

“Remembering the BB&B”

Luke 2:1-20; Matthew 2:1-12 ¹

Please come in. Who did you say you are? Dr. Luke? You’re writing a book about what? Oh! You want to know about that night! My, my, my, I haven’t thought about all that in a long, long time. Well, come on in and sit down by the fire. This could take a while.

Tell me a bit about yourself before we get to my story. . . . So you grew up in Syrian Antioch, but you live now in Macedonia, in Philippi? And you’re a physician? That must be interesting work.

You say you’re a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, and you spent many years with Paul, the great Apostle from Tarsus? I’d say you’ve got some stories of your own to tell!² Well, welcome to Bethlehem!

Ours is an ancient town, as you probably know—there’s been a village here for at least 1,400 years. The name of our town means “House of Bread.” Situated as we are here in the Judean hill country, we have a very mild and pleasant climate.³ This is a good place to live.

We’re close enough—just six miles from Jerusalem—that we can enjoy the city life if we want to, but most of us prefer life in the country. That’s why we stay! Being close to Jerusalem as we are, one of the things we do here in Bethlehem is to raise the flocks that are used for the Temple sacrifices. That will be important in this story before we’re done.

I’ve been the innkeeper here at the Bethlehem Bed & Breakfast now for more than fifty years. My father kept the inn before me, and his father before him. We take pride in being known as the best place to spend the night for miles around—assuming you’re a stranger with no family or friends in the area. The locals refer to us as the “BB & B.”

Although you’re not a Jew, you can’t have missed the fact that Judea is currently under Roman occupation. We’re not the least bit happy about that, but there’s no standing against the Roman army—at least, not if you want to see another birthday.

Well, in the year 3759—that’s obviously the Jewish calendar, not the Roman one you Gentiles use ⁴—Caesar Augustus ordered that a census be taken of the entire Roman Empire. He wanted to be sure he collected all the taxes he could, so he needed to know how many people he ruled. Taxes are never popular, of course, and Roman censuses were especially hated, since their procedures required men to travel to their ancestral hometowns in order to register for the tax. Caesar didn’t care one bit about how inconvenient his orders were.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship on December 24, 2013.

² See Acts 16:10-17, 40, 20:5-15, 21:1-18, 27:1-28:16; Colossians 4:11, 14; 2 Timothy 4:11.

³ Bethlehem is 2,600 feet above sea level.

⁴ This would be what we know as 2 B.C. See www.bethlehemstar.net.

According to Josephus, Quirinius was governor of Syria A.D. 6–7 and conducted a census in A.D. 6 (which Luke is aware of and mentions in [Acts 5:37](#)). But this cannot be the census Luke is referencing here, since it occurred *after* the death of Herod the Great in 1 B.C., and it is known that Jesus was born *during* Herod’s reign (cf. [Matt. 2:1](#); [Luke 1:5](#)). Various plausible solutions have been proposed. Some interpreters believe that because “governor” (participle of Gk. *hēgemoneuō*) was a very general term for “ruler,” it may be that Quirinius was the *administrator* of the census, but not the governor proper.

Another solution is to translate the verse, “This was the registration *before* Quirinius was governor of Syria,” which is grammatically possible (taking Gk. *prōtos* as “before” rather than “first”; the Greek construction is somewhat unusual on any reading). This would make sense because Luke would then be clarifying that this was before the well-known, troublesome census of A.D. 6 ([Acts 5:37](#)).

I guess there's a silver lining in every cloud, though, because all that forced travel obviously made for a lot of good business for me. I've only got six guest rooms here, and I was booked solid for months on end. We've never had such good business, before or since! (There was another census in 3767, as you know, but the tax revolts that accompanied that one hurt my business rather than helping it.)

Well, some very unusual things happened in what you would call June of 3759, and it's those things you've come to learn about. Some folk want to say that what I'm about to tell you happened in December, but they've got their story confused a bit. If you pay close attention, I'll put things right for you before I'm done.

As I say, I'd been booked up for months. Hardly would one customer check out before another checked in, and the line to get a room often began to form not long after first light. Business was very good, indeed, and since I had taken over operation of the inn from my father not long before the census, I was really "feeling my oats" as a young innkeeper with all this unexpected income!

I'm afraid that I had developed a bit of an attitude, since I had no fear of empty rooms and since the persons needing them were seldom happy to learn that I had nothing to offer. I'd become well practiced in telling folks to look somewhere else—knowing full well that there wasn't anywhere else to look. People who showed up late in the day didn't get much sympathy from me.

Well, on the day in question, Elizabeth and I were just sitting down to dinner when an urgent knock came at the door—all the knocks were urgent, of course. Irritated at the interruption, I threw open the door to see a young man and an even younger woman, who was quite obviously pregnant and quite obviously in pain. Elizabeth saw this and came to the door. "This girl's about to have that baby!" she declared, and she gave me a look that said, "DO SOMETHING!"

So what was I going to do, already? The house was full, and I'd been turning people away all day, as I did every day. If I made some arrangement for these latecomers, there would surely be a riot in the town square, with me as its object. "Not a good plan," I thought.

This is where the Temple flocks become important. As a Gentile, you probably don't know this, but God's Law is very particular about the animals to be offered as sacrifices at the Temple, especially those to be killed as sin offerings. Those animals have to be without blemish or defect of any kind, and those sacred flocks are nourished and nurtured from birth until they're taken to the Temple to ensure that they have no wounds or scars or blemishes of any sort. As a matter of fact, the flocks of which I speak are out there north of town right now, and if you wish, you can go out there and confirm for yourself everything I'm about to tell you.

If you do go, you'll see that there's a stone watchtower from which the Temple shepherds watch over their flocks. That particular tower has been there since our ancestor Jacob first came to Bethlehem almost 2,000 years ago,⁵ and it has been known as "Migdal Eder" (migdahl ayder), or "The Tower of the Flocks" ever since. The Temple flocks have been kept near that tower since King Solomon built the first Temple nearly a thousand years ago.

Now while the Temple flocks live outdoors all year, there is one occasion when a ewe is brought indoors, and that's when she's ready to give birth. The Temple shepherds maintain a special, ceremonially clean stable in The Tower of the Flocks, where they bring those ewes for birthing. And while everyone in Bethlehem knows about the Tower and its birthing stall,

⁵ Genesis 35:21

I doubt that anyone had ever thought to use it for a human birth until the idea occurred to me in that very moment.

I sent the young couple and their donkey up the road to Migdal Eder with a request from me, Isaac the Innkeeper, for special consideration from the shepherds . . . and they gave it. The young couple—their names were Joseph and Mary, as you probably know—had a baby boy that night, in the special, sacred birthing stable of The Tower of the Flocks.

And that’s not all. Later that night, other shepherds were watching their flocks on the far side of the village when the heavens opened and an angel choir announced this baby’s birth. And as it happened, those shepherds knew right where to find the baby, because they remembered the words of Targum Yerushalmi: **“He spread his tent beyond Migdal Eder, the place where King Messiah will reveal Himself at the end of days.”**⁶

Well, we all thought it pretty remarkable that this prophecy would be fulfilled in the very place where the sacrificial lambs were born,⁷ but for all that commotion in the beginning, not much happened for quite a while afterward. Joseph and Mary and their son, whom they named Yeshua, or Jesus, decided to stay in Bethlehem after the census, and I helped him get set up in the carpentry business, since that was his trade. Joseph did good work at a fair price, and it didn’t take long before he had all the work he could deliver.

Several months passed, and people had mostly forgotten about the angels, when something else most unusual happened. By Gentile reckoning, it was December of that same year—December of the year 3759—and this is where some folks have gotten confused. Jesus was born in the summer, back in June, but what I’m about to tell you happened near the winter solstice. I’m pretty sure the day was December 25th.⁸

As you probably know, news travels quickly in villages such as ours, and I knew they’d arrived almost as quickly as they passed through the town gates. Unusual men, they were, from the east, toward Persia. They were men who studied the stars, and they said that strange things had taken place in the heavens in the autumn of the previous year, signs that caused them to be sure that a unique King had been born in Israel, a King who would be for all people, not just the Jews. They were so sure of this that they had set out in search of this King, being guided by signs in the heavens that brought them all the way to Bethlehem.

When they told their story, I knew at once who it was of whom they spoke. This could only be little Jesus, just a few months old, whose birth the angels had announced at The Tower

⁶ Migdal Eder is mentioned in Genesis 35:21 and Micah 4:8. This quote comes from the Targum Yerushalmi (also known as Targum Pseudo-Jonathan): *The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan Ben Uzziel On the Pentateuch with the Fragments of the Jerusalem Targum from the Chaldee* by J. W. Etheridge, M.A. (1862): “And Rahel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem. And Jakob erected a pillar over the house of burying—which is the pillar of the tomb of Rahel unto this day. **And Jakob proceeded and spread his tent beyond the tower of Eder, the place from whence, it is to be, the King Meshiha will be revealed at the end of the days.**”

<http://targum.info/targumic-texts/pentateuchal-targumim/> <http://targum.info/pi/pjgen32-36.htm>;
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Targum_Pseudo-Jonathan

See also Alfred Edersheim, *The Life & Times of Jesus the Messiah* in one volume (1886; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), part 1, pp. 185-186, especially this: **“That the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, was a settled conviction. Equally so was the belief, that He was to be revealed from Migdal Eder, ‘the tower of the flock’”** (p. 186); and also see Rabbi Mike L. Short, *Migdal Edar*,

www.mayimhayim.org/Rabbi%20Mike/Migdal%20Eder.htm;
<http://www.kolsimcha.org/messages/2009/040909M.pdf>;
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migdal_Eder_\(biblical_location\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migdal_Eder_(biblical_location)).

⁷ See John 1:29; Revelation 5:6-13.

⁸ This was the year 2 B.C.

of the Flocks. I went with the strangers over to Joseph's house, and when they saw Jesus, they opened their treasure chests and gave Him incredible gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

I don't know what the others thought, but when I saw those gifts, I thought to myself, "Isaac, that gold is a gift for a king. Frankincense is the tool of a priest, and myrrh is the embalming fragrance that is so often the reward of the prophets. Prophet, priest, and king . . . I wonder what this child will turn out to be? What will He be, indeed?"

The magi didn't even stay one night in Bethlehem. After making their gifts to little Jesus, they set out at once on their journey home. Nor did we have to wait long for the next chapter of this most remarkable story to be written.

The next morning, Bethlehem was all astir, not only because of the strange visitors, but because Joseph's family had vanished in the night. They apparently got up in the middle of the night and left town with only the clothes on their backs—and with the gifts of the magi, of course. Two days after that, the most awful thing in the long history of our village took place.

Not knowing any better, you see, the magi had stopped in Jerusalem on their way to us and had paid a courtesy visit to King Herod. As foreigners, they had no way of knowing how paranoid and ruthless Herod was, and they could never have imagined how Herod would hear what they thought was exciting news. After learning that the magi had been following the signs in the heavens for more than a year, Herod sent his soldiers to Bethlehem to kill every boy two years old and younger, just to be sure he got the one child who might become a threat to his throne.

That awful night fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "*A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.*"⁹

Many years passed with no news of Joseph, or Mary, or Jesus—about thirty years, I think—when Jesus burst onto the scene once again, now as a grown man. From Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus went about preaching, teaching, and doing miracles. I heard Him myself, more than once, and I remembered the signs from long ago.

When Jesus shouted, "*The time promised by God has come at last! The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!*"¹⁰ I remembered the words of the Targum: "He spread his tent beyond Migdal Eder, the place where King Messiah will reveal himself at the end of days."

But you know, Dr. Luke, the strangest things were yet to come. Jesus attracted a great following, and the common people loved Him. But the Chief Priests and the leaders of our people feared and hated Him just as much as Herod did—and they succeeded where Herod had failed. The Chief Priests managed to have Jesus killed on the eve of Passover in the year 3793, now more than twenty years ago.

I wasn't in Jerusalem when that happened, but we're close enough to Jerusalem that we felt the earthquake and we saw the sun go dark in the middle of the day as Jesus died. And I saw the moon when it rose that night. It was a blood moon,¹¹ as the prophet Joel had foretold: "*The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.*"¹²

⁹ Matthew 2:18; Jeremiah 31:15

¹⁰ Mark 1:15, NLT

¹¹ A "blood moon" is a moon in full eclipse." See www.bethlehemstar.net.

¹² Joel 2:31-32

And then—but you probably won't believe this—on the day after Sabbath, we heard news that Jesus had risen from the dead! You say you do believe it? Well, I'll surely be interested in what you write about all this in your book. And we've been talking a long time, now. Maybe we should stop and eat something. . . .

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POSTSCRIPT: There's one more thing I need to tell you before we come to the Lord's Table. As the documentary film, *The Star of Bethlehem* points out,<sup>13</sup> the heavenly sign that guided the magi was not a miracle from outside the natural order. It was something even more startling: it was a "clockwork star."

You may know that the movement of the stars and planets is regular and predictable, like a great clock. That's how spacecraft can be targeted to distant destinations decades ahead of time. And that means that from the very instant at which God flung the universe into existence, some 13.7 billion years ago, God knew the very moment that He would enter human history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He marked it in the stars.

And from before the beginning of time, God knew the very moment when our Messiah would breathe His last on the cross. Jesus of Nazareth, born in The Tower of the Flocks, is "*the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world.*"<sup>14</sup> And on this Christmas Eve, He continues to invite you to place your trust in Him.

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<sup>13</sup> [www.bethlehemstar.net](http://www.bethlehemstar.net)

<sup>14</sup> Revelation 13:8