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December 25th: Song of Songs 2 & Luke 2:1-14

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Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away! The birth of Jesus Christ.

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Transcript

Song of Songs, Chapter 2. I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. As a lily among brambles, so is my love among the young women. As an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young men.

With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting-house, and his banner over me was love. Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am sick with love.

His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases. The voice of my beloved.

Behold, he comes, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, looking through the lattice.

My beloved speaks and says to me, Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away.

For behold, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone, the flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtle dove is heard in our land. The fig tree ripens its figs, and the vines are in blossom, they give forth fragrance.

Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away. O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the crannies of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet and your face is lovely. Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom.

My beloved is mine, and I am his, he grazes among the lilies. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on cleft mountains. The opening section of the Song of Songs runs from chapter 1 verse 1 to chapter 2 verse 7, the antiphonal voices of the woman and her lover exchanging declarations of their love for each other.

In the antiphonal, dialogical or even liturgical character of these verses, the relationship between the two is deepened through the loving exchanges between them. In verses 8 to 17 of chapter 2, the lover comes. Commentators who adopt an allegorical reading of the text often hear the exodus in the background of this section, the Lord's answer to the longing of his people for his coming and deliverance.

Allegorical readings of the text are, we have argued, justified for several reasons and rather than presuming that such readings do violence to the text, we can recognize ways in which they are attentive and responsive to the text itself. As Robert Jensen notes, for instance, considering the fact that there was ancient Near Eastern love poetry between pagan gods and goddesses, it doesn't seem unreasonable to recognize the possibility of such love poetry being used concerning the relationship between the Lord and his people. In advancing such readings, we should also be encouraged by recognition of the ways in which the New Testament itself reads the song.

For instance, in chapter 1 verse 12 we read, While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance. In John chapter 12 verses 2 to 3 we find one of John's more subtle allusions to the song, So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table.

Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance, the perfume. The effect of such an allusion is to strengthen the marital imagery of the Gospel of John more broadly, marital imagery that is, if anything, even more pronounced in the book of Revelation.

Jesus is the bridegroom, and several of his interactions with women in the Gospel are framed in ways designed to be reminiscent of the Song of Songs. Jesus is the greater son of David, he is the one whom Israel longs for as its bridegroom messiah. Read in the

manner that John seems to invite us to, the song is a song of longing, anticipation and desire.

It's a song of eschatological expectation. Come Lord Jesus. The opening line of chapter 2 has sometimes been understood as the words of the bridegroom by Christian interpreters, though seemingly not by Jewish ones.

Yet it is better understood as the words of the bride. Edmay Kingsmill questions the common translation Rose of Sharon, arguing that it should rather be understood as bud of the plane, the bud likely referring to the lily in an earlier stage of its growth. She has not yet opened up and fully flowered, something that will occur over the course of the song.

There are several appearances of lilies within the book, this being the first. Arthmar Kiel identifies the lily as a water lily, or lotus of the plains, a symbol of regeneration and return to youth. There are clearly sexual allusions in the imagery of the opening flower that promises rejuvenation and renewal of life.

The hearer and interpreter of the song needs to recognise the presence of such imagery without thinking that its meaning is best conveyed by stripping away the veils of allusion and jettisoning the multifaceted connotations such as the youth and beauty of the bride or the promise of rejuvenation that she holds out to the bridegroom. The sexual imagery of the song is delicate and indirect, and were we to attempt always to get behind it, to escape its mediation and its veiling, our readings would fundamentally betray and misunderstand it. In their loving exchange of expressions of endearment, the bridegroom and the bride take up each other's words and respond in kind.

The bride compared herself to a lily of the valleys, beautiful yet young and in a humble situation. The bridegroom takes the imagery that she has used in comparing herself to a lily, and employs it to express how much she surpasses all who surround her. Then, in answer to him, the bride speaks of the superlative character of the bridegroom himself, with another comparison drawn from nature.

As she exceeds all the women as a lily exceeds brambles, so he exceeds the great trees of the forest, like a delightful fruit tree exceeds the other trees. As Michael Fishbane notes, the identity of this tree has been called into question by historical botanists, who argue that cultivated apple trees were not present in the region, and that what apple trees might have been present had bitter and unpleasant fruit, which clearly wouldn't work for the comparison here. Many suggest that the apricot tree might be in view instead.

Marvin Pope observes the presence of apple tree imagery in Sumerian sacred marriage mythology, and Kingsmill and others question the claims of those who deny the presence of cultivated apples in the region. If the apple tree were a familiar symbol from foreign

poetry, it might also have been employed as an exotic image. If the bride is the lotus in the low valley, perhaps we are to see an implicit contrast in status being drawn between the height of the tree and the lowliness of the lily.

The bride rejoices in the king for the shade and the fruit that he provides. He gives her shelter and she finds sustenance in his love. The bride continues her speech in verse 4, describing the bridegroom bringing her into his banqueting house or his house of wine.

Love is a feast in which the parties delight in the tastes and scents of the other. Wine connotes rest, celebration, relaxation and delight, and clusters of imagery surrounding grapes, wine and drinking are among the most favoured within the song as they are so apt for speaking of the character of love. The term translated banner in verse 4 is another familiar one that has been disputed, some seeing the image of love as a banner raised over someone as nonsensical.

Yet elsewhere in the song the same term is used for armies' banners, as it is for the standards of Israel and its tribes in Numbers chapters 2 and 10. As Kiel observes, the images on such banners and standards convey the mission of a unit or symbols of their deity. As the bride comes under the shelter and protection of the bridegroom and into his feasting hall, his banner over her declares his loving purpose.

A bridegroom who raises such a banner over his beloved is also by implication a mighty man able to guard and to empower her. Here the woman describes herself as lovesick, asking for her lover to revive and refresh her with raisins and apples. Lovesickness is a recurring theme within the song, being used to characterise the bride in particular.

Cheryl Exum writes very helpfully about the way that the man and the woman of the song and their love for each other are presented to us, presented in ways that contrast them and don't just connect them. Describing the woman she writes, she expresses her desire and explores her feelings for him and his for her through stories, stories in which she and he both play roles as themselves or in fantasy guises. However, she writes of the man, the man does not tell stories, his way of talking about love is to look at her and tell her what he sees and how it affects him.

She writes further, the man constructs the woman, creates a picture of her for us through the gaze. We follow his gaze as he progressively builds up a metaphorical picture of her, bit by bit, until she materialises before us. The woman constructs the man, primarily through the voice.

She quotes him speaking to her, but he never quotes her. Exum proceeds to describe the differences between the ways that the love of the two lovers is described. She writes, the difference is subtle, for both feel wondrously overwhelmed by the other.

The woman speaks about herself, about being in love and how she experiences it. I am

faint with love, or I am lovesick. Her condition, lovesickness, is a malady to which lovers are prone, a state of intense longing that feeds on love and leaves one languid and in need of the sustenance only love can bring.

She goes on, the woman tells others, the women of Jerusalem, what love does to her. The man speaks to the woman about what she does to him. She sums up the difference, he is awestruck, she is lovesick.

In verse 6 the bride imagines the bridegroom fondling her, in a description for which we can find far more sexually explicit parallels in Sumerian sacred marriage poetry. The unity of the Song of Songs can be seen in part through its use of repeated refrains. Roland Murphy identifies a few key refrains that recur at various points in the song.

The first of these key refrains is this verse, his left hand is under my head and his right hand embraces me. This refrain is largely repeated in verse 3 of chapter 8. A second refrain is in the verse that follows. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.

This is present in verse 7 here and again in chapter 8 verse 4, two refrains being repeated in two sets of successive verses. However, the adjuration refrain is also found in chapter 3 verse 5. Murphy also sees a who is this refrain, what he terms the possession refrain, my beloved is mine and I am his, and finally, until the day breathes and the shadows flee. The repetition of these refrains serves to connect the song together.

It also weakens the arguments of those who see the song as merely a loose connection of different poems. Robert Alden argues that the song has a strong chiasmic structure, drawing attention to repeated phrases and details on either side of it. However, Richard Davidson argues for a modified chiasmic structure with two parallel panels on either side of the central verses of 4 verse 16 and 5 verse 1, bookended by chiasmic structures in chapter 1 and 2 and from chapter 7 verse 11 to the end of chapter 8. His proposed macro structure for the book depends much more upon the repeated refrains and, to my mind, convincingly demonstrates the robust integrity and unity of the song.

The bride here speaks of love as a force of its own that must be handled with wisdom, neither prematurely excited nor excessively delayed. Like music, with which it shares such a strong affinity, love requires good timing. Just as the silences between notes in a piece of music are not empty but charged and filled with tension, anticipation, recollection and release, so love as depicted in the song takes its time.

It requires knowing the right time for love and experiences through its taking of time the longing and desire of memory or expectancy. These are things that the unmusical hurrying of love to its consummation may never truly know. A truly fulfilling resolution requires time and tension.

Verses 8 to 14 are still the words of the bride, although within verses 10 to 14 she quotes the words of the lover to her. The bride expresses her eager anticipation of her lover's swift arrival. Robert Alter remarks upon the characteristic poetic artistry illustrated in verses 8 and 9. As the song introduces a comparison beneath the verbal surface of the initial lines, this is made explicit at the beginning of verse 9. My beloved is like a gazelle.

The lover's bounding and leaping towards the beloved shows his vigor and his great desire to be at her side. In 2 Samuel 1 verse 19, Jonathan is called the gazelle of Israel, a word that can also mean beauty or honour, likely chosen in part for such connotations. When her gazelle arrives, he calls to his bride to join him.

It is the springtime. Winter is over with its rains. Flowers are starting to appear.

Trees are being pruned. Birds are singing. Figs are starting to ripen.

The vines to blossom and spread their fragrance. The world is coming back to life, nature renewed in its youth, and the lover should join in, participating in the delight, the liveliness and the play appropriate to the season. Like someone trying to coax out a nervous bird, the lover beckons to her, addressing her as his dove, associated with love, beautiful in appearance, with a delightful song.

In a nicely balanced chiasm, he calls to her, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet and your face is lovely. The woman was already connected with the vineyard back in chapter 1 verse 6 and will again speak of herself in terms of the vineyard in chapter 8 verse 12. Exum suggests that we understand the little foxes here as amorous young men in search of grapes from the vineyards of the young women.

The image, she argues, may be more of a playful than a threatening one. The young men are free to romp like little foxes in the vineyards of the young women, who are less free to roam. These foxes need to be caught and brought home so that the vineyards aren't spoiled.

We might also consider the story of Samson as a potentially illuminating background here. Samson is a mighty man and a lover of women. However, in his story he has to deal with wild animals troubling the vineyards of Israel.

He meets and kills a lion in the vineyards of Timnah. Later he punishes the 30 Philistines who robbed him of his wife by binding 150 pairs of foxes together to destroy their fields, five for each one of the Philistines. An allegorical reading of this might perhaps see the vineyard of the bride Israel being threatened by troublesome enemies, depicted as lusty foxes who would spoil it and spiritually compromise it.

The chapter ends with two of the repeated refrains of the song. Within the first we can, as Exum observes, see a clear contrast between the wild foxes of verse 15 and the

beloved, who does not run wild but is committed to her to the exclusion of others, the two of them being bound together in mutual possession. My beloved is mine and I am his.

There is a very natural correspondence, of course, between this and the covenant formula. I will be your God and you will be my people. Some see the beloved here as akin to a shepherd grazing his flock among the lilies or the lotuses.

However, the beloved has just been compared to a gazelle and will again be compared to one in the following verse. In chapter 4 verse 5, another verse that occurs immediately before a refrain like that of verse 17, we read, Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that graze among the lilies. It seems more likely to me, then, that the beloved is grazing himself rather than shepherding grazing sheep, but perhaps the imagery is intentionally designed to invite both readings.

As she is earlier compared to a lily, the image here likely conveys intimacy and lovemaking, the beloved satisfying himself in her body, which is like a flower strewn land. The cleft mountains of verse 17 likely refer to her body in a way that evokes the beauty, mystery, wonder and fruitfulness of the earth herself. Timing continues to be important for the lovers, as we see in the words of the woman in verse But the exact timing and view bewilders most commentators, as the expression used is ambiguous.

Exum takes this ambiguity seriously. The woman is both seemingly sending her lover away and summoning him to her. She notes that the words of the woman here are almost identical to the last words of the song, and that even in the verbal differences from this verse, the same intentional ambiguities seem to be present there.

Writing concerning these differences, she writes, These differences pull in opposite directions, foregrounding the dual impulses already at work in chapter 2 verse 17. The similarity between chapter 2 verse 17 and chapter 8 verse 14 invites us to look more closely at how, in its poetic unfolding, chapter 2 verse 8 to 17 might offer a clue to the meaning of the song as a whole. Chapter 2 verse 8 to 17 ends as the song ends, with the woman seemingly sending her lover away and calling him to her in the same breath.

It is followed in chapter 3 verses 1 to 5 by a second story in which the woman seeks and finds her lover. This pattern indicates that the paradox called sending away and calling for or forth is a prelude to the lover's union, a union that throughout the song is simultaneously assured, deferred, and on a figurative level, enjoyed. A question to consider.

Standing back from the imagery used in this chapter and looking at all of the images taken together, what collective effect does it have in characterizing the love of the pair? Luke chapter 2 verses 1 to 14 In those days the decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was

governor of Syria, and all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

Luke chapter 2 begins with a census of the whole world by Caesar Augustus. This sets Luke's story within the context of the wider empire of Rome, much as the later story of Israel in the Old Testament is placed within the context of larger empires such as Assyria, Babylon, the Medo-Persians, as the influence of Israel and the Lord is felt throughout the wider world that Israel inhabits. Luke's narrative in Luke and Acts will conclude with Paul in Rome, by mentioning Rome at this point, this wider world provides a backdrop for the Gospel, even though most of the action within it will be contained within Israel's borders and population.

It also makes clear that Israel is under foreign control. Under the shadow of Roman rule, an heir of David is returning to the city of David. Much ink has been spilt on the subject of Luke's census, as there immediately seems to be a number of problems.

First of all, Quirinius was not the governor of Syria at the time of Jesus' birth. Second, there's no evidence that people would have to return to their ancestral town to be registered, or that Mary would need to accompany Joseph. And third, Judea wouldn't be included in such a census, because it was a client kingdom of the Romans, under the rule of Herod the Great.

While I won't get into all of these issues here, here are a few observations in response. First of all, it's likely that Bethlehem was not just Joseph's ancestral home, that it was his family home. Mary's home was in Nazareth, where Joseph had gotten betrothed to her.

They then moved down to Bethlehem together, as their initial home was a couple, as

Joseph presumably owned property and had family there. This was where he came from. Joseph takes Mary with him, because Bethlehem is his family home, and he intends that having been betrothed in Nazareth, they marry and settle in Bethlehem.

The census provides the occasion for this, but he goes back because that's where he owns property, that's where he belongs. Later, as we read in Matthew chapter 2, they move back to her hometown of Nazareth for the safety of the infant. And there we get the impression that Joseph and Mary belonged in Bethlehem.

They weren't just visiting there for a short period of time. Perhaps the best explanation I've found for the census is that advanced by Stephen Carlson, who argues that Augustus' census was not a once-off general census, but that Luke is referring here to a larger census policy. The reference to the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria is better translated, he argues, as this became a very important registration when Quirinius was governing Syria.

Now, why would he refer to this? Because the 6 AD census under Quirinius was the time and context of the rise of Judas the Galilean and his resistance to the Roman Empire. He started the movement of the Zealots, which eventually led to the Jewish war with Rome in the late 60s AD. This was a hugely important event within people's memory, and it's referred to elsewhere in scripture in Acts chapter 5 verse 37, further evidence that Luke had some idea of the relevant history.

In Acts 5 verse 37 he writes, After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. Other options have been suggested.

Some have suggested two periods of office for Quirinius. Perhaps one of the most important things to bear in mind here is the limited character of much of the historical evidence that we're working with, and how often we are in danger of jumping to conclusions on the basis of silence or very limited evidence. There are a great many occasions where scepticism about the historical veracity of details in the Gospels has been challenged by later emergence of evidence that directly supports them.

The infant is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger because there's no room for them in the inn. We've all seen nativity plays in which the innkeeper turns away Mary and Joseph. Usually the assumption is that there were such crowds of people in the town for the census that they didn't have space in all lodgings.

This is almost certainly mistaken. Joseph is just a young man returning to his family home, not to his ancestral home. There wouldn't be that much movement around, nor should we expect that the registration was all occurring on a single day or a short succession of days.

These censuses could last many years. They weren't just over a period of days. Others have imagined that there was some sort of prejudice against Mary and Joseph and so the innkeeper didn't let them in.

But there was a far simpler answer. There was no inn and there was no innkeeper. It doesn't even need to mean that there was no room in the family guest room so that they had to camp out with the animals, although it could mean that.

Rather, the more likely explanation is that they weren't short-term visitors to Bethlehem but had moved back there on account of the registration and the marriage and lived there. The simplest way to understand it is that they were living with Joseph's wider family. They would have a smaller marital room attached to the house but that room didn't have room for her to give birth and so they had to relocate to the main room of the house where the animals would also be present in order to give birth.

When he's born, Jesus can then be placed into one of the feeding troughs of the animals. While fishermen are prominent in the New Testament, in which the gospel goes out beyond the land to reach the Gentile peoples, shepherds dominate in the Old Testament. The patriarchs were shepherds.

They were distinguished from the Egyptians by that fact. Moses was a shepherd, as was David. In a familiar Old Testament image, both God and the leaders of Israel were regarded as shepherds of the people, with the nation as their flock.

See that in Psalm 23 or in Jeremiah 3.15 or 23.1-4 and most strikingly perhaps in Ezekiel chapter 34. Moses was a shepherd and he delivered Israel from Pharaoh as a shepherd, using a shepherd's rod to strike the enemy of his people and leading Israel through the wilderness like a flock. This is the way it's described in Isaiah chapter 63 verses 11-13.

Moses' first encounter with the Lord was while keeping watch over his father-in-law's flock. He saw an angelic appearance with glory phenomena, something that probably occurred at night, considering the appearance of fire, and he was given the further sign that he would later worship the Lord on Mount Horeb with the people after bringing them out of Egypt. The shepherds in Luke are watching their flocks when they are given a glorious angelic appearance, accompanied with the glory of the Lord, and are also given a further sign.

And I think we should notice the parallels between Exodus chapter 3 verse 12 and Luke chapter 2 verse 12. In Exodus, And this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you, when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain. In Luke chapter 2 verse 12, And this will be a sign for you, you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, and lying in a manger.

The contrast within the parallel is striking however. The sign received by Luke's

shepherds is that of a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, laid in a manger. The sign given to Moses, the pyrotechnics of Israel's encounter with and worship of the Lord at Sinai, is eclipsed by the sign of an infant in a feeding trough.

In both cases, shepherds are led to an encounter with the Lord. In the first, the Lord is shrouded in the dread darkness of the thundering and fiery glory cloud. And in the second, he has come as a swaddled child in a manger.

The significance of the sign of the swaddled child in a Bethlehem manger, being given to shepherds, probably arises from Old Testament prophecy. The Old Testament foretold the coming of a Messianic shepherd from the line and the town of David. Ezekiel chapter 34 verse 23, And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them, he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

In Micah chapter 5 verse 2 to 5, But you, O Bethlehem of Rathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth. Then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel, and he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth, and he shall be their peace. An infant in a sheep's manger in Bethlehem, the town of David's own birth, is a sign that she who is in labor has brought forth. We can hear the story of Rachel in the background of Micah's prophecy.

Just before the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel, Jacob is told that kings will come from his loins. And while journeying towards Bethlehem, Rachel gives birth to Benjamin and dies. That story lies in the background of Micah chapter 4 and 5. Now Bethlehem has been reached, and the true king is to be born.

The shepherds, symbolizing the leaders of Israel, encounter the promised great shepherd. However, there's a surprise. The one who was to feed the people as his flock is himself in the feeding trough.

The Messiah will feed his flock, but not in the way that people might have expected. He will be their food. Moses had a significant and foreshadowing encounter with the shepherds at a well in Midian, prior to his encounter with the Lord at the burning bush.

He delivered the seven daughters of Jethro from the abusive shepherds and watered their flocks. The one drawn from the water became the one who gave water in the wilderness. And his later ministry involved resisting false shepherds, and leading and watering the people as the Lord's flock in the wilderness.

And there's also foreshadowing in Luke's account of the shepherds. Later in Luke's

gospel, he describes Joseph of Arimathea requesting the body of Jesus from Pilate. In Luke chapter 23, verse 53.

The comparison with the description of the birth of Jesus is a pronounced one. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. The child wrapped in linen cloths and laid in the manger, is later wrapped in linen garments and laid in the tomb.

The comparisons don't end here. Shortly after the wrapping of the body of Jesus, and laying it in the manger or the tomb, there is a dazzling appearance of angels. Once again a sign is given, but the sign is no longer the wrapped body of Jesus in a stone container, but it's the unwrapped linen garments and the empty tomb.

The women within Luke's resurrection account both receive the angelic message, and serve as the angels, the apostolic shepherds. And in both cases the result is marvelling. We see that in chapter 2 verse 18 and in chapter 24 verse 12.

The conclusion of Luke's gospel also tells the story of the shepherds. There the apostolic shepherds are charged as witnesses of the resurrection, who will make widely known the fulfilled sign concerning the son. We could compare chapter 24 verses 45 to 49 with chapter 2 verse 17 here.

The gospel ends with words that echo the end of the account of the shepherds visit. In Luke 24 52 to 53, And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God. In Luke 2 verse 20, And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke's account of the shepherds is the story of a wondrous and remarkable sign. It is reminiscent of the sign of the burning bush. It is anticipatory of the sign of the empty tomb.

And it is revelatory of the promised arrival of the Davidic shepherd. The shepherd Moses' burning bush anticipated the greater sign of the burning mountain of Sinai, as the Lord's presence descended upon it, appearing to the people that Moses shepherded out of Egypt. The wrapped child in the manger seen by the Bethlehem shepherds anticipated the greater sign of the unwrapped linen garments in the empty tomb to the apostolic shepherds.

The account of the shepherds as witnesses, the bursting forth in praise, the theme of rejoicing, and people pondering things in their hearts, also connects this account with that which precedes it in the account of John the Baptist's birth and Zachariah's song of praise. Once again, the purpose of such an account is to help the reader to interpret the meaning of the events. The angels are bringing good news of the birth of the Davidic

Messiah to shepherds.

Some have observed that the language of Lord, Good News and Saviour were all terms that were promptly used within the imperial cult concerning the emperor, with whose action in calling a census this chapter was opened. If Matthew frames Jesus as a challenger to Herod as the king of the Jews, Luke might be framing Jesus as one whose kingdom will eclipse that of Rome. A question to consider.

This chapter begins with the actions of the great Roman emperor Caesar Augustus. But rather than sending heavenly emissaries to give the news of the birth of this new king to Caesar, God sends them to some small town shepherds on the night shift. What are some of the things that we learn about the character of the Kingdom of God from our passage?