

The Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Gospel of Augustus

The scriptures are as alive and relative today as they were when first written by men as they were inspired by the Holy Spirit, however, we must also view them in the context of the culture of that day. Some passages read as heartwarming or benign today would have been read as sedition or treason at the time they were written. A simple phrase such as *today is born to you a savior who is Christ the Lord* was a direct statement against the most powerful man on earth at that time – Caesar. When viewing the Christmas story found in Luke 2 in this context, we see statements often reduced to mere greeting card slogans that were proclaimed by Holy Spirit emboldened men and women under the threat of punishment, imprisonment, or death. Luke appears to take great strides in contradicting statements made regarding Caesar and applying them to the Christ child born in Bethlehem.

First, we must review decrees issued about Caesar Augustus the nephew of the assassinated Julius Caesar. His given name was Gaius Octavius, but was changed to Augustus by the Roman Senate after defeating Mark Antony and Cleopatra. Augustus means *worthy of worship*. His full title was *Imperator Caesar Divi Filius Augustus* or roughly translated, *Commander Caesar, son of the divine, worthy of worship*. *Imperator*, or *Emperor*, was the title by which troops hailed their victorious general after military success.

In 9 B.C., the following was inscribed on a stone in the Greek city of Priene (modern day western Turkey) and spoke of the *euangelion*, the Greek for *gospel* or *good news* and is known as the Priene Calendar Inscription. Augustus was also a self-appointed Pontifex Maximus, or High Priest.

“whereas Providence that orders all our lives has in her display of concern and generosity in our behalf adorned our lives with the highest good: Augustus, whom she has filled with virtue for the benefit of humanity, and has in her beneficence granted us and those who will come after us a **Saviour** who has **made war to cease** and who shall put everything in peaceful order; and whereas Caesar, when he was manifest, transcended the expectations of all who had anticipated the **good news**, not only by surpassing the benefits conferred by his predecessors but by leaving no expectation of surpassing him to those who would come after him, with the result that **the birthday of our God** signalled the beginning of **Good News** for the world because of him; proconsul Paul Fabius Maximus has discovered a way to honour Augustus that was hitherto unknown among the Greeks, namely to reckon time from the date of his nativity; therefore, with the blessings of Good Fortune and for their own welfare, the Greeks in Asia Decreed that the New Year begin for all the cities on September 23, which is the birthday of Augustus; and, to ensure that the dates coincide in every city, all documents are to carry both the Roman and the Greek date, and the first month shall, in accordance with the decree, be observed as the Month of Caesar, beginning with 23 September, the birthday of Caesar.”

The decree was issued by the Roman governing assembly of Asia in order to officially change the calendar year to correspond with the birthday of the Emperor.

The city of Pergamum honored Augustus with a 40-man chorus to sing his praises. The Emperor was so moved that he levied funds to support this chorus as they travelled to major events and proclaim his accomplishments of peace for the world. We will read of another host in Luke’s account that proclaims the arrival of the true Savior.

The Roman poet Horace wrote epistles of Augustus and spoke of other Roman heroes only achieved deity in death, but the Emperor was honored among them even in life and was the great peace-bringer that the world had so long awaited. In the historical context, one must understand the peace that was so celebrated in Rome during this time was actually the end of the bloody campaign of Augustus himself to gain control of the regions, put down his enemies, and control the population. There was a cease fire, but it was fear – not peace, that brought it to pass.

Luke 2:1-38 ESV

1 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

2 This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

3 And all went to be registered, each to his own town.

- Augustus required a census to bolster his standing with the Empire and to record how his borders were increasing – it is ironic to think that the coming King would be one of those recorded in this census
- Quirinius is recorded to have been governor in Syria later in 6 A.D. (about 10 years after this date which we believe to be 4 B.C.), however, there is evidence to support that could have been his second term of governor
- Also, Luke does not use the typical Greek word for governor, but rather one used for an administrator and the writings of Josephus record multiple governors or overseers in the region of Syria around 6-4 B.C.

4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David,

5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

- Some argue that a Roman census did not require travel to one's birthplace or the accompaniment of the wife
- Others argue that the Romans carried out this level of taxation every twenty years and this timeframe does not suit the accepted dating of Luke's account, however, the Romans would sometimes call for a census or registration between the usual taxing and we believe this particular instance to be one of those times
- It could be argued, however, that Joseph had to return to Bethlehem if he had landholdings or some other interests located in Bethlehem that would necessitate the almost 90-mile journey
- As far as Mary accompanying him, we have to remember the controversial circumstances of her pregnancy and also her nearness of delivering the child – both of which would explain her making the journey with Joseph
- Another possibility would be their knowledge of the scriptures and the prophecy concerning His birth in Bethlehem which might have prompted them to see the census as divine appointment

6 And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.

7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

- Houses would sometimes have a covered porch that would also serve as a location for feeding and watering animals
- *Inn*, Hebrew for *guest chamber*
- It is very possible that all the events of that night took place at the home of Joseph's family that still resided in Bethlehem

8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

- The shepherds of Bethlehem were responsible for the flocks that supplied Jerusalem with temple sacrifices
- How fitting these men to view the newborn Lamb of God
- The great patriarchs of Israel were shepherds and the profession, at that time, appeared to be highly esteemed, however, as the children of Israel entered Egypt, the status appears to have been lost
- The Egyptians frowned upon shepherding as an occupation and this mindset appears to have followed the Israelites as they entered Canaan several hundred years later
- The duties of caring for the sheep often fell on the youngest boy of the family as the older brothers were "promoted" once their younger siblings came of age to assume the responsibilities (refer to Samuel's visit to Jesse's house to anoint the new king)
- The Mishnah refers to shepherds as "incompetent" and, in another passage, states one should not rescue a shepherd who has "fallen into a pit"
- Dr. Joachim Jeremias stated shepherds to be "second class citizens" that were "despised in everyday life" and that one "should not buy milk, wool, or a kid from them as it should be assumed it was stolen"

- The rabbis at the time of Jesus were puzzled by the fact that God would allow someone to refer to Him as a shepherd (Psalm 23) and classified shepherds as “sinners” (outcasts of society)

9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.

10 And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

- There are striking parallels between this birth announcement and the gospel of Augustus
- What we view as the gentle Christmas Story is actually very political and even seditious in its wording
- Luke has already taken great steps in including Caesar’s name in his account (the only time in the New Testament that Caesar Augustus is mentioned by name)
- Luke’s account is written with a Greek or Hellenistic viewpoint as compared to Matthew’s writings which would introduce Jesus to a more Jewish audience
- Luke states Christ is a savior “to all people” whereas Matthew introduces the Messiah as the One who would “save His people from their sin”
- Luke concentrates on events and statements made that would rival Caesar’s self-proclaimed deity, whereas Matthew focuses more on events and statements that proclaim Jesus as the rightful heir to David’s throne
- Luke’s controversial statements continue as he further includes the announcement of not only a Savior, but now Christ who is “Lord”
- In New Testament times, there was a yearly proclamation of all to profess, “Caesar is Lord” while offering a pinch of spices as an offering in one of Caesar’s temples (it was this offering that Polycarp refused to make and ultimately the final straw for Rome to require his execution)
- Even Mark’s gospel is introduced with the proclamation, “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” and is a direct contradiction to the gospel of Augustus

12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

- Caesar hired a chorus and scores of other emissaries to proclaim his greatness to the masses, this King was announced by an angelic host
- Caesar proclaimed himself savior and the bringer of peace through his conquests, yet this King would bring peace through His own sacrifice
- Before accomplishing anything on earth as a man, Christ is heralded as the One who would bring peace as the Savior of all mankind (it is common for prophecy to also bring praise to God for what He will do as if He had already done it – for the word of the Lord is sure and it will accomplish that for which it was intended)

15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”

- Augustus was heralded by politicians in Asia, while Jesus was proclaimed savior by an angelic host
- At the time of Christ’s birth, the occupation of the shepherd had degraded to a point where they were viewed as unfit to testify in court, yet God would call these men to be the first witnesses to proclaim the gospel
- This news was not first given in Rome or Jerusalem, but in the hills of Bethlehem
- The gospel was first proclaimed to the shepherds and not the scholars

16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.

17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

21 And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.
22 And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord
23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord")
24 and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons."

- The meager offering speaks to the low economic state of the family as they offer the sacrifice of those not being capable of purchasing the more expensive animals

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.
26 And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.
27 And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law,
28 he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,
29 "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word;
30 for my eyes have seen your salvation
31 that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."
33 And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him.

- Simeon also declares Jesus to be the savior of the whole world
- The *Pax Romana*, or peace of Rome, as self-proclaimed by Augustus was gained by military occupation was attributed to the Christ and would be gained by His self-sacrifice

34 And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed
35 (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."
36 And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin,
37 and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.
38 And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

- Both Simeon and Anna proclaimed the gospel (good news) of the Savior
- The story so often reduced to a greeting card slogan was one of the most controversial and dangerous statements ever recorded with pen
- The New Testament is full of these seditious statements made by bold men and women so transformed by their encounter with the true Savior and Lord that they would risk, and often fall to, the penalties of imprisonment, torture, and death
- Often included in the "Christmas Story" is the visit of the Magi in Matthew 2 (which we know occurred some period of time after the birth of Christ), but Herod's response is put in a greater light when we realize it was not only his throne that this new Christ threatened, but what if this news reached the ears of Caesar?
- Herod was appointed to the throne by Rome (as he was not even Jewish, but rather Idumean or an Edomite) and his standing with Rome was precarious at best
- Later, Pilate would also be threatened by his constituents as the religious leaders threatened him with alerting Rome to his hesitation to punish this Jesus of Nazareth that claimed to be Lord and King
- Augustus spent his life erected temples and cities as a testimony to himself and the Romans changed their calendars to begin on his birthday, but how much of his influence remains today? Jesus spent His life in obscurity in a remote area of the known world some 2,500 miles from the capital of Rome and yet, in His death, burial, and resurrection, the world was changed forever.