

The Sign of the Cross

I. The Augustan Census¹

Rome was willing to absorb any religious figure in addition to its pantheon that itself included a host of alleged deities. The intervention of the God of the universe into the metaphysical smorgasbord of idols, sacrifices, and political intrigue changed the world and intensified the Angelic Conflict.

Luke 2:1 - Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth [SPQR].

v. 2 - This was the first census taken while Quirinius [Κυρήνιος (*Kurénios*)] was governor of Syria.

v. 3 - And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city.

v. 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,

v. 5 - in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child.²

Note that the first person mentioned in Luke's account of the first Christmas was Caesar Augustus (b. Sept. 23, 65 B.C.– d. Aug. 19, A.D. 14) whose decision in Rome that set off a sequence of events that took Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem and the subsequent birth of Messiah.

The omniscience of God is clearly in view here. He perceived in advance the emperor's decree for a census which required coordination of the virgin pregnancy, the timely arrival of the holy couple at Bethlehem for the virgin birth, and the fulfillment of Micah's prophecy in:

Micah 5:2 - "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah [אֶפְרַתָּה (*'Éphrathah*)], 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 old [קִדְמָה (*qethem*): eternity past], from the distant past.

¹ My commentary in the following paragraphs is guided by references to Paul L. Maier's *In the Fullness of Time: A Historian Looks at Christmas, Easter, and the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1991).

² The biblical references in this document are cited from the *New American Standard Version* unless otherwise noted.



The emperor's decree applied to Joseph and Mary because of a critical battle between Rome and Pontus about sixty years before. Roman general, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (g-ní-us pä-m-pé-as mág-nas) or Pómpey the Great, defeated Mithradates (míth-ra-dā'-tēz) the Great, king of Póntus, after which Pompey annexed both Syria and Palestine into the Empire.

In 63 B.C., Pompey took Jerusalem and made Judea a vassal kingdom. Julius Caesar appointed Herod Antípater procurator of Judaea in 47 B.C. Antipater's son, Herod the Great, was made governor of Galilee and then tetrarch of Judaea in 41 B.C., serving until his death in 1 B.C. He is mentioned in Scripture only in the accounts of the magi in Matthew 2:1.

By the year 2 B.C., the year of the Lord's birth, Augustus had assessed the Zeitgeist of the Empire and determined that it needed a religious revival. Romans had abandoned the worship of the various gods of Roman and Greek mythology in favor of the mystery cults practiced among Greek and other immigrants.

The result of this paradigm shift in religious emphasis caused Roman traditions to be exchanged for licentiousness and Augustus wanted to reverse this trend. His efforts to influence a return to Roman standards included the restoration of over eighty temples in Rome and he appointed himself *pontifex maximus*, high priest of the Pontifical College.³ In this way Augustus felt he could better spearhead a moral revival in the Roman Empire.

One of the major breakdowns in civil society was the diminishment of marriage as a cultural institution. Sexual promiscuity had become widespread and resulted in what we used to describe in our culture as children without benefit of clergy. Alarming to Augustus was that there were more children being born out of wedlock than within.

Under the Empire, the Roman Forum became a center for religious and secular spectacles and ceremonies. It was the site of many of the city's most imposing temples and monuments. Among the structures surviving in whole or in part are the Temple of Castor and Pollux, the Temple of the Deified Caesar, the Mamertine Prison, the Curia, or senate house, the Temple of Saturn, the Temple of Vesta, the Temple of Romulus, and the Arch of Titus.⁴ On one occasion Augustus decided to take a random poll of the men who gathered at the Forum. He asked a group of men to divide themselves into two groups—bachelors and husbands. The former so outnumbered the latter that Augustus launched into this diatribe:

³ “Pontifex, roman priest, pontiff; member of the highest college of priests (*collegium pontificum*) in Rome, whose leader (*pontifex maximus*) was the high priest of the Roman religion. The emperors, after Augustus and until AD 382, were the *pontifex maximus*” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia*, 15th ed. [Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1979], 8:114).

⁴ *Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia*, 4:244.



What shall I call you? Men? But you aren't fulfilling the duties of men. Citizens? But for all your efforts, the city is perishing. Romans? But you are in the process of blotting out this name altogether! ... What humanity would be left if all the rest of mankind should do what you are doing? ... You are committing murder in not fathering in the first place those who ought to be your descendants!⁵

To stimulate matrimony, Augustus decreed edicts making adultery, fornication, and other deviancies from the institution of marriage a crime and conferred political benefit to men who were the fathers of at least three legitimate children. On the other hand, bachelors were not allowed to receive inheritances, a restriction that many sought to avoid by marrying infant girls which Augustus countered by setting the minimum age of ten for girls to become engaged followed by a two-year courtship.

It is believed by some historians that because Augustus wanted to determine the effectiveness of his efforts he instituted a number of censuses during his 41-year reign. In addition to its primary focus on taxation, the censuses were also designed to reflect whether or not marriage and birth rates increased as a result of his new laws.

The census mentioned in Luke 2:1–3 was instituted in 5 B.C. and, due to the vast size of the Empire, the edict did not apply to Judea until 2 B.C., the year that chronologists confirm was the year of the virgin birth.

II. Joseph and Mary: From Betrothal to Nuptials

The relationship between Joseph and Mary developed in the northern province of Palestine called Galilee and in the small town of Nazareth populated by around 200 people. The area was somewhat isolated in a basin some ten miles north of the Valley of Jézreel. Its citizens were socially conservative, observing the tenets of the Mosaic Law.

Nazarene describes a resident of the community that by the first century was populated by a mixture of peoples possessing a rough dialect and considered outsiders by those to the south. Many were seditious and rebellious types. At the time of the Lord's birth the term designated a resident but during the thirty years prior to His public ministry it became a term of derision.

When Philip informed Nathanael that the Messiah was "Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph," Nathanael's response was, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?"

⁵ "The harangue against the bachelors is recorded by Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 1vi, 1–10" (Paul L. Maier, *In the Fullness of Time*, 6n3).



The Nazareth of 2 B.C. was a village of a better reputation made up of craftsmen such as Joseph who was a carpenter. He was, according to the genealogy of Matthew 1:6 cf. 1:16, of the line of David through Solomon. It is estimated that he was in his mid-twenties, but Mary, a fellow Nazarene, was probably in her mid-teens. Her lineage, according to the genealogy of Luke 3:23 cf. 3:31, was also of the line of David but through Nathan.⁶

Scripture does not reveal the courtship and betrothal of Joseph, the legal or foster father of Jesus, or Mary, the mother of Jesus' true humanity, but the traditions of the day give some insight to what likely occurred.

Once Joseph decided that Mary was his right woman, following custom, he approached her father for permission to marry her. The circumstance that the two were distant cousins did not violate biblical mandates against their union.

Joseph and Mary were each of the royal bloodline of Judah, direct descendants of David. This was an imperative to initiate fulfilment of the Davidic Covenant, prophesied by the Lord to Nathan in 2 Samuel 7:4–17.

In the Jewish culture, marriage was a contractual agreement not only between the couple but also their families. The two fathers negotiated regarding the dowry. The Hebrew word is **מֹהָר (mohar)**, the “purchase price” of a bride paid to the bride's family. It could be a sum of money but not a fixed sum. It is compensation to the father for the loss of his daughter and the means of providing her certain necessities.⁷

Once the dowry was determined then Joseph was brought before Mary where a benediction was said by the parents. This established the legality of the betrothal between the two. Only a writ of divorcement could break the contract even though they were not yet married. Should Mary commit adultery it would constitute a capital crime, punishable by death through stoning (Deuteronomy 22:20–25). This is why Joseph was in a dilemma when he learned of Mary's pregnancy:

Matthew 1:19 - And Joseph her husband, **being** [εἰμί, (*eimí*)] a **righteous** [δίκαιος, (*dikaïos*)] man and not wanting to disgrace her, **planned to send her away secretly.**

⁶ “Matthew presents Joseph's genealogy ... whereas Luke presents Mary's genealogy. This view is supported by linguistic and historical evidence and is held by many students of the Bible. In addition, appeal may be made to Num. 27:1–11 and 36:1–12 to give Scriptural precedent for the substitution of Joseph's name in Luke 3:23” (C. I. Scofield, ed., “The Genealogies of Jesus,” in *The Scofield Study Bible: NASB* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2005], 1409).

⁷ Peter Trutza, “Marriage,” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopaedia of the Bible*, gen. ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 4:96.



The phrase, “being a righteous man,” begins with the present active participle of the verb *eimí*. It is linear *aktionsart* indicating continuous action. Joseph was a man of integrity. He is also noted as being righteous: *díkaios*, which means he was a believer in the coming Messiah.

Because of these things, he did not want to disgrace her. So, after giving the situation detailed thought, Joseph decided not to go through legal channels but to quietly return her to her father.

This is an area of personal sacrifice. By deciding to follow the least public approach, Joseph demonstrated his true love for Mary. A man would never humiliate the woman he loves in public but rather protect her at all costs:

A man who really loves the woman protects the woman. I'm talking about mental-attitude love. This means that a man never abuses a woman in public, he never runs her down in public, he never exposes her faults to the public, he never runs around and talks about her ... he keeps his mouth shut. And if he has anything to say publically or in front of others about the woman he loves, it is strictly complimentary. He protects, and Joseph was that kind of man.⁸

As usual for the positive believer, solutions to intractable dilemmas are resolved by application of the Word of God. Joseph had wisdom enough to know that if he went the legal route that Mary's name would be besmirched throughout Nazareth. Having no knowledge of the fact that his betrothed was pregnant due to parthenogenesis: “Reproduction without concourse of opposite sexes or union of sexual elements,”⁹ Joseph considered a bill of divorcement.

Párthenōgénesis is a compound of two Greek words: (1) **παρθένος (*parthénos*)**: “virgin,” and (2) **γένεσις (*génesis*)**: “origination.” The 23 male gametes, miraculously created by the Holy Spirit, were united with Mary's 23 female gametes to produce the perfect zygote of the Lord's true humanity.

Ignorant of this, Joseph's ability to completely protect Mary's honor was impossible. Her pregnancy would eventually become known, but at least the citizens of Nazareth would assume it was Joseph's since in other parts of Judea more liberal attitudes toward the betrothal period allowed such behavior. He would at least have spared her a stoning and he would be able to assume the blame.

His problem was resolved by the appearance of an angelic messenger with the news that not only was the pregnancy not the product of adultery, but rather the miraculous appearance of the Messiah into human history.

⁸ R. B. Thieme, Jr., *Matthew*, MP3 CD (Houston: R. B. Thieme, Jr., Bible Ministries, 1965), 438-003.
⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v.: “parthenogenesis.”



Matthew 1:20 - But when he [**Joseph**] had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

v. 21 - “She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name, Jesus [Ἰησοῦς (*’Iēsoús*): **Savior**], for He will save His people from their sins.”

This is referred to as an Annunciation, i.e., the angel *announced* the news that Mary would give birth to the Messiah. The Annunciation is usually assigned to the angel’s announcement to Mary of her impending pregnancy in Luke 1:28–36. The messenger is identified in Luke 1:26 as Gabriel, a seraph-rank, offer-of-arms archangel in the Angelic College of Herald, who is commissioned to communicate divine revelation to select individuals.

Gabriel’s opening remark to Mary was an uplifting salutation:

Luke 1:28 - The angel came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you!”
(EXT)

NOTE: The King James Version adds the phrase, “Blessed art thou among women,” a scribal addition and thus not found in the oldest manuscripts.¹⁰

Two factors need to be observed. First, Jews were aware of angelic messengers’ appearances to biblical personalities. Secondly, on several occasions these angelic heralds were bearers of impending divine wrath. To be approached by a seraph angel would obviously cause one to become startled. Mary is described as being confounded:

Luke 1:29 - But she was very perplexed [διαταράσσω, *diatarássō*] at this statement, and kept pondering [διαλογίζομαι, *dialogízomai*] what kind of salutation this might [εἰμί, *eimí*] be.”

Diatarássō means to be confounded, i.e., confused, bewildered, and puzzled. She is said to ponder the meaning of this angelic encounter, *dialogízomai* means that Mary began to concentrate on what was said, but the optative mood of *eimí* indicates that she has great doubt.

¹⁰ “Most manuscripts read here “blessed are you among women” which also appears in 1:42 (where it is textually certain). This has the earmarks of a scribal addition for balance; the shorter reading, attested by the most important witnesses and several others is thus preferred” (Michael H. Burer, W. Hall Harris III, and Daniel B. Wallace, “Additional Text-Critical Notes,” in *New Testament: New English Translation*, Novum Testamentum Graece [Dallas: NET Bible Press, 2003; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2001], 826).



But Gabriel told her to relax by preceding his remarks with the mandate **Μὴ φοβοῦ** (**Mē phobou**): “Do not be afraid!” He then gave her a detailed explanation, but did not include information Mary considered vital:

Luke 1:30 - So the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid [μὴ φοβοῦ, **mē phobou**], Mary, for you have found favor with God!

v. 31 - “Listen: you will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name Him Jesus [Ἰησοῦς, **lēsoús: Savior**].

v. 32 - “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David.

v. 33 - “He will reign over the house of Jacob [**Israel**] forever, and His kingdom will never end [**Davidic Covenant; see 2 Samuel 7:16**].”

Luke 1:34 - Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I have not had sexual relations with a man?” (EXT)

Mary has been happily involved in preparations for her wedding which was still nine months off. Now she is interrupted by Gabriel’s honorific introduction followed by what she interprets as an insult. It is incongruous to her that she would be assigned the duty of giving birth to Messiah since she retorts to Gabriel, “How will this be since I have not had sexual relations with a man?”

Gabriel quickly addresses her concern with the revelation of the divine plan to introduce the God of the universe into human history by means of hypostatic union: ἐ

Luke 1:35 - The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High [Ὑψιστος (**Húpsistos**): the Holy Spirit] will overshadow [future active indicative of, ἐπισκιάζω (**episkíázō**): to envelop] you. Therefore the Child to be born [true humanity] will be holy; He will be called the Son of God [undiminished deity].

v. 36 - “And look, your relative Elizabeth has also become pregnant with a son in her old age—although she was called barren, she is now in her sixth month!

v. 37 - “For nothing will be impossible with God.”



Luke 1:38 - So Mary said, “Yes, I am a servant [feminine singular of δούλη, *doúlē*: slave woman] of the Lord; let this happen to me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. (NET)

The miracle that occurred in Mary was executed by the Holy Spirit. Three words in verse 35 describe the miracle of the virgin pregnancy. The first phrase states that the “Holy Spirit will come upon”: ἐπέρχομαι (*epérchomai*): “will rest,” plus the preposition ἐπί (*epí*): “upon.”

This is followed by the source of the miracle, “the power of the Most High,” the noun δύναμις (*dúnamis*): “omnipotence,” plus the designation of the Third Person of the Trinity, the descriptive noun Ὑψιστος (*Húpsistos*): “Most High.”

Finally, the future active indicative of the verb ἐπισκιάζω (*episkιάzō*): “to envelop.” The future tense is predictive for an event that is expected to occur at a future time. The active voice stipulates that the Holy Spirit will produce the action of the verb. The indicative mood denotes this is a future event in the divine decree guaranteeing certain futurity.

Luke 1:35a - Seraph Gabriel replied, “The Holy Spirit will rest upon you, and the omnipotence of the Most High will envelop you.” (EXT)

I choose *envelop* to translate *episkιάzō* instead of *overshadow* based on the following definition:

Overshadow (Gk. *episkιάzō*, to envelop in a shadow). From a vaporous cloud that casts a shadow the word is transferred to a shining cloud surrounding and enveloping persons with brightness (Matthew. 17:5; Luke 9:34).

Figurative. It is used of the Holy Spirit extending creative energy upon the womb of the Virgin Mary and impregnating it; a use of the word which seems to have been drawn from the familiar Old Testament idea of a cloud as symbolizing the immediate presence and power of God.¹¹

The verse continues with Gabriel’s statement that the “Child to be born will be holy.” The word *holy* is, interestingly, the neuter singular of the noun ἅγιος (*hágios*) which means “set apart to the service of God,” “sharing God’s purity,” “pure,” or “without blemish.”

¹¹ Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, 3d ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 815.



Hágios agrees with the neuter singular present passive participle of the verb **γεννάω (gennáō)**: “to be born.”

The two concepts are best translated, “The **sanctified One**—set apart to the service of God—which is **to be born** ...” Here’s why:

First of all, both the verb “to be born” and the noun “sanctified” are in the neuter gender, not masculine.

Second, the present tense of the verb is an aoristic present which denotes punctiliar action in present time, i.e., it sets forth an event as now occurring. As Gabriel is speaking these words to Mary, impregnation is occurring. The passive voice means that the impregnation process receives the action of initiating the process.

The neuter gender of the verb *gennáō*, “to be born,” indicates that the twenty-three male chromosomes and their union with Mary’s gamete creating the zygote of the Lord’s true humanity are not yet considered human life, but rather biological life.

The true humanity of the Lord occurs at the virgin birth, indicated next by the phrase “will be called the Son of God.”

The verb here is the future passive indicative of **καλέω (kaléō)**, translated “will be called.” This is a predictive future for an event which is expected to occur in future time.

During the gestation period of approximately 36 weeks, the original zygote goes through three stages of development—blastocyst, embryo, and fetus—before the fully developed child exits the womb.

During the periods of gestation, the life in the womb is biological life and in this passage Luke reports that the Holy Spirit refers to it with the neuter gender which we translate, “One.”

In this last phrase the Holy Spirit predicts that at physical birth the child will be imputed soul life. According to Isaiah 11:2, He will be indwelt by and filled with the Holy Spirit, and therefore sanctified before God for special service to Him.

At the point of selection, the Child will be called the Son of God; this title is made up of two masculine gender nouns: **(1) Υἱός (Huiós)**: Son, and **(2) Θεός (Theós)**: God. The masculine gender indicates a person with human life.

During gestation, the developing biological life does not receive soul life, nor is it imputed the human spirit, consequently, it cannot be considered human life, and in Mary’s case it cannot be referred to as the Son of God. This can only occur at selection, the divine act at physical birth when God imputes soul life to the fetus thus creating human life.



On the occasion of the virgin birth, this human life belonged to Jesus of Nazareth who is also called the Son of God—the union of true humanity with undiminished deity: the hypostatic union.

Luke 1:35 - Seraph Gabriel replied, “The Holy Spirit will rest upon you, and the omnipotence of the Most High will envelop you. The sanctified One [neuter]—set apart to the service of God—which is to be born [neuter] will be called the Son [masculine] of God.” (EXT)

Gabriel then went on to inform Mary that her cousin Elizabeth was in her third trimester. Her pregnancy would result in the birth of John the Baptist who would fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 40:1–3¹² as the forerunner of Jesus Christ.

Luke 1:36 - “And look, your relative Elizabeth has also become pregnant with a son in her old age—although she was called barren, she is now in her sixth month!” (EXT)

Mary was aware of Elizabeth’s barrenness and this second piece of miraculous information solicited disbelief. Gabriel anticipates this reaction and calms her doubts with his statement in:

Luke 1:37 - “For nothing will be impossible with God.” (EXT)

The final verse of the annunciation paragraph is Mary’s expression of personal faith that she was divinely chosen to give birth to the biological life of the Messiah. In doing so she uses her freedom to place herself in slavery to the Lord.

Luke 1:38 - So Mary said, “Yes, I am a servant [feminine singular of δούλη, *doúlē*: slave woman] of the Lord; let this happen to me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. (EXT)

At this point in Luke’s drama, Mary goes to the home of Zacharías, whose wife, Elizabeth, shouted this proclamation on the news of Mary’s pregnancy:

Luke 1:42 She [Elizabeth] exclaimed with a loud voice, “Blessed are you and blessed is the Child in your womb!” (EXT)

(End CR21-01. See CR21-02 for continuation of study at p. 11.)

¹² Also see Malachi 3:1a and Matthew 3:3.

