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Crossways International
Minneapolis, MN 55435 USA
1-800-257-7308
www.crossways.org

The Revised Common Lectionary Notes

December 2, 9, 16, 23, 30, and January 6
by the Rev. Dr. Harry Wendt, founder of Crossways International

December 2, The First Sunday of Advent: Luke 21:25–36

The term “Son of Man” surfaces twice in this pericope (vv. 27, 36). It is used 82 times in the four Gospels—30 times in Matthew, 14 times in Mark, 25 times in Luke, and 13 times in John. Its roots are in Daniel 7; see 7:13. In Daniel 7, the writer sees a series of monsters rise out of the sea—monsters that represent the series of empires under which the Jewish people had suffered: Babylon, Media, Persia, Greece, and (at the time of writing) the Syrian Seleucids. The term “son of man” in Daniel 7 is a symbol for the “saints of the Most High,” the Jewish people, who are assured that the day is coming when they will be given dominion over the nations of the world forever. Jesus radically reinterprets the concept of “Son of Man.” He Himself is the first of a new and true people of God, and His mission is to establish a “true people of God” who will devote life to serving the nations and people of the world, not to dominating them. Without a doubt, the organized church needs to grapple with the meaning of this term and its significance for the life of God’s people.

In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus predicts clearly and powerfully the coming dreadful siege of Jerusalem by the Romans. Luke does not make reference to the Old Testament phrase, “abomination of desolation” (Daniel 9:27, 1 Maccabees 1:54) found in both Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14; it is a phrase that points to the Roman army’s eventual desecration of the Jerusalem Temple.

21:25–28: Luke picks up on the thought referred to in 21:11 and for a few verses looks ahead to the coming of the Son of Man “with power and great glory.” He again makes use of Old Testament figures of speech that picture the world convulsing under the impact of God’s redemptive power. Luke nowhere makes reference to the ignorance of the Son of Man concerning the final days (Mark 13:32–37). He alone includes the comforting remark that on the day of greatest struggle, redemption is at its nearest. The word *redemption* (v. 28) belongs to Paul (Roman 3:24). Here in Luke is the only place in all four Gospels where the term is used.

21:29–36: Luke points out that the generation of his day would witness the fall of Jerusalem. Even so, Jesus directs His hearers attention not to horrors, but to new life in the Kingdom of God. In v. 33, Jesus (reflecting a Jewish idiom) is saying, “Even if the sky and the earth were to pass away, (all) My words (and not just those of the final discourse) will pass away.” In getting his message across, Luke weaves Pauline themes into his text: Luke 21:34, 25 (see 1 Thess. 5:1–3); 21:34a (see 1 Thess. 5:7); v. 36 (see 1

Thess. 4:9–12, 18). Christian life is to be a prayerful preparation for the coming Final Appearing of the true Son of Man!

December 9, The Second Sunday of Advent: Luke 3:1–6

In his prologue (1:1–4), Luke states that, in writing his Gospel (“an orderly account,” 1:1, 3), he drew on information handed down by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word. This prologue is followed by Luke’s unique introductory materials (1:5–2:52) that deal with the births of both John the Baptist and Jesus, and Jesus’ early years. Next, Luke launches his “orderly account” about Jesus’ adult years (chs. 3–24).

3:1: Tiberius (a stepson of Caesar Augustus) succeeded Augustus as emperor of Rome in AD 14 and ruled until AD 37. The 15th year of his reign would have been AD 28 or 29 according to Roman reckoning, or AD 27 according to the system followed in Syria. After Herod the Great died in 4 BC, his territory was divided among three of his sons. Archelaus ruled Judea and Samaria until when he was deposed AD 6. (in response to a joint petition by both Jews and Samaritans) and Roman procurators assumed control of the territory that he had ruled.

Pontius Pilate served as prefect of Judea and Samaria from AD 26 to 36. The Jewish historian Josephus describes Pilate as a greedy and ruthless ruler who had little regard for the local Jewish population and their religious practices.

Herod Antipas ruled Galilee and Perea from 4 BC until AD 39. Although his official title, *tetrarch*, means “ruler of a quarter,” it designated a subordinate prince.

Philip, also a son of Herod the Great, served as tetrarch of the territory to the north and east of the Sea of Galilee from 4 BC until AD 34. Luke refers to only two small areas of Philip’s territory: Iturea and Trachonitis. Philip was the best ruler and most moderate of Herod the Great’s family. In later life, he married Salome (30 years his junior) soon after she demanded the head of John the Baptist in response to her mother’s instructions (Mark 6:14–29). Philip died childless.

Nothing is known about Lysanias, who is here said to have served as tetrarch of Abilene, a region to the northwest of Damascus.

V. 2: The word of the Lord came to John the Baptist (son of Zechariah) in the desert during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. Annas had served as high priest AD 6 to 15. After he was deposed by the Romans in AD 15, Annas made sure that five of his sons, a grandson, and a son-in-law (Caiaphas) exercised supreme religious jurisdiction. Caiaphas served as high priest AD 18 to 36. The office of high priest was sold by Roman officials to the highest bidder. Luke refers to Annas as “high priest” still at this time—possibly because of the continuing influence of Annas, or because the title continued to be used by an ex-high priest.

Luke presents the call of John the Baptist in a manner that reflects the call of Old Testament prophets, and extends the quotation in Mark 1:3 (from Isaiah 40:3) by adding Isaiah 40:4–5.

Unlike Luke, Matthew 3:1ff says nothing about John the Baptist’s origins, and does not suggest that John was a relative of Jesus.

V. 3: John's parents were Zacharias, a priest, and Elizabeth, both descendants of Levi. Hence, John could have joined the staff of the Jerusalem Temple as a professional priest. Instead, he carried out his prophetic ministry in all the region around the Jordan. The overtones of John following his calling are significant. He bypasses the Jerusalem Temple's "sin management system," its "salvation marketing system," and proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The fact that Jews from Judea and Jerusalem (Mark 1:5) went to John to be baptized is significant. Perhaps some of them suspected that the Temple system was corrupt and were looking for some new way to get right with God and influence the nation.

Vv. 4–6: The Essenes from Qumran used this same passage (Isaiah 40:3–5) to explain why their community was in the desert studying and observing the law and the prophets (*The Manual of Discipline*, 1QS 8:12–15).

The "salvation of God" (referred to in 3:6) is declared to be evident for all to see, perhaps in contrast to the empty claims of other gods and rulers to be "saviors"; see Isaiah 45:20–23.

John proclaims that the final age of the world is at hand. In the larger section of Luke 3:1–20, John urges the crowds to repent in view of the coming wrath (vv. 7–9), offers them standards for reforming social conduct (vv. 10–14), and announces to the crowds the coming of One mightier than he (vv. 15–18; note the messianic tones).

There is reason to believe that in Jesus' day, a Jewish elite of about 4,000 controlled and manipulated a wider Jewish population of about 800,000. The manner in which the elite often exercised power over the average citizen reflected the Roman system (summarized below). We need to know something about this system that Jesus, the apostles, and the early church had to deal with.

Rome: Its Political, Economic, and Religious Systems

When Jesus appeared on the scene, the Roman Empire dominated and controlled the Mediterranean world. The imperial establishment proclaimed the following: "Caesar is a son of god! Caesar is Lord! Caesar rules the world! Caesar brings peace! Caesar brings 'good news!'"

Policies introduced by Caesar Augustus, and perpetuated by Vespasian and Hadrian, gave rise to economic tensions. As the Romans believed in greater gods and lesser gods, they also embraced a social hierarchy that distinguished between wealthy patrons of the Emperor and the poor who were subservient to the wealthy. And the wealthy looked on the poor with disdain and exploited them to their own economic advantage.

- Scattered around the empire were numerous large cities, in which the wealthy enjoyed an affluent lifestyle and the poor lived in appalling conditions. Because those living in the cities and large towns needed food, poor farmers had to work extremely hard to supply those needs and survive in the process. Often the ownership of land was transferred from the poor to the wealthy, who sometimes focused on marketing and exporting what the land produced rather than on meeting the needs of the local poor.
- High population densities and inadequate sewage systems resulted in high disease rates and low life expectancies. Cities were able to maintain their population levels only because poor farmers

were often forced to move from the land to the city. Although efforts were made to pacify the poor by beautifying the public sectors of cities with temples, public buildings, and monuments, these things did little to meet their needs, and social tensions resulted.

- The imperial cult played a central role in the life of the Empire. The cult constituted a control-web through which all citizens were pressured to see themselves as connected to Rome and the emperor. Its goal was to serve as a social glue to keep those scattered across a vast empire linked to each other. For most living within the borders of the empire, the imperial cult was the only way in which the emperor was known. Few ever saw the emperor himself. People came to know him only through imperial statues, temples, inscriptions, coins, public festivals, and holidays.
- Little distinction was made between politics and cult, court and temple, rulers and gods. The same titles were given to kings, emperors, and gods. The court of the earthly ruler and the court of the gods were described in much the same way. The earthly ruler was said to possess divine qualities, and the gods earthly ones.
- Temples played a role in the economy of Asian cities. Banks and marketplaces functioned within them. In Rome, the temple of Saturn was the headquarters of the state treasury. The temple of Artemis in Ephesus was the financial headquarters of the province of Asia. Temples were key to the economic life of both the city and the empire. The best that a city had to offer was mediated through the imperial temples: worship, commerce, culture, and celebrations.
- The central myth that operated throughout the Roman Empire during the first century AD was that which surfaced during the reign of Caesar Augustus. The myth elevated him to the position of “Augustus,” a title meaning “revered Caesar”—even “divine Caesar.” As they traveled around within the empire, the apostles had to deal with this and other Roman myths, and their refusal to submit to the system cost some of them their life!
- Women living within the borders of the empire were expected to marry by the age of 14 and to produce as many children as possible—five, at least. After all, the Roman system needed workers. It also needed soldiers to defend the realm and to replace those killed. However, the children of the rich did not have to go to war! And the rich themselves were given tax breaks, and ensured of security and prosperity.
- Rome had a way of dealing with those who posed threats to the imperial system: they crucified them. To make prospective troublemakers aware of what might overtake them, they erected crosses on hills near much-traveled roads close to major cities. Victims were crucified naked and were soon covered in sweat and blood, with excrement and urine running down their legs. They screamed, moaned, and sobbed. A few days later, their rotting remains became fodder for scavenging crows, vultures, dogs, flies, and maggots. The practice of crucifixion guaranteed security for the rich, but not for slaves, servants, tenant farmers, women, people on the borders, soldiers, those not given tax breaks, and those unable to control dreams of freedom and impulses for free speech. Writing in *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (pp. 350, 351), Joachim Jeremias describes how, for many Jews, it was important to have pure descent from Abraham.

A Gentile slave who converted to Judaism “could not, for example, lay his hands on the head of a sacrificial victim, nor weigh out the portions; in the synagogue, he was not allowed to make up the minimum number of ten present which was necessary for public prayer, and he could not be called upon for the reading; at table, he was not allowed to be among the people invited to say the benediction after a meal. Moreover, he had no right to bear witness. Last, and most important, he was deprived of any rights of matrimony. This abysmal social position explains the furious protest of Jesus’ listeners when He called them bondservants (John 8:32–35).

Comment: We might well ask, “What has changed in today’s world?” After all, although for the Roman and Jewish elite the cross ensured domination, for Jesus it meant—and achieved—liberation!

Little wonder that members of the Jewish elite looked on John the Baptist (and later, Jesus) as a threat to their system! Today, we who claim allegiance to Jesus as forgiving Savior and Servant Lord must learn to think and act globally, and open our hearts and hands in relation to the screaming needs that exist among Planet Earth’s billions of needy people!

December 16, The Third Sunday of Advent: Luke 3:7–18

Vv. 7–9: John summons his hearers to go in spirit out into the desert. There, with Moses (Exodus 3) and Isaiah (Isaiah 40–55), they would find the revelation of God’s glory. They must not be like vipers, desert creatures that slither over the sand and carry poison in their system. Unlike dry scrub bushes, their life must bear fruit in works of justice, mercy, and servanthood. Luke here records a genuine memory of the Baptist’s preaching. The metaphors come from the desert: vipers, stones, barren trees. Note that Luke usually edits out of his source words such as “vipers”; he deliberately omits this term from the preaching of Jesus (Mark 12:34; Luke 6:43–45).

John calls for repentance (*metanoia*, a new mind, a change of heart). Playing upon the Hebrew or Aramaic words for stones (*‘abanim* or *‘abnayyah*) and children (*banim* or *banniyah*), John calls for internal holiness, not focus on ethnic descent. God could create the spirit of Abraham more easily in a humble Gentile or a penitent sinner than in a proud Jew. John wants a sincere, total turning to the Lord; a mere reception of John’s baptism as a ritual is not sufficient. “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the tree”; this is the day of final decisions that will result in either abundant blessings or irretrievable losses.

Vv. 10–14: These verses are found only in Luke. They refer to John as the balanced guide of sincere souls. John asks for fundamental things—as did the prophets before him: compassionate almsgiving from everyone, and justice from tax collectors and soldiers. Two tunics (an undergarment that is less necessary than the indispensable outer one) are to be shared with the destitute. Tax collectors (publicans) who paid Rome for the “privilege” of collecting taxes were despised by their fellow Jews. John does not demand that they *quit their jobs*, but that they *reform their morals*. While Mark and John see the Baptist chiefly as a witness to Jesus, Matthew and Luke see him as a teacher of righteousness.

Vv. 15–17: In his teaching, John the Baptist strives to make his hearers admit how humble and poor they really are and how desperately they need salvation. In doing so, he directs their eyes to Jesus the Messiah, Who will be “more powerful” than John. This last phrase points to the expected eschatological Deliverer, the One Who will appear at the *eschaton* or final day. The Messiah’s baptism will be with “the Holy Spirit and fire,” terms for the power of God’s presence that burns away dross and ignites the fire of love. Not only will Jesus refer to His passion as a “baptism” (Mark 10:38–39), but Paul will refer to Christian baptism as a participation in the passion and resurrection of Jesus (Romans 6).

Vv. 18–20: Luke admits that he has summarized John’s preaching on numerous occasions. Then, in customary style, he completes the scene by recording John’s future arrest by Herod Antipas, and his imprisonment in the Machaerus, a fortress to the northeast of the Dead Sea in the region of Perea. Antipas had recently married Herodias, the former wife of Philip—but a different Philip than “the tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis.”

Vv. 21–22: Luke separates the ministry of John the Baptist from that of Jesus by reporting John’s imprisonment before the baptism of Jesus. There is reason to believe that Luke does this to show his understanding of the periods of salvation history. With John the Baptist, the time of promise, the period of “Old Israel,” comes to an end. With the baptism of Jesus and the descent of the Spirit upon Him, the time of fulfillment, the time of Jesus, begins. In his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, Luke will introduce the third epoch of salvation history: the period of the church.

December 23, The Fourth Sunday of Advent: Luke 1:39–45 (46–55)

In 1:36, the angel Gabriel refers to Elizabeth as Mary’s “relative” (NRSV) or “cousin” (NAB).

V. 39: Luke’s nativity narratives focus on the grand truth that, through Jesus’ conception and entry into the world, the grand finale to God’s plan of salvation for humanity breaks into history. Even before His birth, Jesus (whose name means “Yahweh saves”) brings joy to the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Mary travels about 80 to 90 miles south from Nazareth to the region of (today’s) Ain Karim “with haste”—or, as the Greek word implies, “deep in thought” (with good reason!). Possibly, Mary also went south to help an aged relative, already six months pregnant. Perhaps she also wanted to consult with a mature, righteous person such as Elizabeth.

We are not told whether Mary had revealed her pregnancy secret to Joseph. According to Matthew 1:19, 20, when Mary eventually breaks the news to Joseph, he initially decides to terminate their relationship.

Vv. 40–42: When Mary enters the home of her kinswoman and greets her, the child leaps in Elizabeth’s womb and she is filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, referred to so frequently in Luke’s writings, reveals to Elizabeth the exalted mystery resting within the heart of her young relative. She cries out with a loud voice, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Of all women, Mary is the most favored by God.

V. 43: Elizabeth refers to Mary as “the mother of my Lord”—indeed, a profound profession!

Vv. 44, 45: Elizabeth states that at the moment she heard Mary’s greeting, the babe in her womb leaped for joy. Remarkable! Even the unborn John the Baptist was, in some way, aware of what was taking place in Mary’s life, and in the life of the world. It would be interesting to know just how much Elizabeth really understood about the events that were taking place in the life of Mary, and what they would mean for the future history of the Jewish people and the world.

Luke portrays Mary as a believer whose faith stands in contrast to the initial disbelief of Zechariah (1:20).

Vv. 46–55: Although Mary is praised for being the mother of the Lord and because of her faith, she reacts as a servant in a psalm of praise—referred to as the Magnificat. The Magnificat makes no specific reference to Mary’s pregnancy and her visit to Elizabeth (with the possible exception of v. 48). Its contents fit well with themes found elsewhere in Luke:

- Joy and exaltation in the Lord

- The lowly being singled out for God’s favor
- The reversal of human fortunes
- The fulfillment of Old Testament promises

December 24, Christmas Eve: Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)

December 25, Christmas Day: Luke 2:(1–7) 8–20

Some of the “traditions” referred to below are based on late 2nd century apocryphal writings (e.g., *The Gospel of James*).

Tradition (not the text) says that Mary, who was in the advanced stages of pregnancy, rode on a donkey.

Tradition (not the text) suggests that Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem late in the afternoon or in the early evening.

Tradition (not the text) suggests that they sought accommodation at an inn, but were told that no room was available.

Tradition (not the text) suggests that they found, or were offered, accommodation in a cave or a stable—and only just in time, for Jesus was born soon after they settled in.

Tradition (not the text) suggests that both the shepherds and wise men visited the Holy Family at the same time.

What follows is an edited version of the Christmas narrative contained in Crossways International’s publication, *Christmas: The Real Story*. Comments on Christmas Day 2 (John 1:1–14) will follow.

Although in general Matthew and Luke follow Mark’s Gospel outline closely, Mark tells us nothing about the birth of Jesus. Mark’s purpose is to present in narrative form the message of Jesus’ Messiahship and His atoning death and resurrection.

John does not present a birth narrative either. However, he does refer to the expectation that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (7:49–52). Perhaps John wanted to emphasize that heaven is Jesus’ real home, and the historical circumstances of His birth were of little consequence (1:1–4).

In his Christmas story, Matthew does not report any journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem prior to Jesus’ birth (1:18–25). However, he does state that the Holy Family returned to Nazareth *after* Jesus’ birth (2:19–23). Note Matthew 2:23, which states that Joseph *made his home in Nazareth* after returning from Egypt. Had he not lived there before?

According to Luke, Joseph and Mary’s place of residence is *Nazareth*. However, the prophet Micah (5:2–5) had predicted that eventually a true and faithful King from the line of David would be born in *Bethlehem*.

According to Matthew 1:18–25, after Mary finds herself to be “with child from the Holy Spirit,” Joseph understandably taken aback. Although Joseph and Mary are betrothed, they are not as yet living together.

The traditional expectation was that Joseph should divorce Mary, but had he done this, she might have been stoned to death for apparent “unfaithfulness” to him. However, after God communicates to Joseph in a dream the true cause and reason for Mary’s condition, he retains her as his wife.

According to Luke’s version, the angel Gabriel tells Mary what will take place in her life (1:26–38). Mary then visits her cousin Elizabeth, who already seems to know what has taken place (1:39–45). Mary then bursts forth in a hymn of praise, now known as the Magnificat (1:46–55). After spending three months with Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah in the hill country of Judea (near Jerusalem and Bethlehem), Mary returns to Nazareth (1:56).

Luke 2:1–7: The Roman emperor issues a decree that an empire-wide registration is to be held. In Palestine, all go to their own towns to be registered. Joseph apparently had family and historical ties to Bethlehem, and possibly had been born there (Luke 2:3, 4). So Joseph and a pregnant Mary travel south from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a journey of about 80 to 90 miles.

When Jewish people traveled south from Galilee to Judea, they usually followed the Jordan River to ensure access to water for the three- to four-day journey. They also usually avoided traveling through Samaria since Jews and Samaritans harbored long-standing resentment toward one another and disagreed strongly about whether Mt. Gerizim or Jerusalem was the only valid place for worship (John 4:20–26; Luke 9:51–56).

Only Matthew and Luke tell the story of Jesus’ actual birth in Bethlehem. Bethlehem, about five miles south of Jerusalem, plays a prominent role in the nativity narrative. David was born there (1 Samuel 17:12), and his great-grandmother Ruth lived there (Ruth 1:19, 4:11). Micah prophesied that the fortunes of Judah would be restored through a ruler born in Bethlehem of the house of David (Micah 5:2).

Although both Matthew 2:1 and Luke 2:4 refer to Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, only Luke refers to Bethlehem as “the city of David.” However, in the Old Testament, *Jerusalem* is called “the city of David” after David captured it from the Jebusites (2 Samuel 5:6–10). For Jesus, Jerusalem becomes the city of death. His enemies live there and eventually crucify Him there.

Luke writes, “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the *inn*” (2:7).

Was there an inn in Bethlehem? Although there certainly were inns in the Palestine of Jesus’ day, they were usually built on Roman roads. Traders and Romans stayed in these inns; their language, culture, and politics were different from those of Palestine’s citizens. Bethlehem was not on a Roman road, and there is no written or archaeological evidence that there was an inn in Bethlehem when Jesus was born.

What Greek word does Luke use for “inn”? The Greek word translated as “inn” in Luke 2:7 (*kataluma*) can have five meanings, three of which are “house,” “guest room,” and *sometimes* “inn.” The same word is translated as “guest room” in Luke 22:11—a guest room being part of a house. When Luke

makes reference to an “inn,” he knows and uses the appropriate Greek word for it, *pandocheion*, as found in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:34).

According to Luke 2:4, Joseph was a descendant of David—the most famous king in Jewish history—who had been born in Bethlehem. It is likely that Joseph’s lineage would have ensured him a place to stay, either with immediate relatives or with others who had links to David. Finding accommodation in Bethlehem would not have been a problem.

Even if there had been an inn in Bethlehem, would Joseph have asked to stay there? It is likely that Joseph was born in Bethlehem, and that he had family roots there. If, on arrival, someone had asked him, “Who are you?” he would have replied, “I am Joseph, son of Heli, son of Matthat, son of Levi”—and so on. The immediate response would have been, “You are our kinsman! You are most welcome! What can we do for you?” A welcome of this kind was assured, even if his grandfather had left Bethlehem 100 years previously. Such is the custom still today among Palestinians where the culture of extending hospitality remains very strong.

Even if Joseph were to have no immediate relatives in Bethlehem, he would only have had to say that he was a descendant of David, and every door in town would have opened to warmly welcome him and Mary. At that time, Bethlehem’s population was probably only about 150 to 200 people. Even if no accommodations were available in Bethlehem, Mary’s cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1:39) lived only a few miles to the northwest of Bethlehem. Elizabeth would have certainly offered Joseph and Mary accommodation had they needed it.

Furthermore, it would have been socially unacceptable, even insulting, for someone with relatives and roots in Bethlehem to seek accommodation in an inn, and it would have been socially unacceptable for a baby to be born in any place other than a house.

In Jesus’ day, a traditional home typically had a one-room raised living area, with space for the family’s animals at ground level just within the entrance door. Mangers where the animals could feed were located at the edge of the raised family living area adjoining the stable area.

Joseph and Mary were welcomed into a home that had a guest room, but the guest room was already occupied (“there was no room in the *guest room*” (Luke 2:7). The host could not ask those who were already living in the guest room to leave; see Sirach 29:26–28. However, since people in that land at that time were used to living in close quarters, it would not have been a problem to find room for Mary and Joseph elsewhere in the house. At night, mats were rolled out for sleeping. In the morning they were rolled up again and stored against the walls so that sleeping space might again become living space. Where might the guest room have been? A guest room was usually attached to the rear of the house or on an upper level.

Not all houses had a guest room; many comprised just one room, as some Middle East homes still do today. Understanding this helps us discern Jesus’ message in Matthew 5:15, where He speaks of a person lighting a lamp that gives light to all in the house; one lamp could light a house when it had only *one room*.

Where was the manger? Traditionally, even a one-room house had two sections. The family members lived in one section and the animals in the other section. The family section was about three or four feet (about one meter) above ground level, with steps leading up to it. The smaller stable section was at

ground level and served as the family stable.

Set into the upper platform level were one or more mangers where the animals, standing in the lower section, might feed after being brought in at night. So the house where Jesus was born would have had built-in mangers. Each night the family's animals were brought into the house to spend the night in the "house stable." Thus, they could not be stolen, and they contributed their body heat to the house during the night. They were taken out first thing in the morning, and the space set aside for them was cleaned.

Only Matthew describes the visit of the wise men (Matthew 2:1–12). When the wise men came into Jesus' place of residence, they entered a house (2:11). The suggestion that the Holy Family moved from a stable to a house does not do justice to the cultural elements described above.

When was Jesus born? Luke writes, "Joseph went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child" (2:5). It is unlikely that Joseph would have asked Mary to make the long journey south if she were already eight months pregnant. Nowhere does the text say that she rode a donkey. Nowhere does it say that Jesus was born the night they arrived.

Not only that, but if it were obvious when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem that Mary was about to have a child, it is unlikely that the women of Bethlehem would have ignored and neglected Mary in her hour of need. The "honor and shame" culture of the Middle East sees it as a disgrace to the entire community not to offer hospitality.

After reporting the couple's arrival in Bethlehem, Luke goes on to say, "While they were there ..." (2:6), thereby indicating that the infant Jesus might have been born some months after their arrival. Most likely, when Mary was about to give birth, the women of the house and village would have come to her aid, and supplied the necessary bedding and hot water. The men of the house would have vacated it for as long as necessary. After Jesus was born, He would have been wrapped in swaddling cloths (see Ezekiel 16:4), and placed into one of the mangers.

It emerges, then, that David's "greater Son" was born in a simple house in a small village among ordinary people. This simple but profound story sows the seeds for the grand truths that eventually burst forth in the Gospels.

December 25, Christmas Day 2: John 1:1–14

The Gospel of John has no Christmas story. John's prologue (as this section is called) begins not with history, but with eternity. Years ago, a movie was produced titled, "From Here to Eternity." John's Gospel begins with the coming of God's Son "from eternity to here."

The first three verses give us poetry, not with rhyming endings, but with the kind of biblical poetry found in the Psalms. Various statements form parallel lines of thought with further developments, usually reaching a climax. The first five verses may be translated and set out the following way:

In the beginning was the *Word*,
and the *Word* was with God,
and the *Word* was God.

He was in the beginning with God.
All things were *made* through Him,
and without Him was not anything *made* that was *made*.

In Him was *life*,
and the *life* was the light of all people.
The *light* shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Each group develops a new but related thought: the Word as God; creation through Him; life and light through Him. Only vv. 6–8 and 15 (the verses that speak of John the Baptist) do not have a clear poetic form.

Vv. 1–5: From Eternity

The first verses sound familiar. They recall the beginning of Genesis, “In the beginning when God created the heaven and the earth . . .” However, “the beginning” here in John is not in time; it belongs to eternity where there is no time. The Word has always existed with God, has always been God. Christ did not become a person at the birth of Jesus; He only became a man. In the eternal realm, He has always been at God’s side.

He is the one through whom God spoke to the prophets to reveal Himself and His will. He is also the Word through whom God created all things. Since He was God’s agent at creation, everything has life in the Son of God.

But the description of the Son as Life and Light reminds us that He gives life and the light of God’s truth in another final sense. True life, what John often calls “eternal life” (see 3:15, 16, 36; 4:14, 36 etc.), only comes from faith in Jesus after He has enlightened our minds with the truth of God.

No mention is made of the Fall described in Genesis, but the word “darkness” recalls the truth that fallen humanity loves the darkness of ignorance and sin rather than the light of God’s saving truth; see 3:19, 20.

Nevertheless, this dark world has not been able to snuff out the light, even though it put to death the Son of God. Rather, the light now shines more brightly, and the Word rings out more clearly.

Vv. 6–8: The True Witness

The Word was God; John the Baptist was only a man. While the Word was always “*with* God,” John was “*sent by* God.” John’s role was to be no more than a first witness who defended Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God and the Light of the world (8:12). Refusing the spotlight, John pointed away from himself to Jesus. Why is this humility stressed again in v. 8? It is interesting to note that well into the second Christian century there were disciples of John the Baptist who claimed that he was the Messiah and the Light. John’s Gospel wants to reject any such idea once and for all. Every time John is mentioned, he is placed below Jesus; his servant role is stressed; see Acts 19:1–5.

Vv. 9–13: The True Light

Here the stage is set for the drama of the Gospel. Not John, but Jesus, is the true Light. But the tragic irony of history is that the world He created does not recognize Him. His own people, the Jews who have the Hebrew Scriptures, do not welcome Him with open arms as they should. From the beginning, Jesus is attacked, rejected, and accused of being a fraud.

But is Jesus' story all tragedy and doom? Certainly not! There are those who believe in His name—that is, believe in all that He is and represents. Faith in Jesus gives the disciples the right to be called children of God—not merely products of human birth. The terms “blood,” “flesh,” and “will of man,” all describe the normal sexual process of conception and birth. The child of God has to be reborn by the will of God and by the power of the Holy Spirit; see 3:3.

V. 14: Glory Revealed

Magnificent words! God stopped speaking to us as an invisible voice. The Word became a Person whom people could see and touch. The timeless Son becomes a little baby—all to show us God's grace and truth, to give us a glimpse of God's own glory. Israel and Moses were terrified at the vision of God's glory at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:16–21; Hebrews 12:18–21). The prophet Isaiah was struck with fear when he saw the glory of God in the Temple (Isaiah 6:1–5). But there is no fear in the vision of God's glory seen in the Father's only dear Son. Grace, truth, glory: all have been seen in Jesus Who was crucified and Who rose from the dead to show that God's glory is to forgive sinners and to restore them to His way of life—as revealed in His Son, humanity's forgiving Savior and Servant Lord.

December 30, The First Sunday after Christmas: John (1–9) 10–18

John 1:1–14 was dealt with in relation to Christmas Day in the previous set of pericope studies. However, we include those insights once again, and add comments for 1:15–18.

John 1:1–14

The Gospel of John has no Christmas story. John's prologue (as this section is called) begins not with history, but with eternity. Years ago, a movie was produced titled, “From Here to Eternity.” John's Gospel begins with the coming of God's Son “from eternity to here.”

The first three verses give us poetry, not with rhyming endings, but with the kind of biblical poetry found in the Psalms. Various statements form parallel lines of thought with further developments, usually reaching a climax. The first five verses might be translated and set out the following way:

In the beginning was the *Word*,
and the *Word* was with God,
and the *Word* was God.

He was in the beginning with God.
All things were *made* through Him,
and without Him was not anything made that was *made*.

In Him was *life*,
and the *life* was the *light* of all people.
The *light* shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Each group develops a new but related thought: the Word as God; creation through Him; life and light through Him. Only vv. 6–8 and 15 (the verses that speak of John the Baptist) do not have a clear poetic form.

Vv. 1–5: From Eternity

The first verses sound familiar. They recall the beginning of Genesis, “In the beginning when God created the heaven and the earth . . .” However, the “beginning” here in John is not in time; it belongs to eternity where there is no time. The Word has always existed with God, has always been God. Christ did not become a person at the birth of Jesus; He only became a man. In the eternal realm, He has always been at God’s side.

He is the one through whom God spoke to the prophets to reveal Himself and His will. He is also the Word through whom God created all things. Since He was God’s agent at creation, everything has life in the Son of God.

But the description of the Son as Life and Light reminds us that He gives life and the light of God’s truth in another final sense. True life, what John often calls “eternal life” (see 3:15–16, 36; 4:14, 36 etc.), only comes from faith in Jesus after He has enlightened our minds with the truth of God.

No mention is made of the Fall described in Genesis, but the word “darkness” recalls the truth that fallen humanity loves the darkness of ignorance and sin rather than the light of God’s saving truth; see 3:19–20). Nevertheless, this dark world has not been able to snuff out the light, even though it put to death the Son of God. Rather, the light now shines more brightly, and the Word rings out more clearly.

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Amazingly, in the person of Jesus, God “tabernacled” among us in the flesh. Furthermore, when we look at Jesus' life and listen to His words, we see and hear God's grace (redeeming love) and truth (faithfulness to His promises).

V. 15: This verse points to the preliminary servant role of John the Baptist. In the first words that he speaks in this Gospel (repeated in v. 30), John points to the superiority of Jesus. In the ancient world, the “one who comes after” is the slave or servant who walks a respectful distance behind his master. However, Jesus is the servant of God (Isaiah 53), but not the servant of John the Baptist. He submits to His Father, not to John.

V. 16: Jesus ranks higher than John because “He was before me” in the sense that He has always existed—long before John was born. The Older One has the greater authority. Jesus repeats this argument in 8:58, “Before Abraham was, I Am.”

V. 17: Jesus the Messiah was and is greater than Moses. Moses was a servant of God, but not the Son who possessed the fullness of God; see Hebrews 3:2–6. The Law that God gave through Moses did not give the final picture of God's grace and truth. This revelation came only with the Son who knew the Father perfectly.

V. 18: To be in someone's bosom denotes to be in the closest possible relationship with that person; see 13:23–25. Jesus is thus above the Law, and this is what John's prologue suggests from its very first verse. The Jews believed that the Law was always with God, that the Law was the light of humanity, that the

Law revealed God's glory. John says, “No! If we are to see God, we must see Him in Jesus, the Son of God. Only in Him is there the ‘fullness’ of God”; see Colossians 1:19, 2:9.

January 6, The Epiphany: Matthew 2:1–12

What follows consists of afterthoughts to Christmas Day.

When a child is born in the western world today, the parents notify the immediate family by phone and send cards to close friends. In some cases, they place a birth notice in the local paper or in the church bulletin. When Jesus was born, those who helped with the birth in Bethlehem would have been the first to know about it. But the official “birth notice” was given on a more grand scale (Luke 2:8–14). It was given by none other than an angel of the Lord. And after the announcement was made, a heavenly choir *proclaimed* (note: they did not *sing*) words that remain one of the church’s timeless treasures (Luke 2:14).

To whom did they proclaim those words? Shepherds! What an anti-climax—shepherds! The news of Jesus’ birth was not announced to the successful and powerful living in palaces in Jerusalem and elsewhere. It was announced to those classified as outcasts. After all, shepherds worked on the Sabbath and sometimes permitted their flocks to graze on land belonging to others. Furthermore, because they cared for animals belonging to others, the owners feared that the shepherds might kill one of their animals and share its meat with their immediate family. Shepherds were not permitted to give evidence in a court of law. They were not even permitted to enter the Jerusalem Temple!

But something dramatic happened that first Christmas night. When the angel of the Lord delivered the message of Jesus’ birth to the shepherds, the “*glory of the Lord* shone around them” (Luke 2:9). At that time, the religious leaders taught that the glory of the Lord dwelt in the Jerusalem Temple, specifically above the Foundation Stone located on the floor at the center of the Holy of Holies.

What was the Foundation Stone? The Babylonians destroyed the Ark of the Covenant when they destroyed Solomon’s Temple in 587 BC. When the postexilic community rebuilt the Temple, naturally they felt the need for a symbol of God’s presence. Rabbinic tradition says they found the very stone Jacob used for a pillow while sleeping at Bethel (Genesis 28) and placed it where the Ark of the Covenant had previously stood in Solomon’s temple. The High Priest, who entered the Holy of Holies only once each year on the Day of Atonement, sprinkled the blood of a goat on the Foundation Stone to atone for the sins of the people. However, with the birth of Jesus, the glory of the Lord is out of the Temple, incarnate in Jesus, and revealed first to outcasts.

The rabbis also taught that the Foundation Stone was “the navel of the earth”—the location where creation began and from which it spread out. It was the holiest place on earth. The next most holy place was the Holy of Holies in which the stone was located; the next, the Holy Place; the next, the Court of the Priests; the next, the court of Jewish men; the next, the court of Jewish women; the next, the court of the Gentiles; the next, Jerusalem; the next, the Holy Land; and the next, the world beyond the Holy Land.

However, the Christmas story is not about the most Holy *Place* but the most Holy *Person*. Jesus is, and in Him dwells, the glory of God—and outcast shepherds were the first to be told about His birth. When the shepherds rushed to Bethlehem to see for themselves what had been told them, they found the Person who is the key to time and eternity in a simple manger in a simple house. And being shepherds, they would have felt no hesitation to enter the house stable where He lay. No doubt they would have listened with astonishment when they heard the story in fuller measure from Joseph and Mary, and perhaps from hosts and helpers in the house. Even more, having heard and seen, these “outcasts” glorified God and told others!

For centuries, the people of God had prayed to God that He would rend the heavens asunder and come down to rescue them and restore them as a nation (Isaiah 64:1–2). Their prayers were answered on that

first Christmas night when God came down the “backstairs” of Bethlehem, through the “servants’ entrance,” and placed Himself in the crook of a simple woman’s arms. But as time went by, the people discovered that He had not come to rescue them from the Romans, but from themselves and their sins (Matthew 1:21). Indeed, a remarkable beginning to the revelation of God’s final, eternal, heavenly Truth!

Welcome, Gentiles!

Only Matthew records the visit of the wise men from the east (2:1–12). They come to Jerusalem looking for a child born king of the Jews and spoke of having observed a star at its rising; note Numbers 25:15–19, and the reference to “star” and “scepter” in v. 17. They consult with Herod the Great. He, in turn, consults the city’s chief priests and scribes who tell him that the expected Jewish Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, quoting Micah 5:2.

When the wise men resume their journey, the star that they had seen at its rising reappeared, led them to Bethlehem, and hovers over the house where Jesus is staying. They enter the house and present Jesus with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The 10th century monk, Aelfric, wrote:

Gold befits a king; frankincense belongs to the service of God; with myrrh they treat the bodies of dead men so that their bodies decay less rapidly. The gold signified that He is a true king, the frankincense that He is true God, the myrrh that He was then mortal; but now He remains immortal in eternity.

Eventually the wise men leave for their own country. Although Herod had asked them to inform him of the child’s whereabouts, they do not do this—having been warned by an angel in a dream not to honor Herod’s request.

Tradition says that the wise men were three in number; after all, there were three gifts. *Tradition* assigned them names: Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. *Tradition* says that they rode camels. But these notions remain, at best, traditions. There might have been four or more wise men, and they might have traveled by donkey, camel, or on foot.

The Greek word from which the term *magi* is derived refers to a wide variety of people, including fortune-tellers, priestly augurs, astrologers, and magicians. Some suggest that the wise men came from Babylonia, or Persia, where the word *magus* originated. A strong tradition suggests they came from present-day Jordan and that they were astrologers.

There is good reason to believe that the *magi* were Gentiles, for if they had been Jews, they would have known better than to ask King Herod about the birth of a national ruler who might challenge his dynasty. Matthew does not tell us why they wanted to pay homage to a Jewish king or what they learned about Him from their observations of “his star” (Matthew 2:2).

Some astonishing things are beginning to emerge. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the first to visit Him were those viewed as outcasts by the nation’s religious leaders. The next to visit Him were Gentiles.

This is all the more remarkable when it is remembered that at that time, there were those in Israel who

despised the Gentiles and referred to them as “spittle” (2 Esdras 6:55–56, an Apocryphal writing). There were those in Israel who detested the Edomites and Philistines, and referred to the Samaritans as “foolish people” (Sirach 50:25–2, Apocrypha). There were those in Israel who longed for God to pour out His vengeance on the Gentiles (Isaiah 61:2). There were also those who hoped that one day the treasures of the Gentiles would be brought into their land to become theirs (Isaiah 61:6). In the midst of all this, Matthew tells us that some of the wise among the Gentiles willingly brought their treasures to the Christ Child. It would seem that God was fulfilling His people’s dreams in a *radical way—in His way!*

When the wise men visited Herod the Great, most likely they met with him in Jerusalem. As they made the five-mile journey south to Bethlehem, they would have seen on the horizon, about 26 miles south of Bethlehem, a fortress known as the Herodium. The fortress, built by Herod, was the only site to carry Herod’s name. Its ruins can be seen still today.

The Herodium was a large round structure built on a hill and encircled by a cone-shaped miniature mountain. The fortress was reinforced by three semicircular towers, and by a fourth much higher round tower that possibly housed catapults. This higher tower had a solid base so that the vibrations and recoil of the catapults would not damage it.

The structure was not only a fortress but also a magnificently furnished palace, well supplied with water and gardens. Entry was by means of an underground passageway with 200 steps leading up from the bottom of the hill on which it was located. The Herodium served as both the district capital and a monument that could be seen from a distance.

Although Herod could look to his large bodyguard and many fortresses and palaces to ensure his security, he became afraid when told that a “king of the Jews” (*that was Herod’s title!*) had been born somewhere in his realm, and tried to deal with the threat by murder (Matthew 2:3, 16). Although Joseph and Mary rescued Jesus from certain death at Herod’s hands, other very young boys in Bethlehem were not so fortunate (Matthew 2:16).

Although Herod died in Jericho, he was buried in the Herodium with great pomp and ceremony. Josephus writes:

Everything was done by Archelaus to add to the magnificence of the ceremony; he brought forth all the royal ornaments to be carried in procession in honor of the deceased. The bier on which his body was carried was of solid gold, studded with precious stones and draped with the richest purple embroidered with various colors. On it lay the body wrapped in a crimson robe, with a diadem resting on the head, and above that a golden crown and the scepter by the right hand. (*War 1:33.9*)

Herod lies dead in the vicinity of the Herodium. The site of his tomb on the slopes of the hillside on which the Herodium is located was discovered in 2007. The “Bethlehem Babe” whom Herod planned to murder is alive and well, and is enthroned as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Earthly rulers and earthly kingdoms rise and fall, and come and go. However, the Kingdom established by the Bethlehem Babe will continue to all eternity!