

Basic Christianity

The Opening Gambit

by Ronald L. Dart

The Christian faith must seem downright confusing to an onlooker. Even the largest, seemingly the most monolithic Christian denominations are, in reality, composed of many factions. Unless you are an insider, you can remain unaware of the deep divisions that exist among Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans and even Catholics.

Trying to make sense out of the Christian faith starting in the 21st century will be an exercise in futility. Not only are there too many conflicts, the whole landscape is littered with so much jargon, inside knowledge and imagery that the neophyte will be lost from the start.

Even when you try to get down to the basics, “Mere Christianity” as C.S. Lewis called it, you still have problems. Part of the problem arises from the simple truth that the Christian faith did not begin 2000 years ago. It is much older than that. The Christian faith is the worship of the God of Genesis 1, the God who said, “Let there be light,” and who said, “Let us make man in our image.”

Christianity as we know it is a late arrival on the scene. Even Judaism is a Johnny-come-lately. When you open the New Testament in an attempt to understand the Christian faith, *you must not forget this*. The Bible is not the story of two religions. It is the story of one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of us all.

That said, the New Testament is still the place to start if one wants to understand basic Christianity. The New Testament sheds so much light on the Old Testament, that it is hard to think of starting anywhere else. And the New Testament is still the record of the closest, most prolonged and most intimate contact between God and man.

So, where in the New Testament would one start?

Most readers would naturally begin with the book of Matthew, so we’ll follow the same trail even though Matthew starts with one of those interminable lists of who begat whom. It turns out there is some useful information in these lists if one only knows who the players are. Included in this list are two women, Ruth and Bathsheba, who are not Israelite at all. Ruth was a Moabite, and since Bathsheba’s first husband was a Hittite, it is likely she was too (Matthew 1:5-6). This is problematic for those who hold to certain racial purity ideas.

Now none of this makes very entertaining reading, and there are many technical questions that can be raised. But since we are concerned only with *basic* Christianity, we’ll pass on the technicalities.

What Matthew has presented us with right from the start is that Jesus did not arrive on the scene with no roots. Jesus did not appear in Athens, Rome or Babylon. He came on the scene in Jerusalem, in Judea, and with an important Jewish genealogy. He was a direct descendant of David which turns out to be of enormous importance.

In the flesh, Jesus was a Jew. That gives a lot of people heartburn, but you will never get to the basics unless you deal with that fact. Even Paul, whose entire ministry was occupied with Gentiles, makes that point loud and clear. He writes to the Romans about the Israelite people saying that it was of them, “*concerning the flesh Christ came*” (Romans 9:4-5). The writer of the book of Hebrews is even more explicit when he declares: “*For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Juda*” (Hebrews 7:14).

The truth is that the very idea of “Christ,” and hence of “Christian,” is meaningless apart from the Old Testament. The Messiah was the central figure in Hebrew religious writings. Christ is merely the Greek translation of the Hebrew “Messiah.” By merely telling the Gentiles that Jesus was the Christ, one has said nothing intelligible to them. The Gentiles, then, had to have an explanation. The Jews, while they understood the idea of a “Messiah,” were expecting something rather dif-

ment. The Messiah was the central figure in Hebrew religious writings. Christ is merely the Greek translation of the Hebrew “Messiah.” By merely telling the Gentiles that Jesus was the Christ, one has said nothing intelligible to them. The Gentiles, then, had to have an explanation. The Jews, while they understood the idea of a “Messiah,” were expecting something rather different from what they got. They too needed an explanation.

Now this is all significant, because it inexorably ties Jesus, and Christianity, to the faith of the Old Testament. Note well, I said the faith of the Old Testament, not merely of the Jews. Jews and Judaism are late arrivals on the scene. They don’t even exist until halfway through the movie. Judaism would become a sect of the true faith. People today commonly speak of the religion of the Old Testament as “Judaism,” but it is important to understand that Judaism is the response of the Jewish people to the religion of the Old Testament. They received the revelation of God and responded to it. They did not originate it.

Nevertheless, Matthew starts his Gospel with the simple fact that Jesus was a Jew, born of a Jewish mother, and that He appeared on the scene in Judah. At this point, it is useful to turn to Luke for the details of this part of the story for Luke’s gospel describes the opening gambit. The story, oddly enough, does not begin with the birth of Jesus, but with the birth of His forerunner, John the Baptist. We pick up the story from Luke:

“There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years. And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest’s office before God in the order of his course, According to the custom of the priest’s office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense. And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing *on the right side of the altar of incense*” (Luke 1:5-11).

The one who was to announce the coming of the Messiah would not be a Greek or Roman philosopher. He was not a Plato or an Aristotle. For that matter, he was not merely a Jew. He was a Levite and a son of Aaron. His father was a priest of the God of Israel who served in the Temple. We know the two weeks in the year when he served there because we know his section of the priesthood.

Note well. This did not happen while he was out tending sheep. It took place in the Temple, to a priest, at the altar of incense. On the right side of it. Every Israelite knew that the Temple and everything in it was made after the pattern of things in heaven. The place of this announcement is important, and it is a part of the story of the origins of Christianity. *It is important because it reveals that Christianity is not a new religion but the fulfillment of a promise made to the oldest religion.*

Moreover, it is important to the story that Zacharias and his wife were righteous, and their righteousness is defined. They walked in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless (Luke 1:6). The forerunner of the Messiah was not born to just anyone, but to a priest who lived according to the law.

Zacharias and Elisabeth were elderly and childless. Apparently, they had been praying for a child for a long time, because the angel addressed this:

“But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: *for thy prayer is heard*; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb.”

Zacharias did not have to ask what this meant, for this too came from the old religion. The abstinence from wine or strong drink was a condition of the Nazarite vow.¹ John would be a lifetime Nazarite. But what the angel said next must have been riveting to Zacharias.

“And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the

fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Zacharias knew precisely what this meant. We might ask, “Go before who,” but Zacharias would have known. The antecedent in the paragraph is “The Lord their God,” and the reference is to Malachi 4:

“For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall” (Malachi 4:1-2).

This can only be a reference to the Day of the Lord, the last days before the return of Christ. Zacharias knew this. And he also understood the verses following.

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: *And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers*, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.”

It would be impossible to overstate the impact of this on Zacharias. When the angel said of the son to come, “And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; *to make ready a people prepared for the Lord*,” Zacharias knew that his son was to be the Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah. He knew this because he knew the Scriptures.

None of this was easy for Zacharias. He reminded the angel that he was an old man, “well stricken in years,” to use his phrase. Good man that he was, he had a hard time believing the story. So the angel, who turns out to be Gabriel, told him he would be dumb and unable to speak until the thing was finished. It happened exactly like that. After his time in the Temple was finished, he went home. In the natural course of events, his wife Elisabeth con-

ceived, and went into seclusion for five months.

All this establishes the truth that the origins of Christianity are imbedded firmly in the oldest religion, the religion of the Old Testament, even in the Law of Moses. It is imbedded in the Jewish people, their customs, their culture. And it is offered first to the Jews.² But not last.

Brad Young, in his book “Jesus the Jewish Theologian,” makes well the point that if you are going to understand Jesus, you must sit down with Him *and the people He spoke to*. For He spoke their language, grew up in their culture, used their idioms, made repeated reference to their faith and history.

You can’t sit in Athens and interpret Jesus in Jerusalem. Which is where much of Christianity has gone astray, and Judaism too, for that matter. The Greek civilization was so strong and so ubiquitous in the first century, that it exerted a powerful influence on everything and everybody, including the Jews. But I must return to our story:

“And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and *hid herself five months*, saying, Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men. And *in the sixth month* the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary.”

All this is very familiar from church Christmas pageants, but it is easy to overlook the significance of the relationship between these two women and their sons. Jesus and John the Baptist are kinsmen and they met, in a sense, before they were born. The date of Jesus’ birth is even established in relation to John’s. It was the sixth month of Elisabeth’s pregnancy when the angel appeared to Mary and said “Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women” (Luke 1:28).

One can only wonder at this young woman. Highly favored? Blessed among women? When you understand the implications of what the angel is saying, these words seem inadequate. But they troubled Mary and puzzled her. What on earth could this angel mean by that? He would explain: “Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.”

The name Luke wrote was *Iesous* in the Greek, which is a transliteration of the Hebrew Yehoshua, Joshua in English. The name means, “God saves.” It is formed from two words in Hebrew, Yah, or Yahweh, and Yasha, which means to be open, wide, or free.

Since being freed is usually being freed from something, the English idea of “saved” seems close. But I don’t think “saved” says enough. To be *freed* says much more. “saved” and “salvation” have become a part of the Christian jargon, and I sometimes wonder if people in the world really understand what we are talking about. Here is how Jesus put the matter to some disciples:

“Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; *And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.* They answered him, We be Abraham’s seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free? Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, *Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin*” (John 8:31-34).

When Jesus speaks of salvation, He is talking about being liberated from the consequences of sin. As Mary pondered the words of the angel, she probably saw the messianic significance of the name, that her Son would be a savior, but the angel immediately erased all doubt: “He 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.”

Most of Christianity understands the first part of this, that Jesus would be great and the Son of God. But the last statement goes right over the head of most readers. God would give to Jesus the throne of “His father David.” This statement would have been pregnant with meaning to any first century Jew and it was not lost on Mary. The throne of David belonged to one man and one only: The Messiah. But what the angel said next would cast the messianic idea in a whole new light. Mary, along with every Jew of the day, would have expected a temporal Messiah, a deliverer who would set up a new Kingdom of Israel and begin a new dynasty. God was going way beyond anyone’s expectations.

The angel went on to say, “And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there

shall be no end.” Forever? No end? These words take the idea of a Messiah to whole new level. But once again, the Israelite roots of the Messiah are inescapable. He is part and parcel with the history of a line of people and a line of kings.

But there was one huge question Mary had to have answered: “Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?”

It is hard to gauge the effect of the angel’s reply on Mary. We may take it for granted after all these years, but Mary surely did not: “And the angel answered and said unto her, 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.”

Surely Mary’s head was spinning by now. The Holy Spirit, the Power of the Highest would come upon her and she would conceive. The Holy One to be born of her would be called the Son of God, and this was not in the ordinary sense that we are all God’s sons. This would be the real thing.

There is a curious thing about this passage that needs to be explored. The next thing the angel tells Mary is, “And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible.” This is the second time Luke tells us the month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy when Mary conceived Jesus. This means Jesus was born 15 months after Elizabeth conceived John.

Do you recall that I mentioned above that we know the week of Zacharias’ service in the Temple? Assuming that Elisabeth conceived shortly after her husband returned from his week’s service in the Temple, John was conceived about the end of the third week in June. The angel visited Mary in the sixth month of Elisabeth’s pregnancy, placing her conception near the end of the third week of December. John, then, was born near the end of March while Jesus was born near the end of September. What may be significant about this latter date is that it comes very close to the beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles. The Gospel of John may allude to this when he declares, “The word became flesh and tabernacled among us.”⁷³

After the angel had finished his message, Mary must have been in a turmoil, but she was quite a

woman. She replied, “And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” What an incredibly understated response from this remarkable young lady.

Without delay, Mary went down to Judea, to see Elisabeth. When she walked in the door and called out for Elisabeth, the babe leaped in Elisabeth’s womb and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. “Blessed art thou among women,” Elisabeth cried, “and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”

Mary was already a mother even though the fruit of her womb was only an embryo. And that embryo was Elisabeth’s Lord. At this point, Mary broke into a song of praise:

My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced
in God my Saviour.
For he hath regarded the low estate
of his handmaiden:
for, behold, from henceforth
all generations shall call me blessed.
For he that is mighty
hath done to me great things;
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is on them that fear him
from generation to generation.
He hath showed strength with his arm;
he hath scattered the proud
in the imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away.
He hath holpen his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy;
As he spake to our fathers,
to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.

Once again we are reminded that Christ did not appear in Athens or Rome. He was not Greek or Egyptian. He was *Israel’s* Messiah, and a fulfillment of a prophecy made so long ago to a man named Abraham.

Mary stayed with Elisabeth for about three months before returning home. And right after Mary left, Elisabeth bore a son. They named him John. According to Christ, among those born of women, there was not one greater than John the Baptist.

When Zacharias got his voice back, he too was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied. And his

prophecy once again established the fact that we are not starting a new religion. This was *Israel’s* Messiah.

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel;
for he hath visited and redeemed his people,
And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David;
As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets,
which have been since the world began:
That we should be saved from our enemies,
and from the hand of all that hate us;
To perform the mercy promised to our fathers,
and *to remember his holy covenant;*
The oath which he sware to our father Abraham,
That he would grant unto us,
that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies
might serve him without fear,
In holiness and righteousness before him,
all the days of our life.
And thou, child,
shalt be called the prophet of the Highest:
for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord
to prepare his ways;
To give knowledge of salvation unto his people
by the remission of their sins,
Through the tender mercy of our God;
whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us,
To give light to them that sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

And the child John grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel.

Why am I making this point? Because so much of Christian thought and interpretation completely ignores the Old Testament roots of Christianity. Jesus did not come to bring a new religion, but to restore and fill up the oldest religion.

The Bible is not the story of two religions. It is the story of one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of us all.

¹ Numbers 6:1-21

² Romans 1:16, 2:9

³ John 1:14



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