

The Nativity in Bethlehem: The Virgin Birth & the Angelic Annunciation; the Sign of the Cross: Burial Cloths & a Wooden Feeding Trough, Luke 2:7–12; Prophecies: Mic 5:2; Isa 7:14; 53:5, 9; the Two Deaths of Christ

## VI. The Nativity in Bethlehem

### The Virgin Birth and the Angelic Annunciation:

**Luke 2:7** - And Mary gave birth to her first-born Son. She wrapped Him in strips of cloth [ *σπαργανόω*, *sparganoō* ] and she laid Him in a manger [ *φάτνη*, *phatnē* ] because there was no vacancy in the inn.

**v. 8** - In that same region there were shepherds living out in the fields and they were guarding their flocks by night.

**v. 9** - And an angel from the Lord [ *Γαβριήλ*, *Gabriël*: **seraph rank king of arms of the Angelic College of Heralds** ] stood before them and the glory of the Lord shined around them and the shepherds were very afraid.

**v. 10** - And the angel said to them, “Stop being afraid! For behold, I bring you good news of great happiness which shall be for all people.

**v. 11** - “Today, in the city of David there has been born for your benefit a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

Two passages from the Old Testament are fulfilled at the time of this annunciation to the shepherds:

**Micah 5:2** - “As for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, yet from you One will go forth on My behalf to be ruler of Israel [ **true humanity** ]. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity [ **undiminished deity** ].”

**Isaiah 7:14** - “Therefore, the Lord Himself shall give you a miraculous sign: Behold, the virgin shall become pregnant and bear a Son, and she will call His name Immanuel [ **God with us** ].”

### The Sign of the Cross:

**Luke 2:12** - “This sign is for your benefit: you will find the Baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a feeding trough.”

There is a technical grammatical arrangement leading off this verse that causes a very subtle but yet misleading translation in our English Bibles. The three major ones read basically the same: “This is a sign for you.”

However, the verb *εἰμί*, *eimi*: “to be,” is not in the Greek manuscripts. The grammar demands it but it is not unusual for the sake of emphasis to leave the verb out of certain sentences and such is the case here.

The emphasis is on the word *σημεῖον*, *sēmeion*, and translated “sign.” The verse begins with the pronoun *οὗτός*, *houtos*, translated “this.” It draws attention to the subject, “sign.”

What follows is an ellipsis where the verb *eimi* would ordinarily go and then the subject: “This is a sign” would be the complete translation. The word for “sign”: *sēmeion*, would normally be in the nominative case, but, instead, it is in the accusative case. This opens up a number of possibilities for the exact translation. But in context, the emphasis is not going to be on the sign itself but on what the sign represents.

Therefore, the following conclusion is reached: *sēmeion* is a nominative subject in accusative form. This demands that the verb *eimi* be supplied for the ellipsis. Because of the accusative form the following translation emerges: “This sign is for your benefit.”



The word *sēmeion*, or “sign,” has three applications in context all of which are to the benefit of the shepherds as well as all believers of any generation:

1. Something by which something is known. By this sign we will be able to learn a very important doctrine.
2. A system which teaches something important. A very important doctrine is going to be associated with the Messiah’s clothing and location. It helps describe the “good news of great happiness” spoken by Gabriel in verse 10.
3. A sign for identification of a person of great importance. The mission of the Messiah is revealed in the sign.

What follows is the revelation of the sign in two sentences. Number 1: “You will find the Baby wrapped in strips of cloth.”

The words, “wrapped in strips of cloth” are one word in the Greek, the perfect passive participle of the verb **σπαργανώνω, sparganoō**: “having been wrapped in strips of cloth.” The etymology of this word is instructive:

1. *Sparganoō* was first used by Hippocrates, the fourth-century B.C. Greek physician known as the Father of Medicine. However, he is incorrectly credited with writing the Hippocratic oath administered to graduate physicians.
2. The best definition of *sparganoō* is “burial wrap.” In the ancient world, medical areas had a supply of this cloth available so that whenever a patient died he could be immediately wrapped and buried.
3. When a wounded patient was being treated for cuts, swaths of this material were torn off and used as bandages.
4. That the newly born Christ Child is wrapped in burial cloths is said by Gabriel to be a sign: the Messiah is identified with death on the day of his birth.
5. Those who were believers would be able to understand the sign. They could relate Old Testament prophecies with a suffering Messiah. For example:

**Isaiah 53:5** - He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our peace [ reconciliation ] fell upon Him, and by his scourging we are healed [ spiritually ].

**v. 9** - His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man [ Joseph of Arimathaea ] in His death, because He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

6. For these shepherds, knowledge of such passages of Scripture enabled them to understand the sign of the death wrappings around the newborn Messiah.
7. The Father’s plan for salvation called for the undiminished deity of the Second Person of the Trinity to become inseparably united with true humanity, yet without sin.
8. This required the virgin pregnancy and the virgin birth.
9. Without a human father, Jesus was born as Adam was created. He was trichotomous, minus an inherited sinful nature, and therefore, minus the imputation of Adam’s original sin.
10. Consequently, on that first Christmas night, Jesus arrived in this world as a Lamb without spot or blemish—the very same description applied to the sheep the shepherds were guarding on the outskirts of Bethlehem.



11. These were sacrificial animals—without spot or blemish—whose blood covered the sins of the people on each Day of Atonement.
12. Jesus as the Christ was destined to be a substitute for the people; He was decreed to die on the cross once for all.

**Romans 5:8** - God demonstrated His own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died as a substitute for us.

**1 Peter 2:24** - He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds we are now healed.

**2 Corinthians 5:21** - God made Him Who knew no sin to be made sin as a substitute for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

13. In Romans 5:8 and 2 Corinthians 5:21 we see the translation “as a substitute for us.” This includes the proposition **ὑπέρ (huper)** which is usually translated “for us.” Combined with the genitive of advantage of the pronoun **ἐγὼ (egō)**, translated “us,” the phrase can be rendered “on behalf of us,” or “instead of us.” Both carry the idea of substitution and this is the best way to translate the phrase: “as a substitute for us.”
14. The Christ Child wrapped in burial cloths is a sign that He entered this life at the first Christmas with the assigned mission to become our substitute: to die spiritually for our sins (Isaiah 53:9) and to die physically so that we might have a resurrection body just like His (1 John 3:2).
15. The substitutionary death of Christ is often diminished, ignored, or unknown to those who write commentaries. Yet it is the source of our salvation although His physical death is quite often assumed to be.
16. Here are two sources that comment on **מָוֶת (maweth)** the Hebrew word for death which is found in:

**Isaiah 53:9** - His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His deaths [ **מָוֶת (maweth)** ], because He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

**53:9 death.** In the Hebrew the word rendered “death” is an intensive plural. It has been suggested that it speaks of the violence of Christ’s death, the very pain of which made it like a repeated death.<sup>1</sup>

**מָוֶת [mothe]** is a plural exaggerativus here; it is applied to a violent death, the very pain of which makes it like dying again and again.<sup>2</sup>

17. What is missed by Scofield and Delitzsch is that Jesus died twice on the cross, therefore, the plural should be translated literally instead of as an intensive. The New Testament distinguishes these two deaths by the use of two Greek words for death:

**In order to purchase our salvation, Christ had to pay the price of spiritual death. The great difference between the spiritual death of Christ and His physical death cannot be emphasized too strongly. The fact that Christ died twice on the cross is borne out by the use of the Greek and Hebrew words in several passages.**

<sup>1</sup> C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Study Bible: NASB* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 991n.

<sup>2</sup> Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, 3d ed., trans., James Martin (1877; repr., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1969), 2:329.



For example, in Colossians 1:22 [He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death...] the word “death” is in the singular—one death. The Greek noun *thanatos* refers to His spiritual death. When it comes to His physical death, the Greek word is *nekros*. When the resurrection of Christ is mentioned, it is often from *nekros*, not from *thanatos*. The only time that *nekros* is used for spiritual death is when it is found in the plural, as the object of the preposition *ek*, as in Colossians 2:12, “... God having raised Him out from the deaths.” Another example is the plural of *meweth*, “deaths,” in the Old Testament.

His grave was assigned [literally, the Father assigned Christ’s grave] to be with wicked men [the two thieves], Yet with a rich man in His death [deaths]. (Isaiah 54:9a, NASB)

The plural use of “deaths” is not generally understood, and therefore, the meaning of the blood of Christ is obscured. (p. 13)

When His spiritual death was complete, Jesus Christ shouted, “*Tetelestai!*”—the perfect tense meaning, “It is finished in the past with results that go on forever!” (John 19:30). Note that our Lord was still speaking *after* salvation was *completed*. Obviously He could not have spoken if He were physically dead! And certainly if He was still physically alive on the cross after salvation was complete, His physical death could have nothing whatever to do with the payment of sin!<sup>3</sup> (p. 14)

18. This is a critical doctrine because if it is assumed the payment of our sins was the execution of Jesus, then the penalty for sin would be physical death. If that were true and since Jesus Christ died physically for our sins, then we should no longer die physically.

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<sup>3</sup> R. B. Thieme, Jr., *The Blood of Christ*, 5th ed. (Houston: R. B. Thieme, Jr., Bible Ministries, 1989), 13–14.

