

Luke 1-2
A Little Hepp on the Christmas Story
John Hepp, Jr., www.kingdominbible.com

My objective is to make the Christmas story more meaningful as you read it. I especially want you to see how that story is related to God's purposes revealed in the Old Testament Scriptures. See my website (indicated above) for relevant studies. When I ask you to read a Scripture passage, please do so aloud. Here I will usually quote from the New International Version, capitalizing some pronouns.

Introduction

We Christians live in a circle of light, of godly concern, of loving words and embracing arms. Whatever darkness drifts over our personal lives is bound to pass. But just outside our circle is terminal blackness, painful emptiness with no relief. Millions around us have no lasting hope—only the pit with its gaping mouth.

Into that darkness God through us shines His light of the good news—the gospel. The gospel is most fully presented in the four books called “Gospels.” In the Christmas season we celebrate the advent of that good news, that light, into this dark world.

Which Gospel or Gospels tell us the beginning of that advent—the birth of the One who embodies God's good news?

- Not **Mark's Gospel**. Indeed, Mark starts with “the beginning of the good news” (Mark 1:1). But that beginning is the public ministry of John the Baptist. Like the gospel sermons in Acts, Mark says nothing about Jesus' birth. Apparently, it is not essential to know that story in order to be saved.
- Neither does **Matthew's Gospel** tell about the Savior's birth. Matthew begins by giving Jesus' genealogy qualifying Him to be the Christ (the Messiah). He also relates how God got Joseph to keep Mary as his wife even though she was pregnant by the Spirit of God. But the birth itself he mentions only in passing: Joseph “had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave Him the name Jesus” (Matt. 1:25). Immediately, Matthew skips to the visit of the wise men and the flight to Egypt, which took place at least weeks if not months later.
- Neither does **John's Gospel** relate Jesus' birth. John tells us that the Word existed before creation and the Word became flesh. But like Mark, he begins his narration with the ministry of John the Baptist.
- Only **Luke's Gospel**, in chapters 1 and 2, relates the story of the Lord's birth. The first four verses are a preface. There we can see how the birth story—and the rest of Luke—came down to us.

Read Luke 1:1–4 (Luke's preface), noticing the following three persons or groups:

- The writer Luke, a doctor who got converted then worked for years with the apostle Paul.
- “Those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word.” No doubt Luke interviewed many such eyewitnesses during the two years he attended the apostle Paul in prison at Caesarea (Acts 21–26). Among them was Jesus' mother Mary.
- “Most excellent Theophilus,” the person for whom Luke wrote this Gospel and later the Book of Acts. Judging by his title, Theophilus was likely a wealthy government official. He probably paid to have copies made of this book—handmade copies.

Therefore, by these three—Luke, the eyewitnesses, Theophilus—and many other faithful witnesses through the centuries, the story has come down to us.

At this point it would be good for you to read both chapters aloud, which you can do in 15–20 minutes. As you read, notice that they contain two birth announcements by the angel Gabriel, then the two births, with prophecies after each. The announcements were made to godly Israelites—concerning extraordinary births of extraordinary sons. These announcements and prophecies set the stage to understand the rest of Luke’s Gospel.

Read Luke 1–2.

A. Two Birth Announcements by the Angel Gabriel, 1:5–56

1. **Gabriel Announces John’s Birth, 1:5–25.** The angel appeared in the Holy Place of the temple in Jerusalem. He announced to the aged priest Zechariah (Zacharias in some versions) that he and Elizabeth would have a son to be named John (1:5–22). Soon Elizabeth got pregnant and praised God (1:23–25). As you read this passage, notice the following facts:

- Zechariah and Elizabeth were both from the priestly tribe of Levi, which God had chosen to lead His worship under the old covenant. Some priests and other Levites had returned to Judea from the exile in Babylonia. Priests were organized in twenty-four courses, each of which ministered in Jerusalem twice a year.
- Zechariah and Elizabeth had long prayed for a child. God’s response seemed slow but was exactly on time. Their story recalls that of Abraham and Sarah and God’s grace to them. The name for their miraculous child would be *John*, which means “The Lord has been gracious.” This grace of the Lord was not just for John’s parents but for Israel and the whole world. In that grace John would have the sublime task of preparing the people for the Messiah, the Ruler.
- In order to best serve God, John would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before birth. This had never happened (before birth) to anyone before. It pointed to the new age of God’s blessing, the gift of the Spirit as promised by the prophets.
- The angel came from God’s presence in response to the prayers of the godly remnant. He appeared to Zechariah, who was alone in the Holy Place offering incense. That task was a great honor; a priest could be chosen for it only once in his lifetime. The incense symbolized the remnant’s prayers purified. As he offered it inside, “all the assembled worshipers were praying outside” (1:10).
- Many people had cooperated with God to make this moment possible. Consider, for example, the facts that there even was a temple—and that a remnant had returned from exile and survived. Over five centuries before Zechariah, a small remnant had returned from Babylonia to Jerusalem and Judea. In place of Solomon’s glorious temple and city walls, they had found only ruins. Yet, encouraged by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, they had rebuilt the temple (Ezra 1–6). Though the new temple had seemed insignificant, God promised that its glory would be greater (Haggai 2:1–9). Later Ezra and Nehemiah had also done their part by building the walls of Jerusalem and purifying God’s remnant. (In His plan God assigns tasks in every generation. Are you doing the part He assigns you today?)
- Zechariah did not believe God’s promise; therefore, God disciplined him. But Elizabeth did become pregnant. Then she responded to God’s grace in the way we should all respond: she gave God thanks. Thanksgiving is a common theme in Luke—and the main rule for a spiritual life.

Now read Luke 1:5–25.

- 2. Gabriel Announces Jesus' Birth, 1:26–56.** The angel was sent again, this time to Nazareth in Galilee, a then-unrenowned village. There he told a girl, Mary, that she would soon bear the long-awaited Messiah, to be named Jesus (1:26–38). Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, also pregnant by God's grace. Both of them praised God (1:39–56). As you read, notice the following facts:
- Though a virgin, Mary was socially and legally a part of the royal family of David through her espoused husband, Joseph. His relation to David is twice emphasized in the narrative (1:27; 2:4), then traced in his genealogy in 3:23–38. This miraculous child would be God's gift to David's house (Isa. 9:6).
 - The name for this child would be *Jesus*. This represents a Greek form of the Hebrew name *Joshua*, which means "The Lord is salvation."
 - Her child would also be called "the Son of the Most High [that is, of God]" (1:32). *Son of God* was usually a human title, not divine. Luke 4:41 shows that it was equivalent to *Christ*, the same as *Messiah* (John 1:41), the anointed Ruler. His sonship recognizes Him as God's royal Heir (see Psalm 2:7–9 and Hebrews 1:4–5).
 - The angel's description of this child emphasized His future kingdom. He will rule from the throne of David, not from God's throne, where He now waits (Heb. 1:13; 10:12–13; Rev. 3:21). "He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:31). This requires that Israel will finally be converted, as often promised (Dan. 9:24; Zech. 13:1; Mal. 4:5–6; Rom. 11:26–27). Also promised was that Israel will be the center of His worldwide kingdom (Isa. 2:1–4), which will last forever. It will take a thousand years just to cross its vestibule.
 - The first person to recognize the Messiah was John, the unborn baby in Elizabeth.
 - Though only a teenager, Mary was godly. She accepted the Lord's will for her, though it would be hard to explain to others. Later, after Elizabeth greeted her, she exalted the Lord in a marvelous poem (1:46–55). Often called by its first word in Latin, this "Magnificat" lauded God's mercy to Mary (vv. 46–49) and to all mankind (vv. 50–55). It drips with at least fifteen expressions from the Old Testament Scriptures. They boiled up within Mary because God's Word filled her mind and soul.

Now read Luke 1:26–56.**B. Two Miraculous Births, 1:57 to 2:40**

The birthing procedure was normal but the products outstanding. Each birth is told with a similar pattern, which comes to a climax after the second one. After each child was born and named, Spirit-filled prophecies gave witness to men and praise to God. The main subject of all these prophecies was Jesus, the Messiah (the Ruler).

- 1. John Born and Named, 1:57–80.** First Luke tells the story of John's birth and naming (1:57–66). After completing the story of the events themselves (in 1:65–66), he goes back to record Zechariah's Spirit-filled prophecy (1:67–79). As you read, notice the following facts:
- In discipline God had made Zechariah mute and deaf. But now we see (in 1:57–66) that as a result there were more witnesses to God's work. "Neighbors and relatives" learned the story. And "throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things" and wondering about this unusual child John.

- “Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied” (1:67). So what he said was not the idealistic dream of a narrow-minded patriot, but the very truth of God. Zechariah clearly **defined the coming kingdom** in ways unacceptable to many in modern Christianity. Yet, his definition is the Spirit’s definition. To abandon it in the rest of the book would seem reckless and arrogant.
- Before speaking about his own son, Zechariah spoke about Jesus, yet to be born. Looking to the future, which he deemed near, he extolled the Lord, who “has come and has redeemed His people [Israel].” The Lord has “raised up a horn [strong means] of salvation for us in the house of His servant David” (1:68–70). This “horn of salvation” is Jesus, not John.
- Zechariah proceeded to affirm that the Redeemer will give “salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us” (1:71, also v. 74). Thus, full salvation will include the liberation of Israel from their enemies. God “will restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6) when Messiah comes back to rule. In fact, His kingdom will include many such material and political aspects, as promised through the prophets. Such things are not its essence, which is spiritual (Rom. 14:17), but will be included. Full salvation (the coming kingdom) will be based on—but is not identical to—“the forgiveness of their sins” (1:77).

Now read Luke 1:57–80.

2. Jesus Born and Named, 2:1–38. As in John’s case, this account also includes the witnesses and the ensuing prophecies. As you read, notice the following facts:

- To the world in general, Jesus’ birth was quite normal and unnoticed. (“How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.”) Apparently the angel explained and the “great company of the heavenly host” chanted only to a small group of lowly shepherds. The shepherds became key witnesses.
- The Savior born in the city of David was identified as “Christ, the Lord” (2:11). As seen above, *Christ* means the One anointed to be King. His title *Lord* refers not to His divinity but to His being Master. (In Philippians 2:5–11 it is apparently the name God gave Him *after* “He humbled Himself” and died.)
- “Peace to men *on whom His favor rests*” (2:14b). This translation correctly reflects the use in Qumran literature of the equivalents to the italicized words.
- In Luke’s account, as in Matthew’s, nothing has been said about Jesus’ pre-existence. Aside from angelic and human prophecies, He appears as a normal human in a godly family. He is named when He is circumcised (2:21); He is presented to God as firstborn (2:22–24). The fact that His family offered “turtledoves or . . . pigeons” (2:24b) shows that they were poor.
- After Jesus’ birth, just as after John’s, there were prophecies from God. In Jesus’ case, they were given by Simeon (2:23–35) and Anna (2:36–38). They again refer to a glorious future for the nation of Israel (2:25, 32, 34, 38), a hope which a worthy interpreter will not scorn. Though some try to make *Israel* mean the church, it is impossible to do so in Luke 1–2. For example, note “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to Your people Israel”
- Simeon was promised “by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen **the Lord’s Christ**” (2:26). The bolded words here referred to the expected Messiah. (In the Old Testament they also referred to historic kings. For example, David used them for King Saul in 1 Samuel 24:6, 10; 26:11, 16.)
- This section reverberates with praise and thanksgiving to God (2:13, 20, 28, 38).

Now read Luke 2:1–38 and praise God yourself!