

Luke 1:1-4 Setting the Scene for the Christmas Story

Introduction

Increasingly in our society there are people who have no knowledge of our faith, even in its most basic aspects. In a gathering recently of a large number of younger children I posed the question: ‘In the weeks leading up to Christmas we are preparing to celebrate someone’s birth –who is it?’ The vast majority did not offer to answer. The one that did said ‘Santa Claus’. After receiving this answer I had to say it was incorrect and eventually someone else –a boy from a Muslim family- said it was the birth of Jesus. Allowing for their ages and the fact that I was an unfamiliar face to some of those children it is still sobering to catch a glimpse of the extent of the challenge we face in sharing our faith with people today. I have had increasing numbers of conversations with adults in recent years who are respectfully curious about our faith, but wonder if it is based on religious myths or pious stories, rather than on a secure historical basis? They are usually distinct from the ardent atheists who have their own objections, but from their own ‘faith’ perspective. For generations we have taken for granted the fact that the basic outline of our faith is well-known in the wider community, even if people choose not to believe it or practice it. Yet from the boffins on the challenging TV Quiz shows who can easily give answers to some of the most obscure questions on specialist topics, but are stumped by questions an intelligent Bible class student could answer, to the average man or woman in the street, there is no longer a common basis of knowledge. Now we are naturally disappointed, as ignorance is never a cause of rejoicing in any educational context. Many years ago a fellow student joked that he was proud to be ignorant of some topic on which the lecturer was speaking. It was the one time I saw that fine scholar lose his temper in a class. A boundary had been crossed that was inexcusable. We were forcefully reminded that education keeps us humble because no matter how much we learn, it only brings to our attention even more areas of knowledge of which we were previously unaware. Luke takes an opportunity he had been given by a friend to explain the solid foundation of Christianity in the life and work of its founder Jesus of Nazareth. At the start of advent it is good to be reminded afresh of the secure ground on which we stand as Christians.

1. The Pattern of His Composition (Luke 1:1-3a)

¹ Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word.³ Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, (a) **The Different Gospels** Christians can sometimes be surprised to learn that many more than four gospels were written to describe the life and teaching of Jesus. Prior to the circulation of the four gospels we possess it was only natural that a variety of individuals would attempt to record and preserve what they knew of Jesus once it became clear that the first generation of believers who had known Jesus during His earthly ministry were nearly all dead and no longer able to verify as primary witnesses the events and teaching described in the New Testament. Papias, a second generation Christian, stated that Peter ‘used to adapt his instructions [about the life and teaching of Jesus] to the needs of the particular audience he was addressing. John Mark was the person who wrote down what Peter used to tell of the ‘Jesus story’ (Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae*, Book III. p.39). Luke, at the start of his Gospel, admits that what he is doing was quite common in the Early Church –writing an account of Jesus’ life and work. *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us* (Luke 1:1). It is unknown how many genuine Christian accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus were written, but Luke’s Gospel was as thoroughly prepared and

researched as any that have been written. Sir William Ramsay, the famous archaeologist and biblical scholar from Aberdeen, began his professional life holding the standard view in university circles of his day that Luke's work, especially his Acts of the Apostles 'was fabricated in the middle of the second century... [but] was gradually driven to the conclusion that it must have been written in the first century and with admirable knowledge.' (Sir William Ramsay, *Pauline and Other Studies*, 1906, p.199). In another of his works Ramsay wrote: 'You may press the words of Luke in a degree beyond any other historian's and they stand the keenest scrutiny and the hardest treatment.' (Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, p.89). Ramsay's many books over a lifetime of academic research and archaeological expeditions in the Graeco-Roman world give countless examples of the accuracy of the details of Luke's scholarship. However, it was not just orthodox Christians who were writing gospels or accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus. In addition, a rival faith that pretended to be a genuine form of the Christian faith (like Mormonism or Jehovah's Witnesses today) also produced its own 'gospels' in later centuries. *The Gospel of Thomas* is the best known Gnostic gospel, but there are apparently more than fifty Gnostic gospels made up in later centuries, but named after genuine biblical characters to give them an air of respectability. Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* draws a lot of his strange ideas based on these dubious texts. There is even a 15th century 'gospel' the Gospel of Barnabas written by a Muslim to promote his religion, which was first translated from Italian to English over a hundred years ago. (This spurious document ought not to be confused with the genuine Christian document, the Epistle of Barnabas which dates between 70 and 135 AD). However, some Muslim apologists still use this forgery to criticise Christianity to the present day, but others in fairness have asked for it to stop as it is not advancing their cause.

(b) **The Sources of the Gospels** (Luke 1:2) *just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word.* Luke has probably spoken to hundreds of people who saw and heard Jesus carry out His ministry, something that Luke had not experienced. He was one of the second generation Christians, and probably a Gentile also, who had joined the new communities in the early years after the Day of Pentecost. At the outset of his work this Christian author is making it very clear that what his readers need to know is that he has not made up the information he is recording; on the contrary it all comes from people who were eye-witnesses and who were also committed to the proclamation of the Christian faith. The very fact that they had met with Jesus had transformed their lives and given them a new purpose for living. Unlike Matthew (Levi), and John who had been with Jesus and could at first hand give testimony to what Jesus had said and done Luke did the next best thing, like Mark, and record the experiences of those who had been with Him at the crucial times in His ministry. After all there were a lot of people who were still alive at the time he was doing his research in the Holy Land. In a letter of Paul from that time period which referred to the primary witnesses for the faith Paul wrote these words: *After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me ...* (I Corinthians 15:6-8a). This epistle was written about twenty years or so after the start of the Christian Church and these people were able to check what others had written to confirm or deny its accuracy. If Paul was glad to refer back to them then Luke also would have acknowledged his indebtedness to them

(c) **The Content of the Gospels** (Luke 1:1b) Luke has very carefully interviewed eyewitnesses of Jesus' life and ministry and recorded for posterity what these people referred to as *an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us* (Luke 1:1b). the style of Luke's writing was in keeping with the best historians of the Roman world who felt it necessary to emphasise when they were attempting to write accurate factual history, rather than fictional stories based on the past. One historian commonly quoted in this context was Dionysius of

Halicarnassus (60-c.7BC), author of a History of Rome who wrote these words: ‘Before beginning to write I gathered information, partly from the lips of the most learned men with whom I came into contact, and partly from histories written by Romans of whom they spoke with praise (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Antiquitates Romanae 1.6.1). It is clear from the information we have in this Gospel that Mary, Jesus’ mother and probably Elizabeth and Zechariah were amongst the individuals who recounted the amazing intervention of God in their lives and their testimonies would have served as the basis for the account of the birth of Jesus and the related events that took place around that time. Part of the reason why certain things are recorded in other gospels, but not in Luke’s account, is that he has chosen to include things he can independently verify as well as the restrictions of space he would have had on his parchment. With the length of his Gospel it is unlikely that he could have included many more words without incurring the heavy expense of starting another scroll. He did do that, but for his second book The Acts of the Apostles. He also has a purpose behind what he has written: Luke is drawing his readers’ attention to *an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us* (Luke 1:1b). He has selected from the greater mass of information he must have collected in order to show that Jesus is the Messiah, the Saviour of the World, the One who has come *to seek and to save the lost* (Luke 19:10). Although factually accurate he is not writing a modern critical biography, instead he has a clear purpose, he wishes his readers to come to faith in Jesus and to follow Him, as Luke has done for some years. In effect each of the Gospel writers has the same intention as John who wrote in John 20:31: *But these [accounts of the life of Jesus] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.*

2. **The Nature of His Presentation** (Luke 1:3b)

it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus In many ways all the orthodox Christian Gospels had two clear purposes, namely accurate records of the words and actions of Jesus to contrast with the false gospels made up by followers of other faiths seeking to draw people away from Christianity, together with an evangelistic intent to lead people to see Jesus as He really is and then acknowledge Him as their Lord and Saviour. Luke on his Gospel exhibits:

(a) **Thorough Research** While Paul was in prison in Caesarea Philippi waiting to be sent to Rome for trial before Caesar, Luke wanted to use his time well over the more than a year he had to spend waiting to see the legal process be completed in that province of the Roman Empire. He has taken his time and has an eye for detail. Luke, a Syrian by birth, came from the cosmopolitan city of Antioch. He was a trained G.P. who came to see his vocation as keeping Paul in reasonable health after all the brutal ordeals he had faced at the hands of his persecutors. Colossians 4: 14 states his occupation *Our dear friend Luke, the doctor...sends greetings*. Like Paul and Barnabas he is single and lived to the remarkable age of eighty-four, something very uncommon for Christians in the Roman world before the time of Constantine, the first Christian Emperor in the 4th Century AD. His geographical references bear the hallmarks of someone who had been to the places he describes, for example, in Luke 8:26 in his reference to the region of the Gadarenes. Or his awareness of the travel route through Jericho (Luke 19:1) and the distance of the village of Emmaus from Jerusalem. Although a non-Jew his descriptions of Jewish history are clear such as the priestly heritage of Zechariah (Luke 1:5) and most remarkably the details of Roman history in Luke 2:1-2 about Caesar Augustus and the Governor of the Province of Syria Quirinius – until the detailed researches of William Ramsay a century ago many New Testament scholar had dismissed Luke’s statement here as fiction (a few still do!), but he got it spot on; Again in Luke 3:1-2 the listing of the regional governors and the high priests (Annas was the occupant in Jewish eyes, but

the Romans insisted on regular changes of occupants so Annas appointed his sons or in this case his son-in-law Caiaphas to keep the Romans happy –and kept the job in the family!). His references to the Old Testament are clear, but as a Gentile writing for Gentiles he does not have the repeated biblical quotations that Matthew provides in his Gospel –as a Jew for fellow Jews, though he is not afraid to follow the Jewish practice of listing the genealogy of Jesus through Mary; Matthew uses Joseph’s line to David in Matthew chapter one. However, for Luke his purpose is very different –the list of names is provided to reveal Jesus as *the son of Adam, the son of God* (Luke 3:38). In other words Jesus is the Saviour for the descendants of Adam – all humanity- if they will repent of their sins and accept Him as their Lord and Saviour as various people like Zacchaeus, the Jewish traitor (Luke 19:1-10); and the woman with the colourful sexual history (Luke 7:36-50) did. It is interesting that his use of the Greek language varies. In Luke 1:1-4 it is the equivalent of the ‘Queen’s English’, formal prose. In accounts where he is clearly repeating information provided in Aramaic or Hebrew such as Mary’s song (Luke 1:46-55) there is a Hebraic feel to the text –like the difference between the regional news presenters on the BBC and the main national broadcasts from London. Luke has immersed himself in his work and we thank God for the thoroughness with which his task was accomplished, both in the Gospel and in Acts.

(b) **Order** *it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus*
If you haven’t done so try reading through Jeremiah whose prophecies are not in chronological order and see the contrast with the Gospel writers. There are of course many ways books can be written, but most of us prefer to see the progression of thought in a work. His orderliness is most in evidence in Acts where once the Church has begun in Jerusalem (Acts 1-2), he charts the spread of the faith in waves to cross new frontiers, reaching the Samaritans (Acts 8), then the Gentiles (in Acts 10 with Cornelius); then the followers of John the Baptist at Ephesus (Acts 19:1-7)); interweaving the narrative with a focus on the ministries of the key leaders of the Church, in particular Peter, and Paul whom he was accompanying for part of the time period under discussion. All four Gospels lead to the cross and resurrection of Jesus, but Luke highlights features that are less prominent in the other three such as the importance of prayer and the key contribution of women in the ministry of Jesus.

3. **The Purpose of His Gospel** (Luke 1:4)

⁴ *so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.* Christianity is a faith grounded on factual historical events, purposed by God and recorded to encourage us to trust God’s future plans for His people from now until eternity. Michael Wilcocks, in his commentary on Luke, draws our attention to the key word here in v4. It is translated in the NIV as *the certainty*. He suggests that it might accurately be translated *infallibility* (The Message of Luke, p. 31). This is the strength Luke declares of my work. Some people outside the faith will be sceptical of your claims regarding Jesus and may even ridicule you for standing firm for it. Luke, at a time when all these eyewitness can verify or contradict his account makes this bold declaration of the accuracy of his work and he was vindicated by the recognition of the Christian Church in the first few centuries of the Christian era and in the last hundred years or so by the best biblical scholars who have studied his work.

Luke knew the questions many early followers of Jesus were asking? Why did Jesus have to die in such a cruel manner –was it a tragic accident or had God planned to save us through such a sacrifice. In his account of the glorious encounter with Moses and Elijah in the Transfiguration in Luke 9:28-36, Luke records a key detail in verse 31 where he highlights the fact that the conversation was about what Jesus would undergo around the time of his death in Jerusalem – in fulfilment of the purposes of God –it was no accident or tragedy. Others were asking: why is it that so many people have no interest when we share with them

such good news – is there something wrong with how we are doing it? there may be some times, but Luke will record Jesus weeping over Jerusalem (Luke 19:39-44) because of their hardness of hearts in response to His preaching and witness. We struggle sometimes in our prayers and at times feel overwhelmed by the challenges we face in living for God. At such times, says Luke, join our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:39-46) and sense a little of the agonies He went through as he yielded to the Father's plan for the culmination of His earthly ministry. In a culture where the word of a man was acceptable and a woman had to stay silent, Luke risks the credibility of the Gospel in that cultural context by highlighting the betrayal of Judas (Luke 22:1-3) and the denial of Peter (Luke 22:54-62), despite Jesus' prior warning only hours earlier (Luke 22:31-34); together with the ultimate irony that the first evangelists privileged by God to share the good news of Jesus' resurrection were women. Luke 24:9-10: *When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others.* ¹⁰ *It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles.* Our Lord may have consciously chosen men for his apostles (Luke 6:12-16) and following the pattern recorded in I Timothy 3, the same gender for the offices of Pastor-teacher and elders, but His treatment of women was light years ahead of both Jews and Gentiles of that day. Our Lord and the first Christians showed no fear in challenging social conventions of their day where they were wrong. Luke very sensitive to this fact records the significance of this in his Gospel –something we may miss in our unrecognisably different cultural context more than two thousand years later. Some key features of this Gospel include:

(a) **God is in control** therefore there is no need for you to be afraid – notice the repeating of this message, for example to Zechariah in the Temple in Jerusalem (Luke 1:13); to Mary at home in Nazareth, rural Galilee (Luke 1:30); to the shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem (Luke 2:10); don't be afraid because God is in control of history and is watching over you life and mine. Do you need to hear this message in your personal circumstances? All of us have times in our lives when circumstances threaten to overwhelm us. In Luke's account of the Christmas story this theme is so prominent and persistent –because many of us need this truth repeated to us time and again because we are afraid and are feeling vulnerable concerning what the future may hold for us in our families, in our workplace or with respect to a major health issue in the family and countless other things that arise.

(b) **God's timing is accurate** time and again Luke emphasises *today* or *this day* in some translations. Luke 2:11 records words spoken by the angel to the Shepherds: **Today**, *in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you;* at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Nazareth there is the summary of the key points of His sermon which included these words spoken immediately after the completion of the Scripture reading from Isaiah 61: **Today**, *this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing* (Luke 4:21). On the last journey towards Jerusalem Jesus refused to be intimidated by some Pharisees who tried to make Jesus afraid of King Herod, declaring in Luke 13:32-33: *He replied, Go tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.'* ³³ *In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day— for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!* All of us have our doubts and our fears wondering sometimes why our prayers appear to go unanswered and our difficulties continue unabated. Luke assures us that God has not forgotten you. The timing of events in your life is on schedule with Him, even if we are not privileged to glimpse the timetable –trust Him to work it out, He did that first Christmas and the first Easter, surely He can do so in our more ordinary lives as well?

(c) **God's grace is sufficient for everyone** In the secular world the rich and powerful get the lions share of all rewards and privileges and sometimes trample on the weak. Mary, the extraordinary teenager chosen by God would sing in Luke 1:52-53: *He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.* ⁵³ *He has filled the hungry with good things but has*

sent the rich away empty. The social outcasts of Jewish society, the Shepherds would hear this extraordinary message: *I bring you good news of great joy that will be for **all the people**, even people like you (Luke 2:11).* The aged Simeon holding the baby Jesus in his arms will pray some extraordinary words: *For my eyes have seen Your salvation,³¹ which You have prepared in the sight of **all people**,³² a light for revelation **to the Gentiles and** for glory to **Your people Israel.*** John the Baptist will declare in Luke 3:6: *All mankind will see God's salvation.* This did not please all the religious people of the day who were unhappy that some unsavoury individuals were now following Jesus (Luke 15:1-2: *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear him.² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, **This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.*** Do you need to put your faith in Jesus for the first time this morning? He will receive you if you respond to His gracious invitation today. As a follower of Jesus at the start of Advent Luke reminds us of the extraordinary plans the Father made for the coming of His Son to earth that first Christmas. He is in control and His timing is perfect and His grace is sufficient for your circumstances today. Maybe you need to be assured of that fact today? Such blessed news should lead us to rejoice with Elizabeth and Mary (Luke 1:42-55) and with the shepherds as they returned home from Bethlehem *glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told* (Luke 2:20), Amen.