

**TANGAZA COLLEGE**  
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**“...SHE LAID HIM IN A MANGER BECAUSE THERE  
WAS NO PLACE FOR THEM IN THE INN.” LUKE 2:7**

**Exegesis and History of Interpretation of the Text; and Its  
Message for the Poor and the Rich**

Moderator

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A Long Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of Ecclesiastical Degree of  
Baccalaureate in Theology

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this Long Essay to the late Rev. Fr. Maurice Reen, IC., it was through whom I became God's child. To my beloved parents Mr. Ludovick and the late Mrs. Benadetta Ludovick, who said *Yes* on my behalf to the gift of faith offered to me on the 8<sup>th</sup> day after I was born. And to all God's People who have said *Yes* to God's gift of Salvation.

## **EPIGRAPH**

**“He opened their Minds and gave them Power to Understand the  
Scriptures”**

**(Luke 24:45)**

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## STUDENT'S DECLARATION


I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflection. It is submitted in partial requirements for the Ecclesiastical Degree of Baccalaureate in Theology. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

Signed: 

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Date: 28<sup>th</sup> February 2005

This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor.

Signed: 

Name of the Supervisor: FR MUTINDA

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

At Christmas time in 2001 we attended a mid-night mass at a small church of an outstation of Maramba parish in Tanga Tanzania. It was striking to see, how the celebrant during the homily labored to create a Christmas atmosphere and Christmas simplicity. He did this, by creatively constructing a scene of what he thought should have taken place at the birth of Jesus. From that time on we have been so attentive to this observation and now we can say that that priest in that outstation is not alone.

The birth of Jesus as narrated in the Scriptures seems to be of secondary importance as compared to the narratives of his passion death and resurrection. Part of the reason is that the former is in retrospect to the latter. However during Christmas the Infancy narratives takes the centre stage.<sup>1</sup>

During Christmas time, many try to create the Christmas atmosphere, they do this often by creating up stories, and reconstructing what can be imagined as the historical circumstances of the birth of Jesus. They base their creations on the legends which have nothing to do with the gospel text. Their intention is to bring about what they think is not in the gospel text, i.e. the Christmas atmosphere and spirit, but as they embark on this exercise they use crèche scenes and legend stories and unfortunately

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<sup>1</sup> HERMAN HENDRICKX, *Infancy Narratives*, 127.

they fall into self-same pit of blurring the biblical text and consequently the Christmas atmosphere.

Our aim in this long essay is to recover the Christmas spirit. We shall do so not by creating what can be imagined to have been the historical circumstance of the birth of Jesus, but rather by a return to the simplicity and somberness of the original biblical text. We aim to achieve this exercise by an exegetical analysis of the gospel text. We shall use the text from the Gospel according to St. Luke. Our particular interest lies on the meaning of Luke 2:7, and how this has been understood to mean by different ages. Since Luke 2:1-20 is an undivided unit, our exegesis will thus treat it as a unit, our emphasis will however be on verse 7.

The attempt to create the Christmas atmosphere, which has been helped by the legend stories and the Christmas crèche scenes together with medieval piety has come up with a new interpretation of the biblical text under study. We intend to uncover this meaning that has up. We shall refer to this new meaning as *popular meaning*. When Luke was putting down this passage he had his intended meaning, we shall state this meaning and then show that the popular meaning does not necessarily contradict the original meaning, in fact it enhances and enriches the original meaning.

Our essay therefore will be divided in three chapters. In chapter one we will attempt to situate the text. We shall answer all the introductory questions concerning our text. Chapter two will be dedicated on the exegesis and meaning of the text. Our last chapter will present a skimmed history of interpretation of the text. We will then sift the

message that is there in the text today. This message is for the poor as well as for the rich.

Thus our objective is very big but our time is constraining and space limited. Following this then our essay will not be fully exhaustive and thus will not have the final word on the matter. However it will be scientific enough to be credible.



## Chapter I

### Situating of the Text: Luke 2:7. Introductory Questions.

#### **1. Introduction**

In this chapter we are going to answer the introductory questions that can be raised when one is doing the exegesis of the Luke 2:7. In this, we shall first of all delimitate the text. We shall show that even though we are dealing with only verse 7 in fact the text should be treated as a whole from verse 1 to 20. We shall also answer the questions on the context of the text, both remote and immediate. We shall discuss how Luke is very creative in this aspect. It is highly probable that Luke purposely confuses the historical facts in order to serve his purpose.

Form and structure are important in any exegetical work and so we shall look into that. Normally in any literary work there is meaning that is carried on how that body of work is structured and formed. And without much ado we shall now begin.

## **2. Delimitation of the Text**

### **2.1 *Terminus a Quo***

*Terminus a Quo* and *Terminus ad Quem* are Latin terms which mean the beginning and the end of the periscope respectively. The body between these is considered as one coherent unit. We consider 2:1 as our *Terminus a Quo*. This may seem strange since our topic is made up of verse 7. We have done so for the following reason. 2:1 marks the beginning of an episode which runs to 2:20. This episode is an indivisible unit and should be treated as such. Verses 1-5 can be considered as an introduction. It offers the reason why the child happened to be born in Jerusalem.

### **2.2 *Terminus ad Quem***

As we have already hinted in the paragraph above, we consider 2:20 as the *Terminus ad Quem*. We have this for the following reason. 2:20 marks the end of an indivisible unit. This marks the end of the story of how Jesus was born. From 2:21 we read of another episode which tells the story of Jesus' circumcision.

## **3. Context of the Text**

### **3.1 *Remote Context***

Luke is very creative about the context. The remote context is the Census which was for 'the whole world.' The Census was ordered by Augustus and was probably conducted by Quirinius.<sup>2</sup> Now given that the Census was for 'the whole world,' Joseph and Mary were also affected by it. Joseph who was a Galilean, but living at Nazareth was obliged to go to his ancestral home, to be counted, he went together with his

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2 RAYMOND E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 413.

heavily pregnant wife, Mary. This Census supplied the occasion for the Birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, and in the time of King Herod of Judea.<sup>3</sup>

However the setting that Luke suggests is hard to believe for the following reasons. There is lack of evidence to prove that there was actually one Census under Augustus, which indeed covered the whole world. By *the whole world* it is to be understood to mean the whole empire. There was one and the only Census that was conducted while Quirinus was legate in Syria, however this one affected only Judea and not Galilee. This took place around 6-7 AD which would amount to ten years after the death of Herod the Great. It is clear that Luke has confused the facts and the dates.<sup>4</sup>

It is a strong probability that Luke has purposely confuses the facts about the census in order to explain the presence of Joseph and Mary at Bethlehem. Since the two have to come to Bethlehem, they must be living somewhere else, again Luke presupposes that these lived in Nazareth before Jesus was born. Matthew holds a different view on this.<sup>5</sup> Matthew presents Bethlehem as the city of Joseph and Mary.

### 3.2 Immediate Context

Luke almost dramatically moves from his setting which he purportedly created with the help of the census to the actual birth of Jesus. It was when Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem that the time came for Mary to give birth. Luke creates hard and difficult conditions for the baby to be born.

Mary gave birth to her first born baby boy. As soon as the baby is born, Luke tells of very significant facts about the situation where the baby was born. First, that the

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<sup>3</sup> PHEME PERKINS, *Reading the New Testament*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> PERKINS, *Reading the New Testament*, 33. See also HERMAN HENDRICKX, *Infancy Narratives*, 94.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 2:23.

baby was laid in a manger because there was room or place in the inn. What Luke meant by this phrase “there was no place in the inn” is not very clear. There is so much speculation concerning what Luke meant. This will be a matter for discussion in our next chapter. Second, Luke goes down to some details, he explains that when the child was born he was wrapped in the swaddling clothes.

From the two facts the precise picture that Luke wants to portray is not very clear.<sup>6</sup> However the details about the swaddling clothes and the manger are repeated in the story and for that reason they must be of significance. The creativity of Luke brings in the vicinity the shepherds and the Angel of Lord, the angel embarks on the duty to inform and interpret the meaning of the birth of Jesus to the shepherds and he gives them a sign on how to find the child.

## **4. Form and Structure**

### **4.1 Form**

This text can be called a *midrash*. Before we give the reasons why we consider it to be a *midrash* we deem it fit to first of all explain even if sketchily what does it mean when we say that a text is *midrash*. What does *midrash* mean?

*Midrash* derives from the Hebrew root *darash* ( דָּרַשׁ ) which means to search out, to investigate, that is to discover a thought that is not seen in the surface.<sup>7</sup> The word *darash* is used of seeking an answer from Yahweh through the oracle, and it is probable this meaning is at the base of its use to designate the study of the sacred Scriptures.<sup>8</sup> *Midrash* indicates the result of the action. It is a distinctive Jewish literary form. It is a

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<sup>6</sup> RAYMOND BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 418.

<sup>7</sup> J. D. DOUGLAS, ed., *The New Bible Dictionary*, 1237.

<sup>8</sup> JOHN L. MACKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 574. Also HERMAN HENDRICKX, *Infancy Narratives*, 5.

composition that explains the Scriptures and seeks to make them understandable and meaningful for a later generation. A midrash has a very practical aim; that is through it the author wants to set forth a contemporary value and significance of an older text.<sup>9</sup>

There are two most characteristic features that are frequently found in a midrash. These are: first, there is a careful attention that is given to the details of the biblical narrative and always accompanied with a desire to explain the reasons for the happenings, as well as and more importantly, drawing out the applications for the present. Second, the biblical material is handled very creatively, the details are changed mainly in order to fit the author's purposes. The events are idealized and sometimes even embellished with legendary material to make them fuller, more vivid and edifying.<sup>10</sup>

Having given the sketchy explanation of what a midrash is, the following are the reasons why we consider Luke 2:1-20 a midrash. First, the text tries to interpret the meaning of Christ's event by means of analogies from the Old Testament. Second, the text is part of chapters 1 and 2 of Luke's Gospel the infancy narratives which are midrashic.<sup>11</sup> In this text and indeed in these two chapters we see the author combining together but very creatively the different scenes such as the shepherds in the field, the angels and the angels' interpretation of the birth of Jesus to the shepherds. Third, the author alludes to different midrashic stories and combines their elements in order to serve his purpose. Such stories are to mention but one, Micah 4-5. This speaks of the

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<sup>9</sup> JAMES D. G. DUNN, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 84. See also BRENDAN MCGRATH, *The Meaning and Use of Midrash*. CNTS 72.

<sup>10</sup> A. G. WRIGHT, *The Literary Genre Midrash*, 74. See also HENDRICKX, *Infancy Narratives*. 5.

<sup>11</sup> HENDRICKX, *Infancy Narratives*, 7.

flow of peoples and nations to Jerusalem, compare it with Joseph's going up, which would also mean a journey to Jerusalem, compare it with the movement of the whole world which is caused by the census of Augustus. The midrashic nature of the Birth narrative puts Jesus as the fulfillment of God's Promise to David. Jesus is presented as a descendant of David through Joseph his father cf. Luke 2:4 and the heavenly titles by the Angel places him as the fulfillment of the Promise to David.

#### **4.2 Structure of the Text**

The structure of this episode is such that it can be divided into three parts. We will refer to these parts as the Setting, the Annunciation and the Reactions. So we shall divide the passage as follows.<sup>12</sup>

Luke 2:1-7. The occasion of the census, this occasion brings Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. While in Bethlehem Mary gives birth to Jesus. She covers him with the swaddling clothes and lays him in a manger. This is just the setting.

The second part is Luke 2:8-14. We shall call this part the annunciation. In the vicinity there is an angel of the Lord who announces to the shepherds about the birth of the Savior, Messiah who is also the Lord. These are Christological titles. They could be as a result of retrospective reflection. They point out to the fact that this periscope is a post resurrection reflection which the author brings forward right at the birth of Jesus. The angel gives the shepherds a sign and the sign is this: A baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and laying in the manger. And there appears the multitude of heavenly hosts who chant the *Gloria*.

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<sup>12</sup> We have adopted this division from RAYMOND E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 410.

Luke 2:15-20 is the third part. It is the part containing the reactions. The first reaction, the shepherds go to Bethlehem to see this sign; once they find and verify it, they at once make known what was told them. The second reaction, their hearers are astonished. The third reaction, Mary the mother of the child keeps all these events in her heart. The fourth reaction, the shepherds return while praising God.

Note, even though the author creates the whole scene for the birth of Jesus, the author's centre of attention is not very much Jesus' birth per se but rather the angelic annunciation of that birth as well as their interpretation to the shepherds and the latter's reaction to this message.<sup>13</sup> With this type of structure the author has a theological rationale in mind, but suffice to point the note out. We shall not discuss the theological rationale of the author's structure here.

#### **4.3 Parallelism**

Our pericope is part of Luke's Infancy Narrative. According to many scholars Luke's Infancy Narrative is composed to the form of a diptych. This diptych has two phases: before the births of John and Jesus and the accounts of the births of John and Jesus. Central to this structure is the parallelism between John and Jesus. There are two annunciations (Luke 1:5-25; 1:26-38); two conceptions (Luke 1:24-25; 1:35); two births (Luke 1:57-58; 2:6-7).<sup>14</sup>

#### **5. Textual Criticism.**

Textual criticism is the quest to establish the original wording of the text. With this passage there are four areas that need the some criticism. The first is in 2:9 it is the

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<sup>13</sup> BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 410.

<sup>14</sup> HENDRICKX, *Infancy Narratives*, 62.

use of καί. The reading καί ἰδοῦ on the one hand it is in harmony with the solemn style that Luke uses in chapters 1 and 2 where ἰδοῦ occurs ten times. However it is difficult to imagine if ἰδοῦ were present originally that copyists would have omitted it. καί is graded as {C}.<sup>15</sup>

The second is 2:11, the reading combination Χριστός κύριος, it occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. It is highly probable that Luke uses this combination deliberately instead of much more frequent combination in the New Testament that is Χριστος κύριου. This combination is graded as {A}. The suggestion is, though very weak, that the copyists might have introduced some modifications though this is not attested.<sup>16</sup>

The third is 2:14 the reading ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκίας which is graded as {B}, is probably explainable due to either amelioration of the sense or else because of the palaeographical oversight. That is to say at the end of the line εὐδοκίας would differ from εὐδοκία only by the presence of the smallest possible lunar sigma, which is little more than a point. So the genitive case which is the more difficult reading is supported by the oldest representatives of Alexandrian and the Western groups of witnesses.<sup>17</sup> The meaning seems to be then that at the birth of the Saviour the peace of God rests on those whom he has chosen in accord with his good pleasure.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> BRUCE M. METZGER, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 132.

<sup>16</sup> METZGER, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 132.

<sup>17</sup> METZGER, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 133.

<sup>18</sup> METZGER, *A Textual Commentary*...133.



## 6. Conclusion

We have come to the close of chapter one. We have tried to address the important issues of our topic before we begin the proper exegesis. We have noticed that Luke is very creative in his writing of the passage of our concern. He has very creatively handled the midrashic literary form in order to give to the old passage the contemporary meaning. That is the meaning of the Birth of the Messiah for the early church.

Luke, we have also noted that he has purportedly mixed the facts and confused them in order to serve his purpose. For example the dates about the census, the people involved and the area it covered were all either mixed up or faked in order to serve his intention of bringing Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Jerusalem. For Luke Jesus who is the Messiah has to be born in Bethlehem. Luke alludes, as we have seen, to the Old Testament readings like Micah.

We have answered the introductory questions about the exegesis and history of interpretation of Luke 2:7 that we intend to develop. If Luke is so much creative, what is the message he intends to deliver? We will attempt to answer this question in our second chapter, by of course, an exegesis of the passage under study.

Our treatment has not been fully exhaustive as so many other questions could still be raised and be answered. Those questions say about theology behind Luke's ways we did not raise them here, they are left to be discussed some other time. Those ones

that we have answered will help us in our next chapter that is chapter 2 when we shall do the exegesis of our text. We shall now move to chapter 2

## Chapter II

### Exegetical Analysis and Interpretation of Luke 2:1-20

#### 1. Introduction

We intend to give an exegetical analysis and interpretation of our pericope Luke 2:1-20. Our main concern will be Luke 2:7. In our analysis we shall be selective. We will begin by giving the exegesis of the verses that precedes verse 7 as these carry a key to the meaning that Luke intends to his audience.

We shall then delve into verse 7. In order to give an understandable exposition of this verse, a look into certain features that are mentioned in this verse is needful. These features include the *Manger*, the *Inn* and the *Swaddling cloths*. We will zoom down to these, because these are repeated in other verses in the pericope and any thing that is repeated in scriptures must be very important and quite meaningful.

As we mentioned before, Luke alludes to Old Testament citations. A recourse will be made to some of these citations. These we hope will shade more light and provide us the proper perspective in understanding Luke's meaning and use of the features in the pericope.

Note, Luke's thought is not however determined by the rigorous sense of these citations that he recalls and uses. His thought is rather determined by the meaning these texts carry in function of the event of Christ's coming. Hence he conceives them anew in his faith framework and exploits them to serve the new revelation that he intends to speak about. Lastly we will conclude by showing the meaning of these features as they are read in relation to the sign given by the angel.

## 2. Exegesis of Luke 2:1-20

Verse 1 “A decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled.”

Augustus was emperor from the year 30 BC to 14 AD.<sup>19</sup> We lack the evidence both biblical and extra biblical to testify of this single census of ‘all the world’ or even of the whole Roman empire that was conducted during the time of Caesar Augustus.<sup>20</sup> It is generally agreed that if such a census of ‘the whole world’ or of the whole Roman empire had actually taken place it is more probable that it would have left some traces in the Roman history.<sup>21</sup>

The name Augustus is important for Luke’s intention. For this name would evoke memories and ideals in his readers especially those who knew Roman history. This is so because in 29 BC, Augustus had brought an end to almost a century of civil wars that had destroyed the Roman empire. This made his age to be propagandized as a glorious age of pastoral rule. He was considered as the Savior of ‘the whole world’ and his birthday inscription proclaimed that actually his birthday marked the beginning of the Good News for the world.<sup>22</sup> Luke uses the event to paradoxically contradict this propaganda. He does so by showing that Augustus’s decree was but a setting for the

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<sup>19</sup> H. HENDRICKX, *Infancy Narratives*, 93.

<sup>20</sup> H. CONZELMANN, *The Theology of St. Luke*, 132-144. See also ROBERT J. KARRIS, *The Gospel According to Luke in NJBC*, 682.

<sup>21</sup> J. FITZMYER, *The Gospel According to St. Luke I-X*, 393-400. There are those who argue that there was actually such a census. For a different view see BROOK W. R. PEARSON, *The Lucan Censuses, Revisited*, *CBQ* 61, II, 262-282.

<sup>22</sup> R. E. BROWN, *An Adult Christ at Christmas*, 18.

birth of Jesus, the birthday that marked the true beginning of the Good News for the world took place not in Rome but in Bethlehem.<sup>23</sup>

Verse 2: “This was the first enrollment when Quirinius was governor of Syria.”

Publius Sulpicius Quirinius as his full name stands became a lagate of Syria in 6 AD and specially assigned the duty of restructuring Judea as a Roman province after Archeleus, the son of Herod the Great, who ruled from 4 BC to 6 AD was deposed.

Verse 3: “And each went to enrolled, each to his city.”

Luke presents Bethlehem as the city of Joseph. However Joseph was not residing in Bethlehem (cf. verse 4). He is rather presented as residing in Nazareth. Matthew presents Nazareth as the city of Joseph and Mary (cf. Matthew 2:23). Again we lack the evidence to suggest that people were actually expected to return to their native land at any Roman census, as the Roman censuses were for military and taxation purposes. So Joseph’s going up to Bethlehem seems to be because of his Davidic lineage<sup>24</sup> as it is stated clearly in Luke 2:4. “...because he was of the house and lineage of David.”

Verse 4: “ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem...”

*Joseph also went up.* To go up is traditionally used for the journey to Jerusalem. Jerusalem here is designated as ‘city of David’. It is probable that Luke shifts Micah’s reference to ‘the mountain of the house of the Lord’ from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, since

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<sup>23</sup> R. E. BROWN, *An Adult Christ at Christmas*, 18.

<sup>24</sup> J. FITZMYER, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, 405.

it is here that people have to go to see the Lord, for ‘to you is born in the city of David a savior who is Christ the Lord” (cf. Luke 2:11)<sup>25</sup>

*To the city of David which is called Bethlehem.* This is rather unusual presentation by Luke. The phrase city of David in the Old Testament is used in reference to the Citadel of Zion, to Jerusalem which was formerly the stronghold of the Jebusites (cf. 2Samuel 5:7,9; 1Kings 2:10). There is no evidence in the Old Testament not even in Judaism to indicate that Bethlehem was designated as the city of David. Luke’s reference here is therefore rather puzzling. There is evidence however to suggest that since David in the Old Testament is presented as a son of Jesse an Ephrathite in Judah (cf. 1Samuel 17:12), it is probable therefore that David was born and brought up in Bethlehem up to the time of his anointment by the prophet Samuel (cf. 1Samuel 1-13).<sup>26</sup> Again it is more probable that Luke’s rather unusual reference to Bethlehem as city of David, is because he wants to emphasize Jesus’ connection with David of Bethlehem the lowly shepherd rather than David of Jerusalem. He could be avoiding to present Jesus as a Political and a triumphant messiah as this was the expectation at the time.

Verse 7: “And She gave birth to her first-born Son, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn”

*And She gave birth to her first-born Son:* First born (πρωτοκος) sometimes is equivalent to Only son (μονογενες). The first born would imply that there could be

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<sup>25</sup> H. HENDRICKX, *Infancy Narratives*, 94. See also R. E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 396. Micah’s text see Micah 4:1-3. Isaiah 2:2-3 has similar text.

<sup>26</sup> J. FITZMYER, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, 406.

other children, first as among many. However Luke's use of *πρωτοκοκος* was to tell us that there was no child before Jesus, and therefore Jesus was to have privileges and position that the Hebrew tradition prescribes for a First born. Cf. Numbers 3:12-13; 18:15-16. The mention of *πρωτοκοκος* was probably in preparation for the dedication of Jesus as the first born<sup>27</sup> in Luke 2:22-23<sup>28</sup> with the religious practice of Israel.

*And wrapped him in swaddling cloths:* The word *ἐσπαργανώσεν* literally means she swaddled him. Strips or bands of clothes were wrapped around a new born to keep the limbs straight by means of restrain. This, it seems, was a common practice in the Ancient Palestine. However it is most unlikely that Jesus was swaddled for this purpose. Swaddling a baby was a sign of Parental care cf. Wisdom 7:4 and lack of it is considered a neglect as is in the allegorical description of Jerusalem in Ezekiel.<sup>29</sup> Luke's use of *ἐσπαργανώσεν* may signify that Mary did to Jesus what any Ancient Palestinian mother would have done to a new born baby. One may also rightly argue that though Jesus' place of birth seems lowly and even desolate he however did not lack the tender motherly care.<sup>30</sup>

*And laid/placed him in a manger:* A manger could be anything between an open feeding area and a feeding trough for animals. It could be used to mean a stall or a stable, as is used in Job 6:5. Luke's use of this word in this verse would mean a feeding

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<sup>27</sup> L. T. JOHNSON, *The Gospel of Luke*, SacPag. 3, 50. See also R.E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 398.

<sup>28</sup> Luke 2:22-23 "And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord') Leviticus 12:2-8.

<sup>29</sup> R. E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 399. The allegorical description is in Ezekiel chapter 16. Wisdom 7:4 reads: "I was nursed with care in swaddling cloths"

<sup>30</sup> J. FITZMYER, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 409. Cf. Ezekiel 16:1-10.



trough rather than any other meaning. Manger is a significant detail in this pericope and so are the swaddling cloths, we shall discuss them later.

*Because there was no place for them in the inn.* The Greek word that is translated as *inn* is κατάλυμα. It is not *inn* in the modern understanding of the word. This word κατάλυμα is also used in Luke 2:11, and here it is used to mean an open space where visitors can gather, a guest room. For *inn* as we would understand it today, Luke uses another word πανδοχείον. Cf. Luke 10:34.<sup>31</sup>

The lack of space has caused some in trying to explain this line to come up with different theories. Some say that there was crowding because of the census as all were to go and be counted. This however cannot be substantiated in any way in the pericope. Also we may argue against this, as the census was not a one day or one week event that could bring all people at once. These censuses could actually take as long as three years.<sup>32</sup> The others yet see a tone of rejection in this line, they see but a cruel and inhospitable innkeeper.

Verse 8: “And in that same region there were shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flock by night.” This verse is probably the one through which the popular piety has managed to fix night as the time when Jesus was born. The idea of midnight is rather an outcome of application of Wisdom 18:14-15 which reads “when

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<sup>31</sup> Luke 10:35 reads: “And the next day he took out two *dinarri* and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care; and whatever more you spend I will repay you when I come back’”.

<sup>32</sup> W. M. Ramsey, “Luke’s Narrative of the Birth of Christ, *ExpTim* 4 (1992), 483. as quoted in BROOK W. R. PEARSON, *The Lucan Censuses, Revisited, CBQ* 61, II, 262-282.

all things were in quit silence and the *night in its swift course was half spent* your all-powerful word leaped down from heaven's royal throne" to the birth of Jesus<sup>33</sup>

Luke introduces the shepherds, a group of people who were poor and often could not keep the Law for night and day they looked after their herd and could not manage all the ablutions that the Law required and for this reason not so commendable, as the first to receive the announcement of Jesus' birth. By this he tries to offer an illustration of the realization of the revolutionary nature of the Messianic times that he described in Luke 1:51-53 in the *Magnificat*.<sup>34</sup>

Verse 9: "And an Angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone, and they were filled with fear."

*The glory of the Lord* in the OT Septuagint(LXX) is δόξα is an expression marking the majestic presence of the Lord. This presence is to be physically and strongly felt. *They were filled with fear* is a standard and natural reaction to angelic appearances. It happened to Mary, "but she was greatly troubled..." Luke 1:29, it happened to Zachariah for "Zachariah was troubled when he saw him and fear fell upon him" Luke 1:12. It even happened to Daniel in the OT. Daniel 10:12 "then he said to me 'fear not Daniel...'"

Verse 10: "And the Angel said to them 'I announce to you Good News of a great joy which will come to all the people'"

Even though the setting for Jesus' birth was in the context of the Roman empire cf. Luke 2:1, and even though this empire was thought of including all inhabited world,

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<sup>33</sup> R. E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 402.

<sup>34</sup> H. HENDRICKX, *Infancy Narratives*, 95. See also ROBERT J. KARRIS, *The Gospel According to Luke in NJBC*, 683.

the good news for all the people here is to be understood as limited only to the Jewish world.<sup>35</sup>

Verse 11: “for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ-Lord”

*To you* is presumably said to the shepherds and the all the people whom they represent. This verse is put in the mode of imperial proclamation to affirm that it is Jesus, and not the emperor Augustus as the propaganda would have it, who is the savior and source of peace.<sup>36</sup> *Today/ this day* in Greek σήμερον is an expression which brings out Luke’s sense of realized Eschatology i.e. the Last times are at hand. *Savior* is a translation of the Hebrew word שׁוׁׁ In Luke 1:47 this term is used as a Divine attribute and was used for God, but in Luke 1:69 Jesus is already designated as horn of salvation.

<sup>37</sup> The combination Χριστός κύριος, literally Christ Lord, without articles occurs nowhere else in the New Testament cf. notes on textual criticism in chapter one. However in the letter to the Philippians the three titles are applied to the Jesus of the *Parousia*.<sup>38</sup> *Lord* is a LXX translation of the word *Adonai* with its equivalence Κύριος. The word *Adonai* which means LORD was a substitution of the name of God, YHWH in the OT.<sup>39</sup> This name revealed as far as our human language could express, the inner nature and the personality of God. The name was regarded so holy such that in later centuries the pious Jews avoided pronouncing it. Hence whenever this name appeared it would be

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<sup>35</sup> H. HENDRICKX, *Infancy Narratives*, 96.

<sup>36</sup> H. HENDRICKX, *Infancy Narratives*, 96.

<sup>37</sup> BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 402.

<sup>38</sup> Philippians 3:20 “But our common-wealth is in heaven and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

<sup>39</sup> JAMES PLASTARAS, *Creation and Covenant*, 121.

substituted with *Adonai*. This practice was strengthened by the various modern language translations of the Bible. The proper name of Yahweh is dropped and YHWH of the Hebrew text is rendered as Lord.<sup>40</sup>

Verse 12: “And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby lying in a manger”

*And this will be a sign for you:* The sign here is not in the sense of a miracle. It is rather a sign that they will find a child in the apparent meaningful circumstances, i.e. a child wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. There is a relationship in both sign and message and between child and the people. In the message the child's titles are announced to the people, whereas in the sign the child is to found by the people but in the meaningful circumstance. So the notion of a sign complements the Angel's message of great joy to all people, and the condition of the child is paired with the announcement that he is a savior Lord Messiah.<sup>41</sup>

Verse 14: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased”

*Glory* means the experience and recognition of God's powerful action in man's behalf, that is the honor people and Angels give to God for having experienced and recognize his majestic presence. *And on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.* The way this hymn is understood is determined by the meaning and grammatical force of the last words of the verse ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκία(ς) cf. notes on the Textual Criticism in chapter 1. *Peace* here stands for everything which makes for

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<sup>40</sup> JAMES PLASTARAS, *Creation and Covenant* 122.

<sup>41</sup> CHARLES H. GIBLIN, *Reflections on the Sign of the Manger*, CBQ 29 I-II, 91 ff.

man's total well-being. Here it is God who seeks to establish a loving relationship with his people, a relationship whereby man will enjoy a total well-being.

Verse 16:

*With haste.* This implies the ready obedience and response of the shepherds to the revelation. *Found Mary and Joseph* There is a reversal of order of how the names of Joseph and Mary should appear. The placing of Mary's name first may reflect the respect for the Mother of the Messiah.<sup>42</sup>

### **3. The Meaning of the text**

In order to determine the meaning of verse 7 we deem it fit to examine carefully the three features that are mentioned in this verse i.e. the *manger*, the *inn* and the *swaddling cloths*. Some of these features are repeated more than once in the pericope which implies that they are very significant to the meaning that is intended by the author.

The first feature we to examine is the manger. This feature is mentioned three times in this pericope. The first mention is in Luke 2:7. Here it is a place in which the child was laid because there was no place for the parents and obviously nor for him in the inn. The second mention is in Luke 2:12. This second mention is even more significant because here it is mentioned expressively with the notion of the sign. The sign is that, the shepherds are to find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger.

The manger is significant because it is a place where the child was to be found. The immediate context of the story speaks of the change of the place from Nazareth in

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<sup>42</sup> R. E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 406.

Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea. This change has a prophetic significance. The Messiah was to be born in the city of David's origin, cf. Luke 2:4; Micah 5:1-5. Not only is this city of David's origin important but even and more precisely the place i.e. the manger where the Messiah is to be found is all-important.<sup>43</sup>

The third mention of a Manger is in Luke 2:16. As the shepherds hurriedly seek the event made known to them, what they do find is Mary, Joseph and the child lying in a manger. The manger is important here because the child mentioned is lying there. The important fact is not so much the manger at this point, but rather the child that is lying there, in the manger. The basic feature of this child's role is to indicate God's new disposition towards his people.<sup>44</sup>

The *inn* is not mentioned anywhere in this pericope before the birth of the child. This points to the fact that the inn was not a shelter that the parents of Jesus sought for and were refused or a shelter they looked for but not given. If the point of the verse is about the shelter that was refused of Jesus' parents then somehow the inn would have been mentioned in the verse at least once before the birth of Jesus. Instead this is mentioned only after the last verb following the mention of birth and swaddling of the child, even then it is mentioned in contrast with the manger. A look into Old Testament to see how these words were used will shed more light in the understanding of the meaning of the verse.

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<sup>43</sup> CHARLES H. GIBLIN, Reflections on the Sign of the Manger, *CBQ* 29 I-II, 90.

<sup>44</sup> CHARLES H. GIBLIN, Reflections on the Sign of the Manger, *CBQ* 29 I-II, 96.

#### 4. Old Testament use of Manger, Inn and the Swaddling Cloths

The first citation is about the manger. This citation is from prophet Isaiah and it reads “The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master’s crib but Israel does not know, my people does not understand” Isaiah 1:3. The word φάνη that is used for crib is the same that is used for manger in Luke. The meaning of Isaiah’s text above is as follows. Yahweh who is the owner of Israel is also the source of its sustenance. Unfortunately Israel does not know its owner and consequently doesn’t know the source of its sustenance, whereas the ox, and the ass know their source of sustenance i.e. the manger. In Luke 2:12, 16 the shepherds find the child lying in a manger, in other words they have found again their source of sustenance, but only because God has shown them the way to find him again.<sup>45</sup>

The second citation concerns the inn. In prophet Jeremiah we read “O you hope of Israel, its savior in time of trouble, why should you be like a stranger in the land like the wayfarer who stays in an inn for the night?” Jeremiah 14:8. The word that is translated as inn is κατάλυμα the same word that Luke uses.

Jeremiah complains that God has forgotten his people. He no longer visits them as his own. And even when he passes through the country, he does not stay with his own but lodges in an inn as a foreigner and traveler. If Jesus’ role is to indicate God’s new disposition towards his people then he is not to found in an inn.<sup>46</sup>

The last citation is from the Wisdom of Solomon. We read: “I was nursed with care in swaddling clothes, for no king has had a different beginning of existence.”

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<sup>45</sup> H. HENDRICKX, *The Infancy Narratives*, 101. See also R. E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 419.

<sup>46</sup> R. E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 419. See also CHARLES H. GIBLIN, Reflections on the Sign of the Manger, *CBQ* 29 I-II, 100f.

Wisdom 7:4-5. This is Solomon himself speaking, that at his birth he too was wrapped in swaddling cloths as the way of all. Solomon is a royal son of king David. For Jesus to be swaddled affirms the fact that he too is the son of David. Also and more importantly he is the one and only royal son of God.<sup>47</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Luke has used the three Old Testament citations that we have just discussed very creatively. He has combined them using the midrashic method. It is our duty to read these texts in the light of the midrashic reflections throughout Luke's first two chapters, we have also to grasp them in the totally new context of the story as Luke presents it, thus we shall have the fuller understanding of the mystery of Jesus' birth.

Jesus is born in the city of David, the place of his prophesied origin. He is not to be found in an inn, for he is not an alien or a traveler through the land or one who lodges there because he lacks family, he lacks friends and acquaintances. He is rather to be found in a manger, as he is the sign of God being the sustenance of his people. He is son of David, the royal son of God. His being wrapped in swaddling cloths does not underscore his royal rank, instead it affirms it, for no king has any other beginning of existence anyway.

So therefore the child who is born today in the city of David is a royal child. His condition, i.e. wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger attests to that same fact. This new born is also a Savior since he is called *ישו* which is Jesus, his being in the manger makes him one through whom God sustains his people. Note however that it is God who sustains his people. Hence the scope of the passage is more Theocentric in

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<sup>47</sup> CHARLES H. GIBLIN, Reflections on the Sign of the Manger, *CBQ* 29 I-II, 100.



nature than Christocentric, that is to say it is more God centered approach. The sign of a child in a manger indicates God's new relationship to his people. This is the reason why the manger which symbolizes God's sustenance of his people is presented as holding the child, who in fact has been declared to be a savior. The manger is never a symbol by and in itself.

Traditionally, the manger and the swaddling cloths are understood as a center point in reference to the poverty in which Jesus chose to be born. This interpretation seems to depend more on late medieval piety and of course present day feelings and experience rather than on an attempt to read from the text itself.<sup>48</sup> Since we have established the more probable meaning of the text, our third chapter will deal but in a very skimming fashion with the history of Interpretation of verse 7 and how this contemporary meaning does not necessary contradict the original meaning and lastly show that the message is for the poor as well as for the rich.

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<sup>48</sup> H. HENDRICKX, *The Infancy Narratives*, 101.

## Chapter III

### History of Interpretation of Luke 2:7 And Its Message for the Poor and the Rich

#### 1. Introduction

In the second chapter of our paper an attempt was made to establish the meaning of the text that we are treating, i.e. Luke 2:7. We have achieved this attempt by a careful return to the simplicity and somberness of the text through exegesis and interpretation. As we stated earlier, Luke 2:7 is a part of larger pericope that is a whole, i.e. Luke 2:1-20, which should be treated as a unit. We have therefore treated it in that manner.

To remind our reader, we shall state again but briefly what we have arrived at as the meaning of our text in question. Simply put, the meaning is this: That God has a new disposition towards His people. He is their sustenance and has allowed to be found again and recognized by his people as their sustenance, his people who could no longer find Him, their sustenance. In order to help this process of people finding again their sustenance, God offers them a sign, and the sign is this: You will find a child wrapped in swaddling cloths and laying in a manger (Luke 2:12).

Today, this text has acquired a different emphasis in meaning and thus a new meaning. Today's understanding is about Poverty with which the new born-baby, the Royal Son of God, chose to be born. This popular understanding of Luke 2:1-20 has been shaped by many things. It has been as a result of preaching, storytelling, and the influence of the introduction of the cribs and Christmas crèche scenes.

In this third chapter, we shall show the history of the interpretation of our text, i.e. Luke 2:1-20. Since a lot has been written about the interpretation of this text, we shall limit ourselves to the influence of the introduction of the Christmas crèche scenes had in the build up to the new acquired meaning of our text. We will first skim at the understanding of the text by the church fathers and ancient historical figures like Constantine. We will show too that the popular understanding of this text does not necessarily contradict the original meaning but rather enriches it. And as a step to our conclusion we shall show that message in the text is for both the poor and the rich.

## 2. The Popular Understanding of Luke 2:1-20

The popular understanding of our pericope today emphasizes the Poverty motif that is seen from the simplicity of the scene where Jesus was born. According to this motif, it was God's plan that Jesus was to be born in poverty and His parents forced by the circumstances resorted to the manger, the poor and private place. For the parents, they went to the manger because the room was apparently occupied and thus could not offer the privacy needed.<sup>49</sup> The child was to be born in poor conditions in order to identify as well as have a preferential option for the poor, the lowly, and the marginalized of the earth. The following quotation brings the gist of the popular understanding of our text:

The guest room was apparently occupied and hence could offer no privacy. So Mary and Joseph had withdrawn to a stable at the back of or underneath the house, perhaps in a cave. A feeding trough served as a crib. How simple and bare it all seems.[...] Luke has kept the story clean of any decoration that would remove it from the lowly, the poor, and the marginal of the Earth.<sup>50</sup>

According to this quotation several things come out so clearly. Privacy is depicted as an important concern for Mary and Joseph, to the point that when the room had no place, they had to withdraw either to the back of the house or underneath it, as whichever the case may have been. The poverty surrounding the birth place of Jesus is also important, because Jesus chose to be born in such conditions in order to identify with the poor, the lowly and the marginalized. The scene provides an identification of the poor. In fact "In the history of the church there have been many so poor and

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<sup>49</sup> GIUSEPPE RICCIOTTI, *The Life of Christ*, 239.

<sup>50</sup> FRED B. CRADDOCK, *Luke. Interpretation*, 35.

abandoned as to be able to identify with this scene.”<sup>51</sup> The presence of the shepherds in the story is used as a further point to support the poverty motif. Accordingly therefore “...they (shepherds) belong into the story not only because they serve to tie Jesus to the shepherd King (2Samuel 7:8) but also because they belong on Luke’s guest list for the Kingdom of God: the poor, the maimed, the blind, the lame (14:13, 21).”<sup>52</sup>

The tradition that associated the birth place of Jesus with a cave is partly the source of the popular understanding. Even though Luke does not tell us exactly where Jesus was born the subsequent piety fixed the site as a cave. Could it have been influenced by the reading of Isaiah 33:16 “He will dwell in a cave of strong rock.”? The tradition was so strongly established that a Constantinian basilica was established in 325 A.D. over a series of caves in Bethlehem to mark the site.<sup>53</sup> The facts tie up together. The cave might have served as the shelter for the animals and the feed-store. According to this tradition then it is a likely birth place. And the Isaiah reading we have quoted gives flesh to this probability. All in all the cave was frugal.

### **3. The Church Fathers’ Understanding of the Text**

The popular understanding of the text, which associates poverty with the birth of Jesus was a common-place understanding among the church fathers too. Looking at the Patristic homilies during Christmas from this text we immediately notice that the manger and the swaddling cloths are a sign of poverty. Commenting on Luke 2:7 ‘...and wrapped him up in swaddling cloths’ Bede says that “He who has clothed with

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<sup>51</sup> FRED B. CRADDOCK, Luke. *Interpretation*, 35.

<sup>52</sup> FRED B. CRADDOCK, Luke. *Interpretation*, 37.

<sup>53</sup> R. E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 401. The presence of many caves may lower the level of the argument. However we will buy the strong tradition point of view that in fact the cave that Jesus was born in lies among the series.

varied ornament the world, is folded in poor swaddling clothes, that we may receive the first robe.”<sup>54</sup>

Metaphrastes still on the same verse says:

O wondrous bondage and sojourn which He endured, who holds the world in His hand! From his first day He seeks only poverty and honors in it His person. Had he wished He might have appeared moving the heavens, shaking the earth, hurling down the lightning. But not in this way did He come. He wished to save not to cast down, and from the beginning to tread under foot the foolish pride of man. So He not alone became man, He became a poor man; and chose a poor mother, who had not even a cradle wherein her new born Babe might lie. For there follows: And she laid Him in a manger.<sup>55</sup>

From the above quotation we deduce that Jesus was rich and yet he chose to be born poor and by a poor mother, all because he knew the dangers associated with riches and he wanted to trample down on the root of them all that is the human pride. Ambrose gives us a synthesis of the fathers understanding of this text when he says “Because of thee, weakness: within Himself Power; because of thee, poor; within Himself all riches. Do not measure by what the eye sees, but acknowledge this: that you are redeemed.”<sup>56</sup>

The short quotations we have cited from the fathers, self explain about the fathers understanding on the text. We can rightly say that the Poverty motif in Jesus’ birth appealed to the fathers. Today the understanding is as a result of the medieval pious practices and the introduction of the crèche scenes introduced by St. Francis of Assisi to whom we now turn.

#### **4. Francis of Assisi and the First Crib scene**

St. Francis was born at Assisi in Umbria Italy in 1182. He was given the name John at baptism. But his father Peter Bernadone who did much of his trade in France

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<sup>54</sup> M. F. TOAL trans., ed., *Patristic Homilies, on the Gospels*, 122.

<sup>55</sup> M. F. TOAL trans., ed., *Patristic Homilies, on the Gospels*, 122.

<sup>56</sup> M. F. TOAL trans., ed., *Patristic Homilies, on the Gospels*, 122.

was not present when Francis was born and so they called his son '*Francesco*' i.e. French man. Francis founded the order of Friar Minors in 1226.<sup>57</sup> Francis was imbued with the spirit of poverty. He considered poverty as a virtue and lived it radically. Francis' gentle spirit and love of poverty is called *Il Poverello* in Italian.

In 1223 Francis introduced the first Christmas crib at Greccio.<sup>58</sup> The crib was simple and reflected the poverty which Francis exonerated in his life. And so "The manger was prepared, the hay had been brought, the ox and the ass were led in. the simplicity was honored, poverty was exalted, humility was commended, and Greccio was as it were a new Bethlehem."<sup>59</sup> The *Il Poverello* that was reflected on the first crib scene has left a mark on the interpretation of Luke 2:1-20.

Since then the crib scenes have served as a teaching aid to express and stress on the poverty in which Jesus was born. These scenes have thus been always made simple to reflect the poverty, even though sometimes the church goes next door to Matthew to borrow the Magi and their gifts in order to soften the poverty spirit.<sup>60</sup> The emphasis on poverty has ever since crept into the understanding and today it has become the popular understanding. In creating the first crib scene Francis did just as many would do namely to bring into reality their imagination of what should have happened at the birth of Jesus.

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<sup>57</sup> MICHAEL WALSH, ed., *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, 314-18.

<sup>58</sup> R. E. BROWN, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 419. See also M. BIALY, *The Crib and the Exegesis of Luke 2:1-20*

<sup>59</sup> MARION A. HABIG, ed., *Celano First Life 85 St. Francis Omnibus of Sources*, 300.

<sup>60</sup> FRED B. CRADDOCK, *Luke. Interpretation*, 37.

## **5. The Popular Meaning Doesn't Contradict the Original Meaning**

Earlier on we did state the original meaning of the text as Luke intended it. We shall not do that again here. The popular understanding does not contradict Luke's original meaning, because we see it as rather another aspect of the same message, only probably that Luke was not emphasizing on this aspect at this point in time. So even though to allude to poverty in interpreting the passage under study is considered to be off the point<sup>61</sup> but if we will take the bible as one story and treat it as a unit we will be surprised to see that indeed to allude to poverty is on the point. Just two verses later from our *Terminus ad Quem* we get a clear evidence of poverty in the family. Luke 2:22-24 "and when the time came for their purification, [...] they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. [...] and offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons."

Mary offered two young pigeons. The regulation for this sacrifice is to be found in Leviticus 12. the normal sacrifice was a lamb of a year old and a young pigeon or a turtle dove (Leviticus 12:6). But if she could afford the lamb she shall take two turtle doves or two young pigeons (Leviticus 12:8). This sacrifice was known as the offering of the poor.<sup>62</sup> Luke may not have stressed the point about poverty but he brings it across.

## **6. The Message For the Poor and the Rich**

### **6.1 The Message For the Poor**

In the OT the understanding the *Poor* encompasses from those who lack the necessities of life to those who depend on God would thus pray like the poor. Even

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<sup>61</sup> H. HENDRICKX, *The Infancy Narratives*, 95.

<sup>62</sup> H. HENDRICKX, *The Infancy Narratives*, 95.



though Luke would have a concern about the former, the message here is for poor in the wider sense. The poor then are those whose only hope is in God<sup>63</sup> as their source of sustenance and their Savior.

If God has a new disposition for his people, then the starting point is the preferential option for the poor, the lowly and the marginalized of the earth. It is no wonder then the shepherds, those who represent the poor according to popular understanding are in fact the first to hear the Good News. The poverty surrounding Jesus' birth and the naming ceremonies in Luke is a sign and Jesus' solidarity and his indentifying with the poor, and the Good News is that he is their sustenance, he is their Savior. It is in this way that the popular understanding enriches the original meaning.

God becomes poor in solidarity with the poor. His solidarity does not confine him to the same state but confirms him as a Savior. It is no wonder Ambrose was able to say "...because of thee, poor; with himself all riches. Do not measure by what the eye sees, but acknowledge this: that you are redeemed."<sup>64</sup> Poverty which is by and in itself is an evil is not to be exonerated but only if it is used to free oneself towards finding God our sustenance.

## **6.2 The Message For the Rich**

It is most likely that in Luke's community there was a high sense of material possessions to the degree that Luke was obsessed about. It is for this reason that his Gospel preserves more traditions related to material possessions than any of the other gospels. Luke sees the accumulation and holding of riches as inversely related to the

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<sup>63</sup> MICHAEL FALLON, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, 51.

<sup>64</sup> M. F. TOAL trans., ed., *Patristic Homilies, on the Gospels*. 122.

possibility of salvation. The rich are therefore seen in bad light in Luke; he however allows them a possibility of salvation.

How does feature in the text under study? Or phrased differently: what is the message for the rich from the text? The message for the rich from the text consists in a teaching about detachment from material things or from anything in our lives that presents an obstacle to our union with the Lord<sup>65</sup> who is to be found again in a Manger as our source of sustenance. This teaching is to be clearly found in the poverty of Jesus' birth as seen in Luke 2:7.<sup>66</sup>

The detachment that the rich are called to have from their riches will enable them to identify with the poor as did Jesus. They are called to have a proper use of their material possessions in helping the poor, and this way participate in God's option. When the rich are detached from their possessions their only hope will be in God. It is in this that they too will become the poor, namely "those whose only hope is in God."<sup>67</sup> Once the rich detach themselves from their riches, which often stand as a symbol of power in Luke's Gospel,<sup>68</sup> they will look for God as their source of sustenance and thus they will become the objects of God's Mission.

## 7. Conclusion

We have to the end of third chapter. This chapter was an attempt to show how our text under study has been interpreted through time. Today the text has developed the

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<sup>65</sup> WARREN DICHARRY, *The Human Authors of the New Testament: Mark, Matthew and Luke*, 188.

<sup>66</sup> WARREN DICHARRY, *The Human Authors of the New Testament: Mark, Matthew and Luke*, 188.

<sup>67</sup> MICHAEL FALLON, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, 51.

<sup>68</sup> M. K. POWEL, *What Are They Saying About Luke?*, 98.

meaning that takes into account our present day situation and needs. Our situation has thus added to meaning of the text by way of enriching it.

According to *the history of the influence of the text theory* (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) text once written, breaks out from its historical setting and moves within history. Due to the passage of time it is interpreted according to the time by the believing community and thus brings about the tradition of interpretation.<sup>69</sup> Our popular understanding of the text under study is therefore the tradition of interpretation.

One's understanding of the text depends on what one brings to the to it: one's worries, one's anxieties, one's problems and joys of life. Thus the appropriation of the text depends very much on what one brings to it, either as an individual or as community. If the we see the theme of poverty today it is because it is a pertinent issue in our society today. Likewise to the issue of proper use of possessions.

Tradition of the interpretation adds and enriches the meaning of the text. It does so supplying to the text the meaning which is not readily accessible through the exegetical procedures. Sometimes however this may distort the meaning of the text, even though this is not true to our text.

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. The Address of JOHN PAUL II and the Document of the PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION: *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church; Approaches Based On Tradition*.

## GENERAL CONCLUSION

We have come to the end of our essay. We have managed to present the message of the text under study. We have also shown how this original meaning has been enriched by the tradition of interpretation. This process sometimes blurs the original meaning of the text. However that has not been the case with our text.

The popular understanding of our text stresses the theme of poverty that surrounds the scene of the birth of Jesus. Even though this is contended by some scholars as they say that that is 'to read into the text,' we are of the different opinion. We see the theme of poverty being strongly presented in the text. Our argument is as follows.

The scholars argue against this theme, after arriving at the original meaning as Luke intended it, through a rigorous exercise of exegesis and analysis. Those scholars are correct in as far as exegesis is concerned and in as far as Luke's original meaning is concerned. Since the text once written breaks off from its historical setting, we are correct when we see the theme of poverty as strong in the text, because this has come about as the result of the tradition of interpretation.

We are convinced to say so even more so because our popular understanding does not contradict the original meaning. If the church community has, since from the time of the patristics to the present day, been inspired to see the this theme in the text it is because "He opened their minds and gave them the power to understand the

scriptures.”<sup>70</sup> This theme is there, the Patristics saw it, the Medieval church through St. Francis saw it, and we see it today.

Our methodology has been influenced very much by the Historical Critical Methods. One of the limitations in this method is the temptation to isolate the text from the biblical picture-square, and treat it as an isolated text. Our text under study is a part of Luke’s Infancy Narrative. The Infancy Narratives need always to be treated in a broader perspective of Salvation History.<sup>71</sup> In this Salvation History God has promised to bring his Kingdom. Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise. In the birth of Jesus, God’s decisive intervention in the history takes place. In Jesus, God’s new disposition towards his people is manifested, and his disposition is Salvation for all. However God has a preferential option for the lowly, the poor, and all the marginalized of the world, the group whose representative in the birth scene the shepherds were. It is a little wonder therefore that when Jesus begins the proclamation of the Kingdom of God he says “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; because He has anointed me to preach the Good News to the Poor.”<sup>72</sup>

The infancy Narratives are midrashic in nature. They are not therefore an attempt to reconstruct the history of the beginning of Jesus, but they are rather an interpretation of the person and birth of Jesus done in the light of the faith in the Risen Lord. Thus the Easter event is to be a focal point through which the Infancy Narratives are to be looked at. The Easter event was a liberation event, a liberation from the greatest of all poverty, i.e. the alienation from God caused by sin. It was also a liberation event

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<sup>70</sup> Luke 24:45.

<sup>71</sup> HERMAN HENDRICKX, *Infancy Narratives*, 118.

<sup>72</sup> Luke 4:18.

from all subsequent forms of oppression poverty included. When God opted for the poor and identified with them it is so because he is to liberate them.

If our Christmas crèche scenes are an attempt to bring about the historical humble beginnings of Jesus, they are indeed missing a point, but if they are an attempt to help us understand the message about the Kingdom, that is, it is inclusive of the poor the sinners, the rich and all the marginalized of the world, then they should be used.

## ABRIVIATONS

AD	<i>Ano Domino</i>
BC	Before Christ
CBQ	The Catholic Biblical Quarterly
Cf.	Confer
NJBC	The New Jerome Biblical Commentary
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SacPag	Sacra Pagina Series
LXX	Septuagint Greek Translation of The Bible
CNTS	Commentaries in the New Testament Studies
PCB	Pontifical Biblical Commission

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