

The First Christmas

Narratives of Empire and Resistance

Session 3: Luke's Accurate Account

The Rev. John Elliot Lein — December 15, 2019

Reminder: What are these stories for (Luke's version)?

These stories were crafted around critical questions from the second generation of “little-Christ” in the 1st century CE:

1. Who is “the Anointed”? (John the Baptist *or* Jesus)
2. Who is the Son of God, Lord, Savior of the World, God-With-Us, Prince of Peace? (Caesar Augustus *or* Jesus the Anointed)
3. How does divine peace come upon the world? (through violence and victory *or* through nonviolence and suffering)

These stories are not about *fact*, they are about *meaning*. Consider these stories as *overture*: an opening which proclaims the overall theme of a work—related but different for each Matthew and Luke.

IMPORTANT NOTE: The Hebrew Bible is fulfilled/completed in two ways: the *New Testament* for Christians, and the *Mishnah/Talmud* for Jews. Both are “the old covenant re-*new*-ed”.

Unique Elements of Luke's *Overture*

- The story is four times longer than Matthew's version.
- Mary and Joseph live in *Nazareth*, from which they journey to *Bethlehem* for the birth and then back to *Nazareth*.
- Mary is the main character:
 - She is named eleven times and Joseph only three (in Matthew, Joseph is named eight times and Mary three).
 - The vision and song are Mary's, not Joseph's.

- Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John the Baptist’s conception are all unique to Luke.
- The traditional elements are all here, not in Matthew: the journey to Bethlehem, birth, angels and shepherds, circumcision, blessing or teaching in the temple. Only the Magi come from Matthew’s account (also Herod and Egypt).

The Miraculous Conceptions

- Luke’s model for Elizabeth and John is Sarah and Isaac (Gen 17-18), Hannah and Samuel (1 Sam 1-2).
- For Luke, Mary’s virginity does not connect to a *prophecy* from Isaiah, but from a *parallel & contrast* with Elizabeth’s barrenness and Octavian’s (Caesar Augustus) conception:
 - Elizabeth’s pregnancy is from *aged-barrenness*, a miracle similar to other great Hebrew stories; Mary’s is from *virginity*, a miracle greater than any Hebrew story.
 - Caesar’s mother was said to have been divinely raped by Apollo the Sun God in the form of a snake; Mary’s divine conception requires partnership/permission, but no physical coupling (remains a virgin until the birth).
 - **A great theological/political claim:** *the divine conception of Jesus is greater than that of all Hebrew leaders as well of the greatest Roman; therefore the throne of Christ is an order of magnitude greater than any throne before.*

*The focus is on “...the theology of the child
and not the biology of the mother...”*

The Genealogy of the Son of God

- Genealogy in Luke, compared to Matthew:
 - The genealogy runs in reverse: present to past.
 - Moved past the Nativity/Baptism, marking the *beginning*.
 - Stretches beyond the Hebrews, to root of all humanity.
 - No women here, though Luke is generally more inclusive.
- Luke connects Adam-as-Son-of-God with Jesus—a new cre-

ation. The first beginning, in Genesis, features a Spirit hovering over water. So also does this second beginning!

- Genealogies were part of Caesar Augustus' claim to divinity; Virgil's *Aeneid* was Rome's *New Testament*, Homer's works their *Old Testament*; "Augustus" means "The One Who Is to Be Worshipped."
- The genealogies of Jesus are **counter-genealogies** to Caesar Augustus' claim of divine heritage/predestination.

"...what is always clear is that ancient genealogy was not about history and poetry, but about prophecy and destiny, not about accuracy, but about advertising."

Luke's Theme: Jesus the True Emperor of Peace

- To be an "anointed one" (Hebrew: *messiah*, Greek: *Christos*) was to be divinely appointed for a task of leadership, as all kings, priests, and prophets were.
- The legendary king David, born in Bethlehem 1,000 years prior, had been the model for Jewish hope for generations, looking to one who would in David's name inaugurate *that day* of liberation and peace. The 1st c. questions were:
 - Would this new David be transcendent, or human?
 - Would he be a violent warrior, or a nonviolent leader?
- Luke's convoluted and historically incorrect story of the census and journey was never meant as modernist *history* but as a political and theological claim that Jesus's *story* is intertwined with the greats—Hebrew and Roman:
 1. "All the world" (as Rome claimed for itself) *could* not be and never *was* counted by the Empire at one time.
 2. The census of Quirinius was conducted in 6 CE, 8 years after the death of Herod and birth of Jesus in 4 BCE.
 3. No Roman census ever required relocation.
 4. Joseph was under Herod Antipas' rule and taxation in Galilean Nazareth, not under direct Roman control and Syrian oversight as the Judean Bethlehem was.
 5. Only the head of household was taxed; not all family members like Mary.

- The *shepherds* are an example of Luke's Gospel to the marginalized (Luke 4:18-19; 7:22), and connect to David.
 - Luke's angel connects *Messiah* with Jewish divine titles *Lord* and *Savior* and the Roman titles *the Lord* and *Savior*:
 - For Jews, God is the Lord and Savior; for Romans, Caesar is the Lord and Savior. To say "Jesus is Lord" is a claim of theology (God incarnated) and empire (Caesar replaced)!
 - It would be as if a German Christian in the 1940s proclaimed "Jesus der Führer" (leader).
 - Only Luke,* gospeller to the Gentiles, uses "savior" of Jesus, the title frequently used of Caesar Augustus.
 - The heavenly host proclaims "on earth **peace** among those whom he favors!" The bringing of peace is a regular claim about/of Jesus throughout Luke and Acts.
 - In Roman inscriptions of the time, Caesar Augustus's *epiphany* is proclaimed as the *gospel* of the *savior* who brought *peace* to the *whole world*.
 - Peace comes from the heavens: for Augustus it was Jupiter's "good pleasure," for Jesus it is "God's favor."
 - Both proclaim a new creation, a new start for humanity.
 - Titles used of both: Divine, Son of God, God, God from God, Lord, Redeemer Liberator, Savior of the World.
 - **The choice:** Caesar's peace comes through victory; Christ's peace comes through justice. *To whom will we pledge our allegiance/faith?*
 - For Luke: Jesus' refusal to combat violence with violence sets a new path for his followers, whether Jewish or Roman.
- "Christmas is not about tinsel and mistletoe or even ornaments and presents, but about what **means** will we use toward the end of a peace from heaven upon our earth."*

Keep Reading:

- *The First Christmas*
 Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan

*Besides once in *John*, it's absent in the other three gospels.