

Jesus is born (Luke 1 & 2)

Many years had passed since our last story about the Israelites and the land that the Israelites lived in was now part of the Roman Empire. The land still had a king but the king had to do what the Roman Emperor wanted. One of these Emperors was Augustus and he liked to know who was living in his Empire – it helped him when he wanted to get more money to know how many people could pay tax.

So, the Roman Emperor Augustus said, "Write down the names of all the people in every country that I rule. I want to make sure they pay my tax." This was called a census, when everybody's name and home town was written down in a list. The Emperor's order went out, away across the sea, to the far-off land where the Israelites lived and we are going to learn about a particular Israelite couple called Mary and Joseph.

Mary and Joseph were a young couple who lived in Nazareth. One day, Mary was on her own in Nazareth and an angel visited her, one of God's messengers from heaven. The angel told Mary that she was going to have a baby who would be a special king, God's own son and should be called Jesus. Mary was scared but the angel told her not to be worried – it was God's plan. Then the angel left.

Some months later, when the baby was soon to be born, Joseph went to Mary and said, "We must go to Bethlehem, my family's home town, to put our names on the Emperor's census list." They got busy, packing what they needed and could carry on this long journey and they set off, probably helped by a donkey so that Mary didn't have to walk too far or carry a heavy bag.

When they got to Bethlehem, the town was full of people. Joseph and Mary went from place to place looking for somewhere to stay. There wasn't one spare room. There wasn't one spare bed, not anywhere. But Mary's baby was coming soon and Joseph was worried about her. They had to find somewhere to stay.

They spoke to a man whose inn, like a small hotel, was full and he said that there was only one place left: the place where the animals slept! They got there just in time because, soon after, the baby was born. There was no place for the baby to sleep except a manger, where the animals were fed. Joseph filled it with clean straw while Mary wrapped her baby up in cloth, a sort of mixture between a sheet and an all-in-one baby outfit. Safe in the manger, little Jesus slept....

Outside the town, on the hills, the sheep were safe in their pen. A strong stone wall with prickly thorns on top kept the fierce wild animals out. And all night long the shepherds watched out for danger.

All was dark. All was quiet. Then, suddenly, the sky blazed with light, too bright to look at. An angel was there with the shepherds. The angel spoke to the shepherds in a loud clear voice: "Good news! The best news ever! For you and for the whole world! Today, in Bethlehem, your King is born. God's promised King! Go and see for yourselves! You will find him lying in a manger!"

At once the sky was full of angel voices singing: "Glory to God in heaven and peace on earth!" Then once again, all was dark; all was quiet. The shepherds took a deep breath and said, "We must do as the angel said. The sheep will be safe enough."

They hurried off to Bethlehem to look for this baby. There they found the new-born king, just as the angel had told them, not in a palace, not in a house, not even in the inn. They found him lying in a manger, in the place where the animals slept. They must have wondered what a king was doing in a rough place like this but they were used to sleeping in rough places themselves, so perhaps they felt at home. They stood there looking at him and his parents.

The shepherds told Mary and Joseph all that had happened. They said to Mary and Joseph and anybody else who was nearby, "Suddenly the sky blazed with light and an angel spoke to us! He said, 'Today in Bethlehem, your King is born. God's promised King! Go and see for yourselves'. So, here we are.

Mary listened. This was a night to remember. She would never forget it.

The shepherds strode back through the dark streets. Soon it would be morning. They must see to their sheep. As they walked back to the fields they spoke excitedly about what they had seen and heard. They praised God that what they had found was exactly as the angel had told them it would be.