he is from the Davidic line, and David was born there. But how many thousands and thousands of people in Joseph’s time could in one way or another

trace their line back to David? Moreover, how would anyone really know? Contrary to what is often said and thought, there simply were not reliable genealogies back then.

But there's yet a bigger problem. David lived a thousand years earlier than Joseph. Are we to imagine that everyone in the Roman empire is returning to the home of their ancestors from a thousand years earlier to register for this census? And there's no record of the massive migrations involved in any historical source? They just forgot to mention that part? Even more, how is it even possible? Imagine that to avoid the current fiscal cliff, the Congress works out a deal that we all need to register for a new tax, and the requirement is that we register where our ancestors from a thousand years ago came from. Where will \*you\* go?

There are more problems with this account. The most famous is the fact that this could not have been, contrary to what the text says, when Quirinius was the governor of Syria, if it was also "in the days of King Herod of Judea" (1:5). We know from inscriptions and the Jewish historian Josephus that Quirinius did not become governor until ten years after Herod died.

What we have here is not a historical account, but something else. I'll explore what that something else is in later posts.

## **Bethlehem & Nazareth in Luke: Where Was Jesus Really Born?**

From the Bart Ehrman Blog at <https://ehrmanblog.org/>

Yesterday I discussed Matthew's account of how it is that Jesus came to be born in Bethlehem, if in fact he "came" from Nazareth. For Matthew it is because Joseph and Mary were originally from Bethlehem. That was their home town. And the place of Jesus' birth. Two or more years after his birth, they relocated to Nazareth in Galilee, over a hundred miles to the north, to get away from the rulers of Judea who were thought to be out to kill the child. (That in itself, I hardly need to say, seems completely implausible, that a local king is eager to kill a peasant child out of fear that he will wrest the kingdom away from him....)

Luke has a completely different account of how it happened. In Luke, Bethlehem is

decidedly not Joseph and Mary's home town. The whole point of the story is that it is not. They are from Nazareth. But then how does Jesus come to be born somewhere else? In the most famous passage of the birth narratives, we are told that it is because of a "decree" that went out from the ruler of the Roman Empire, Caesar Augustus. "All the world" had to be "enrolled" – that is, there was a world-wide census. We are told that this was the "first enrollment" made when Quirinius was the governor of Syria.

Since Joseph is "of the house and lineage of David," and since David (his ancestor from about 1000 years earlier) had been born in Bethlehem, Joseph had to register for the census in Bethlehem. In other words, everyone in the Roman empire is returning to the home of their ancestors (from a 1000 years earlier??? Really? "the entire world?" And everyone in the Roman empire is doing this? How are we to imagine the massive shifts of population for this census? And no other source even bothers to mention it???) (But pursue the questions further: why does Joseph have to register in the town of his ancestor [David] from 1000 years before? Why not an ancestor from 1200 years earlier? or 700 years earlier? or 100 years earlier? Does this even make sense? Why David in particular?).

In any event, since Joseph has to register in Bethlehem, and since Mary is his betrothed, they make a trip to Bethlehem. And it just so happens that this is when Mary goes into labor. So she gives birth to Jesus in Bethlehem. Since there is no room for them in the inn, they lay the child in a cattle manger, and the shepherds come to worship him.

Eight days later they have him circumcised. And then, since they are right next door anyway, 32 days after birth they go to the Temple in Jerusalem and perform the offering for Mary's ritual cleansing "according to what is said in the Law of Moses" (referring to Leviticus 12), and then, "when they had performed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth."

So even though Jesus was raised in Nazareth (starting when he was just under two months old), he was born in Bethlehem.

But what about the wise men from Matthew who come to find them in a house in Bethlehem, over a year later? Moreover, if Luke is right that they return to Nazareth a month after Jesus' birth, how can Matthew be right that they fled to Egypt (they're obviously doing this on foot, so it would, well, take a while), and that they don't return until much later after Herod dies. In Matthew they want to return from Egypt to their hometown Bethlehem, but can't because of Archelaus. But here in Luke their home town isn't Bethlehem at all, but Nazareth.

There are other irreconcilable problems with Luke's account. How could this have been the first enrollment when Quirinius was the governor of Syria? Quirinius was not the Syrian governor when Herod was the Judean king. Not even close. Quirinius did not become the

governor unto 6 CE. But Herod died in 4 BCE.

So what's going on here? What's going on is that both Matthew and Luke want Jesus to be born in Bethlehem even though they both know that he came from Nazareth. Both accounts are filled with implausibilities on their own score (a star leading "wise men" to the east – they wouldn't be very wise if they thought that a star could lead them in a straight line anywhere — and stopping over a house; a census of the entire Roman world that could not have happened); and they contradict each other up and down the map.

My view is that neither story is historical, but that both have an ultimate objective to explain how Jesus could be the messiah if he was from Nazareth instead of Bethlehem. So they (or their sources) came up with stories to get him born in Bethlehem. These stories are meant to show that Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Micah 5:2, and Matthew himself indicates in clear terms, by quoting the very prophecy.

And so what conclusion can we draw? To me it seems all fairly straightforward. Jesus was not really born in Bethlehem.

OK then, if not there, where? He came from Nazareth. I can't think of a single good reason to think he wasn't born there.