

LUKE
for
EVERYONE

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T.
WRIGHT

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NEW TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T. Wright

Matthew for Everyone, Part 1

Matthew for Everyone, Part 2

Mark for Everyone

Luke for Everyone

John for Everyone, Part 1

John for Everyone, Part 2

Acts for Everyone, Part 1

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Romans for Everyone, Part 1

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1 Corinthians for Everyone

2 Corinthians for Everyone

Galatians and Thessalonians for Everyone

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus for Everyone

Hebrews for Everyone

James, Peter, John and Judah for Everyone

Revelation for Everyone

*For
Margaret Eleanor Forman
(herself a historian)
with gratitude for the love, support and prayers
of over fifty years*

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It took me ten years, but I'm glad I did it. Writing a guide to the books of the New Testament felt at times like trying to climb all the Scottish mountains in quick succession. But the views from the tops were amazing, and discovering new pathways up and down was very rewarding as well. The real reward, though, has come in the messages I've received from around the world, telling me that the books have been helpful and encouraging, opening up new and unexpected vistas.

Perhaps I should say that this series wasn't designed to help with sermon preparation, though many preachers have confessed to me that they've used it that way. The books were meant, as their title suggests, for everyone, particularly for people who would never dream of picking up an academic commentary but who nevertheless want to dig a little deeper.

The New Testament seems intended to provoke all readers, at whatever stage, to fresh thought, understanding and practice. For that, we all need explanation, advice and encouragement. I'm glad these books seem to have had that effect, and I'm delighted that they are now available with study guides in these new editions.

N. T. Wright
2022

INTRODUCTION

On the very first occasion when someone stood up in public to tell people about Jesus, he made it very clear: this message is for *everyone*.

It was a great day – sometimes called the birthday of the church. The great wind of God’s spirit had swept through Jesus’ followers and filled them with a new joy and a sense of God’s presence and power. Their leader, Peter, who only a few weeks before had been crying like a baby because he’d lied and cursed and denied even knowing Jesus, found himself on his feet explaining to a huge crowd that something had happened which had changed the world for ever. What God had done for him, Peter, he was beginning to do for the whole world: new life, forgiveness, new hope and power were opening up like spring flowers after a long winter. A new age had begun in which the living God was going to do new things in the world – beginning then and there with the individuals who were listening to him. ‘This promise is for *you*,’ he said, ‘and for your children, and for everyone who is far away’ (Acts 2.39). It wasn’t just for the person standing next to you. It was for everyone.

Within a remarkably short time this came true to such an extent that the young movement spread throughout much of the known world. And one way in which the *everyone* promise worked out was through the writings of the early Christian leaders. These short works – mostly letters and stories about Jesus – were widely circulated and eagerly read. They were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.

That is as true today as it was then. Of course, it matters that some people give time and care to the historical evidence, the meaning of the original words (the early Christians wrote in Greek), and the exact and particular force of what different writers were saying about God, Jesus, the world and themselves. This series is based quite closely on that sort of work. But the point of it all is that the message can get out to everyone, especially to people who wouldn’t normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it. That’s the sort of person for whom these books are written. And that’s why there’s a glossary, in the back, of the key words that you can’t really get along without, with a simple description of what they mean. Whenever you see a word in **bold type** in the text, you can go to the back and remind yourself what’s going on.

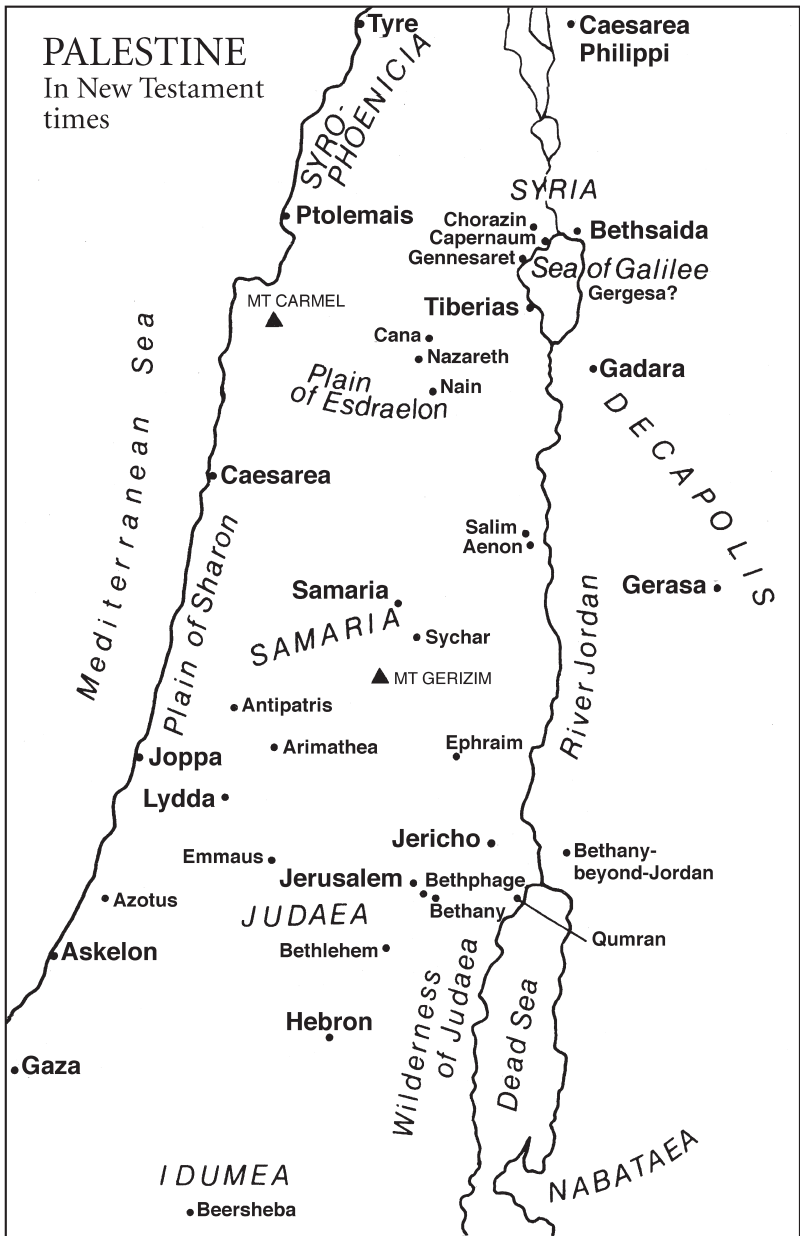
INTRODUCTION

There are of course many translations of the New Testament available today. The one I offer here is designed for the same kind of reader: one who mightn't necessarily understand the more formal, sometimes even ponderous, tones of some of the standard ones. I have of course tried to keep as close to the original as I can. But my main aim has been to be sure that the words can speak not just to some people, but to everyone.

Let me add a note about the translation the reader will find here of the Greek word *Christos*. Most translations simply say 'Christ', but most modern English speakers assume that that word is simply a proper name (as though 'Jesus' were Jesus 'Christian' name and 'Christ' were his 'surname'). For all sorts of reasons, I disagree; so I have experimented not only with 'Messiah' (which is what the word literally means) but sometimes, too, with 'King'.

This particular volume opens up one of the most brilliant writings in early Christianity. Luke tells us that he had had a chance to stand back from the extraordinary events that had been going on, to talk to the people involved, to read some earlier writings, and to make his own quite full version so that readers could know the truth about the things to do with Jesus. He was an educated and cultured man, the first real historian to write about Jesus. His book places Jesus not only at the heart of the Jewish world of the first century, but at the heart of the Roman world into which the Christian gospel exploded and which it was destined to change so radically. So here it is: Luke for everyone!

Tom Wright



LUKE 1.1-4

Prologue

¹Many people have undertaken to draw up an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled in our midst. ²It has been handed down to us by the original eyewitnesses and stewards of the word. ³So, most excellent Theophilus, since I had traced the course of the whole thing scrupulously from the start, I thought it a good idea to write an orderly account for you, ⁴so that you may have secure knowledge about the matters in which you have been instructed.

‘SPACE ALIENS TOOK MY BABY’, screams the headline. Or perhaps ‘GRANDMOTHER SWIMS ATLANTIC’. And what do people say? ‘It must be true; it was in the newspapers.’ ‘I saw it on television.’ ‘The person who told me was told by someone who was there at the time.’

We have learnt to laugh at all of these. News is ‘packaged’ to tell us what we want to hear. Television cameras often deceive. And stories which come from ‘a friend of a friend’ might as well be fiction. How do we know what to believe?

Luke opens his **gospel** with a long, formal sentence, like a huge stone entrance welcoming you impressively to a large building. Here, he is saying, is something solid, something you can trust. Writers in the first-century Mediterranean world quite often wrote opening sentences like this; readers would know they were beginning a serious, well-researched piece of work. This wasn’t a fly-by-night or casual account. It would hold its head up in the world at large.

‘Of course,’ we think, with our suspicious modern minds, ‘he would say that, wouldn’t he?’ But look at the claims he makes. Luke isn’t asking us simply to take it on trust; he is appealing to a wide base of evidence. Several others have written about these events; he has these writings, some of which we may be able to trace, as sources. He has been in touch with eyewitnesses who have told him what they saw and heard. And, perhaps most important, he has listened to accredited teachers within local communities. We need to say a further word about these people.

Imagine a village in ancient Palestine. They didn’t have printed books or newspapers, television or radio. They had official storytellers. Some great event would happen: an earthquake, a battle, or the visit of an emperor. Within a day or two the story would be told all round the village, and would settle into a regular form. Everyone would know the story, but some of the better storytellers in the village would be recognized by the others as the right people to tell it.

And that’s what they’d do. They wouldn’t change the story or modify it; if they did, people would notice and set them straight. Perhaps the

closest we get to this in the modern Western world is when a family tells a story or anecdote, often with everybody knowing what's coming. In the same way, you don't change the words of your national anthem, or of the songs that you sang as a child. So when Luke went round the villages of Palestine and Syria in the second half of the first century, listening to the stories told by the accredited storytellers – 'the stewards of the word', as he calls them – he would know he was in touch with solid, reliable evidence that went right back to the early events. Plato had said, five hundred years earlier, that there was a danger in writing things down; human memories, he thought, were the best way to get things right and pass them on. In the century after Luke, one of the great Christian teachers declared that he preferred living testimony to writings. You can't tell where a book has come from, but you can look witnesses in the eye, and use your judgment about whether to trust them.

So why is Luke writing it all down now? Isn't he shooting himself in the foot? Who was he, anyway, and when was he writing?

I wish we knew for sure who the author of this book was, but actually we don't. We call him 'Luke' because that's who the church, from very early on, said had written this gospel and the Acts of the Apostles (as you'll see from Acts 1.1, Acts appears to be written by the same person, and there are signs throughout both books that this is in fact the case). He may well have been the Luke whom Paul mentions as his companion (Colossians 4.14; Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4.11). He could have been writing any time between AD 50 and 90; there must have been time for the 'many others' he refers to to have written and circulated their works, but equally there is no particular reason to insist that he must have been writing as late as 90, or even 80. A fair guess is probably that he was indeed Luke, one of Paul's companions, and that he was writing in the 60s and 70s.

The main reason he's writing is that the **message** about Jesus has spread far and wide, way beyond the original communities in the regions Jesus himself visited. Peter, Paul and other missionaries had carried the message in all directions, and doubtless there were garbled, muddled and misleading reports circulating about who exactly Jesus was, what he did and said, and what had happened to him. Luke knows of other writings that have begun the task of putting it down on paper, but he has a wider audience in mind, an educated, intelligent, enquiring public. 'Most excellent Theophilus' may be a real person, perhaps a Roman governor or local official, whom Luke has come to know; or this may be a literary device, a way of addressing anyone who has heard about Christianity, and who is perhaps 'a lover of God' (that's what 'Theophilus' means in Greek). He does imply that 'Theophilus' has already been officially taught something about Jesus and what it

means to follow him, so perhaps he also intends it for recent converts who are eager to learn more.

In any case, if he is writing in the late 60s or early 70s, a further reason would be the horrendous war that was raging in Palestine at the time. The Jews rebelled against the occupying Roman forces in 66, until finally, after a long siege, Jerusalem was destroyed in 70. The result was that many towns and villages where Jesus had been seen and known were decimated. Not only was the older generation dying out, but communities that had witnessed Jesus' activities were being dispersed or destroyed. The stories, which depended for transmission on a peaceful, stable society, were in danger of dying out. Unless steps were taken to write them down, the message would not be passed on to the next generation. And since Luke, like all the early Christians, believed that the things that had actually happened – what we would call the historical facts – had changed the course of the world, it was vital that they be presented as clearly and unambiguously as possible.

Luke thus constructs a grand doorway into his gospel. He invites us to come in and make ourselves at home. Here we will find security, a solid basis for lasting **faith**.

LUKE 1.5–25

Gabriel Visits Zechariah

⁵In the time when Herod was king of Judaea, there was a priest called Zechariah, of the priestly division of Abijah. His wife, who came from the Aaron family, was called Elisabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous in God's sight; they followed all the Lord's commandments and ordinances without fault. ⁷They had no children. Elisabeth was barren, and both of them were of an advanced age.

⁸It so happened, when Zechariah was performing his priestly service before God, according to the order of his division, ⁹that the lot fell to him, according to the priestly custom, to go in to the Lord's sanctuary to offer incense. ¹⁰The people were praying outside in a large crowd, at the time of the incense-offering. ¹¹An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right-hand side of the incense-altar.

¹²Zechariah was troubled and terror-struck when he saw the angel.

¹³But the angel said to him:

'Don't be afraid, Zechariah: your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elisabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴This will bring you joy and celebration, and many will rejoice at his birth.

¹⁵He will be a great man in God's sight; he will drink no wine or strong drink. He will be filled with the holy spirit from his mother's womb,

¹⁶and will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

¹⁷He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, and he will turn the hearts of fathers to children, and of unbelievers to the wisdom of the righteous. He will get ready for the Lord a prepared people.

¹⁸‘How can I be sure of this?’ said Zechariah to the angel. ‘I’m an old man! My wife’s not as young as she used to be, either!’

¹⁹‘Look here,’ replied the angel, ‘I’m Gabriel. I stand in God’s presence. I was sent to speak to you and give you this splendid news.

²⁰Now, listen: you will be silent – you won’t be able to speak – until the day when it all happens, because you didn’t believe my words. But they will come true at the proper time.’

²¹Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and were surprised that he was taking such a long time in the sanctuary. ²²But when he came out he couldn’t speak to them, and they understood that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He made gestures to them, but remained speechless.

²³So, when the days of his priestly service were complete, he went back home. ²⁴After that time, Elisabeth his wife conceived. She stayed in hiding for five months.

²⁵‘This is the Lord’s doing,’ she said; ‘at last he has looked on me, and taken away my public shame.’

The capital of Ireland is the wonderful old city of Dublin. It is famous for many reasons. People go there from all over the world to stroll around its streets, to drink in its pubs, to visit its historic buildings, and to see the places made world-famous by writers such as James Joyce.

Perhaps surprisingly, the attraction that draws most visitors in Dublin is the zoo. And, perhaps equally surprisingly, the second most popular site for visitors is the Book of Kells, displayed at the centre of a special exhibition in Trinity College. This wonderfully ornamented manuscript of the gospels dates to around AD 800 – considerably closer in time to the New Testament itself than to us today.

The people who arranged the exhibition don’t let the public see the gospels themselves straight away. Wisely, they lead you first past several other very old books, which prepare you step by step for the great treasure itself. By the time you reach the heart of the exhibition you have already thought your way back to the world of early Celtic Christianity, to the monks who spent years of their life painstakingly copying out parts of the Bible and lavishly decorating it. You are now ready to appreciate it properly.

Luke has done something very similar in the opening of his **gospel**. His story is, of course, principally about Jesus, but the name ‘Jesus’ doesn’t occur for the first 30 verses, and Jesus himself is not born until well into the story. Luke is going to tell us about Mary’s extraordinary pregnancy and Jesus’ extraordinary birth, but he knows we will need

to prepare our minds and hearts for this story. So he begins with the story of Zechariah and Elisabeth, a devout couple going about their everyday life.

First he grips us with their human drama. This couple, well past childbearing age, are going to have a son at last, in a culture where childless women were mocked. This drama is heightened by the comic encounter between Zechariah and the angel (don't be frightened of finding the Bible funny when it really is!). Luke indicates that through this all-too-human story of puzzlement, half-faith, and dogged devotion to duty, God's saving purposes are going to be dramatically advanced. The son to be born will fulfil the biblical promises that had spoken of God sending someone to prepare Israel for the coming divine visitation. The scriptures had foretold that the prophet Elijah would return one day to get the people ready for God's arrival. Gabriel tells Zechariah that this will be John's task.

The story would remind any Bible reader of much older stories: Abraham and Sarah having a child in their old age (Genesis 21), Rachel bearing Jacob two sons after years of childlessness (Genesis 30; 35), and particularly the births of Samson (Judges 13) and Samuel (1 Samuel 1). This story, Luke hints, is not a strange new thing, but takes its place within a long-standing sequence of God's purposes. The child to be born, who will be called **John**, will play a key role in God's fulfilment of his promises. The story thus prepares us, like tourists getting into the mood for the central exhibit, for the still more remarkable events that will follow swiftly.

Zechariah and Elisabeth weren't expecting any of this. They were simply devout people going about their regular business. They were 'righteous in God's sight', observant Jews, keeping the law as a sign of grateful devotion to God. They lived outside Jerusalem, in the Judaeen hill country. Like all **priests** except the chief priests, who lived in Jerusalem itself, Zechariah would come in to the city when it was the turn of his division to perform the regular Temple liturgy; he would stay in lodgings within the **Temple** precincts, and then return home to continue his normal work as a teacher and leader in the local community. On this occasion Zechariah was appointed by lot to go into the inner court, out of sight of the lay people, to offer incense. Sometimes regular duty provides the context for extraordinary visions.

Luke is careful not to dress up the story by making Zechariah a great hero of **faith**. Like some of the Old Testament leaders, his first reaction to the news is to clutch at straws: he needs a sign, something that will help him to believe. He is given one, but it comes as a punishment; we can almost see the angel putting his hands on his hips and telling Zechariah off for presuming to doubt his word. Zechariah is struck

speechless, and the dark comedy continues with the old priest coming out to the people and making signs and gestures to indicate what had happened (how would you describe seeing an angel, just using your hands and arms?). The account concludes, of course, with Elisabeth's joy at her unexpected pregnancy.

This story, preparing us for the even more remarkable conception and birth of Jesus himself, reminds us of something important. God regularly works through ordinary people, doing what they normally do, who with a mixture of half-faith and devotion are holding themselves ready for whatever God has in mind. The story is about much more than Zechariah's joy at having a son at last, or Elisabeth's exultation in being freed from the scorn of the mothers in the village. It is about the great fulfilment of God's promises and purposes. But the needs, hopes and fears of ordinary people are not forgotten in this larger story, precisely because of who Israel's God is – the God of lavish, self-giving love, as Luke will tell us in so many ways throughout his gospel. When this God acts on the large scale, he takes care of smaller human concerns as well. The drama which now takes centre stage is truly the story of God, the world, and every ordinary human being who has ever lived in it. That's how Luke intends it to be.

LUKE 1.26–38

The Annunciation of the Birth of Jesus

²⁶In the sixth month, Gabriel the angel was sent from God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man called Joseph, from the family of David. The virgin was called Mary.

²⁸'Greetings, favoured one!' said the angel when he arrived. 'May the Lord be with you!'

²⁹She was disturbed at this, and wondered what such a greeting might mean.

³⁰'Don't be afraid, Mary,' said the angel to her. 'You're in favour with God. ³¹Listen: you will conceive in your womb and will have a son; and you shall call his name Jesus. ³²He will be a great man, and he'll be called the son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, ³³and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever. His kingdom will never come to an end.'

³⁴'How will this happen?' said Mary to the angel. 'I'm still a virgin!'

³⁵'The holy spirit will come upon you,' replied the angel, 'and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. For that reason the holy one who is born from you will be called God's Son.

³⁶'Let me tell you this, too: your cousin Elisabeth, in her old age, has also conceived a son. This is the sixth month for her, a woman

who people used to say was barren. ³⁷With God, you see, nothing is impossible.

³⁸‘Here I am,’ said Mary; ‘I’m the Lord’s servant-girl. Let it happen to me as you’ve said.’

Then the angel left her.

Ask a newspaper editor what sort of stories will sell the most copies, and three categories come swiftly to mind: sex, royalty and religion. If they can be combined, so much the better. ‘POP STAR’S LOVE CHILD’ is good; ‘PRINCESS HAS SECRET AFFAIR’ is better; ‘KING’S SECRET NIGHT WITH NUN’ is better still. So when people read the story of Gabriel visiting Mary, with the child to be born being the future Lord of the world, their minds easily jump in the way the newspapers have conditioned them to do. People have read into the story all sorts of things that aren’t there, and have failed to notice some of the really important things that are.

Let’s begin with the obvious point. The story makes it clear that Jesus was conceived in Mary’s womb before she had had any sexual relations. Many people today find this impossible to believe, but they often think that this difficulty has only arisen in modern times, because of all we now know about the precise mechanics of conception and birth. Not so. The ancient world didn’t know about X chromosomes and Y chromosomes, but they knew as well as we do that babies were the result of sexual intercourse, and that people who claimed to be pregnant by other means might well be covering up a moral and social offence. Yet Mary’s story is told by both Luke and Matthew, in versions so different that they can hardly be dependent on one another; in other words, the story seems to have been widely known in the very early church, rather than being a fantasy invented several generations after the fact. Why would these two writers, and devout Jewish Christian congregations that passed on such stories, have done so, giving hostages to fortune in this way, unless they had good reason to suppose they were true?

It’s important to stress that the story says nothing about Mary remaining a virgin after Jesus’ birth. That’s a much later idea. Nor does it say anything about the goodness or badness of sexual identity or sexual relations. Whatever Luke (and Matthew) are trying to say with this story, they aren’t saying that virginity is a morally better state than marriage. They are not denigrating sex, women, conception or birth. They are simply reporting that Jesus did not have a father in the ordinary way, and that this was because Mary had been given special grace to be the mother of God’s incarnate self.

Luke has no thought that this might make Jesus somehow less than fully human. Scientists will say that virgin birth is in theory possible

(it sometimes happens in small animals, e.g. lizards), and that a child thus produced would be a complete human being. The problem is that, always supposing such a thing were possible, the child would naturally be female. The truly remarkable thing from the scientific point of view is that Jesus was male.

The angel gives what looks like a double explanation for the whole event. The **holy spirit** will come upon Mary, enabling her (as the spirit always does) to do and be more than she could by herself. But at the same time ‘the power of the Most High’ will overshadow her. This is something different: God himself, the creator, will surround her completely with his sovereign power.

All this sounds extremely peculiar, but we should remember that in the Bible, and in Jewish and Christian thought at their best, the true God is the one in whose image humans were made in the first place. We aren’t talking about a pagan god intervening roughly and inappropriately in the affairs of mortals, but about the one who, as St Augustine said, made us for himself. When he takes the initiative, it is always a matter of love, love which will care for us and take us up into his saving purposes. Mary is, to that extent, the supreme example of what always happens when God is at work by grace through human beings. God’s power from outside, and the indwelling spirit within, together result in things being done which would have been unthinkable any other way.

Of course, no one is likely to be convinced of Luke’s story who isn’t already in some sense open to the possibility that Jesus, though certainly a fully human being, was also the one in whom Israel’s God had made his personal appearance on the stage of history. And it’s important to say that neither Luke nor Matthew (the two writers who speak about Jesus’ conception directly) suggest that this is the most important thing about Jesus. In all of Paul’s writings, he never mentions that there had been anything unusual about Jesus’ conception or birth. Jesus’ death and **resurrection** remain, for him, far more significant. But to those who have come to some kind of faith in the crucified and risen Jesus, whose minds are thus opened to God being uniquely present in him, there is a sense of appropriateness, hard to define, easy to recognize, about the story Luke and Matthew tell. It isn’t what we would have expected, but it somehow rings true.

Far more important for the whole story, though, is the political or royal meaning Luke gives to the whole event. The child to be born will be the **Messiah**, the king of the house of David. God had promised David a descendant who would reign for ever – not over Israel only, but also the whole world. And this coming king would be, in some sense, ‘God’s son’ (2 Samuel 7.14; Psalm 2.7; Psalm 89.27). As with a good deal of New Testament language about Jesus, this is both a huge

theological claim (Jesus is somehow identified with God in a unique way which people then and now find it hard to grasp and believe) and a huge political claim (Jesus is the true ruler of the world in a way which leaves Caesar, and the powers of the world today, a long way behind).

Put all this together – the conception of a baby, the power of God, and the challenge to all human empires – and we can see why the story is so explosive. Perhaps that's one reason why it's so controversial. Perhaps some of the fuss and bother about whether Mary could have conceived Jesus without a human father is because, deep down, we don't want to think that there might be a king who could claim this sort of absolute allegiance?

Whatever answer we give to that, we shouldn't miss the contrast between muddled, puzzled Zechariah in the previous story and the obedient humility of Mary in this one. She too questions Gabriel, but this seems to be a request for information, not proof. Rather, faced with the chance to be the mother of the Messiah, though not yet aware of what this will involve, she says the words which have rung down the years as a model of the human response to God's unexpected vocation: 'Here I am, the Lord's servant-girl; let it be as you have said.'

LUKE 1.39–56

The Magnificat: Mary's Song of Praise

³⁹Mary got up then and there, and went in excitement to the hill country of Judaea. ⁴⁰She went into Zechariah's house, and greeted Elisabeth. ⁴¹When Elisabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby gave a leap in her womb. Elisabeth was filled with the holy spirit, ⁴²and shouted at the top of her voice:

'Of all women, you're the blessed one! And the fruit of your womb – he's blessed, too! ⁴³Why should this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴Look – when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the child in my womb gave a great leap for joy! ⁴⁵A blessing on you, for believing that what the Lord said to you would come true!

⁴⁶Mary said,

'My soul declares that the Lord is great,

⁴⁷my spirit exults in my saviour, my God.

⁴⁸He saw his servant-girl in her humility;
from now, I'll be blessed by all peoples to come.

⁴⁹The Powerful One, whose name is Holy,
has done great things for me, for me.

⁵⁰His mercy extends from father to son,
from mother to daughter for those who fear him.

⁵¹Powerful things he has done with his arm:
he routed the arrogant through their own cunning.

⁵²Down from their thrones he hurled the rulers,
up from the earth he raised the humble.

⁵³The hungry he filled with the fat of the land,
but the rich he sent off with nothing to eat.

⁵⁴He has rescued his servant, Israel his child,
because he remembered his mercy of old,

⁵⁵just as he said to our long-ago ancestors –
Abraham and his descendants for ever.

⁵⁶Mary stayed with Elisabeth for three months, and then returned home.

What would make you celebrate wildly, without inhibition?

Perhaps it would be the news that someone close to you who'd been very sick was getting better and would soon be home.

Perhaps it would be the news that your country had escaped from tyranny and oppression, and could look forward to a new time of freedom and prosperity.

Perhaps it would be seeing that the floods which had threatened your home were going down again.

Perhaps it would be the message that all your money worries, or business worries, had been sorted out and you could relax.

Perhaps it would be the telephone call to say that you had been appointed to the job you'd always longed for.

Whatever it might be, you'd do things you normally wouldn't.

You might dance round and round with a friend.

You might shout and throw your hat in the air (I once did that without thinking, before I stopped to reflect what a cliché it was).

You might telephone everybody you could think of and invite them to a party.

You might sing a song. You might even make one up as you went along – probably out of snatches of poems and songs you already knew, or perhaps by adding your own new words to a great old hymn.

And if you lived in any kind of culture where rhythm and beat mattered, it would be the sort of song you could clap your hands to, or stamp on the ground.

Now read Mary's song like that. (It's often called *Magnificat*, because that is its first word in Latin.) It's one of the most famous songs in Christianity. It's been whispered in monasteries, chanted in cathedrals, recited in small remote churches by evening candlelight, and set to music with trumpets and kettledrums by Johann Sebastian Bach.

It's the **gospel** before the gospel, a fierce bright shout of triumph thirty weeks before Bethlehem, thirty years before Calvary and Easter. It goes with a swing and a clap and a stamp. It's all about God, and it's all about revolution. And it's all because of Jesus – Jesus who's only just been conceived, not yet born, but who has made Elisabeth's baby leap for joy in her womb and has made Mary giddy with excitement and hope and triumph. In many cultures today, it's the women who really know how to celebrate, to sing and dance, with their bodies and voices saying things far deeper than words. That's how Mary's song comes across here.

Yes, Mary will have to learn many other things as well. A sword will pierce her **soul**, she is told when Jesus is a baby. She will lose him for three days when he's twelve. She will think he's gone mad when he's thirty. She will despair completely for a further three days in Jerusalem, as the God she now wildly celebrates seems to have deceived her (that, too, is part of the same Jewish tradition she draws on in this song). All of us who sing her song should remember these things too. But the moment of triumph will return with Easter and Pentecost, and this time it won't be taken away.

Why did Mary launch into a song like this? What has the news of her son got to do with God's strong power overthrowing the power structures of the world, demolishing the mighty and exalting the humble?

Mary and Elisabeth shared a dream. It was the ancient dream of Israel: the dream that one day all that the prophets had said would come true. One day Israel's God would do what he had said to Israel's earliest ancestors: all nations would be blessed through Abraham's family. But for that to happen, the powers that kept the world in slavery had to be toppled. Nobody would normally thank God for blessing if they were poor, hungry, enslaved and miserable. God would have to win a victory over the bullies, the power brokers, the forces of evil which people like Mary and Elisabeth knew all too well, living as they did in the dark days of Herod the Great, whose casual brutality was backed up with the threat of Rome. Mary and Elisabeth, like so many Jews of their time, searched the scriptures, soaked themselves in the psalms and prophetic writings which spoke of mercy, hope, fulfillment, reversal, revolution, victory over evil and of God coming to the rescue at last.

All of that is poured into this song, like a rich, foaming drink that comes bubbling over the edge of the jug and spills out all round. Almost every word is a biblical quotation such as Mary would have known from childhood. Much of it echoes the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, the song which celebrated the birth of Samuel and all

that God was going to do through him. Now these two mothers-to-be celebrate together what God is going to do through their sons, **John** and Jesus.

This is all part of Luke's scene-setting for what will follow, as the two boys grow up and really do become the agents of God's long-promised revolution, the victory over the powers of evil. Much of Mary's song is echoed by her son's preaching, as he warns the rich not to trust in their wealth, and promises God's **kingdom** to the poor.

But once again Luke hasn't just given us a big picture. Mary's visit to Elisabeth is a wonderful human portrait of the older woman, pregnant at last after hope had gone, and the younger one, pregnant far sooner than she had expected. That might have been a moment of tension: Mary might have felt proud, Elisabeth perhaps resentful. Nothing of that happens. Instead, the intimate details: John, three months before his birth, leaping in the womb at Mary's voice, and the holy spirit carrying Elisabeth into shouted praise and Mary into song.

Underneath it all is a celebration of God. God has taken the initiative – God the Lord, the saviour, the Powerful One, the Holy One, the Merciful One, the Faithful One. God is the ultimate reason to celebrate.

LUKE 1.57–80

Zechariah's Song of Praise

⁵⁷The time arrived for Elisabeth's child to be born, and she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had increased his mercy to her, and they came to celebrate with her.

⁵⁹Now on the eighth day, when they came to circumcise the child, they were calling him by his father's name, Zechariah. ⁶⁰But his mother spoke up.

'No,' she said, 'he is to be called John.'

⁶¹'None of your relatives,' they objected, 'is called by that name.'

⁶²They made signs to his father, to ask what he wanted him to be called. ⁶³He asked for a writing tablet, and wrote on it, 'His name is John.'

Everyone was astonished. ⁶⁴Immediately his mouth and his tongue were unfastened, and he spoke, praising God. ⁶⁵Fear came over all those who lived in the neighbourhood, and people spoke of all these things throughout all the hill country of Judaea. ⁶⁶Everyone who heard about it turned the matter over in their hearts.

'What then will this child become?' they said. And the Lord's hand was with him.

⁶⁷John's father Zechariah was filled with the holy spirit, and spoke this prophecy:

⁶⁸Blessed be the Lord, Israel's God!
He's come to his people and bought them their freedom.
⁶⁹He's raised up a horn of salvation for us
in David's house, the house of his servant,
⁷⁰just as he promised, through the mouths of the prophets,
the holy ones, speaking from ages of old:
⁷¹salvation from our enemies, rescue from hatred,
⁷²mercy to our ancestors, keeping his holy covenant.
⁷³He swore an oath to Abraham our father,
⁷⁴to give us deliverance from fear and foes,
so we might worship him, ⁷⁵holy and righteous
before his face to the end of our days.
⁷⁶You, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest One,
you'll go before the Lord, preparing his way,
⁷⁷letting his people know of salvation,
through the forgiveness of all their sins.
⁷⁸The heart of our God is full of mercy,
that's why his daylight has dawned from on high,
⁷⁹bringing light to the dark, as we sat in death's shadow,
guiding our feet in the path of peace.

⁸⁰The child grew, and became powerful in the spirit. He lived in the wilderness until the day when he was revealed to Israel.

Many people today can't imagine what life would be like without a television. We are so used to it telling us what to think about all the time that, without it, some people become quite worried, lost in a world of their own unfamiliar thoughts like an explorer whose guide has just disappeared. Take away radio and newspapers as well, and . . . what would *you* think about all day?

That was the situation, of course, of most people in the world until very recently. It was the situation for everybody in Jesus' time. If you were Zechariah, what would you think of all day?

Your family, certainly. Local village business, presumably. Your health, quite possibly. The state of the crops, the prospect for harvest.

But behind these obvious concerns, there are deeper questions. Something is wrong in the world. People are suffering. *Your* people are suffering. Wicked foreigners have come from far away, with hatred in their eyes and weapons in their hands. Darkness and death have stalked the land. Many people in many countries have had all this to think about over many centuries.

Behind that again, there may be a sense that, though much has gone wrong, somehow there is a larger hope. Things can be put right. Things *will* be put right. Let go of this and you're sunk. Often it's the

old people, the ones who cherish old memories and imaginations, who keep alive the rumour of hope.

Zechariah comes across in this passage, especially in the prophetic poem, as someone who has pondered the agony and the hope for many years, and who now finds the two bubbling out of him as he looks in awe and delight at his baby son.

It's a poem about God acting at last, finally doing what he promised many centuries ago, and doing it at a time when his people had had their fill of hatred and oppression. One evil empire after another had trampled them underfoot; now at last God was going to give them deliverance. We can feel the long years of pain and sorrow, of darkness and death, overshadowing his mind. Nameless enemies are lurking round the corner in his imagination and experience. No doubt it was partly this that had made him question Gabriel's word in the first place.

But we can also feel the long years of quiet prayer and trust. God had made a **covenant** with Abraham. God had promised to send a new David. God had spoken of a prophet who would go ahead to prepare the way. All these things he had known, believed, prayed and longed for. Now they were all to come true.

Much of the poem could be read simply as the celebration of what we would call a 'political' salvation – though few ancient Jews, and not very many modern ones, would want to separate the secular from the sacred the way the modern West has done. But there are signs that Zechariah's vision goes beyond simply a realigning of political powers. God's mercy, the forgiveness of sins, the rescue from death itself; all of this points to a deeper and wider meaning of 'salvation'. Luke is preparing us to see that God, in fulfilling the great promises of the Old Testament, is going beyond a merely this-worldly salvation and opening the door to a whole new world in which sin and death themselves will be dealt with. This, of course, is the message that will occupy the rest of the book.

Zechariah's own story, of nine months' silence suddenly broken at the naming of the child, is a reflection on a smaller scale of what was going on in the Israel of his day. Prophecy, many believed, had been silent for a long time. Now it was going to burst out again, to lead many back to a true allegiance to their God. What had begun as a kind of punishment for Zechariah's lack of **faith** now turns into a new sort of sign, a sign that God is doing a new thing.

Luke's long first chapter holds together what we often find easier to keep separate. At point after point he has linked his story to the ancient biblical record of Israel, to the patriarchs, kings, prophets and psalms. He is writing of the moment when the centuries-old story was going to come round a corner at last, out of darkness into sudden light. He never forgets this larger perspective; everything that he will tell us

about Jesus makes sense as the fulfilment of God’s ancient promises, the hope of Israel come to fruition at last.

But Luke’s story vibrates equally with the personal hopes and fears of ordinary people. Zechariah, Elisabeth and Mary stand out as real people, hesitating between faith and doubt, called to trust God at a new moment in history. It’s a mark not only of Luke’s skill as a writer but also of the nature of the God he is writing about that both the big picture and the smaller human stories matter totally. This is, after all, as Zechariah had glimpsed, the story of how the creator God came to rescue his people. It is the story, as Luke will now tell, of how God himself was born as a baby.

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