

BEHOLD YOUR GOD!

SCRIPTURE—Luke 1:26-35

TEXT—“*Behold your God!*”—Isaiah 40:9.

A certain university president had the unusual habit of tipping his hat every time he met a small boy on the street. When asked why, he replied, “I never know but that I may be speaking to a future president of the United States.”

This delightful little story suggests a question for each of us at this Christmas time. When you look into the manger of Bethlehem, what do you see? The world has many answers. A few brazened souls see evidence of illegitimacy. Others, less brazened but just as skeptical, see the folklore of an ancient people which sought by it to embody a theological truth. Philosophy sees a puzzle. Biology discovers a problem. Art and music find inspiration. Literature sees its greatest subject. Theology meets its timeless challenge.

But however you may regard the Babe of Bethlehem, you cannot ignore Him. In the history of the world did ever the birth of a babe to a peasant woman create such a commotion in his natal hour? Heaven hovered low to announce His birth. Humble folk sought through the night to kneel at His cradle. Wise men left their studies to bring Him gifts. A tyrant dispatched his soldiers to destroy Him. Even His mother and foster father wondered at the mystery which surrounded His birth.

For this little Baby was unlike any other that is born of woman. Literally the eternal ages look down upon Him. The centuries which preceded Him peered from the day-dawn of revelation to foretell His coming. The unfolding ages which came after Him look fondly upon Him with assurance, faith, and hope. History itself divides itself by the hour of His birth. And well it may, for no one else has so affected the affairs of men and nations as has this little

Babe in whom are met the hopes and fears of all the years.

Men may look upon Him with speculation, denial, or faith. But as you stand in the quietness of a roughly hewn stable, the invisible hand of the ages gently draws back the swaddling clothes of time to reveal a sleeping Babe. And the voice of the Eternal says, "*Behold your God!*" (Isa. 40:9).

The most beautiful and complete account of the birth of Jesus is found in the Gospel of Luke. At the same time it gives us the strongest documentary proof that Jesus was born of a virgin. For these reasons we would concentrate our thoughts on this account as we note, first, the man; second, the message; third, the meaning.

First, consider the man. Luke is the only Gentile writer in the New Testament. He was probably a Macedonian by birth, and, therefore, possessed the mind of a Greek. It is usually held that he was converted by Paul during his second missionary journey. Thereafter he became a constant companion of the apostle. As a result, during Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea, Luke spent two years in Palestine. Here he had ample opportunity to acquaint himself with the facts concerning the life of Jesus.

Luke was a historian. Sir William Ramsey, one of the most critical yet ardent students of Luke's writings, declared him to be "a historian of the first rank." Even where his writings conflict with the official records of the Roman Empire, archaeology has confirmed Luke, showing that the Empire's records were either in error or else incomplete. Therefore, Luke deserves a fair-minded study as to his records.

That he wrote with serious historical purpose is seen in his introduction to his gospel. "*Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to draw up a narrative concerning those matters which have been fulfilled among us, even as they delivered them unto us, who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having traced the course*

to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus; that thou mightest know the certainty concerning the things wherein thou wast instructed" (1:1-4 ASV).

Furthermore, Luke was a physician (Col. 4:14), and, therefore, a scientist. As a scientist he knew how to ferret out facts and evaluate evidence. As a physician he would from the beginning be prejudiced against the idea of a virgin birth. At the same time he would feel kindly toward womanhood, and would enjoy her confidence. There is every reason to believe that Luke talked with Mary herself. To whom would she speak more intimately about the birth of her Son than to a Christian physician? A physician usually talks with the mother before writing out the birth certificate.

So "having traced . . . all things accurately," Luke the physician-scientist-historian wrote out the birth record of Jesus. And while Matthew records it (1:18-2:1), and John (1:14) and Paul (Gal. 4:4) imply a knowledge of it, it is to Luke that we owe the greatest debt for the beautiful story of Christmas.

Second, note the message. That Luke records that Jesus was born of a virgin cannot be denied. Following the introduction (1:1-4) of an exact historian, the first two chapters of Luke's gospel actually glow with an account of the miraculous — angels, visions, heavenly messengers, the angelic host, and the prophetic insight of two aged people in the temple.

Were these merely the superstitious imaginations of primitive Jewish minds? Some would have us think so. But the mind of Luke was Greek, not Jewish. He was a physician-scientist-historian, a man of culture, not of primitive legends. He had "traced . . . all things accurately." He recorded them in opposition to all of his previous training. Certainly the evidence must have proved convincing to him. Repeatedly he has been proved trustworthy under the cold analysis of modern scientific techniques. Doc-

ament scholar, says, "To say that he was credulous and told legends . . . is to fly in the face of Luke 1:1-4 and to brand Luke either as a hypocrite or an incompetent."* There is absolutely no evidence to justify such a charge.

Luke has been described as the first man of science to grapple with the problem of the virgin birth. And to one of the greatest events in history he brought all of his training. He heard the stories and read the fragmentary accounts. He traced them accurately to their sources. He weighed the evidence. He ferreted out the truth. He talked with "eyewitnesses."

Now with what eyewitness to Jesus' birth could he talk? There were only two, Joseph and Mary. And Joseph most certainly was dead. So he must have talked with Mary herself. Who else could best tell of Gabriel's visit to a virgin in Nazareth? Who else would know of her uneasiness on hearing the angel's voice? And Luke records that the first question about the virgin birth was raised by Mary herself. "*How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?*" (Luke 1:34). A physician would remember this problem also.

But he also would remember the angel's answer. "*The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God*" (1:35).

A miracle? Yes. A biological miracle recorded by a scientist-physician who was a "historian of the first rank." But Luke is not alone. For multitudes of his successors among modern scientists, physicians, and historians join with Luke in confessing that Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary."

There was a day not too long ago when men might deny the possibility of miracles. But that day is no longer with us. For finite man has wrought

**Luke the Historian*, Scribners, New York, 1930, p. 103.

too many seeming "miracles" in doing what would have been impossible a few years ago. Shall we deny even greater miracles to an infinite God?

Science no longer regards the universe as a closed system of law which defies any invasion of its fixed order. It recognizes that it is possible to impose higher laws upon basic ones, thus enabling man to fly, conquer disease, and to work in countless ways what the vernacular terms as "miracle." A miracle in the spiritual sense is simply God imposing upon known laws of nature higher laws known only to Him, by which He achieves His spiritual ends. Such a miracle is the virgin birth of His Son.

Now despite this fact doubting minds through the ages have retreated before the onslaught of truth from one position of denial to another—from such charges as illegitimacy, to Jewish legend, to pagan myth, to the impossibility of the miraculous. Their current position is to call the virgin birth a theological "myth," meaning a basic historical truth, but not actual history, related in theological form. They contend that it is not necessary to believe in the virgin birth, but simply to believe that God has invaded history in the person of Jesus Christ for redemptive purposes. But to these I would pose three questions. How better could God invade history than in the virgin born Son of God? If Jesus be not virgin born is He the Son of God at all or just another son of a man? And, if not the Son of God, can He be our Saviour? The answers are obvious. But I fear that these adverse critics will not admit to them.

In the same chapters Luke records the virgin birth of Jesus and the birth of John the Baptist to aged parents. Both are biologically impossible. Both are in the realm of the miraculous. Yet no question is raised by the critics about John. Is it not because the unique deity of Jesus is founded on His virgin birth? So the philosophers-turned-theologians deny the unique deity of Jesus by denying His virgin birth.

WHOM WILL YOU BELIEVE: PHILOSOPHERS who two thousand years after the event wander about in the wild moors of unrestricted speculative reason. Or Luke the scientist-physician-historian who, within the lifetime of Mary and after tracing all things accurately, recorded under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary?" I prefer to stand with Luke.

Yes, it is the same Holy Spirit in Luke as in Isaiah who says, "Behold your God!"

Third, consider the meaning. Luke's account of the virgin birth does not end with a Babe in a manger. It looks beyond the Babe to the suffering Son of Man.

When the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary he said that she "*shall bring forth a son, and shall call his name JESUS*" (1:31). And when the angel of the Lord proclaimed this wondrous birth to the shepherds he said, "*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord*" (2:11). These names are highly suggestive. "Christ" is the eternal second Person of the Trinity, anointed of God for salvation. "Jesus" means "Jehovah is salvation," and is the name of the historical manifestation of the eternal Christ. "Lord" is the Old Testament "Jehovah," and also points forward to the triumph of Jesus Christ in His redemptive mission.

Now all of these names fall into place as we read the words of Simeon to Mary. "*Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also . . .*" (2:35). Thus a shadow is cast over the glad-some birth hour of Jesus. For the sword which shall plunge into the soul of the mother will first pierce through her Holy Child.

This may hardly seem to be the place to inject such gruesome thoughts into so happy a scene. But they are there nevertheless. So as you "behold your God," this Babe in a manger, you catch the real meaning of Christmas only as you look beyond the manger to the cross and the empty tomb.

"Behold your God" incarnated in a little Babe! But as you do so, you see more. For these eyes now sleeping will one day look upon a mob of hatred hounding Him to His death. His little brow will some day wear a crown of thorns. His back now nestling comfortably in a cradle will feel the cutting blows of the cruel lash. Swaddling clothes tenderly placed will give way to the mockery of a king's robe. Chubby hands and feet will be lacerated by the cutting spikes. The heart that now beats in peaceful slumber will be pierced by a soldier's spear. He who first lay in a manger will be hanged on a cross.

But, thanks be to God, Luke does not end there. For this Babe "*shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father, David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end*" (1:32-33). From the cradle to the cross, from the cross through the empty tomb to the throne! This is the message of Christmas in its fulness.

Yes, the president of a great university may tip his hat to a future president of the United States. But you and I—kings, presidents, humble folk—can bow before the manger of a Child, and say in faith and in truth, "Behold your God!"

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