

Theophilus: Nobody knows my true identity; everyone must only speculate about me.

One reasonable way to think of me is as a rather wealthy, mid-level Roman official who lives in Philippi, Macedonia about forty years after Jesus died.

My name is Theophilus, and Luke wrote his book to me.

Think of me as a non-Jewish God-fearer who loves to hang around the synagogues and hear about the God of the Hebrews. When I heard the Gospel, and found that I could have eternal life... without having to follow the Mosaic Laws? You can only imagine my joy. Especially to avert suffering through the disfiguring act of circumcision- (he gasps) so horrific to us— Romans and Greeks. But after hearing more and more about the Christian faith, I had more and more questions. I wanted answers. I asked Luke for them.

One of the things that you might notice in Luke's writings is that he did not spend much time putting events into historical, political, or even geographical context. I already knew those things, there was no need for Luke to talk about them. Unfortunately, you are probably not as familiar with those things as I am. Let me give you an example of context that I am talking about.

Jesus lived his childhood during the time of Emperor Caesar Augustus, and his adulthood under the successor to Augustus, Tiberius. This was during Rome's Golden Age. Rome controlled all of the areas around the Mediterranean Sea, and most of Europe. The purpose of the empire was to support the city of Rome and grow its powers.

Israel, or Judea, was a tiny dot on Rome's radar. It comprised less than 1% of Rome's population and land mass. Roman's thought of Israel about as often as New Yorker's think of Tulsa. It's in Oklahoma, by the way. Fly over country, I believe is the term? If it hadn't been for Israel's relatively new seaport at Caesarea, the Romans would not have cared if Israel had fallen into the ocean and disappeared. It was through that seaport that many of Rome's luxury goods were transported.

Rome sent second-rate officials to rule over Judea, because none of the first-rate ones would go. The weather was awful, the Jews were extremely troublesome, and there wasn't much to steal to enrich oneself. If you were climbing the political or military ladder, you avoided Israel if at all possible. Instead, Rome gave immense power to local people like King Herod the Great. As

long as they kept the peace and tax revenue flowing to Rome, those local rulers could do as they pleased.

Because the Bible is written to Christians and Jews, and its stories are primarily located in Israel, you could easily get the idea that Israel was the center of attention of the world. It was quite the opposite in my life. Rome was the center of the world, and Israel barely existed. When Jesus was born in Nazareth, it was the equivalent of him being born in Bugtussle. Again, in Oklahoma, and tiny even by tiny town standards. He certainly would not have been considered a threat to Rome, and Herod would have been expected to deal with Jesus and his followers in any way Herod deemed fit.

In your time, when someone wants to write a biography about the most famous person in the world, they have mountains of digital information at their fingertips. An author's task is to sort through the vast amount of information and decide what is worthy to include in a person's life story. It is up to the reader to decide whether the information is credible and if the story really lines up with reality. I'm sure it has gotten more difficult for today's readers to discern such things, many of your current writers have their own agendas, often outweighing the supposed true story.

In my time, things were a little different. Virtually all of the biographies, and many of the history books, were written at the paid request of rich people or powerful politicians. It was expected that the author would slant the story line to favor whomever was paying for the book. Sometimes the slant would be so severe as to make the story unrecognizable to those familiar with the situation. However, that didn't matter to most readers as long as the story was good.

My situation was quite different. I was only interested in hearing the truth. In fact, one of the reasons I chose to listen to Luke was because of his esteemed reputation for gathering relevant facts and coming to accurate conclusions. His training as a doctor taught him how to do exactly that. He insisted that his final scroll should be irrefutably accurate. I knew that would be a challenge because he would be describing miracles and the actions of God.

Since Luke wrote his story many decades after the death of Jesus, you may wonder what information sources Luke used. I *insisted* on knowing his sources. There were many people who knew Jesus well who were still alive, and could tell their stories directly. Many people who had already died had told their stories to others, and Luke gathered as many of those as possible. He was personal friends with many of Jesus' apostles and family members. He questioned them at every opportunity.

Mark's written account of the life of Jesus was an especially valuable source since one of Mark's primary sources was the Apostle Peter. There were other accounts about the life of Jesus that had been written. Many of these later disappear from history, so future scholars will be puzzled about the source of some of Luke's information. As a point of interest, my friend, Matthew, also consulted some of the sources Luke used. That partially explains why some of their passages are so similar, but there are two other factors coming into play.

In my world, it was quite acceptable to copy, or partially copy, the writings of other people without giving them credit. So, if a passage looks exactly the same in Luke's account and Matthew's, you don't know whether the original source was Luke, Matthew or someone else. Second, and related to the previous point, all of the New Testament writers wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He may very well be the reason why some of the passages are written word-for-word.

In many of the myths of the Roman and Greek gods, the gods have children in rather interesting ways, and those gods and children have curious super powers. Here is the first challenge that I had for Luke. I wanted him to convince me why those Roman and Greek gods were myths, but Jesus and his birth wasn't a myth.

Luke:

When I first met him, Theophilus had already been taught many things about Jesus. But, he had also previously been taught many things about the Greek and Roman gods. I believed he was on the verge of becoming a Christian, but he wanted to know beyond any doubt that Jesus Christ was a true god, not just another mythical being. I wanted him to know for certain, the things he had been taught about Jesus.¹ I wrote my book knowing that it might not only sway him to a decision, but might sway many others who would read it.

See the dilemma? I was writing about miracles and healings. I was not a witness to the miracles and healings of Jesus, but I was a witness to many of the healings and miracles of Paul and other apostles. With my training, you can assume that I would not be easily fooled by fake healings and miracles. You can also assume I did not write about them if I did not fully believe they were true.

I desperately did NOT want to start my account with the miracle births of John and Jesus. Both would sound like Greek myths to Theophilus. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit inspired me to tell those stories in such a way that they would lead the reader to understand the divinity of Jesus.

Which brings me to a topic I need to address before you hear Mary's story. From the point of view of the 21st Century, it is almost impossible for you to understand a certain topic fully, or understand its theological significance. As an extraordinarily insightful doctor, I feel like I can do a good job of explaining it to you. This subject is crucial to understanding the life of Jesus. It will take a few minutes, so be patient. (catches himself being a doctor about it all, so adds,) Please.

One reason you will have a hard time understanding this next topic is because of modern birth control methods, birth control pills, and DNA testing. Today, most women want to keep from

¹ Luke 1:4

getting pregnant until they are ready to have a child, and they have the means to do so. If there is ever a question of paternity, a simple DNA test will settle the matter.

Another reason birth control methods obscure your understanding is that young women no longer feel as compelled to remain virgins. They often perceive that the main reason to stay a virgin is to keep from getting pregnant. A precious few still believe it is God's will for them to remain chaste until marriage, "I don't believe virginity is as common as it used to be..." as one of your country songs goes. Suffice it all to say the number of virgins is dwindling.,

In my time, there were three crucial reasons for a young Jewish woman to remain a virgin until marriage. First, if she wasn't a virgin, that meant she had committed the sin of fornication, and was subject to harsh punishments, including death by stoning, by the community... and her family. If she was even suspected of this, it was highly unlikely she would ever marry an honorable man.

The second and third reasons are related. Inheritance laws were based on the rule of "primogeniture," meaning the firstborn legitimate son inherited much more than the other sons or daughters. Sometimes the firstborn legitimate son inherited everything. Also, some of the Jewish religious rites required an identification of the firstborn legitimate son. So, it was absolutely crucial that Jewish parents could identify the firstborn legitimate son beyond a shadow of a doubt.

The only way a father could know beyond any doubt that a son was both firstborn and legitimate was for his bride to be a virgin the first time they had intercourse, and for her not to be allowed to be around other men until after she became pregnant. That is why so many wedding customs and community rituals were centered on the bride proving she was a virgin on her wedding night, and then keeping her away from other men.

Now, the medical part of the discussion. The only way for a woman to prove she was a virgin was for her membrane to still be intact on the night of the marriage. This was assumed to be the case if she bled upon the first act of intercourse, but it could also be proven by a physical examination by a midwife or a doctor.

Have you ever wondered how Joseph, and Mary's community, fully believed that she was a virgin, but was impregnated by the Holy Spirit? Two possible reasons: All of us could have been convinced by the Holy Spirit that that was how it happened. You might remember they relied on the Holy Spirit for many things. Or, Mary might have been able to prove her story by being examined by a doctor or trained women in midwifery. The Bible doesn't say if Mary was examined or not, but you can bet that the thought would have crossed her mind. After all, she was pledged to be married,² she could had been convicted of fornication and adultery, and the social penalties would have been severe...maybe even death, but most surely the end of her

² Luke 1:27

engagement to Joseph. Somehow, she and the Holy Spirit convinced her community, that she was both pregnant and a virgin.

To you, a pregnant virgin is an impossibility. To many Jews who believed the prophet Isaiah, a pregnant virgin was a certain sign. Isaiah wrote, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”³ Fortunately, everyone knew that Mary was of the house of David, so they would have been surprised, but not shocked that she was a pregnant virgin. Far from stoning her, they would have thrown her a giant party!

Matthew and I listed the genealogies of Jesus. Today, children memorize their ABC’s at an early age. But those who were descendants of David learned their genealogies at an early age. Both Joseph and Mary were descendants of David,⁴ Jesus was, too. Which meant he was a legitimate candidate to be the Messiah.

I’ve set the stage and introduced you to the main character of my book, Jesus. At his birth, he was the firstborn legitimate Son of God, and was qualified to be the Messiah. As you hear the stories that helped me write my book, I believe you will also be convinced that Jesus was, and still is, the Christ, the Messiah.

³ Isaiah 7:14

⁴ Luke 1:27