

The Christmas Story

Response to Yoder Column in *Washington Post* 25 Dec 1984

What Luke Could Take for Granted

Edwin M. Yoder, Jr.

One of the best tales ever told begins with the writer's urbane pledge to a Roman official: he is about to present an "orderly" account of certain recent stories, that the truth might be known.

You will doubtless recognize the tale more readily if we skip from that disarming preface to these more familiar lines: "In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus..."

The Gospel according to St. Luke has been regarded for ages as the most accessible and human of the four accounts. Aside from the text itself, more is known, or may be guessed, about the writer. He was keenly interested in so anchoring his story in identifiable time and place that readers and hearers would find it plausible. Accordingly, a story of divine visitation begins with an emperor's whim: Caesar Augustus decides to take a census.

Luke, it is believed, was a Gentile from Antioch. Those who have ears for such things call his Greek polished, or more polished than the humble Greek of the other evangelists. He was evidently a friend and traveling companion of St. Paul. Like Paul he valued the Roman order and wished to reassure the imperial authorities. This new sect, the Christians, posed no threat to the stability of the empire.

With these aspects of Luke's character and purpose 20th century readers are easy. But something is odd about Luke and his book. For all his urbanity, he is a soft touch for the miraculous. His narrative from the first overflows with events which, to a modern eye, strain belief.

The leading figure in the opening scenes is not a man but an angel, Gabriel. This Gabriel strikes an old priest temporarily dumb because he doubts the news that he is to be the father of John the Baptist. Later, when the infant Jesus is brought to the temple for dedication as a first-born son, an aged prophetess is lurking about. And this is to say nothing of the occasion, a few nights earlier, when shepherds hear anthems of universal good will in the sky.

From the modern point of view, all this seems challenging – at least, not the sort of thing Dan Rather would report with a straight face. The skilled narrator freely dilutes his history with what we would call superstition. If this is an "orderly account" of the "truth," as he solemnly assures his Roman friend Theophilus, the truth is a patchwork fabric.

It is such discrepancies that children invariably notice and question, when adults stand in deferential silence. But never mind, children used to be told, "back in those days" writers

did not distinguish as we do between various sorts of narrative – between fact and fiction, or between history and myth.

But when we grew up, we put away childish explanations, and the matter became more complicated. A writer of Luke's abilities was quite aware when he mixed the poetic or mythic with the historical. The text shows it. Yet he could do it with perfect serenity, and not merely because his purpose was in part liturgical.

The world of Luke, as a famous poet of our own day has explained in another connection, had not suffered a "dissociation of sensibility." It had not undergone that fragmentation of the understanding that was brought on by modern science.

How good it would be, if only for a moment at the Christmas season, to be able to re-enter Luke's profound simplicity of mind, unvexed by fussy distinctions. Then we could take for granted, as he did, that signs and wonders now and then interrupt the predictable flow of observed cause and effect; that such interruptions of the "natural" order may be taken not as puzzles but as signs of a welcome cosmic interest in our small world.

We might again be like those devout Jews from whom Luke learned that even the most mundane events, to say nothing of marvels, reflected divine patterns unfolding.

Yes, it would be the best of Christmas treats to read Luke's narrative as if it were the most natural of expectations that history sometimes pauses for the caroling of angels, or that a child born in a stable might be the answer to mankind's endless strife. For some, this may be difficult. But we are, at least, at one with Luke in seeing that such a story, if true, would be truly magnificent.

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The Editor
The Washington Post

Dear Sir:

Herewith a few comments re/ Edwin Yoder's article on the Christmas story, "What Luke Could Take for Granted" (*Post* 12/25/84, page A-19).

Mr. Yoder is surely right "in seeing that such a story, if true, would be truly magnificent." But he parts company with the early Christians (at least Paul, 1 Corinthians 15:14) in thinking that the miraculous can be dispensed with and Christianity retained.

He is also mistaken in supposing that Luke, "for all his urbanity ... is a soft touch for the miraculous." According to Paul's letters and Luke's *Acts of the Apostles*, Luke was an associate of the apostle, a physician, and an eyewitness to several of Paul's miracles.

While Paul was imprisoned for two years at Caesarea, Luke was in Palestine with ample opportunity to research the matters treated in his Gospel. This is presumably what Luke is talking about when he tells us, "I myself have investigated everything from the beginning ... so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:3-4).

Yoder is also correct when he says that Luke's narrative "overflows with events which, to a modern eye, strain belief." Indeed, this situation has something to do with modern science, though I think the rejection of the miraculous is an unwarranted extrapolation from science. The question, however, is who is right: the eyewitnesses, or modern scholars at 1900 years' distance from the events? Of course we moderns understand science better than the ancients, but neither we nor they would suppose we were observing natural phenomena if we saw the dead raised, thousands of people filled with a few loaves of bread, or a storm stilled with a word. After all, modern science has not been able to explain how the miracles of Jesus were merely misunderstood natural events. Such an attempt by Hermann Paulus in the 1830s was mocked out even by liberals of the time for its strained interpretations. The usual procedure today is to dismiss the accounts as legendary elaborations in despite of Luke's (and Paul's) claims.

Must we, then, either meekly take the word of the Bible writers without supporting evidence, or reject it in favor of modern theories that we live in a closed universe into which not even God can penetrate? No, God has provided evidence by which those who really want to know can reach sufficient certainty on these matters. I myself have a doctorate in astrophysics from Cornell University; I know many others trained in modern science that have come to believe the Bible is an accurate record of God's dealings with mankind on the basis of solid evidence, not merely a leap in the dark.

Space forbids any real survey of this evidence, but for those who would like to investigate, let me propose the following reading list: (1) Evidence for God from cosmology and design in the universe: Robert Jastrow, *God & the Astronomers*; Paul Davies, *Accidental Universe*; Alan Hayward, *God Is*; (2) Evidence from man's moral nature: C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*; (3) Evidence from fulfilled Biblical predictions: John Urquhart, *The Wonders of Prophecy*; Peter Stoner and Robert Newman, *Science Speaks*; (4) Evidence from Jesus' resurrection: John Wenham, *The Easter Enigma*; Ian Wilson, *The Shroud of Turin*; (5) Evidence from transformed lives: Chuck Coulson, *Born Again*; Eric Barrett and David Fisher, *Scientists Who Believe*. If you've only got time for one, read Hayward.

Sincerely,
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