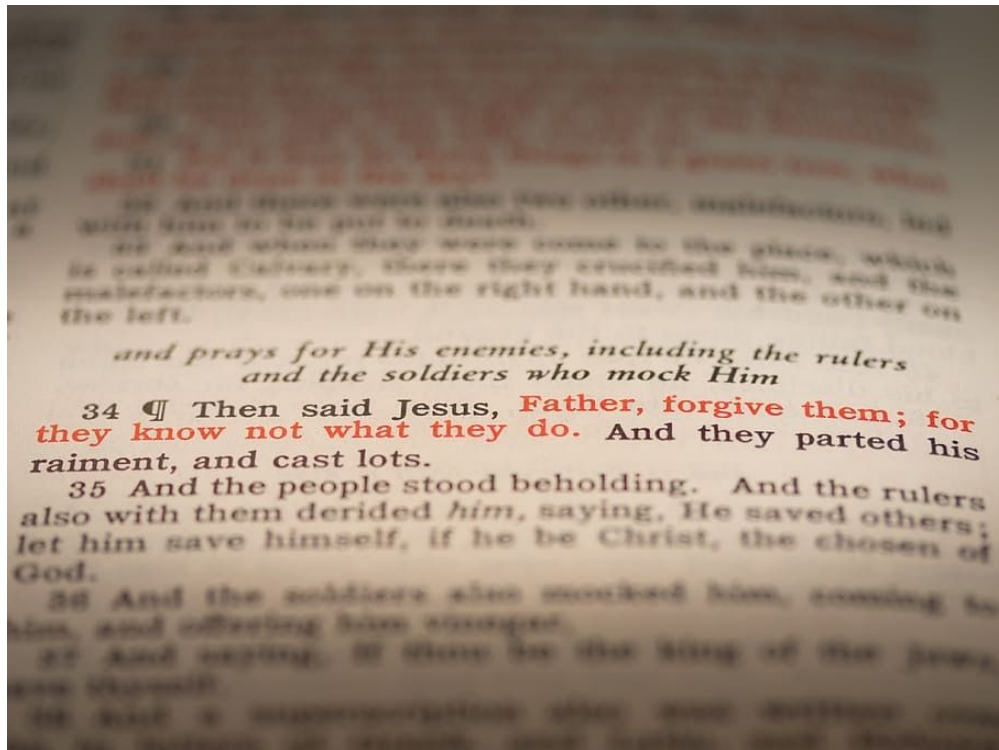




The Story of Jesus according to Luke -A Seekers' Companion

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Lesson 1

The Gospel of Luke, as the author states, is a work of literature,

*Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.*¹

-Luke 1:1-4

Luke tells us here that he is writing a story about Jesus, “an orderly account.” He tells us also that he is drawing on eyewitness accounts. Scholars speculate that Luke used written sources, also. Luke and Matthew use a common written document called “Q” which was a collection of Jesus’ sayings. We don’t have the actual Q document, but Matthew and Luke have the same, or very similar sayings of Jesus in more or less the same order.

Luke also used Mark’s Gospel, as a written text (as did Matthew). Luke was a consummate storyteller. He uses irony, dramatic tensions, and other literary devices to tell his story of Jesus. When we read Luke, we need to watch the stories unfold; we need to look at the characters, how they develop, who the protagonists and antagonists are. Watching the stories unfold in this way is how we will come to meaning in Luke. Unlike John’s Gospel, Luke’s Gospel has very few long sermons. Luke has short sayings

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of Jesus, but only a few sermons. To derive meaning in Luke, we listen to stories—not interpret sermons.

In Luke we have some of the most popular Christmas stories of Jesus’ birth and infancy. Luke gives us the journey to Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus in a barn, the shepherds, the choir of angels singing to the shepherds, and Jesus teaching in the temple at the age of 12.

Luke 1:5-24

Luke’s account of Jesus begins with a statement that places Jesus into history. “In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah” (Luke 1:5). Roman historians write about King Herod (Herod Antipater), so we have independent confirmation of this character’s historical existence and also the time in which he lived and reigned. He lived in the time of Augustus (27 BCE-14CE), and reigned from 4 BCE-39 CE.

The Jesus story is about the greatest miracle known to humanity: childbirth. Leaving aside the question of Jesus’ divinity, the conception, gestation, and birth of a human baby is perhaps the greatest miracle we know on earth. And since the Gospel message is about childbirth, Luke’s story begins with women, who play the greatest part in childbirth.

Luke’s story is striking. In a time dominated by men, in a book written by a man, in a church controlled by men, Luke gives us a story about two women. And the two women have names: Elizabeth and Mary.

And Luke brings his readers into the life of these two women as they carry their babies—from conception through pregnancy, and finally into childbirth. Mark and

John begin their stories with Jesus fully grown up, with the beginning of His ministry. Matthew talks about Mary’s pregnancy, but he does so by talking about how Joseph, her fiancée, reacts to Mary’s pregnancy.

Luke talks about the two women, Elizabeth and Mary. He talks about Elizabeth while she is pregnant for five months. He mentions experiences that pregnant women know—such as the baby moving in her womb. When Mary comes to visit Elizabeth, Elizabeth’s baby leaps in her womb,

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy” (Luke 1:41-44).

And we are brought into the life of Mary while she is pregnant. When Joseph travels to Jerusalem to be registered for taxes, we are told, “He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child” (Luke 2:5).

There are complications surrounding the children of both Elizabeth and Mary. In Elizabeth’s case, she is advanced in years and without child. In New Testament times, women derived their status through their children. We are told that Elizabeth was barren—that is, she didn’t have any children—and she had to endure the shame of being childless. When Elizabeth conceives, “She said,²⁵ “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people”” (Luke 1:24-25).

Mary has a serious problem. She is pregnant and her fiancée Joseph has not slept with her yet. Luke does not comment on this. But Matthew does. In Matthew's Gospel, Joseph contemplates divorcing Mary. But in both Matthew and Luke, an angel explains that God is the Father of her baby. The angel who speaks to Mary has a name: Gabriel. Gabriel's words to Mary are called the Annunciation in the history of Christianity. This Annunciation is the subject of many paintings, reaching back to the very origins of art in the west.

Gabriel has also appeared to Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband. But Zechariah's reaction to Gabriel is markedly different than is Mary's reaction. Zechariah doubts, but Mary believes.

Zechariah is a priest, and he is serving in the temple when Gabriel appears to him. He is a descendant of an ancient priestly line—that of Abijah. King David chose 24 leaders of the many priests who served in the Jerusalem temple (1 Chronicles 24:9). One of these leaders is Abijah, Zechariah's distant ancestor. Elizabeth, Zechariah's mother, is a descendant of the very first priest in Israel: Aaron. Aaron assisted Moses, and acted as the first priest, while Moses was the prophet. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth are good people, who follow the precepts of their religion faithfully, "Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord" (Luke 1:6).

When Gabriel appears to Zechariah, Zechariah is in the temple. Zechariah is terrified when he sees Gabriel, but Gabriel brings him welcome news. He tells Zechariah that Elizabeth will have a child. Elizabeth is quite old, which makes the possibility of her having a baby remote. So Zechariah questions Gabriel. In fact, Zechariah not only questions Gabriel, he demands proof, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." Zechariah is asking for

some kind of sign that Gabriel's words are true. Gabriel responds by rendering Zechariah mute until John is born.

Luke contrasts Zechariah's response to Gabriel with Mary's response. While Zechariah demands proof, Mary believes. It is Elizabeth who states the contrast, "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Mary's response is also significant in another respect. Her consent. Mary agrees to be the mother of Jesus, "Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'" In Classical times, there were stories of gods impregnating mortal women. Zeus was notorious for this. But these are rape stories. One such story is Europa, who was raped by Zeus in the form of a bull. But the story of Mary is strikingly different. It bears similarities to the Classical stories of God-Men, who were fathered by a god and born by mortal woman. But Mary agrees to be the mother of God.

There is a technical term in Gabriel's words to Mary that requires attention. Gabriel says that "the holy one" will be born. The Holy One is a term that appears many times in the Hebrew Scriptures, and it has a specific meaning. It means Yahweh (Jehovah, in the King James translation). Since "The Holy One" is to be born to Mary, Luke is saying that Yahweh will be incarnated as Jesus. That means that Jesus is Yahweh. Some passages in which the Holy One is mentioned are, Daniel 4:10, 13; Habakkuk 3:3; Isaiah 1:4; 5:19; 10:20; 12:6; 17:7; 29:19; 30: 11, 12; 41:16; 43:3, 11, 14, 15; (here the Holy One is also called "your Savior," vs. 3, 11; and "your Redeemer," vs. 14); 47:4 (where Holy One is called "your Redeemer"); 48:41; 49:7; 54:5 ("your Redeemer") Psalm 78:41; Jeremiah 51:5; and in other places.

I am the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel (Isaiah 43:3).

I, even I, am the LORD; and beside me there is no savior (43:11).

Thus saith the LORD, your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel (43:14).

Mary sings a song of celebration, which echoes Hannah's song, of long ago, about the birth of her son, the prophet Samuel. Hannah's song in 1 Samuel:2 begins just like Mary's song, "My heart rejoices in the LORD;" sings Hannah, and Mary sings,

My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

But there is a significant difference in Mary's song that we will notice throughout Luke's account of the Jesus story. While Hannah is concerned with the political power of kings and princes, Mary sings about inward things, "he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts." Mary and Hannah sing about God lifting up the lowly and poor,

Those who were full hire themselves out for food,

but those who were hungry are hungry no more (1 Samuel 2:5)

he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty (Luke 1:53)

It is Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, who really sings about what is going on in all this. Zechariah makes it plain that in Jesus, God has come to humanity,

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,

because he has come to his people and redeemed them (Luke 1:68).

And like so many in Jesus' time, Zechariah expects Jesus to be the ruling king descended from King David who will drive out the Romans, rule in a re-established Kingdom of Israel, and make Israel a light to all the other nations of the world,

*He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David . . .
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.*

Throughout Jesus' ministry, He would redefine who the Messiah is, pointing like Mary, inward—to what goes on in a person's soul.