

## BIBLE MAP #6

### Isaiah 11:1-10: Responsive Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19: Luke 2:1-7

This is the sixth and final week in our message series BIBLE MAP, where our goal has been to make the Bible: Meaningful: Applicable and Practical. Today we're going to take some of what we've been learning and apply it to the very familiar story of Christmas that is found in the Gospel of Luke.

Let's look at the big picture first. We learned a few weeks ago that every book of the Bible is different. That is true of the four books that are called gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They are all accounts of "the good news" of Jesus Christ but they tell that good news in different ways. That's why the gospels, when you read them, seem similar and different at the same time.

Matthew wrote primarily for Jews. That's why he quotes from the Old Testament so much, and especially from the prophets. His task is to reveal Jesus as the long awaited Messiah of God's chosen people, the Hebrews.

Mark was written, not to prove anything, but as an instruction manual for new converts to Christianity, who knew little or nothing about Jesus and who he was.

Luke was written mainly for Gentiles, or non-Jews. So Luke tries to avoid using Jewish terms. For example, whereas Matthew refers to Jesus he often uses the Jewish word "Rabbi". Luke, as a Gentile himself, prefers the Greek word "Master".

John's gospel is the theological gospel. John was a deep thinker, who always sought out the spiritual meaning of the things Jesus said and did. That's why John's gospel is often harder to understand than the other gospels.

Now our Scripture today is from Luke's gospel so here's some more background about Luke. Luke was a doctor. He was well educated. He had an eye for detail. He spent two years with Paul, when Paul was in prison. When he wrote it is clear that he wrote with care. He often gives us historical reference points. And he is the gospel writer who gave us the account of the birth of Jesus with which we are most familiar, Luke 2:1-7 We just read that passage, so today we're going to look at it in some detail.

Luke begins by grounding the Christmas story in history.

***"At that time Emperor Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Roman Empire. <sup>2</sup> When this first census took place,***

***Quirinius was the governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> Everyone, then, went to register himself, each to his own hometown.***

Emperor Caesar Augustus has often been called the founder of the Roman Empire because it was during his rule that this empire expanded dramatically. Augustus ruled from 27BC to 14AD, which includes the period during which Jesus was born. The story begins:

***"Emperor Augustus order a census to be taken throughout the Roman Empire."***

In the Roman Empire censuses were taken periodically with two goals in mind. To assess taxation. And to determine those who were eligible for compulsory military service. Now the Jews were exempt from military service so the census in Palestine would have been mainly for taxation purpose.

Such censuses were taken by the Romans every 14 years, and we actually have documents from every census taken between AD20 to AD 270! If the census cycle held good in the Roman province of Syria, which included Judea, the census Luke mentions was probably held in 8BC. This would then be the year that Jesus was born.

***<sup>2</sup> When this first census took place, Quirinius was the governor of Syria.***

Now it is possible that Luke made a factual error here. Historians say that Quirinius did not actually become governor of the Roman province of Syria until AD6. However, we also know that Quirinius held a high official government post in the region from 10BC to 7BC, which spans the time when this census took place. Or perhaps Luke is referring to the census in 6AD, which would make that the year Jesus was born, in which case his historical facts both hold true. But biblical historians prefer the earlier date.

But biblical scholars also suggest Luke may simply have got his facts wrong for no other reason than the fact that Quirinius had been in government service in Syria for a long time before becoming governor, so Luke may have simply assumed he was governor during the census, or perhaps he misread his research notes. It happens. The choir, for example, were quick to point out to me recently that when I had typed out the words to one song we were signing I had written "heavenly hot", instead of "heavenly host!" I knew better but mistakes happen!

In fact, it is a factual error like this that actually makes the Bible so believable. Think of a traffic accident that is witnessed by four eye

witnesses. Each person sees the event from their own perspective depending on where they were standing, what angle they saw things from, what they were doing at the time and with whatever other biases they may bring. For example, an eyewitness who has never driven a vehicle may see an accident differently from the one who drives regularly. If all four eye-witnesses accounts were exactly the same that testimony is undoubtedly suspect and you would wonder whether the witnesses had made up the story. Luke's simple mistake makes his testimony more, not less believable.

***Everyone, then, went to register himself, each to his own hometown.***

Now usually the census did not require this. Like our modern day censuses most were about where you lived now so the tax collector could find you, or so the military could find you for your compulsory military service. However, from time to time the historical record shows that the kind of census outlined in the Bible did actually happen. Here is an actual government edict from a Roman census in Egypt:

**Gaius Vibius Maximus, Prefect of Egypt orders: "Seeing time has come for the house to house census, it is necessary to compel all those who for any cause whatsoever are residing outside their districts to return to their own homes, that they may both carry out the regular order of the census, and may also diligently attend to the cultivation of their allotments."**

The key phrase there, is that people who were "outside their districts" had to return home. In Judea the old tribal ancestries were still very strong in the time of Jesus and so it is completely likely that men would be ordered to return to the headquarters of their tribe in order to be counted. For Joseph, who was from the house of David, that would be Bethlehem. The very fact that Bethlehem was so busy that there was no room in the inn suggests that this is because all Joseph's tribe had come home for the census! The story in Luke continues:

**<sup>4</sup> Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to the town of Bethlehem in Judea, the birthplace of King David. Joseph went there because he was a descendant of David.**

The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was 80 miles. It would not be a straight route as good Jews would not travel through Samaria but would take the long way around. For us this distance would take an hour and a half by car with a stop at Timmies along the way! Back then a fit man could travel perhaps 20 miles a day making it a 4 day journey. Not so for Mary and Joseph. Mary was very pregnant. The roads were rough. They probably

walked the whole way. The journey would take at least 8-10 days. They probably camped along the side of the road at night.

It's possible, of course, that they had a donkey for Mary to ride but Scripture makes no mention of that. The donkey does not appear in Christian literature until an apocryphal gospel called *The Postevangelium of James*, written around AD145, long after the other four gospels. It does say this about Joseph, **"he saddled the ass, and set her upon it"**

So the idea of Mary riding on a donkey has been around for most of Christianity but we have to be clear that it is not mentioned in the New Testament.

**<sup>4</sup> Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to the town of Bethlehem in Judea, the birthplace of King David. Joseph went there because he was a descendant of David.**

At the time of Jesus, Bethlehem was just a little town, six miles south of Jerusalem. In the olden days it was called Ephrathah. That explains the reference in the Old Testament prophecy of Micah 5:2:

**"The Lord says, "Bethlehem Ephrathah, you are one of the smallest towns in Judah, but out of you I will bring a ruler for Israel, whose family line goes back to ancient times."**

The name Bethlehem means "*House of Bread*", an appropriate title for a town that stood in fertile countryside, surrounded by hills. An appropriate birth place, one concludes, for Jesus who was later to describe himself as the **"The Bread of Life"**.

Bethlehem had a long history. It was there that Jacob had buried his wife Rachel. It was there that Ruth had married Boaz. But above all Bethlehem was the hometown of King David. For Jewish people this was its claim to fame. And it was in Bethlehem, according to the prophet Micah, that David's greater son, the Messiah, was expected to be born. Luke continues:

**<sup>5</sup> (Joseph) went to register with Mary, who was promised in marriage to him.**

Mary was promised in marriage to Joseph. She was betrothed to him. Betrothal lasted for a year in Jewish culture and it was just as binding as marriage. It could be dissolved only by divorce. That explains the line in Matthew's gospel that tells us that when Joseph discovered Mary was pregnant, and knowing he was not the father:

**Joseph was a man who always did what was right, but he did not want to disgrace Mary publicly, so he made plans to break the engagement** (i.e. get a divorce) **privately.**

By the way, if the man died before the actual marriage, the woman he was betrothed to was in the eyes of the law called a "*virgin widow*".

Luke finishes this part of the story:

**She was pregnant, <sup>6</sup> and while they were in Bethlehem, the time came for her to have her baby. <sup>7</sup> She gave birth to her first son, wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger—there was no room for them to stay in the inn.**

Now this inn was not a Best Western, or given its location in the Middle East, not even a Best Eastern! Bethlehem today only has a population of around 25,000 people but due to the influx of visitors and pilgrims it now has over 30 hotels. Not so in Jesus day. The population was estimated to be around 800 or less, and there may well have been only one or two small inns.

We're not even sure what that inn looked like. We assume it may have had a few rooms but even that might not be true. Often all the "innkeeper" did was supply fodder for the animals of travellers and a fire for them to cook over in the courtyard. Travellers usually brought, or bought, their own food. "**No room in the inn**" might simply mean that the courtyard of the inn was so crowded that there was no room for anyone else to fit in there. And if the inn did have a few rooms you can be sure, in a tribal society, that the elders of the tribe would be in those rooms, not a lowly member of the tribe like Joseph.

**<sup>7</sup> She gave birth to her first son, wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger.**

Did you know that Scripture mentions a manger but it doesn't actually mention a stable? And the word "manger" simply refers to a place where animals feed. This might have been in a stable, or it might have been outside in the courtyard. Neither are there any reference to all the other animals that our hymn writers have spoken about, or we add into our Nativity plays. You know the kind of hymns I mean. *Away in a Manger* where "the cattle are lowing". *Jesus, our brother, kind and good* where "The friendly animals around him stood." Or in *Infant holy, infant lowly* where we find that "Oxen lowing." You get the point. Our hymns make an understandable poetic connection - a manger leads to a stable which leads

to animals in the stable - but Scripture doesn't actually mention them. Oh, by the way Scripture doesn't even mention an innkeeper!

It is, therefore, possible that this manager, this feeding station for animals, was outside. Or it could have been in the lower level of a house because in those days animals were often brought into the house at night to protect them from wild animals and thieves. Perhaps one of Joseph's relatives, for he must have had some in Bethlehem, had pity on Mary and brought the lower level of their home where the animals were kept.

Interestingly, when Matthew (2:11) tells about the Magi finding Jesus it says this:

**"They went into the house... knelt down and worshipped him"**

We read on:

**(Mary) wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger.**

The King James Version calls these cloths "**swaddling clothes**". The old English word "swaddle" means to "wrap a baby in garments or cloth". Or if you like, to wrap the baby in a receiving blanket, with the purpose of keeping the newborn warm and secure.

We don't have time to look at the rest of the Christmas story in detail but, as you know, Luke goes on to tell about the angels appearing to the shepherds and announcing the birth of a Saviour. Now do you remember that I mentioned the fertile land around Bethlehem and how it was surrounded by hills? These hills were full of great grazing land.

You'll also remember that in the Temple in Jerusalem, eight miles away, morning and evening sacrifices were made of a lamb that had no blemishes on it. We do know that the Temple authorities had its own private flocks of sheep in order to have a steady supply of these perfect offerings, and we know from ancient accounts that these flocks were likely pastured around Bethlehem. Could it be that it was the shepherds who were looking after the Temple lambs who were to be sacrificed for the sins of the people that were the first to see Jesus who is described later by John the Baptist in John Chapter 1:29 as the "**Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world**"? We don't know for sure, but it is entirely possible.

One final thing. There was a tradition in Israel that when a boy was born, the local musicians would gather at the house of the newborn to welcome him with simple music. But Jesus wasn't at home when he was born. But did

God let the moment pass unnoticed? No, he sent a heavenly host of angels to sing about his birth:

***Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased"***

This Advent season let us then sing our praises to the God who loved us so much that He came in Jesus – Emmanuel, God with us – to be our Saviour.

### **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Holy God,

We stand in awe when we consider who you are and all you have done for us.

We marvel that you entered our world and came to live among us in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.

We remember how you humbled yourself and accepted death on the cross for our salvation.

You are our peace.

We pray, today, as Scripture commands, for the peace of Jerusalem, and for peace in every nation and for peace between nations.

We pray that hatred, prejudice, racism and anger in the hearts of all people will be burned away by your refining fire, O God, and that love for one another will replace it.

We pray for peace in the work place and in the boardroom, in our schools and in our homes, in our families and in our friendships, in our churches and in our communities. Teach us, Lord, with all our personal differences to treat one another with respect and to work together for the common good.

We pray for peace for the dying as they enter the last month, or days or moments of their lives.

We pray for peace for the troubled, whatever the cause of their trouble, that they may find their hope in you.

We pray peace for those known to us who are going through a difficult journey at this point in their lives.

And we pray peace for ourselves for we are all broken people but we also pray as those who have found Jesus Christ to the means of our hope, our peace, our joy and our love and we declare that He is our peace. Amen.