

The Nativity of the Lord Christmas Mass at Midnight

Jerome Biblical Commentary with Texts

Reading 1

[Is 9:1-6](#)

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom
a light has shone.
You have brought them abundant joy
and great rejoicing,
as they rejoice before you as at the harvest,
as people make merry when dividing spoils.
For the yoke that burdened them,
the pole on their shoulder,
and the rod of their taskmaster
you have smashed, as on the day of Midian.
For every boot that tramped in battle,
every cloak rolled in blood,
will be burned as fuel for flames.
For a child is born to us, a son is given us;
upon his shoulder dominion rests.
They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero,
Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.
His dominion is vast
and forever peaceful,
from David's throne, and over his kingdom,
which he confirms and sustains
by judgment and justice,
both now and forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this!

(d) THE PRINCE OF PEACE (8:23-9:6). **23.** Zebulun and Naphthali were the first provinces of Israel to be overrun by Tiglath-pileser III in 733. Some of the population of these territories was sent into exile (VBW 3, 32). *but in the end:* Eventually God would restore the ravaged lands to their former glory. Mt 4:15-16 sees in Jesus' Galilean proclamation of the kingdom of God the fulfillment of this prophecy. The swift change in this verse from a vision of ruin to a promise of restoration prepares the way for the following oracle, one of the most important Messianic passages in the OT. The oracle has been incorporated into the Christian liturgy of Christmas Day.

VBW B. Mazar *et al.*, eds., *Views of the Biblical World*, tr. M. Dagut (5 vols.; N.Y., 1961)

OT Old Testament

9:1. Some scholars believe that the entire oracle (1-6) is a liturgical piece excerpted from the ceremony of a royal accession. Every time that a Davidic king came to the throne and was hailed as an adopted son of God there was cause for rejoicing. On this occasion, the promises of an eternal covenant with David were reaffirmed and hopes were raised for that ideal king of the future who would perfectly realize the dynastic ideal. Therefore, the oracle does not concern any historical king, such as Ahaz or Hezekiah, but the ideal king who would introduce the definitive era of peace and justice. Once again, the prophetic perspective is focused not on a king of the present but on the ideal Davidic king, the Emmanuel of 7:14. Perfect tenses are used by Isaiah, but they are “prophetic perfects,” expressing the certainty of a future event.**3.** The captive’s condition is compared to that of a harnessed farm animal, a fairly common image of enslavement. Usually the yoke was made of wood but sometimes of metal (Jer 28:13). The “pole” was the bar of the yoke that pressed down on the captive’s shoulders (VBW 3, 33). Isaiah later compares the liberation of Israel from Assyrian captivity to the breaking of a yoke and the lifting of a burden (10:27; 14:25). *as on the day of Midian:* An allusion to Gideon’s defeat of the Midianites (Jgs 7:16-25).**5.** *for a child is born to us:* On the day of a king’s enthronement he was proclaimed an adopted son of God (Ps 2:7), the theological basis for which is found in the dynastic promise to David’s house (2 Sm 7:14). *they name him wonder-counselor...:* These are the titles that go to make up the royal “protocol”; they were given to the king on his accession. To this ideal king are ascribed the wisdom of Solomon, the courage of David, and the religious virtue of the patriarchs and Moses. He is the quintessence of the great virtues of his people. The accent is strong on “wisdom,” the virtue by which king and counselor established prosperity for the community (J. Bourke, *CBQ* 22 [1960] 134-36). **6.** *judgment and justice:* This is the work of a counselor who is, at the same time, a royal personage. His eternal rule shall be assured by the Lord of hosts. The picture is that of the ideal king, the last representative of David’s line and not the next one to succeed on the throne of Judah. Christian tradition has, with one voice, seen in Christ the fulfillment of this promise. Certainly no historical king of Judah adequately realized this hope attached to the ideal king. *the zeal of the Lord of hosts:* God’s “zeal” (q n’â) could punish Israel for her sins (Dt 5:9), especially idolatry, but this same quality would also assure the fulfillment of the promises to his people.

(Coppens, J., “Le roi idéal d’Is. IX, 5-6 et XI, 1-5 est-il une figure messianique?” À la *recontre de Dieu* [Fest. A Gelin; Le Puy, 1961] 85-108, esp. bibliog.)

Responsorial Psalm

[Ps 96: 1-2, 2-3, 11-12, 13](#)

(Lk 2:11) **Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.**

Sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all you lands.

Sing to the LORD; bless his name.

Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.

Announce his salvation, day after day.

Tell his glory among the nations;
among all peoples, his wondrous deeds.

Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.

Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice;
let the sea and what fills it resound;
let the plains be joyful and all that is in them!

Then shall all the trees of the forest exult.

Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.

They shall exult before the LORD, for he comes;
for he comes to rule the earth.

He shall rule the world with justice

and the peoples with his constancy. **Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.**

Ps 96. A hymn of praise, commemorating Yahweh as king (see comment on Pss 47, 93, 95). In 1 Chr 16, this song is inserted in the context of David's bringing the Ark to the Jerusalem Tabernacle. There is a noticeable similarity to Is (40:10; 44:23; 49:13). Structure: 1-6, Israel is invited to sing of God's incomparable majesty and creative power; 7-10, an invitation to the nations to bring tribute and to worship God as king and creator; 11-13, an invitation to creation to rejoice in the Lord's dominion. **1. new song:** So-called because it commemorates a new evidence of God's rule; the divine supremacy is to be acknowledged in liturgical worship. Note the Ugaritic abc-a«b««d pattern (and "staircase" parallelism in 7-8). **2. his salvation:** The saving deeds of old, which are now being rehearsed. **4.** Cf. Ps 95:3. **5. things of naught:** Lit., "zeros" (' lîlîm), a favorite term of Isaiah (2:8; 10:10; etc.); the ineffectiveness of the gods is contrasted with Yahweh's creative power. **6.** The personification of divine attributes in the entourage of the deity is found also in Mesopotamian hymns (cf. Falkenstein and Von Soden, *op. cit.*, 222, 320; Ps 89:15). **his sanctuary:** Probably the Temple. **7-9.** Cf. Ps 29:1-2. **10.** Israel is commanded to say, "The Lord is king"—the characteristic cry of the enthronement Pss; the kingship is shown in creation (from of old) and in rule of the world. Some OL and LXX manuscripts added "from the tree, in a reference to the crucifixion of Christ (cf. "regnavit a ligno Deus" of the *Vexilla regis* hymn). **13. he comes:** The coming of the Lord is the actualization of his reign in the cult, which represents and celebrates his rule in the world.

Reading II

[Ti 2:11-14](#)

Beloved:

The grace of God has appeared, saving all
and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires
and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age,
as we await the blessed hope,
the appearance of the glory of our great God
and savior Jesus Christ,
who gave himself for us to deliver us from all lawlessness
and to cleanse for himself a people as his own, eager to do what is good.

Graces of the Redemption (2:11-15). **11.** *The grace of God, source of salvation for all men, has been manifested:* In the incarnation and redemptive work of Christ (cf. 2 Tm 1:9-10). *for all men:* Cf. 1 Tm 2:3-6. **13.** *awaiting the blessed hope and manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ:* On “blessed hope” and “glory,” see comment on 1 Tm 1:11; on “manifestation,” see comment on 1 Tm 6:14. This verse is an eloquent expression of Paul’s belief in the divinity of Christ. Sometimes the translation is found: “of the great God [i.e., the Father] and our Savior Jesus Christ.” The following considerations militate against this translation: (1) In the Greek the expressions “great God” and “our Savior Jesus Christ” are governed by a single definite article; (2) the verse refers to the parousia, and everywhere else the glorious manifestation of the parousia pertains to Christ (1 Tm 6:14-15; 2 Tm 4:1; 1 Cor 1:7; 2 Thes 1:7; etc.); (3) the rest of the sentence (v. 14) speaks only of Christ and ascribes to him a divine prerogative, the possession of the chosen people (see comment on v. 14); (4) the terms in the text reflect phraseology used in the cult of gods and emperors, where the terms “god” and “savior” are used in reference to a particular deity or emperor (e.g., Ptolemy I was called “savior and god”; in 48 BC J. Caesar was acclaimed at Ephesus as “god, son of Ares and Aphrodite, common savior of men”). (Cf. R. E. Brown, *TS* 26 [1965] 556-57.) **14.** *gave himself for us:* In Pauline terminology this expression refers to the sacrificial death of Christ (1 Tm 2:6; Gal 1:4; 2:20; Eph 5:2, 25). *to purify for himself a people of his own:* Adopting OT phraseology that refers to God’s people of the old covenant and their purification (Ex 19:5; Dt 7:6; 14:2), Paul asserts that Christians are the people of the New Covenant, whom Christ has chosen and purified (Eph 5:25-27; Heb 9:14; 1 Pt 2:9-10). **15.** Titus may still be youthful, as Timothy was (1 Tm 4:12).

Gospel

[Lk 2:1-14](#)

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus
that the whole world should be enrolled.
This was the first enrollment,
when Quirinius was governor of Syria.
So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town.
And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth
to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem,
because he was of the house and family of David,
to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.
While they were there,
the time came for her to have her child,
and she gave birth to her firstborn son.
She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger,
because there was no room for them in the inn.

Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields
and keeping the night watch over their flock.
The angel of the Lord appeared to them
and the glory of the Lord shone around them,
and they were struck with great fear.
The angel said to them,
“Do not be afraid;
for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy
that will be for all the people.
For today in the city of David
a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.
And this will be a sign for you:
you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes
and lying in a manger.”
And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel,
praising God and saying:
“Glory to God in the highest
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

(b) THE BIRTH OF JESUS (2:1-40). **1-2**. These verses are distinctly different in style from the Semitic tone of the rest of chs. 1-2 and are quite Lucan; Luke has thus made his own contribution to the Infancy Narrative. *when Quirinius was governor of Syria*: Luke’s reference to the census of Quirinius poses an historical problem that is still unsolved. It rises chiefly from Acts 5:37 and

Josephus, *Ant.* 17.13, 5 § 355; 18.1, 1 § 1-2, which refer to a census under Quirinius while Coponius was procurator of Judea (→ History of Israel, 75:136). This would have been *ca.* AD 6-7. For attempts to justify Luke's chronology, see *EDB* 336-38; W. Grundmann, *Evangelium*, 76-79; W. F. Arndt, *Luke*, 76-80.**3. each to his own city:** A Roman census could be based on residence in one's native city; an Egyptian papyrus contains an edict of the governor of Egypt in AD 104 ordering a "census by household" and stipulating that all who are out of their districts are to return to their own home (see A. Deissmann, *LAE* 268-69).**4. to the city of David:** Emphasis is put here on the royal privileges that come to Jesus through Joseph (1:32-33). *Bethlehem:* The distance between Nazareth and Bethlehem would be about 90 mi. (cf. C. Kopp, *Holy Places of the Gospels* [N.Y., 1963] 1-48; E. Lussier, *BT 1* [1962-63] 158-62; M. W. Schoenberg, *BT 1* [1962-63] 152-57).¹ **6. days...fulfilled:** Lk uses the word "fulfilled" eight times in chs. 1-2 (cf. Gal 4:4); centuries of longing and prayer, inspired and sustained by divine promises, are about to end. Lk might be making a special allusion to Mi 5:1f. an important text not only because it sees ancient promises reaching fulfillment in the Davidic messianic king, but also because another passage, Mi 4:9f. sees the chosen people experiencing the travail of messianic agony while giving birth to ultimate victory.**7. first-born son:** The Gk word, *pr totokos*, is consistently used throughout the OT (LXX) for the child who will continue the name and receive the double portion of property of the ancestral line (Gn 27; Dt 21:17). In certain cases the name carried strong messianic significance; through the firstborn the patriarchal blessings or religious heritage of Israel were transmitted (Gn 27; Ex 4:22; Rom 8:29; Col 1:18). The strong Jewish character of the infancy Narrative, therefore, explains the use of *pr totokos* in place of *monogen s* (only-begotten) of 7:12; the former word in no way demands that Mary had other children by Joseph (see *EDB* 777-79; *ThDNT* 4, 737-41; R. T. Siebenbeck, *BT 1* [1962-63] 194-200). *wrapped him*

Ant. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*

EDB L. F. Hartman, ed., *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible* (N.Y., 1963). English version of *BibLex*

LAE A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (London, 1927)

BT *The Bible Today*

¹Brown, R. E., Fitzmyer, J. A., & Murphy, R. E. 1968]; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996. *The Jerome Biblical commentary* (electronic ed.). Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ

Gk Greek

OT Old Testament

LXX Septuagint (Greek translation of the OT)

EDB L. F. Hartman, ed., *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible* (N.Y., 1963). English version of *BibLex*

ThDNT G. Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1964-). English version of *ThWNT*

BT *The Bible Today*

up: In the long strips of cloth, customary in Palestine, so that the child grows straight and strong.
manger: A feeding trough for animals. Jesus was born in one of the caves in the hills around Bethlehem. These caves were used at times as homes for families by adding a lean-to at the entrance of the cave; the family's livestock was housed inside the cave. *in the inn*: The word *katalyma* means a room for a guest or for eating (Lk 22:11). Because the outer room attached to the cave was already fully occupied or at least did not afford privacy, Joseph brought Mary inside the cave where the livestock ordinarily rested.

8. shepherds: The poor, as typical of Lk, are first to receive the message of salvation in Jesus' presence, among men. A double tradition or reputation surrounds the shepherd. The patriarchs were shepherds, so was David; "to shepherd" was a synonym for ruling (2 Sm 7:7; Jer 2:8). God himself is called the shepherd of Israel (Pss 23:1; 80:2). In both pagan and patristic literature (Vergil, *Eclogues* 4; Origen, *Catechesis* 20), shepherds are the innocent ones to whom divinity reveals itself; but this idea seems outside the scope of biblical thought. Another Israelite tradition, however, held that the shepherds were so destitute as to be always on the point of stealing and therefore completely untrustworthy (Str-B 2, 113-14).
9. angel of the Lord: See comments on 1:11 and Mt 1:20. *glory of the Lord*: The wondrous presence of God the Redeemer. In the OT this phrase is associated with great redeeming acts of God (Ex 14:4, 18; 16:7) and especially with the Ark or Temple (Ex 40:34f.; 1 Kgs 8:11). Whereas Luke prefers to restrict the term "glory" to Jesus' ascension or parousia (9:26, 31f.; 19:38; 21:27; 24:26; Acts 7:55), John applies it to the entire life of Jesus (Jn 1:14; 2:11).
10. A parallel sequence of promise and fulfillment can be traced between the annunciation of Jesus' birth to Mary and this angelic visitation to the shepherds: angel(s) appeared (1:26; 2:10); said to her (them) (1:30; 2:10); do not be afraid.., (1:30; 2:10); grace or joy, *charin* or *charan* in Greek; you will bring forth, or, there has been born (1:31; 2:11); Jesus, Savior (1:31; 2:11); Son of Most High, or, the Messiah Lord (1:32; 2:11); throne or city of David (1:32; 2:11); sign (1:36; 2:12); angel(s) depart (1:38; 2:15). See R. Laurentin, *Structure*, 126-27, n. 3. *good news*: See 1:19.

42 11. The contents of the Gospel are now revealed: the fulfillment of OT promises about a Davidic Messiah, the Lord's Anointed, who is himself Savior and Lord. Note how three significant titles are given to Jesus in this one verse: *s t r* (Savior), *christos* (the Anointed), *kyrios* (Lord). For Luke the most significant title is "Savior," for "salvation" is one of the main themes of his Gospel. Among the Syn he alone employs the title and the noun *s t ria*; he uses the verb *s z* (save) 30 times in the Gospel and Acts, more than the combined number of

Str-B H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (6 vols.; Munich, 1922-61)

OT Old Testament

OT Old Testament

Syn Synoptic Gospels or Synoptic writers

occurrences in Mt and Mk (see W. Grundmann, *Evangelium*, 454-56; W. Foerster, *ThWNT* 7, 990-92).¹⁴ *men of good will*: That is, of God's good pleasure. The phrase does not refer to the good dispositions of men themselves but to the predilection of God. God is not to be thought of as taking delight in man's goodness but rather as bestowing goodness on man through his divine election and mercy. The phrase has a parallel in QL (1QH 4:32-33; 11:9; see J. A. Fitzmyer, *TS* 19 [1958] 225-27; E. Vogt, "Peace Among Men of God's Good Pleasure, Lk. 2:14," *The Scrolls and the NT* [ed. K. Stendahl; N.Y., 1957] 114-17; C.-H. Hunzinger, *ZNW* 44 [1952-53] 85-90). The song of the angels gives a liturgical setting to the birth of Jesus as well as an eschatological aura (19:38).²

ThWNT G. Kittel, ed., *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (8 vols.; Stuttgart, 1933-).
German version of *ThDNT*

QL Qumran Literature (See *Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Texts*)

1QH Hôd yôt (Hymns of Thanksgiving) (→ 68:74)

TS *Theological Studies*

NT New Testament

ZNW *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*

²Brown, R. E., Fitzmyer, J. A., & Murphy, R. E. 1968]; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996. *The Jerome Biblical commentary* (electronic ed.). Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ