

Christmas

Kurt Hedlund

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CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE EYES OF THEOPHILUS

LUKE 2:1-10; ROMANS 1:1-4

I.

That first Christmas was a profoundly Jewish event. It involved the birth of a Jewish boy to poor, young Jewish parents in the fulfillment of Jewish prophecies in a Jewish village in the hills of Judea. The birth of this descendant of King David had tremendous implications for the Jewish people. Eventually its significance to Gentiles was also recognized. In the end it came to have great significance to you and to me.

We know details about the birth of Jesus largely because a description of it was given to a Gentile by the name of Theophilus. At the beginning of the Gospel According to Luke (PROJECTOR ON--- LUKE 1:1), we read, **"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, (LUKE 1:2) just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, (LUKE 1:3) it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, (LUKE 1:4) that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught."**

The gospel writer Luke is described in the Book of Acts in the New Testament as a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul. He is also known as a physician and a Gentile. He undertook an effort to gather information from eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus to put together a biography about Him.

We have only a few clues about who Theophilus was. Obviously the gospel writer had some kind of acquaintance with him. If he was not a believer in Jesus, Theophilus at least had received instruction about Jesus. His name is a Greek name, suggesting that he was a Gentile. It was a common name in the first century. It literally meant "friend of God."

Then also the adjective "most excellent" was used of him. This was a title that was commonly used of Roman citizens who were part of what has been called "the equestrian class." These people were high up on the Roman social and political scale, second only to the senatorial class. The Book of Acts was also written by Luke to Theophilus. Three times Luke uses this title to refer to Roman officials. For example, in Acts #23 v. 26 a Roman military officer is sending a letter to the Roman governor of Judea. (ACTS

23:26). He says in his letter, "Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency--- same Greek word--- **the governor Felix, greetings.**"

II.

Putting all of the available clues together, we can make some educated guesses about THE ROMAN LIFE OF THEOPHILUS. (II. THE ROMAN LIFE OF THEOPHILUS). The Gospel According to Luke was written about 60 AD. In this first century time period most members of this equestrian class lived in Italy. The majority of them lived in, or near, Rome.

The wealthiest and most powerful Romans belonged to the senatorial order. The equestrians ranked number two. The qualifications to belong to this group were well defined. Caesar Augustus years earlier had declared that members of the equestrian class must have property worth at least 100,000 denarii. For a basis of comparison, the average wage of a laborer in the first century was one denarius a day.

By occupation equestrians were businessmen and military officers and government administrators. Many, perhaps most, had served in the military. Some held administrative posts in government in various parts of the empire, such as Felix, whom we just saw described as governor of Judea.

Equestrians were well educated. Many had been sent to Athens for their advanced schooling. They had general awareness about what was going on in the rest of the world. They were well read. Some had private libraries. Some frequented the two large public libraries that were present in Rome.

Families were important to equestrians. They knew about their noble lineage and were proud of their ancestors. The men tended to marry women from other equestrian families. Although equestrian women were also educated, the men in the family had legal authority over their families. They typically had slaves who helped to manage the household.

Usually equestrians had even more wealthy patrons to whom they had some accountability. These patrons were like what we might call mentors today. The patrons would help these equestrians to advance in their careers. In turn the equestrians were expected to give loyalty and support to their patron/mentors. The equestrian clients in turn served as patrons for other men, who would provide various kinds of support for their careers.

Theophilus would have eaten well. There was considerable variety in the diets of these wealthy people. In Italy they were entertained by circuses, plays, beast baiting and gladiatorial contests. They gathered at the baths for socializing, lectures, massages, concerts and exercise.

Compared to the rest of the world, life was really good for members of the equestrian class. But Theophilus apparently sensed that something was missing from his life. He recognized that there was a deficiency in his world view. At least, he was open to the consideration of another perspective on life. Money and professional success can never ultimately provide satisfaction for the deepest longings of the human soul.

III.

So consider next THE ROMAN WORLD VIEW OF THEOPHILUS. (III. THE ROMAN WORLD VIEW OF THEOPHILUS) The Romans were religious. They were superstitious and polytheistic. They believed in many gods. Over time they had adopted gods of conquered countries as their own. They had especially embraced the Greek gods, having renamed the primary Greek gods with Latin names.

Because there were so many gods, people like Theophilus usually gave special attention to one or two or three of the gods. Often equestrians would be devoted to a patron god related to their profession. They would go to this god's temple, make contributions to its priests and express devotion on holidays set aside to honor this particular god.

The thinking of Romans tended to be that these gods were dealmakers. One could bargain with them. If this god helped me out in a professional project, a trip or a relationship situation, then special contributions and acts of devotion would be made. Does anybody ever view God like that today?

About a hundred years before the time of Theophilus something theologically new happened in Roman religion (JULIUS CAESAR). In 44 BC Julius Caesar was assassinated. After his death, the Roman senate gave him divine honors. He was declared to be a god, and he was added to the Roman pantheon of gods. Julius Caesar thus became the first Roman citizen to be deified. He was a man who had also become a god.

After the death of Julius Caesar, the Greek writer Plutarch says that there was a "**great comet, which showed itself in great splendor for seven nights after Caesar's murder.**" It was a heavenly sign that was interpreted as meaning that Julius Caesar had now joined the other Roman gods in heaven. Thus heavenly signs would have great significance to Roman citizens and to members of the equestrian class.

For the next 17 years there was civil war in Rome, in which several men battled against each other to become the next emperor. The contest eventually came down to Marc Antony, the lover of the famous Cleopatra, and a guy by the name of Octavian. (OCTAVIAN) Octavian came out of that as the winner. He was the adopted son of Julius Caesar. When he came to power, the Roman senate granted him the title

"Caesar Augustus." He came also to be called the son of the divine Julius Caesar. The senate later declared him to be Pontifex Maximus, the high priest of the Roman gods.

Augustus was an effective administrator. During his long forty year rule he brought to the empire a time of peace that became known as the Pax Augusta, or more broadly, the Pax Romana--- the Roman Peace. He was responsible for a census conducted throughout his empire, which became the vehicle by which a young couple from Nazareth in Galilee was brought to the little town of Bethlehem in Judea.

Some of the coins minted during his reign (AUGUSTUS COIN) looked like this. On the side pictured on the left appears DIVI F. This Latin terminology stands for "Son of God." By virtue of his status as the adopted son of Julius Caesar, he was the Son of God. Thus he became the first living Roman emperor to receive actual worship for being regarded as divine.

On the other side of the coin Augustus is pictured as sitting on a globe, having a cornucopia by him. The promise is that he is leading Rome into a new age of prosperity. Such is the picture of the emperor on the throne in Rome when Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the eastern reaches of his empire.

With the advent of Augustus, temples began to be built throughout the empire to honor the emperor. (PRIENE MARKER) At a place in Asia Minor called Priene, archaeologists have discovered a large beam that once was located at the entrance to the main temple of the city. On it is inscribed in Greek a dedication to the city's patron goddess Athena and to "**Autocrat (or World-Conqueror) Caesar, the Son of God, the god Augustus.**" On another inscription (PRIENE CALENDAR INSCRIPTION) in this temple Augustus is called "the Savior." He is also described as "**the beginning of the good tidings---** the same word that is used in Latin for 'gospel.'--- **for the world...**" Augustus is hailed as the beginning of the gospel and the Savior of the world.

(TIBERIUS) When Caesar Augustus died, his son-in-law Tiberius replaced him. He did not have such grand views of himself as did Augustus. The Roman senate did not deify him. He and his relatives did call themselves "the seed of Julius," perhaps claiming some degree of divinity, or at least special favor.

(CALIGULA) Caligula replaced Tiberius on the throne of Rome. He was only 25 years old. He was unstable. He had a wild lifestyle. He was not popular. He commanded people to worship him, but it was doubtful that many regarded him as divine. He was killed by a military official.

(CLAUDIUS) Next came Claudius, who was an uncle of Caligula. He was fairly effective as an administrator. He was poisoned by his young wife. After his death, the Roman historian Suetonius reports that he was "**buried with regal pomp and enrolled among the gods...**"

(NERO) Finally, we come to Nero, who ruled during the time that our Theophilus was being instructed by the gospel writer Luke. Nero was a vicious and cruel ruler. You may remember the story about how he supposedly fiddled while Rome burned. He persecuted Christians and blamed them for the fire that burned much of Rome. Nero built a temple to himself in Rome.

IV.

Given this background for the limited knowledge that we have about Theophilus, let's consider THE IMPACT OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY ON THEOPHILUS. (IV. THE IMPACT OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY...) A couple of years before Luke sent his gospel account to Theophilus, Paul wrote the Epistle to the Romans to the Christians in that city. If Theophilus was living in Rome, he may have been exposed to this letter. The opening words of Romans would have grabbed his attention and forced him to realize the significance of the claims about this Jesus.

(ROMANS 1:1-2) At the beginning of his letter Paul wrote, "**Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, (ROMANS 1:3) concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh (ROMANS 1:4) and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord...**"

This Christian leader claims that Jesus is the Son of God. The Romans have used that title for the emperors. It is claimed by Paul that this Jesus is the seed, or descendant, of David. The Romans know how important lineage is. Theophilus would know about the famous King David. Kingship is also being claimed for this Jesus. Could Theophilus claim loyalty to a Jewish king? His standing as a Roman equestrian would be put in doubt. Deciding to follow Jesus often causes other problems.

The claim is also made that this Jesus rose from the dead. No emperor ever made that claim. Is this Jesus the real deal? Theophilus had to be sure. These Christians don't allow worship of other gods. If Theophilus embraces Christ, his patriotism will be questioned. His patron may reject him. His social standing will be put in danger. His career will be in doubt. (PROJECTOR OFF)

At some point, Luke the physician, who had been a travel companion of the Apostle Paul, made the acquaintance of this equestrian Theophilus. A couple of years after Romans was written, he sent Theophilus a detailed account of the life of Jesus. He began right off with the most detailed description that we have of the birth of Jesus.

In the first chapter of Luke's Gospel, Theophilus learned about the appearance of an angel to Mary, who informed her that she would be impregnated by the Holy Spirit and that her child would be called "the Son of God." Son of God? That was a title that the Roman emperors claimed for themselves. Augustus was the first one among the Roman rulers who had claimed it.

Then at the beginning of #2 Theophilus was reminded that this Jesus had been born during the reign of Caesar Augustus. In fact, it was his call for a census that resulted in this Jesus being born in Bethlehem, the home town of His famous ancestor King David. Could a boy born to poor, young Jewish parents actually be the Son of God?

Then Luke claims that there was a heavenly display at the birth of Jesus. (PROJECTOR ON--- LUKE 2:13) As witnessed by shepherds watching their sheep outside of Bethlehem, we read, "**And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, (LUKE 2:14) 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!'**" The Roman tradition was that a comet appeared in the sky at the death of Julius Caesar. Here the claim was that there was a heavenly display at the birth of Jesus.

This Jesus was also associated with the promise of peace. At the end of #1, Luke (LUKE 1:79) recorded a prophecy from the father of John the Baptist that Jesus would "**guide our feet into the way of peace.**" The claim of the Romans was that Caesar Augustus had brought the inhabited world peace. But was it a lasting peace? Was it a peace that brought rest to a man's soul? (PROJECTOR OFF)

At some point Theophilus had to decide. Who really was the Son of God? Who was truly divine? Everywhere that he looked in Rome, and in much of the rest of the Roman Empire, he saw inscriptions that cried out for loyalty to the Roman gods and emperors. He saw these inscriptions on temples, on public buildings, on monuments, on statues, on gates at the entrances of cities.

The only inscription that he knew about from Luke that Jesus got was a plaque that was placed on the top of His cross by Roman governor Pontius Pilate which read, "This is the King of the Jews." A crucified king? Yet these Christians were willing to die for the claim that He had actually risen from the dead. They claimed that this was the gospel, the true good news.

We don't know for sure how Theophilus decided. Despite the dominance of the world system around him, there was some kind of pull that attracted him to Jesus. Some of us may have felt that same kind of pull. At some point we also must decide what we will believe about the claims of Jesus.

V.

Consider then THE IMPLICATION OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY FOR US. (PROJECTOR ON--- V. THE IMPLICATION OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY FOR US) Like Theophilus, we live in a polytheistic world. The prevailing notion in our culture is that there are many roads to heaven. There are many different religious beliefs that, in the end, all lead us to God.

There are also other gods whom you can add to your pantheon of gods. You can believe in the god of science. When scientists are convinced that they have figured something out, then it is true, and you can put your faith in it. When they claim that they have discovered the origin of humanity and the origin of life on this planet, then we have to adjust our theology accordingly. For science wants our loyalty as the final arbiter of truth.

You can also believe in the related god of materialism. Everywhere we look, we see this god promoted. We hear him proclaimed on the radio. We see him proclaimed in TV commercials, on billboards, on the Internet. If we give our time and energy to this god, we can have happiness and security and significance.

Some of us are attracted to the god of ESPN. We can give our lives to the sports gods and to the sports books. They promise excitement and meaning and purpose. We can become devotees to the heroes of competition. Now in Las Vegas we have our own hockey team, and soon we will have an NFL team and a women's professional basketball team.

In our metropolitan area the goddess of entertainment cries out for our loyalty. Come to the Strip. Look at the lights. Enter into this world of glitz and beauty and ringing slot machines. Come spend your hours at the gaming tables. Give your life to entertainment. Strive to have your name on the Winners' Wall.

Some of these things can have a proper place in life. But so often the temptation is to treat them as a god, to let them have first place in our lives, to devote our lives to their pursuit.

But over here there is the Baby Jesus who was sent from God, who eventually died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins and who rose again from the dead. He cries out to us that He came that we might have an abundant life. He gave us a physical world that He intended for us to enjoy. But we must decide who will be Number One in our lives. There is only One who can hold that place. He wants to be that One. He wants to be our only God.

Michael Lorenzen grew up in a family that served other gods. His father served the god of alcohol. He lied and stole in order to serve his god. When Michael was 12, his father left their Anaheim, California, home in order to avoid arrest on grand theft and forgery charges.

At an even earlier age Michael had chosen to follow the god of baseball. His father had gently encouraged that pursuit. Michael's older brother had scouts come to see him play. His brother was drafted by the Dodgers in 2000, and that further encouraged Michael's athletic pursuits. But he also skateboarded with friends, drank and smoked a lot of marijuana.

Those temptations could have done in his baseball pursuits, but at his high school homecoming at age 17, something happened. After the dance, his friends and their dates had gone to Huntington Beach for food. As the girls headed in to eat, the guys wandered below a pier to smoke. When they came back up, a man asked if he could talk to them about God. The group mockingly said yes and laughed through his testimony.

But Michael was silent. He had generally believed in God, but this man was telling him that wasn't enough. It was the first time he had given any thought to the sins that he had committed. "**It was the perfect time to be confronted,**" he said. Michael decided to put his trust in Jesus and to embrace Him as his Savior. He quit drinking, started going to church and began to study the Bible.

Michael also began to look at his baseball talent through a different lens. If his talent for baseball was a God-given gift, it was his Christian duty to maximize it in order to glorify God. The childhood dedication to his talent returned, and Michael earned a baseball scholarship to Cal State-Fullerton. (MICHAEL LORENZEN) In 2013 the Cincinnati Reds drafted him. Two years later he made his major league debut. He continues to enjoy success as a Major League pitcher. But now he does not treat baseball as a god in itself. Rather he says that he plays baseball to glorify God. (*USA Today*, 2/14/2017)

The angels told those humble shepherds (LUKE 2:10-11) on that first Christmas, "**Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.**" This Savior can be ours as well if we will simply put our trust in Him, if we will welcome Him into our lives.