



The shepherd that missed out.



WEEK THREE: THE CERTAINTY: LUKE 1:1-2:39

The very first sentence in Luke’s Gospel takes up four verses. It is one of the most carefully constructed sentences in the Bible. In Greek it is common to leave the key word to the very end. Obviously, in English it is often missed. In Greek, it’s like a depth charge! That word is “the certainty” (asphaleian)! Luke very skilfully wants us to know that this is an absolute certainty. We know from Acts that Luke was a very careful historian. In a day and age when regional boundaries and administrations were in a period of change, Luke gets the regional centres correct and the titles of the different regional governors correct for the time line of Paul’s missionary journeys. As Michael Wilcock comments: “the writer who

never puts a foot wrong in matters which we can verify may well be trusted implicitly in the rest". Luke was probably a convert of Paul in his ministry in modern day Turkey (Asia Minor); he appears suddenly alongside Paul in Acts 16:10 at the time of the vision Paul received to take the Gospel into Europe (the Macedonian call). This is the point in Luke's account when he uses the word "we"! (Try finding the other "we" passages in Acts!) Luke's Gospel was written at an early date, but we can spot when he had time to visit Mary and other witnesses of the Gospel events : when Paul was imprisoned for 2 years by Felix in Caesarea (Acts 23:32).

Luke 1:5-25. When Zechariah was in the sanctuary, Gabriel appeared to Him, in response, the angel said, to his prayers. Now what was Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth regularly praying about? We find a clue in ch.2: 25 & 37: Simeon and Anna were part of a group of pious believers who were praying for "the Messiah to come and and rescue Israel"(v25). Zechariah must have thought that his prayers were being answered when he saw Gabriel (and he wasn't completely wrong); however, he did not expect to be part of the answer to his prayers also. The birth of a son to be called John was completely out of the ball park! Malachi 4:5,6 was about to be fulfilled through Zechariah and Elizabeth!! Do we share this with Zechariah: shameful unbelief that God can choose to fulfil some of our prayers through little us?

The Virgin Birth Luke 1:26-38. Mary has a different attitude to Gabriel; although she has just heard something quite unbelievable, she responds with amazing faith: “I am the Lord’s Servant. May everything you have said about me come true.” We might struggle to believe a virgin birth, however, but let me bring three considerations for you to consider.

- 1) The character of Luke.** The certainty highlighted in the opening 4 verses of Luke tells us that Luke is a careful historian and his source may well have been Mary. You might find myths and legends in some religious writers to convey some teaching or another, but not in Luke.
- 2) The character of his material.** Luke has as an historian cool objectivity, but he doesn’t hesitate to record miracles when his researches have convinced him they have occurred.
- 3) The character of the Saviour.** The angel describes Jesus as “the Son of the Most High” (v32). John 1:1 states quite simply: “In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God and the Word was God” Note also His kingdom will never end (v33)!

In line with the opening of Luke’s Gospel: this Virgin Birth is a certainty (hence the title of this study).

Mary now hurries (in mid December) to see Elizabeth. John within the womb becomes to the youngest evangelist in

history: still in the womb, and three months from birth, he gives his mother a hefty kick to point out Jesus. Note Elizabeth's comment: "You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said."

The Magnificat The old order of things has been toppled! Herod might kill babies to hold on to power; kingmakers might attempt (as in the War of the Roses) to place kings in power. However, God breaks in to exalt the humble (and starts with a lowly servant girl, Mary). The Gospels announce the coming of a new king, indeed the King of Kings, but he was born in a stable.

Birth of the Prophet of the Most High LUKE:2:1-20

- **THE CENSUS** (V.1) There have been some problems with this census, however, as we have noticed, Luke is a very meticulous historian. Quirinius was governor of Syria in 6AD; however, he did also have some authority over Judea in 6-4BC. Also, as we might notice over the killing of the innocents, Rome was beginning to have concerns over Herod's growing paranoia, and a census at the time of the birth of Jesus could well have been arranged to humiliate Herod and bring him back into line. Egyptian censuses were taken every 7 years and Rome might used the excuse to perform something like it in Judea at this time.

- The census meant that Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem (because of Joseph's descent from Judah) at around about Sept/Oct. This would be at minimum a three day journey, possibly slower with a heavily pregnant Mary.
- At this time of year, shepherds did keep watch over their flocks at night in fields nearby. These shepherds were from Migdal Eder (the Tower of the Flock)¹. Their flocks, however, were bred for sacrifice in the temple and so baby lambs were wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger to prevent any accidental injuries which would rule them out for temple service. Any bells ringing regarding the baby Jesus, swaddling cloths and being laid in a manger??
- No room at an inn, doesn't mean an inn as we would understand it: Bethlehem didn't have any; we're talking about a guest room in a private house or a public shelter for travelers.
- Shepherds often came from the lowliest strata of Jewish society and some were vagabonds and trouble makers.
- At any rate they were poor and humble peasants. They had the privilege of being the first on the scene, having met with a glorious angel telling them "*the Saviour –yes,*

¹ Jesus the Messiah, Alfred Edersheim , p131 & note14

the Messiah the Lord has been born today in Bethlehem the city of David.”

- You will recognise Him by this sign: the sacrificial lamb of God???
- Our first evangelists were all shepherds; all who heard were astonished. Humble folk often make the best evangelists. (Although you might also consider the Cambridge seven! Challenged by Hudson Taylor, C.T Studd ,along with Stanley Smith, Montague Beauchamp, William Cassels, Dixon Hoste, Arthur Polhill-Turner and Cecil Polhill-Turner, left promising careers to carry the Gospel to China in 1885).
- vv.21-38 Eight days after Jesus’ birth he was circumcised (long before medical science discovered that this day was the single time a baby’s blood clotting agent was at its maximum) and given the name Jesus. Note also the poor man’s offering 40 days after the birth of Jesus for the ritual purification of women following childbirth. A pair of turtle doves would have cost (in 1883 values) about 8 pence; whereas the offering of a young lamb would have been 3 shillings.²
- Prophecy of Simeon vv25-35 This elderly man had been promised that he would not die before seeing the Lord’s Messiah. A man led by the Holy Spirit to pray, would be

² Life and Times of Jesus the messiah, Alfred Edersheim p137

equally led into the Temple at the right time on the right day!!! He prophesied about Jesus' ministry "*a light to reveal God to the nations and the glory of your people Israel*". (Remember Jesus' warnings about the yeast of the Pharisees in our study of Mark (ch8:15); the feeding of the 4,000 showed that the Gospel was for the whole world {in v.20, the word for basket in Greek is a Gentile basket; in the feeding of the 5,000 it was a Jewish basket: in other words: the Gospel is for the whole world})

- Simeon also warned of opposition of many in Israel and forewarned of the crucifixion : "*a sword will pierce your very soul*"
- Another prophet approached, an 84 year old widow, Anna, who never left the Temple day or night, worshipping God with fasting and prayer. She burst into prayer and then set about as an excited evangelist to "*those who had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem*"
- Have we ever considered asking God who might be receptive to hearing about Jesus from us and then going out excitedly to evangelise. (P.S. Luke never uses the word Gospel as a noun, only as a verb, with the sense of preaching or proclaiming (Luke 1:19, 2:10, 3:18, 4:18, 4:43, 7:22, 8:1, 9:6, 16:16, 20:1)

- **The church might well believe the Gospel as a noun, but Luke calls us as a church to go out with it as a verb!!!**

