

The 2d Sign of Christmas: Burial Cloths & Feeding Trough, Lk 2:7; the Herald Angel, vv. 8-12; Pass in Review, vv. 13-14; Shepherds & Signs, vv. 15-18; Carol

21. The delivery of the Messiah and events surrounding it follow in Luke's narrative and among them are two significant acts by Mary that become the Second Sign of Christmas.

II. The Second Sign of Christmas, Luke 2:7:

Luke 2:7 - And she gave birth of her first-born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid Him in a feeding trough because there was no vacancy available to them in the inn.

1. Two things occur here to create another sign that contains harbingers of the suffering, spiritual death, physical death, and burial of Jesus the Christ.
2. The statement that Mary "gave birth to her first-born son" is another verification of her virgin status. The Child's birth ushers in the dispensation of the Incarnation of the Messiah: undiminished deity and true humanity in one Person forever.
3. But His true humanity is destined to serve a very special purpose: His life and work that will provide salvation and eternal life to anyone who believes in Him.
4. The first sign of the destiny of Jesus is that Mary wraps Him in "bands of cloth." The word for "bands of cloth" is the constative aorist tense of the verb **σπαργανόω, sparganoō**. This word is an unusual one to use in the context of wrapping a newborn and will become part of the second sign given to the shepherds.
5. The constative aorist contemplates the action in its entirety. The procedure for prepping a child following birth was to wrap his arms, legs, and torso in strips of cloth. The word goes back to classical Greece. *Sparganoō* was used by Hippocrates, the father of medicine, to describe wrapping the wounds of an injured person with strips of cloth. Secondly these strips of cloth were also used to wrap a body for burial.
6. There was a custom in the first century A.D. that may seem macabre to us in the twenty-first but it was a necessary consideration when planning a trip. As people prepared for a journey they had to consider the challenges they might encounter along the way, some of which could result in death—falls, accidents, attacks by highwaymen, illness, etc.
7. A corpse was something that could not be dealt with efficiently in remote locations. Therefore, it was customary to include among their belongings a supply of **σπάργανα, spargana**: "burial cloths."
8. Isolated in what is apparently an animal stall, Mary is forced to use these *spargana* that Joseph had packed to swaddle her child. Immediately following His physical birth, the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world was prophetically wrapped in burial cloths.
9. Interestingly, once the swaddling was completed a child would be wrapped in the same fashion as a corpse for burial. Once Mary had finished swaddling the Christ Child, she is said to have "laid Him in a feeding trough" which is referred to in all the major English translations as a "manger." The Greek word here is:

φάτνη, phatnē - This is a feeding trough for animals, often assumed to be made of wood but this is not the case:

Blaiklock, Edward M. and R. K. Harrison (gen. eds.). *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*. (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1983), 299:

MANGER. A box or trough containing fodder for domesticated animals. The heavy wooden mangers of medieval Christian art were foreign to Ancient Near Eastern usage, which commonly employed natural stone mangers.

10. What we see develop in this sequence of events is the sign that our Lord was born to die. The tombs of the first century were excavated from the rock of hillsides and natural caves were used by some. In these tombs shelves were hollowed out of the walls to form a flat surface above floor level on which to lay the corpse. Jesus was buried in such a tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea.
11. Thus the sign, the rallying point, given to the shepherds in verse 12 will be that they will find the Messiah wrapped in burial cloths, lying in a stone feeding trough, all emblematic that He was born to die for the sins of the world. His birth thus became a shadow of His passion.
12. The *spargana* initially represent the suffering he endured from physical wounds. He was slugged by members of the Sanhedrin, lashed by the Romans 39 times, pricked by the crown of thorns, felled by the weight of the cross, and crucified by its nails.
13. His suffering also included the three hours of spiritual trauma associated with being identified with and being judged for the sins of the human race.
14. Then following death, He was taken and placed in a stone enclosure wrapped in burial cloths by Joseph and Nicodemus.
15. Such was the circumstance in the stable. The Gift of God was imputed soul life to the biological life provided by Mary. The result of the human life of our Lord was immediately placed in circumstances that were emblematic of His death.
16. The burial cloths and His placement in a stone feeding trough formed the sign, the “rallying point,” the “center of attraction on which people are to pin their hopes.”

Luke 2:7 - And she gave birth of her first-born son and wrapped him in burial cloths and laid Him in a stone feeding trough because there was no vacancy available to them in the inn.

17. The events that follow give details about the first people to be informed of the Messiah’s birth, the giving of the sign to which they are to rally, and the glorious appearance of the Angelic Order of Battle.

III. A Herald Angel Informs the Shepherds, Luke 2:8-12:

Luke 2:8 - And in that same region [outside the city of Bethlehem] there were shepherds on duty in the fields guarding their flocks during the night.

1. The Jewish Talmud is composed of two major divisions: the Mishnah and the Gemarah. The Mishnah is the written version of the Oral Tradition which is the rabbis’ interpretation of the biblical law, whereas the Gemarah is a commentary on the Mishnah.
2. It is in the Mishnah that we learn that these shepherds at Bethlehem were actually on special assignment. Their duty was to guard the sheep used at the Temple in Jerusalem for special offerings associated with the Levitical sacrificial code.
3. These sheep were therefore quite special since they had been identified as those without spot or blemish thus qualified to portray the impeccability of the Messiah and thus His qualification to be mankind’s substitute on the cross.
4. Because of the requirements of their job these shepherds were not able to go up to Jerusalem for the sacrifices and as a result they were considered outcasts by the religious hierarchy.
5. Their absence from the rituals was a benefit to them since we will see that they immediately understood the reality of the angelic herald’s message to them. They knew the Mosaic Law and they knew the typologies of Christ contained in the sacrifices.

6. When the angel made his announcement that Messiah had come they knew that the Lamb without spot or blemish had arrived in human form. Whereas they would not leave the flock to go up to Jerusalem to observe the sacrifice of the ritual lambs they did leave the flocks to go to Bethlehem to observe the Lamb of God.

Luke 2:9 - And the angel of the Lord [a herald from the Angelic College of Heralds] stood before them and the glory of the Lord shined around them; and they were startled.

7. The shepherds went into Code Red. The appearance of the angel was unexpected and therefore they went on alert. The angel, aware of their *modus operandi* told them to relax:

Luke 2:10 - And the angel said to them, "Do not be startled. Behold, I bring you good news of great joy which shall be to all people."

8. The good news is **εὐαγγελίζω, euangelizō** which is a compound that means literally "to proclaim the good," and is the root from which we get the English word "evangelize." The angel had brought the shepherds the good news of Messiah's birth.
9. Note that the news is designed to bring great happiness to the entire world. Obviously the entire world will not enjoy great happiness as a result but it will be made available to "all people."
10. The happiness proclaimed is that which develops in a believer's soul. It is an inner resource that is not dependent on any external influence or circumstance but rather the presence of God's Word resident in his soul.
11. It is faith in Christ that ignites the spiritual life and enables the positive believer to grow in grace and develop the problem-solving device of sharing the happiness of God.
12. The angel next presents the *bona fides* that makes his proclamation good news:

Luke 2:11 - "Because today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior Who is Christ the Lord [Χριστὸς Κύριος, **Christos Kurios: the Messiah Lord**]."

13. This is a very bold statement. The angel is telling these men that there is a Child in Bethlehem Who is the Messiah. This is information the majority of the next generation of Jews will reject. The Messiah has been longed for over the course of centuries, and now they are told He has come.
14. To enable the shepherds to identify the Child they are given a "rallying point" at which they can "pin their hopes":

Luke 2:12 - "This will be the sign [σημεῖον, **sēmeion**] for you: you will find the Baby wrapped in burial cloths [σπαργανῶ, **sparganoō**] and lying in a stone feeding trough [φάτνη, **phatnē**].

15. These shepherds understood the meaning of these words. They gave them the necessary description they needed to find the Christ Child but also revealed to them the implications of His birth: He was born to die for their sins.
16. The word sign in the New Testament is **σημεῖον, sēmeion** and we need to take a quick look at its literal definition:

Friedrich, Gerhard (ed.). *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (Grand Rapids: 1971), 7:211; 219; 231:

σημεῖον, sēmeion.

The general use of **אִי** ['oth] in the Old Testament:

From a whole series of sayings which contain אֹת ['oth] it may be gathered with certainty that what is denoted thereby can be perceived with the senses and is often meant to be so. As a rule the reference is to visual perception.

No less conclusive are numerous passages which do not refer formally to seeing but presuppose that something visible is denoted by the term.

In Numbers 2:2 each tribe of the people has its אֹת ['oth] around which the members gather and which has to be visible if it is to achieve its purpose; it is probably a special emblem. אֹת ['oth] is distinguished here from דֶּגֶל [degel] which serves also as a standard for each group of three tribes. (p. 211)

σημεῖον [sēmeion] in Relation to אֹת ['oth] in the Septuagint:

σημεῖον aims at sense impressions with a view to imparting insight or knowledge. It is used in the LXX [Septuagint] on the basis of the sense of a "sign or mark which identifies something or someone, which thus makes identifiable." (p. 219)

New Testament Usage. Luke 2:12 uses the word as an introduction to the declaration of the angel in which he adduces as a "sign" or "proof" of the truth of his message about the birth of the Messiah the fact that the newborn child has found his first resting-place in a crib. In this situation it presupposes among those for whom it is meant the perception of certain data (2:15) which for their part serve a purpose of confirmation, 2:16, 20. (p. 231)

17. In our study we have discovered four words that are synonymous: אֹת ['oth], דֶּגֶל degel, and נֶס nes in the Hebrew and now σημεῖον [sēmeion] in the Greek.
18. They all refer to information that is given to someone so that they can make a visual identification for proof or verification.
19. Also we learned that among these things are standards, banners, guidons, or emblems that are used in military operations to identify one's rallying point, or an object or a person upon which one would "pin his hopes."
20. The Christ Child is such a standard. In fact one of these words is used in a title given our Lord by Moses:

Exodus 17:15 - Moses built an altar, and called the name of it Jehovah-nissi [יְהוָה נִסִּי YHWH nissi: The Lord is my banner].

21. Not only do the shepherds use the information about the Christ Child's physical circumstance to guide them to His location they are anxious to rally to Him in order to worship the One on whose shoulders the fate of the world rests.
22. This guidon also has application for the sudden appearance of the Angelic Order of Battle.

IV. The Angelic Army Passes in Review, Luke 2:13-14:

Luke 2:13 - Suddenly there appeared with the angel divisions of the Angelic Order of Battle praising God and saying,

v. 14 - "Glory to God in the highest and on earth tranquility of soul among those with whom God is well-pleased."

1. Angels' bodies are made of light therefore they are able to make themselves visible or invisible as the situation demands. We do not see angels in the Church Age but they were often made visible during the Old Testament dispensations.
2. What we see taking place is not only an extremely important event in human history but also in angelic history. Jesus Christ has many names and we have just mentioned one. Another is Lord of Hosts: יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת Yehowah sev'aoth: the Lord of the Armies.

3. Jesus Christ is the Commander-in-Chief of the angelic armies. Divisions of this Angelic Order of Battle cordon off the area in Bethlehem where their commanding Officer has just taken on true humanity.
 4. The first order of business for them is to execute a pass in review and salute the Christ Child on His entry into the affairs of men at what Paul referred to in Galatians 4:4 as the “fullness of time.”
 5. In verse 13 we find the word “praise,” which is the Greek verb αἰνέω, *aineō*. It has a synonym, εὐλογέω, *eulogeō* whose predominant application is “to bless.”
 6. The word *aineō* is used exclusively to express thanksgiving, appreciation, and esteem for a superior and is always directed toward God.
 7. The word *eulogeō* is used to describe blessings bestowed from a superior to an inferior, i.e., God blesses man and angels. It may be used to express appreciation or thanksgiving to a superior, e.g., man praises God.
 8. The Old Testament synonym is בָּרַךְ *barach*. It and the two Greek synonyms all mean “to salute” when the subject is man or angel and the object is God.
 9. Therefore, what we have is a pass in review, and as the angelic armies pass the reviewing stand at Bethlehem’s stable, they salute their Commander-in-Chief: *Yehowah sev’aoth* in hypostatic union His true humanity in the presence of the Christ Child.
 10. As they pass the reviewing stand the angelic warriors express their salute with the following encomium:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, tranquility of soul among those with whom God is well-pleased.”
 11. The Lord is well-pleased with each of these elect angels who have served under Him faithfully since their creation in eternity past. They make up the myriads that are deployed among the armies of the Angelic Order of Battle and who now salute Him in his royal but vulnerable statues as a newborn infant.
 12. Many of these angels will provide protection for the Christ Child throughout the Incarnation. It would be a violation of the rules of engagement for the angelic conflict if the demonic hoards of Lucifer sought to remove Him from the battlefield ahead of schedule.
 13. The Lord’s appearance in hypostatic union sets in motion a ministry that will present the true Messiah to Israel and then to the rest of the world.
 14. Salvation is given to any member of the human race who accepts the Father’s expression of unconditional love in the form of His uniquely born Son, Jesus Christ.
 15. These armies return to duty with a contingent left behind to provide divine protection which will be needed on several occasions, one of the most threatening occurring under the reign of Herod two years hence.
 16. As the angelic warriors return to heaven, the shepherds go into action.
- V. The Shepherds & the Signs of Christmas, Luke 2:15-18:

Luke 2:15 - So when the angels had passed in review from them and returned into heaven, the shepherds began to say, “Let us go straight to Bethlehem and see this thing that has occurred which the Lord has made known to us through this herald angel.”

v. 16 - So they went posthaste and located Mary and Joseph, and found the Baby lying in a feeding trough.

v. 17 - When they had seen this [the sign: the rallying point to which they could pin their hopes for eternal life], they made known the statement from the angelic herald that had been told to them about this Child.

v. 18 - And all who heard it were both astonished and ponderous concerning what the shepherds told them.

1. These shepherds left their lambs and went immediately to the Lamb these sheep were destined to represent in what would now become rituals without reality at the Temple in Jerusalem.
2. When they saw the Christ Child, wrapped in burial cloths and lying in a stone feeding trough in the side of a cave-like enclosure, they clearly understood that the Messiah had not only come into this life, He had come into it to die for their sins.
3. Without returning to the meaningless sheep, they instead went to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.
4. These were obviously responsible men and no doubt they soon returned to their duties on the outskirts of Bethlehem to tend their flocks. But now their priority one was not to tend the sheep bound for meaningless sacrifices but to worship and serve the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world.

VI. "Have Yourself a Blessed Little Christmas"

In 1943 Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane wrote five songs for the soundtrack of the 1944 movie *Meet Me in St. Louis*. One of these, "The Trolley Song" won the 1945 Oscar for Best Original Song. In 1989 another of their tunes won the ASCAP Award for the Most Performed Feature Film Standard. This song is "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas."

I recently received a CD single of this song but with a new lyric by Martin, who was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1914. The vocal is by Sylvia Lange and her piano accompaniment at the time of the recording was by none other than a 90-year-old Hugh Martin.

The liner notes of the CD include the following comments by Sylvia Lange:

Many years after "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" was written, Martin's life was turned inside out when he accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior and from that moment on, Christmas took on a new meaning. In 1996, along with his friend John Fricke, Hugh penned a whole new lyric to point to the real Reason for the Season ... Jesus Christ. I think he really grasped the true meaning of Christmas in these special new words ... see if you agree. Love, Sylvia.

"Have Yourself a Blessed Little Christmas" (Hugh Martin and John Fricke)

**Christmas future is far away,
Christmas past is past;
Christmas present is here to stay
Bringing joy that will last.**

**Have yourself a blessed little Christmas,
Christ the King is born;
Let your voices ring upon this happy morn.
Have yourself a blessed little Christmas,
Serenade the earth;
Tell the world we celebrate the Savior's birth.**

**Let us gather and sing to Him,
Let us bring to Him our praise;
Son of God, and a Friend of all**

To the end of all our days.

Let us all proclaim the joyous tidings,
Voices raised on high;
Send this carol soaring up into the sky,
This very merry, blessed Christmas lullaby.

Son of God and a Friend of all
To the end of all our days;
Sing hosannas, hymns, and hallelujahs
As to Him we bow.
Make the music mighty as the heavens allow,
And have yourself a blessed little Christmas,
Have yourself a merry little Christmas,
Have yourself a blessed little Christmas now.

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