

18 June 2023

Luke's Good News: The Backstory

Luke 1-2

Luke sits at a desk covered with paper and writing utensils.

My dear Theophilus.

I am sorry I have taken so long to reply to your letter. Let me begin by assuring you that I have not run mad. Yes, I have joined a new religion, the one called The Way, which centers on the Jew Jesus, called the Christ. Believe me: I am as surprised as you, especially when I remember how in the past we both mocked such fashionable faiths as Mithraism and the Mysteries of Eleusis. I would tell you that this faith is different from others, but I know that every devotee says that about his own religion, so I have decided to let you make that judgment yourself. I have for some time been collecting the writings about this Jesus – some books that record his teachings and one short history of his life and ministry – and I have now traveled to Judea to speak personally with many of those who knew him well. In this, and in ensuing letters, I propose to lay all that information out in an orderly fashion, that you may see for yourself that this Jesus is indeed all that I say.

Pause and lean back.

Now, where do I even start?

I think I must begin even before Jesus was born, back in the time of Herod's reign in Judea. There was a Jewish priest at that time named Zechariah, who was married to a woman from the high priestly line named Elizabeth. They were model Jews, obedient in all matters to the Jewish law, but for all that they had not been rewarded with a son. This was a deep grief, but they were now past the age of childbearing. Now it happened one day, when Zechariah was doing his periodic service in the temple that his name was drawn to take the incense into the inner sanctuary – which is both a great honor and a great responsibility. He entered the inner sanctum and there before him stood an angel of God! Zechariah went pale, but the angel said, "Don't be afraid. I've come to bring good news. Your prayers have been heard. This time next year, Elizabeth will bear a son."

I can only suppose that Zechariah recovered quickly from his fear, for his next words were, "Like fun, she will. Look at me. I. Am. An. Old. Man."

The angel replied. "No, you look at me. I. Am. Gabriel. Don't tell me what God can do. You'll see. And, because you didn't believe, you won't be able to speak until you do."

When Zechariah – now mute – emerged from the temple, it was clear that something extraordinary had happened to him, but he of course could not tell them what, so in time he returned to his home and his wife Elizabeth, his term of service in Jerusalem complete. Sure enough, a few months later it became clear to all that old Elizabeth was pregnant.

Some six months after these amazing events, the angel Gabriel made another visit, this time to young woman named Mary, in the little Galilean town of Nazareth. Mary was engaged to a man of the line of David named Joseph, but she was not married yet and still a virgin. Gabriel said to her, "Hail, O favored one! The Lord is with you." Mary just looked at him, frowning, and

said nothing. I don't suppose angels are used to that response, because after a moment the angel spoke again. "Um, don't be afraid. God has favored you." Still Mary just sat in silence and waited. The angel went on: "You will conceive and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus! He will be great in the eyes of God and will assume the throne of David!"

At last Mary spoke. "You know I'm a virgin, right? I don't mean to be disrespectful, but I mention that fact because usually –"

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you," the angel declared, "and will brood over you until you conceive a child who will be called the Son of God." Again, Mary looked at him in silence. At last the angel said, "God can do what God wants. Even now your cousin Elizabeth, who as you know is past the age of childbearing, is great with child. God is behind that, too."

And Mary said, "If this is what God wants of me, then let it be as God says."

I know what you're thinking, Theophilus: this is a remarkably calm and collected response to such a visitation from one who is a mere child. But I do not doubt it. I have never met a more remarkable woman.

Shortly thereafter, feeling the first stirrings of life within, Mary made a visit to her cousin Elizabeth, where I suppose they exchanged notes on their respective birth stories, but Mary had gone home before Elizabeth's time came to give birth. She bore a son. It was a nine-days-wonder in their town, but though the promise had come true, still Zechariah was mute. On the eighth day, when it was time for the child to be circumcised and given his name, their relatives gathered and said to Elizabeth, "I suppose you'll name him Zechariah, after his father?" but Elizabeth replied, "No, his name will be John."

"But Elizabeth, there's no one in your family by that name. What about Phineas? Or Eleazar? Those are good priestly names. You must think of what Zechariah would want." At that, Zechariah gestured for writing materials and wrote clearly, "His name is John."

At that moment, Zechariah's tongue was unbound, and he spoke again, singing praise to God and promising that one day this child would be not a priest but a great prophet, who would go before the Lord to prepare his way. And given all the strange things that had accompanied young John's birth, people almost believed him.

Meanwhile, back in Nazareth, Mary's time was drawing close as well. But just before she could be delivered of her child, word came to all the Jewish lands that Emperor Augustus had declared a census. (This was the first census, when Quirinius was governor.) Everyone had to go to their hometown to be numbered. Joseph, who by now was Mary's husband, was from the tribe of Judah, a descendent of David, so he had to pack his pregnant wife up and travel to Bethlehem. It's a journey of several days; I will leave you to imagine what that was like and only add that even when they arrived at last at the city of David, there was no rest for them. Every room in every house was full. At last, a man took pity on the homeless couple and let them take shelter with his cattle. There, in a filthy dugout, Jesus the Christ was born, and his exhausted mother wrapped him up and placed him in a feed trough to sleep.

This is a king? you're wondering. A stable? A feed bin? Shouldn't a promised king be in a palace, surrounded by his court? Of course. Let me tell you about his royal entourage. Just outside of town, in the hills where young David once watched his father's sheep, some shepherds kept their flocks through the night. Suddenly, the night sky was split open above them and an angel of the Lord appeared to them. Unlike Mary, these shepherds behaved as most of us would:

they cried out in fear and trembled like leaves. But the angel said, “Don’t be afraid. I bring good news. Today the Christ has been born in Bethlehem. He’s in a stable there, wrapped up and sleeping in a feed trough.” Then a host of angels appeared, and they all began to sing praise to God and to the helpless newborn waif who was to be God’s salvation to the earth. When they were done, the angels left them, and the shepherds hitched up their robes and went to see this Christ among the cattle.

I should wrap up this first letter soon, dear Theophilus, but let me just tell a few more quick stories. As I mentioned earlier, the Jews circumcise their children on the eighth day, and Mary and Joseph were nothing if not faithful Jews. So on the eighth day, they took their baby to the temple in Jerusalem. Now, I don’t know if you had a chance to see that temple before Vespasian tore it down, but I was there once in the days before the war, and it was a wonder to behold. Massive walls, priests in their fine robes, crowds jamming every corner, cattle lowing and sheep bleating. Those two poor provincials and their baby must have felt lost, but as they wormed their way through the crowds, an old man that they’d never seen before came up to them. The man’s name was Simeon, and he said, “Can I see the child?” It surprised them both, but what mother can resist showing off her baby? Mary lifted the cloth to show the child’s face, and Simeon began to cry. “Thank you, Lord,” he murmured. “Now I can die in peace.” He turned to go, but they stopped him. “Wait! What was all that about?”

“The Lord had promised me that I should see the Coming One, the Lord’s anointed, before I died,” he replied. Then he stared at them. “I’m sorry. Did you not know?”

Hardly had he finished speaking when an old widow woman appeared, one Anna, who had been alone for over sixty years and had spent nearly every day of those years in the temple in prayer. This poor widow Anna pushed through the crowd, gazed on the baby, then began shouting, “This is him! This is the one I’ve been praying for! Everyone look over here! This is the promised one! This baby!” Well, it took the little family a long time to get out of the temple that day.

Although there was one time when it took even longer. One more story. As I said, Mary and Joseph were faithful Jews, which meant regular trips to Jerusalem on feast days. Well, it happened in the year when Jesus was twelve years old that they misplaced him in the temple. Yes, I know, but they were part of a whole caravan of friends and relatives from Nazareth, and the boy *was* already twelve and able to take care of himself. They didn’t realize until they had stopped for the first night that he wasn’t with them. So they had to turn around and head back to the big city. And where do you suppose they found him? In the temple, talking about the law of God with the scribes and scholars, asking questions that they couldn’t answer and answering questions they hadn’t ever thought to ask. With all the anger of any frightened parent, Mary and Joseph grabbed him and started to yell at him for scaring them and for bothering the scribes, but Mary told me that she remembers like it was yesterday how he just looked at them, smiled, and said, “What did you think I was here for, anyway?”

Then this child who bore the weight of centuries of promise went home to grow up.

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Do you see, Theophilus, what I meant when I said that this Jesus was not like the other gods? This is no origin story of a Mithras or Dionysus or Osiris or Zeus or even a Caesar. This is a tale of a human boy born in poverty, deposited in a trough, welcomed to earth by unwashed

shepherds, ignored by priests but adored by poor widows. And this . . . *this* is the disreputable story that the Christians openly tell about their God. And there are stranger things to come. Until next time, your friend, Luke.