

## Luke 1-2

In all the Bible, Luke alone tells us the good news from the anticipation of the Savior's birth to the spread of his community to the nations, and all the way to Rome. Luke wrote more of the New Testament than any other writer. He may have been the only non-Hebrew author of the Bible. And he prominently emphasizes that the good news is for all nations.

Unlike ancient writers who tried to distance their "Christianity" from the Jews, Luke demonstrates consistently that this message which was spreading to the nations was about the historic God of the Hebrews. It was the true continuity of the story of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Moses, David, and Elijah. Their stories were fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, the eternal King of the nations.

## Luke 1

Luke, an ethical academic, cites his research. He carefully notes times, locations, and the names of original sources, the people whose stories he is reporting.

Luke begins his report with a faithful Levite, Zechariah, serving in the Jerusalem Temple. This priest and his wife Elizabeth had remained childless into their old age (just as Abraham and Sarah had before Yahweh gave the first "son of the Promise"). Their culture would have seen their barrenness as an affliction, a shame inflicted on them by God. But their culture was wrong. Their "shame" was the context in which God would demonstrate his grace, showing what kind of God he really is. The barren couple would have a son who would be a second Elijah. They weren't "afflicted" as a punishment. They were barren so God could show his love in a personal way that they could not explain away. As Elizabeth literally puts it, "He has cut away my shame"--like cleaning out a festering wound. That's the kind of thing this God does.

The story shifts from Jerusalem to Nazareth, and from the Levitical couple to a young pair descended from David. Joseph and Mary were pledged to a marriage that had not yet been consummated. Mary would bear a son who is a new creation--not a second Isaac, but a second Adam. Mary recognizes that this is the kind of thing only Yahweh would do. He skips over arrogant power-brokers to give grace and honor to the humble--something he has been doing, she says, since Abraham. This child comes from the God who has been revealing himself in surprising ways to humble people for a long time.

The story shifts to the hill country of Judea. The old Levitical couple has their son of the Promise. Everyone assumes he will be named after his father Zechariah. Not so. He will be named John, a name meaning "Yahweh is Gracious." This story is not merely about an obscure old couple. It is, Zechariah proclaims, about the God of Abraham and David, the God who saves. This child will remind people of Yahweh's salvation, forgiveness, mercy and peace. And the child will grow up in the wilderness, just as the young nation of Israel did centuries earlier.

## Luke 2

Augustus, the emperor in Rome, flexes his power over nations by decreeing that everyone must enroll to be taxed. This happened when Quirinius was governor of Syria. While these two men are at the height of their political power, God was at work in a peasant couple in Nazareth. He moved the Roman Empire in order to get two Jews from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Joseph must go to the city of his ancestor

King David. Unlike Augustus, Joseph actually has a royal pedigree. And in Bethlehem, the baby is born who is the true Savior King of the nations.

Heaven announces the eternal King's birth to shepherds outside Bethlehem. Shepherds are near the bottom of the social scale, but God has a long history of working through shepherds. Again, Abraham, Moses, and David come to mind. The shepherds are terrified of the messenger, but he assures them his message is good, and it is for all peoples. The Savior, the eternal King, is born, and they will find him in manger in Bethlehem. The shepherds get a glimpse of heavenly celebration, then speed to Bethlehem. Once they find Joseph, Mary and the baby, they spread the good news they had been given--the first witnesses to the Savior's coming.

Joseph and Mary carefully follow the Old Testament laws and have the baby circumcised in the Jerusalem Temple. There, a faithful old man says the Lord revealed this child to be the Savior and a revelation to the nations. He hints that it won't come without violent opposition. A devout widow also affirms this child as the Redeemer.

The story jumps 12 years. The family lives in Nazareth, but the devout parents have taken him to the Passover in Jerusalem. On the way home they discover Jesus is not with any of their relatives in the caravan. They return to Jerusalem and, after a panicked search, find him among the teachers at the Temple, who are amazed at his questions and his wisdom. The boy says, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's place?" Jesus' first recorded words state that God is his Father. Clearly he expects Joseph and Mary to understand this, and clearly they don't. But he goes home and lives obedient to parents, and increasingly esteemed by others.

I am struck by . . .

Context: Luke sees the Old Testament story running directly to the arrival of Jesus.

Scope: The message that Jesus embodies is for all nations.

Audience: God uses kings of this world, but he reveals himself to people overlooked by this world, men and women alike.

Strategy: The intentional juxtaposition of Augustus and Jesus suggests that God is not merely a bigger, stronger, richer king; The eternal King transcends the whole paradigm of this world and operates with a radically different set of values. He doesn't win the "king of the hill" game by fighting his way to the top; he goes to the bottom to raise the lowly.

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