

INCARNATION: A YALE BIBLE STUDY

Savior of the World Luke's Pageant on a Large Stage

with Dr. Allen Hilton

One of the most powerful moments of my life happened in an outdoor Dominican chapel in Managua, Nicaragua. It was the early 2000s, and I was traveling with a delegation from Plymouth Church in Seattle to visit a Moravian church in that city. On a side trip we almost didn't take, we stopped to worship with the Dominicans.

After attending to vans and head counts and lost backpacks and the usual side work of a trip leader, I finally turned to approach the chapel and the scene took my breath away. There in that otherwise rundown outdoor park, with cheap aluminum pews and graffiti on the posts, stood a magnificent (word carefully chosen) nativity scene. But this was no painting from the Italian Renaissance. Here, all the characters, Mary, Joseph, the baby, the shepherds, and a host of other attendants on the scene (including contemporary, local heroes of justice) – everyone in the scene was a Central American peasant, dressed in bright clothes of a Nicaraguan peasant, had brown skin and the same facial features that I had seen in the Moravian congregation all week. It took my breath away, and then I wept.

Luke's Christmas story does that, for those who have ears to hear. It lands in a remote corner of a gigantic Empire among powerless people who have very little. And yet, by the power of God, it radiates to the whole earth. It features Mary, the mother, who sings out the magnificent choice of a God who enters history through the lowly, and who will, after the birth, sacrifice the two turtledoves that Moses offered to those who could not afford a lamb. The birth will be attended, not by dignitaries but by shepherds working the graveyard shift with their flocks. This is an indigenous birth of a poor boy child on the stage of a powerful Empire that he will ultimately outlast. Let's read!

Part One – The Lines of Linus (Luke 2.1-20)

At the very highest competitive level, the sport of golf has four major championships: the Masters Tournament, the PGA Championship, The US Open, and The British Open. While the latter three have been contested on many different golf courses over their history, the first of

these, the Masters, returns each year to the same course, lit up by dogwood and azaleas and carved through Georgia Pines: The Augusta National Golf Club. (Some of you are already humming [the CBS Sports theme song](#) for the event.) That makes the eighteen holes at Augusta very, very familiar. While golf connoisseurs may recognize the occasional famous hole on PGA, US Open, and British Open courses, these venues are not nearly as familiar as the holes we see every year at the Masters. During the second weekend in April (in non-Covid seasons), even casual golf fans will text friends, saying, “Did you see what Tiger did at 16?” because we’ve seen the short 16th hole played out so many times.

Luke 2 is the Augusta National of the Christmas story. That may sound odd, given that there are only two birth stories in the Bible. But it is true. Most churches don’t rotate back and forth. Most churches feature “a decree [going out] from Caesar Augustus”, “no room at the inn,” “shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night”, and “heavenly hosts singing glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.” I didn’t have to look those verses up to quote them, and you probably wouldn’t have needed help either. We hear the story again and again and again. It’s the one Linus speaks, blanket over his shoulder, to redirect his bickering friends to what matters in the classic Charlie Brown Christmas. Matthew 1 still surprises some people who have been to decades of Christmas Eve services. When Luke 2 is read out, many mouth the words.

This familiarity has an upside, of course. What we know “by heart” has a good chance of staying in us and forming us. The lowliness and unlikeliness of God’s child having shepherds for a first audience sinks into us. “Peace on earth, goodwill to men/all” sinks in, too.

There is also a downside to knowing this story well. The German philosopher and aesthetic theorist Arthur Schopenhauer once wrote, “When I have called an object red, I’ve stopped looking at it.” Sometimes when a passage is as familiar as Luke’s Christmas story, we’re sure we’ve “got it” and we stop listening for new things. In our time together with Luke’s famous story, in a delightful both/and, we will hope to maximize our familiarity, without closing ourselves to new discoveries.

Sent by a Census

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So, Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. (Luke 2.1-5)

In November many Americans voted in our national, state, and local elections without leaving their homes. The same is true for most Americans who have participated in the 2020 U.S. census. In our world, such things mostly come to us.

This was not so for Joseph and Mary. The ruler of the world, Caesar Augustus (Octavius, adopted son of Julius Caesar – ruled 39 BCE to 14 CE) decided that he needed a record of all his subjects. (When Jesus was born, by the way, our best recent population estimates put that number somewhere between 4 and 5 million persons who spanned all of the colored territories except the pink ones on the map below. That’s a lot of people covering an enormous area to count!



Augustus decreed that families must travel to the town of the family’s patriarch to be counted. Joseph’s clan were Bethlehem people, according to Luke, and so Joseph and Mary set out.

A Barn Birth?

The American comedian Emo Philips does a bit in which he says in his annoying, hilarious, high-pitched voice,

I had this dream. I die, and I'm in the waiting room in heaven. And this guy walks in behind me and leaves the door open. I said, "I can't believe this. Close the door! What, were you born in a barn?" And then I looked. It was Jesus.

That joke is funny because the King James Version of the Bible – the Linus version – has Joseph and Mary holing up in someone’s barn just in time for the baby to come. That translation says of Mary,

she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

Most English translations follow the KJV, so that’s the way most of us have stored this story in our minds. Joseph and Mary, a poor family, traveling at a busy time, have no reservations and no clout, so the innkeeper turns them away and they have to find a spot in somebody’s barn.

Have you ever wondered why they don’t just stay with the kinfolk? The Greek word that KJV and others translate “inn” is “KATALUMA”. It’s not used a lot in the New Testament. In fact, the only other time is in the parallel scenes in Mark 14.14/Luke 22.11, where Jesus instructs his disciples on how to procure a space for them to share the Passover feast (another busy time, by the way). There, though, it’s translated differently. I’ll quote the KJV:

And wheresoever he shall go in, say ye to the goodman of the house, The Master saith, Where is the guestchamber (KATALUMA), where I shall eat the Passover with my disciples?

On that holy Thursday, Jesus and the disciples set their table in someone’s guest room. Our picture would be much different if it had been rendered “inn”, wouldn’t it? Because of that usage, and because of the probabilities surrounding a Caesar-forced family reunion in the ancestral city, some translators believe “guestchamber”, or in 21st-century idiom, “guest room” works best for Luke 2.7 as well. Here’s the NIV:

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. (Luke 2.7)

This takes Mary and Joseph’s quest out of the rough commercial realm (inns were notorious places) and into the familial. They show up to be counted by Caesar’s people, so they need a place to stay; but cousin Micah or aunt Ruth have no more residential rooms upstairs, so they park in the ground floor main room – the one where the animals are brought in to spend nights when it’s cold.

By this translation, they’re not exactly sleeping on the pullout sofa, but they’re in a family home – probably Joseph’s extended family – not in the parking lot outside a Motel 6. With apologies to all of you whose kids or grandkids have played the innkeeper in the pageant, I think this picture is more likely than the classic one: that Jesus is born and swaddled in a familiar manger in a familiar house.

What Angels Do

Usually angels, when they come upon some unsuspecting, minding-their-own-business sort, have a three-step rhythm:

1. They scare them,
2. then they comfort them,
3. then they speak news to them.

This is the way angels behave in scripture. We'll soon track back to an instance of that rhythm when Gabriel shows up in Mary's kitchen to tell her she'll be parenting the Son. In that passage it goes like this.

The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

1. Scare 'em:
Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.
2. Comfort 'em:
But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.
3. Speak news to 'em:
You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

In the Linus passage, it goes...

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and

1. *they were terrified.*
2. *But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid..."*
3. *I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.*

Angels are reliable. They freak people out, then they calm them down, then they bring God's message to them.

This time the terrified ones are shepherds. We shouldn't skip that. Joseph's great-great-great grandfather David was a shepherd, of course – out in the field "keeping the sheep" when the old prophet Samuel came through Bethlehem to find someone to replace the failed King Saul. (1 Samuel 16.11) In fact, the shepherds from the Linus lines may be standing in the very same fields David patrolled. Synchronicity.

Once the shepherds have calmed down enough to hear, presumably, the angel goes on to share the content of the good news:

Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

A savior! Matthew's angel gave Joseph news of a savior, too, you'll recall: "He will save his people from their sins." Luke's angels announce Jesus as a savior with no such qualifier. The rest of the Gospel of Luke will have to help us answer the question this wide-open use of the word summons:

Savior of Whom...from What...and Why?

The Greek noun we translate "savior" is SOTER with a long "O" and an "E" that sounds like "AY" as in neighbor and weigh. The verb is "SOZO" with two long "Os". I tell you this, because Luke will use this word just an awful lot to describe all sorts of help God gives people.

In our time, American Christianity usually confines "savior" and "salvation language to a future rescue from hell, as in "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal savior." On the other hand, to describe other sorts of rescue or saving, people usually use words in the charity/compassion/justice category. Salvation is eternal, those other things are temporal.

Luke draws no such line. Take a look at the chart below and watch how Luke moves back and forth between time and eternity, between rescue from present ills to rescue from future ones.

USE OF *SŌTER*, *SŌTERIA*, *SŌTERION*, AND *SŌZEIN* IN LUKE

<i>Verse</i>	<i>Who is to be saved?</i>	<i>What does salvation mean?</i>	<i>Who, what brings it?</i>	<i>How received?</i>
1:47	Mary	blessedness (1:42, 48)	God	faith (1:45)
1:69, 71	Israel	rescue from enemies	God	_____
1:77	the Lord's people	forgiveness	John (1:76)	_____
2:11	shepherds	peace (2:14)	Christ the Lord	_____
2:30	all people	revelation, glory	Jesus (1:27)	_____
3:6	all flesh	forgiveness (3:3)	John	baptism
6:9	man with infirmity	healing	word of Jesus	_____
7:50	sinner (7:37)	forgiveness (7:48)	word of Jesus	faith
8:12	ones along the path	_____	word of God	faith
8:36	demoniac	exorcism	command of Jesus	_____
8:48	woman with infirmity	healing	power of Jesus	faith
8:50	Jairus' daughter	resurrection	word of Jesus	faith
9:24	whoever	_____	_____	self-denial
13:23	a few	feasting in God's reign	_____	effort
17:19	leper	being made clean	Jesus	faith
18:26	who?	entering God's reign	God	_____
18:42	blind man	reception of sight	word of Jesus	faith
19:9, 10	Zacchaeus	being child of Abraham	Jesus (19:10)	renunciation

Chart Source: Mark Allan Powell, "Salvation in Luke-Acts," *Word and World* 1992.

As the chart's maker, Mark Allan Powell, puts it,

Salvation in Luke-Acts means participation in the reign of God...The reign of God in Luke-Acts is both a present (Luke 11:20; 17:21) and a future (Acts 22:18, 29-30) reality...Luke emphasizes the present dimensions over the future ones. Luke recognizes that people are interested in receiving eternal life (Luke 10:25; 18:18), and he affirms the legitimacy of this hope (Luke 18:30; Acts 13:48); but, in general, he lays more emphasis on the life that God's reign makes possible here and now. This is brought out by his repeated use of the word "today" in significant passages (Luke 2:11; 3:22; 4:21; 5:26; 19:5, 9; 23:43). Defined as

“participation in the reign of God,” salvation means living life, even now, as God intends it to be lived.

Luke’s “savior” land in American Christianity with power, as if to say, “Not only have you reduced Jesus by delaying his saving power ‘til death, you’ve reduced it by not crediting God with saving work when God feeds, clothes, shelters, and heals people among you.” For those who have ears to hear!

The brilliant news that this baby will be such a comprehensive Savior lights up the whole huge choir of heaven, who simply can’t help themselves:

*Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel,
praising God and saying,
“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

The shepherds don’t sleep on the news, either. “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about!” And when they’ve seen this marvel, they spread the word (Who wouldn’t?!) and suddenly they become the speakers of good news – like messengers’ messengers...or angels’ angels.

Mary famously collects all of this in a sort of spiritual scrapbook: “But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.”

Part Two – The Befores and Afters

With Matthew, we spent most of our time (and prep guide space) on the events surrounding Joseph’s story and the one-line birth. Luke has given us many more lines for the birth, so we’ll spend less time with the befores and afters. But that does not make them any less important. Here they are in outline form:

The Build

- The angel Gabriel announces to childless Priest Zachariah in Jerusalem that he and his wife Elizabeth will have a formidable son. Zechariah has trouble believing the news. (1.8-25)
- The same angel Gabriel announces to young Mary in Nazareth that she will give birth to...
 - the “son of the Most High,
 - [who will receive] the throne of his father David and
 - reign over Jacob’s descendants forever.”

Mary asks how and receives word that it will be the Holy Spirit’s doing.

Mary scores much better than Priest Zachariah on the faith test, and famously responds with consent: “I am the Lord’s servant (Gk: DOULE). May your word to me be fulfilled.” (1.26-38)

NOTE: God gives Mary a daunting task and she initially hesitates, but then willingly accepts. The apple will not fall far from the tree when this faithful woman’s boy gets to Gethsemane. (Luke 22.39-46)

- Mary and Elizabeth share good news. (1.39-45)
- Magnificat: Mary reflects on the sweeping significance of God’s choosing to enter through the lowly (1.46-55)
- John (the Baptist) is born (1.57-66)
- Papa Zachariah’s song of praise (1.67-88)

The Response

- Mary and Joseph present Jesus in the Temple, sacrificing turtledoves for Mary’s post-birth purification (2.22-24)
- The righteous and devout Simeon sees “the consolation of Israel” with his own eyes, praises God, and prophesies about Jesus’ future. (2.25-35)
- The aging widow and prophetess Anna proclaims to the people that this child would be “the redemption of Israel” (36-38)

The Boy in the Temple

“Did you not know I would be in my father’s house?”

The Prophet in the Wilderness (3.1-18)

- God passes over many exalted rulers and powers
 - *In the reign of Tiberius Caesar...*
 - *when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea,*
 - *Herod tetrarch of Galilee,*
 - *his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and*
 - *Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—*
 - *during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas*

and...the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

- John chastises the complacent and announces that God requires the “fruit of repentance.”
- Uniquely in the Gospels, John then provides specific forms of that fruit:
 - for all: “anyone with two shirts, give one away, and the same with food.”
 - for tax collectors: “no fraudulent extra burden on the people.”

- for soldiers: “no extortion or false accusations.”
- John announces Jesus.

What’s Next?

The Gospel of John is next. There will be no angels or mangers or Marys or Josephs there. Rather, John will reflect on the whole event from a distance, putting it in the context of cosmos. The one whose birth Matthew and Luke describe will be nothing short of the Word of God (1.1-5, through whom creation came, but found astonishingly in human flesh. With scope that wide, but “veiled in flesh” (1.14), our task will be to ask how anyone ever found which flesh was God-inhabited. To prep, read John 1 and consider the ways that John’s Gospel supports that grand opening claim.