

How Do We Know? – Chapter Three

The Story – Act II

Act I began with the call of Abraham and the curtain did not fall until shortly after the Jews' returned from exile. Act II begins 400 years later, starting shortly before the birth of Christ and ending thirty years after his resurrection.

In some ways, Act I (the Old Testament) is the more impressive of the two. The 39 books that comprise it fill more pages and cover a longer time span than the 27 books that make up the New Testament. But it's in Act II that the story comes together and the play reaches its climax. You should buckle up.

We will turn to Act II in a moment, but before we do, you need to know a bit about what happened during the 400-year intermission.

The Intermission

Shortly after the Jews returned from Babylon, the heavens went quiet. Creation continued to declare the glory of God, but God had nothing to say to his people.

During the first seventy years, the Jews' political situation went unchanged - the Persians allowed them some freedom but demanded heavy taxes. However, it took a series of turns after that.

- In 330 BC, Alexander the Great led the Greeks over the Persians, which brought the Jews under his fold.¹
- After Alexander died in 323 BC, the Jews fell under Syrian control and their situation deteriorated.² In 167 BC they rebelled, eventually prevailed over the Syrians and secured their freedom.³
- For the next 100 years, the Jews governed themselves, but in 63 BC they were conquered by the Pompey and forced to become Roman subjects.

This was their status at as Act II opens. Though once politically formidable, Israel was now a third-tier player in the backwaters of the Roman Empire. They were occupied by a foreign army, reported to a non-Jewish king, were suffering under a crushing tax burden and had not heard from God in 400 years.⁴

It was at this point that Act II begins.

Scene One: The Birth and Early Years of Jesus

As the curtain rises for Act II, the spotlight shines on Zechariah, an aging Jewish leader who is serving as high priest on the Day of Atonement. As he attends to the duties every high priest has performed since Moses received the Law over a thousand years earlier, something remarkable happens: God breaks the silence.

After four hundred years without any communication from heaven, an angel appeared to Zechariah and said:

Do not be afraid; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.⁵

In other words, Zechariah is told that he and his elderly wife will soon have a son, whom they are to name John. He is also told that John will be the one to announce the arrival of the Messiah.

This was the news that generations of Jews had been praying for! It meant that the Genesis 3 promise was about to be fulfilled.

Several months go by and then the same angel made a second announcement, this time to a young woman named Mary.

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord

God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.”

“I am the Lord's servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.⁶

Those who read the Playbill before the performance began understand what is being said: the rescuer is about to walk onto the stage.

Scene Two: His Public Ministry

The birth of Christ in a Bethlehem manger – followed in short order by a visit of the Magi and Joseph’s decision to flee to Egypt – are reported in the opening chapters of the Gospels. However, because the writers of these books are more focused on Christ’s death than on his life, we are told little else about Jesus until he turns thirty and begins his public ministry.⁷

It is at that point that he responds to John the Baptist’s invitation to be baptized. After emerging from the Jordan River, Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the desert where he is tempted by Satan. After forty days he emerges and begins serving as a Rabbi.

Jesus will spend the next three years traveling around Palestine, declaring that the Kingdom of God has arrived. During this time, he will distinguish himself in two ways:

He will claim to be the Messiah: Though Jesus avoids fueling the political and military expectations the Jews associate with the Messiah, he will make it clear that he believes he is the one they have been waiting for.

- He claims: to be eternal, to be the creator of the world and to be able to forgive sins.
- He accepts worship and declares that one day he will rule both Heaven and Earth.
- He affirms Peter’s announcement that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God.”⁸
- And when the Pharisees accuse him of being demon-possessed, Jesus counters by claiming the sacred name of God – “I AM” - as his own.⁹

It is common to hear that Jesus was a humble teacher who did not claim to be God, but if the person standing in front of you in line at Starbucks made any of the claims that Jesus

mades in the Gospels, no one would call him humble. Instead, they would call an ambulance or the police.

Jesus will also support these claims by his actions. In addition to claiming to be the Messiah, Jesus will live such an exemplary life that the only thing his enemies could accuse him of was keeping bad company. He also demonstrated an unrivaled mastery of both the natural and supernatural world - turning water into wine, rebuking a storm, multiplying food, healing the sick, walking on water, and raising the dead.¹⁰

Scene Three: The Final Week

When we arrive at the final week of Christ's life, the Gospel writers slow down to provide more detail. Matthew, Mark, and Luke devote one-third of their Gospels to these seven days. John devotes half. When you remember that everything from Genesis 3 forward has been leading up to this moment, this makes sense.¹¹

This final week – which Christians annually commemorate in “Holy Week” - begins with Christ’s triumphal entry and ends with his resurrection. The high watermark is his crucifixion, but everyday contains dramatic elements.

Sunday: Had Jesus wanted to slip into Jerusalem unnoticed he could have done so, but remaining under the radar was no longer his goal, so he paraded into the city in a manner designed to remind the crowd of Solomon’s coronation ride one thousand years earlier. The people responded by lining his path with palm branches - the political symbol of an independent Israel - and shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” Both Jewish and Roman leaders were stunned by Christ’s actions and unnerved by his popularity.

Monday – Wednesday: Having spent Sunday night outside the city gates, Jesus re-entered Jerusalem on Monday and proceeded directly to the Temple, where he chased the moneychangers away. On Tuesday he announced that he was about to be killed and verbally jostled with Jewish authorities. On Wednesday he lamented Jerusalem’s approaching fall.

Thursday: After washing his disciples’ feet on Thursday evening, Jesus then celebrated the Passover meal with them. Part way through the ancient service, he deviated from the script to make it clear that the Passover had always been about him. Animal sacrifices were never been enough to take away the sins of those made in God’s image. Jesus was the true Passover Lamb – the ultimate innocent third party who laid down his life so that guilty people can go free.

In his letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul recounts the events of that night, stating that: “On the night that he was betrayed, Christ took bread and, when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” And in the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”¹²

The disciples had attended Passover meals their entire lives. This was the first night they had any clue that it had been designed to foreshadow Christ. And the events of the next few days make it clear that they did not yet understand what Jesus was saying at the Last Supper. They are to be forgiven. In a world where people aspire to be God, the idea that God would become a person and then die in their place is unthinkable.¹³ But that is what was about to happen.

Friday: Late on Thursday night, Jesus retreated to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray for strength and to wait for his arrest. Around one o'clock on Friday morning, Judas led a group of Jewish guards to him. After a brief confrontation, Jesus was arrested and taken to Caiaphas's house for the first in a series of interrogations. Eventually he was sent to Pilate, along with a request from the Jewish leaders that the Roman governor order Christ's execution.¹⁴

Pilate questioned Jesus for some time, but "after finding no guilt in this man," he sent him to Herod Antipas. When Jesus refused to answer Antipas's questions, Jesus was sent back to Pilate.

Having already determined that he was innocent - and having been warned by his wife not to get entangled with him - Pilate tried to release Jesus. But when the Sanhedrin mobilized the crowd to demand his death, Pilate feared that a riot was about to break out. After symbolically washing his hands, he acquiesced and ordered Jesus crucified.

Around 8:30 in the morning, Roman soldiers began to carry out his directive. After mocking and whipping Jesus, they crammed a crown of thorns on his head and forced him to carry his cross to the execution site. Once there they nailed him to it, propped it up between two thieves and waited for him to die.

And here is where all the story lines come together. While hanging on the cross, Jesus was revealed to be the ultimate innocent third party who dies so that guilty people can go free. In willing going to his death, he not only demonstrates the love of God, bears the wrath of God and preserves the justice of God, he also defeats evil, fulfills the promises made to Abraham, and brings an end to both the Mosaic Covenant and the sacrificial system.¹⁵

At Calvary the story lines that were launched early in Genesis and that have unfolded throughout Acts I and II all come together. All roads lead to Jesus.¹⁶

Scene Four: The Resurrection, Ascension, and Commission

Remarkably, as amazing as Scene Three is, Scene Four tops it. After suffering, dying and being placed in a sealed tomb, Jesus rises from the dead.

Immediately following Christ's crucifixion, his disciples scattered. Mistaken about his mission, devastated by his death, fearful of Rome and lacking a clear leader, they went underground. The first thing this meant was that care for Christ's body fell to others. Joseph

of Arimathea, along with Mary Magdalene and others stepped forward to claim the body and hurriedly place it in a grave.

The next thing we are told is that because the Jewish leaders feared someone might steal his body to sow confusion among the people, guards were placed at the tomb.

Nevertheless, on the morning of third day, the women who came to embalm his body not only discovered that the grave was empty, they were told by an angel that he had risen from the dead.

Over the course of the next forty days, more than 500 people claimed to see Jesus alive, including his disciples, who met with him on numerous occasions during the next few weeks. We are also told that it was during these post-resurrection discussions that he explained how the Scriptures had been pointing to him all along.¹⁷

At the end of this period, Jesus ascended into heaven. Just prior to this, he commissioned his followers to carry on the work he had begun, saying:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

After completing his mission, commissioning his followers, and promising to send a Helper, Jesus told his followers that he was going to prepare a place for them and that he would eventually return in power to reclaim all that was his. He then rose through the sky to take his place at the right hand of his Father.

Scene Five: The Church

The events that follow Christ’s resurrection and ascension are recorded in the Book of Acts, which is Luke’s account of the first thirty years of the church. Four critical events stand out.

The arrival of the Holy Spirit: Among the last things Jesus said to his disciples was that they should go to Jerusalem and wait for Help. Acts 2 records the moment the Helper arrives and supernaturally indwells them. The initial manifestation of his presence included a halo of fire and the ability to speak in unlearned languages. Armed with this ability, they spill into the streets to talk about Jesus, and three thousand people become Christ followers on that day.

The expansion of the offer: The second major theme in Scene Five is the extension of God’s grace to the Gentiles. Between Genesis 12 and Acts 10 – i.e., through all of Act I and through the first four scenes of Act II – the story has been Jewish. But through a series of events in the Book of Acts, the disciples are persuaded that Jesus is not just the Jewish Messiah, he is the Savior of the world.¹⁸

The persecution of Christians: Though there are a few early moments when the broader world was receptive to Christians, that changes shortly after Pentecost. The Jews who rejected Christ's claims stopped thinking of those who believed in Christ as Jews, and started thinking of them as heretics instead. At the same time, Romans began accusing Christians of being atheists for refusing to worship Caesar. Before long, identifying as a Christian might cost you your job or your life. A young deacon named Stephen became the church's first martyr. Ten of the remaining eleven apostles were killed for their faith.

The church grows and spreads: In spite of the persecution, the number of people who trusted in Christ grew. In the early chapters of Acts, Peter is the clear leader of the church.¹⁹ A third of the way through Luke's account we read about the dramatic conversion of Saul and his subsequent rise to leadership within the movement. Saul – who is later known as Paul – becomes such an important leader that the second half of the Book of Acts is devoted almost exclusively to his work.²⁰

Between 64 and 67 A.D. both Peter and Paul are martyred in a wave of persecution launched by the Roman Emperor Nero. Not long after this, the Jews revolted against Rome. In the counterattack, the Romans ransacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple.²¹ The Apostle John – the only one of the remaining disciples not to be martyred for his faith – lived in exile for another twenty years. During that time he wrote three of the New Testament Epistles (1, 2 and 3 John) and also the Book of Revelation.

There is More

I've framed the Bible as a play that unfolds in two Acts in order to explain the story line. As I have noted on several occasions, there is more to the Bible than that.

For starters, if we want to stick with the metaphor of a Play, we need an Act III to cover everything from 70 AD to the return of Christ,²² an Act IV to cover His return and Final Judgement, and an Act V to unpack eternity.

But more than that, the Bible contains books that are not part of the storyline. In addition to historical books that tell the story, the Old Testament contains prayers, proverbs and other types of "wisdom literature." Likewise, in addition to the Gospels and Acts - which advance the story - the New Testament contains letters, sermons and the Book of Revelation.

The library of literature contained in the Bible is not something easily summarized or described. You need to read it for yourself. I'll tell you how in chapter six.

¹ Alexander the Great is generally understood to be a Greek leader, but he was Macedonian by birth. (His father was the Barbarian King, Phillip of Macedon). Phillip wanted his young son to have the very best education and training and therefore hired Aristotle – the Greek philosopher – because the Greeks had the superior culture. When Alexander set about conquering the world, it was the Greek culture – and Greek language that he imposed on others, not Macedonian.

² After conquering Achaia and crossing into Asia Minor Alexander overthrew the Persians in three major battles (334 B.C. - 331 B.C.). This included a victory over Tyre, a former stronghold whose demise had been predicted by Ezekiel in the sixth century. Alexander then moved south and arrived in Jerusalem where he was so favorably impressed by a delegation of priests that he decided to allow the Jews, provided they remained loyal to him and embraced Greek culture, to maintain a level of autonomy he allowed few others. (In *Antiquities*, a history of the Jews written by Josephus, we are told that a delegation of priests went out to meet Alexander as he and his army approached Jerusalem. The High Priest proceeded to read to Alexander from a scroll of the Book of Daniel, and “when the book of Daniel was showed him wherein Daniel declared that one of the Greeks should destroy the empire of the Persians, he supposed that himself was the person intended; and he was then glad.”)

³ In 161 B.C. the Greek Emperor Antiochus had ordered that a Jewish priest sacrifice a pig on the altar in front of an idol that had been placed inside the Holy Temple. When a priest was finally found willing to comply, Judas Maccabeus (nicknamed “the hammer”) killed the priest and smashed the idol with a hammer. 1 Maccabees 1:54, 59 records this event. In Mark 13:14 Jesus refers to it by using a phrase from the Greek version of Daniel 12:11, “the abomination of desolation,” to explain a future desecration of a similar kind.

⁴ Prior to the fall of Israel in 722 B.C. (when most of the ten tribes were wiped out) and the Exile (when the Southern two tribes were carried off to Babylon) the Jews were organized according to their tribal ancestry. After these events this was no longer possible and they broke into four sects: the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. The Pharisees, with whom Christ has on-going interaction, were the most religiously conservatives of the day. In an effort to prevent anyone from violating their interpretation of the Law they created laws around God’s Laws (i.e., if God’s law had said “Don’t drive your chariot over 25 mph”, they posted signs saying “Don’t drive over 15”). Over time the number of laws they created grew. By the time Act Two begins the Pharisees considered their laws to be as important as God’s. The Sadducees, the wealthy, aristocratic, and most politically liberal of the groups, were far less religious than the Pharisees. They only accepted the books of Moses and were influenced by the Greek philosophers. Their real interest was power. They have a smaller part in Act Two than the Pharisees, but show up on several occasions, most notably as they battle with the Pharisees over control of the Sanhedrin Council, the only real political body the Romans allowed the Jews to maintain. The Essenes were a mostly monastic kind of group. They paid little attention to what was going on politically, preferring to seek a holy life as removed from the concerns of the day as possible. (They retreated into the desert around the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea Scrolls, one of the most important archeological finds of the twentieth century, are documents from this community.) The Zealots were a political party that wanted to take up arms and overthrow the Romans.

⁵ Luke 1:13ff

⁶ Luke 1:26ff

⁷ Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – who are sometimes referred to as the Evangelists - are up front about their reason for writing: it is not to give the reader Christ's life story, it is to persuade their readers that Jesus is the Messiah and that we should follow and worship Him. Each author includes slightly different information because each writer had a different reader in mind. (Matthew wrote for Jews, John for Greeks, Luke for Gentiles). In every case, though, they focus on the end of Christ's life. They each share a few words about his birth, one sentence to describe Him from ages 18 to 30, and then concentrate two-thirds of their content on a short 3½ years. The final third of the Synoptic Gospels - and fully one-half of John's - are devoted to the final week of Christ's life. All of this is out of keeping with a typical biography.

⁸ Christ's response to Peter's statement that He is the Messiah is: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven." Matthew 16:13ff

⁹ The passage is found in John 8:48ff. The name "I AM" – i.e., YHWH – was considered so sacred to the Jews that they would never say it, fearing that if they uttered it in an unworthy manner they would be guilty of "taking the Lord's name in vain." Sometime in the third century B.C., the Jews stopped writing the name, substituting a hybrid word made up of the Hebrew consonants for "I AM" (i.e., YWHW) with the vowels for the word *Adonai* (the Hebrew word for "Lord"). When a reader saw this strange word, they were reminded not to utter the name YHWH but to say the word Lord instead. (The phonetic pronunciation of this hybrid term is Jehovah. It was only recently that scholars realized what the ancient Hebrews had done to protect the name of God.) I mention all of this to note that when Christ took the name YHWH for himself by saying, "Before Abraham was born, I AM", he was making the boldest claim to be God a Jew could imagine. It is no wonder that they picked up stones to kill him for blasphemy.

¹⁰ Given that more books have been written about Jesus than have been written about any other person, it should not surprise us to learn that a lot more could be said about his life and teaching. I will mention only three things: 1) He was not impressed with self-righteous people or their religious legalism. Christ's harshest words were directed at religious leaders who were proud of their spiritual efforts. In contrast with them, he was gracious with the simple, cared for the poor, affirmed women, laughed with children, attended parties, granted second chances, and forgave sins; 2) He spoke of the world to come. Jesus promised that a life-giving relationship with his Father was immediately available to those who embraced him, but he also spoke often about the next life. In fact, he instructed people to live today as if their eternal destiny hung in the balance, because it did. He argued that we should adopt the values of heaven right now, give up anything that distracted us from following God, and judge others as we wished to be judged. Throughout his parables he suggested that this life was one we should invest for an eternal return by seeking first the kingdom of God; 3) A systematic study of his miracles indicate that taken together they demonstrated his power over every aspect of creation

¹¹ In addition to the obvious reasons Holy Week merits so much attention, it is not just that everything from Genesis 3 forward has been leading up to it, it is that everything from Revelation 22 (the last chapter of the New Testament) points back to it.

¹² I Corinthians 11:23f

¹³ Tertullian, one of the early church fathers, famously stated, "We believe because it is absurd." Meaning: no one would think to make this up. It is too fantastic.

¹⁴ There are a few legal issues to note: 1) according to the legal customs of this period, those interrogating Jesus broke several of their own customs and laws; 2) the Jews sent Jesus to Pilate because while they were allowed some control over their people, the Roman government did not allow them to impose a capital sentence on anyone.

¹⁵ The “crimson thread” that begins in Genesis and weaves its way through the binding of Isaac, the Passover and the sacrificial system, reaches its crescendo and conclusion when Christ dies as the ultimate sacrifice. As a fully human person, he was able to perfectly substitute himself for us. As God, his death was of infinite value: therefore his blood was able to pay the debt of all who turn to him. We should not be surprised that after his death the Temple was destroyed and the sacrificial system was stopped.

¹⁶ As you reread the book you will see new ways in which the storyline all fits together. For instance, I was recently struck by the way Exodus 12 pre-figures Holy Week. In that text - written over a thousand years before Jesus was born - the Jews are not only told to remember the Passover by slaughtering an unblemished male lamb, they are instructed to kill the lamb at 3PM, being careful that when they do so they do not break any of its bones. As we read the last chapters of the Gospels we see that Jesus - the unblemished (sinless) male lamb – was put to death at 3 PM (Mt. 27:46) and even though it was customary to break the legs of someone being crucified, Christ’s legs were not broken because he was already dead. Of course, as amazing as it might be that the pieces all fit together, the text would encourage us to be more amazed at Christ himself. Jesus set aside the glory that was rightfully his in order to become part of the world he created. He continued his humiliation by becoming not just a man but a slave, and not just a slave, but one who submitted himself to mockery, torture, and crucifixion. In a world where men strive to become gods, the idea that God would become a man and suffer as Christ did is unthinkable. But that is what happened.

¹⁷ Luke 24:25f

¹⁸ The disciples initially learn that Christ’s offer extends to proselytes (i.e., Gentile converts to Judaism). Then they realize it is also extended to Samaritans (half-Jews), and finally they are shocked to learn that God’s love extends even to the Gentiles (non-Jews). (Judaism had welcomed converts under a two-tier structure. Those Gentiles who wanted to worship God and follow the Law and were willing to undergo circumcision were proselytes – which meant that they were effectively Jews. Those who wanted to worship God and follow the Law but were unwilling to go under the knife were God-fearers. Those in this second camp could not eat with the Jews because they were considered ritually unclean.) The extension of the offer to everyone caused a real crisis for the early church and even threatened to split it. The disruption led to the church’s first council (Acts 15). Eventually the universal nature of God’s offer was accepted, and they all realized that the promise God had made to Abraham was that he would bless his descendants so that they could be a blessing to the all of the nations. Christ was that blessing. Convinced of this, the missionary outreach of the early church continued.

¹⁹ At the time of his conversion Paul was referred to as Saul.

²⁰ In addition to being the leading advocate of telling the Gentiles about Christ, he spearheads the church’s missionary ventures and writes thirteen of the twenty-seven books that make up the New Testament.

²¹ The Roman army crushed the Jewish opposition throughout Palestine and then, in the spring of seventy A.D., laid siege on Jerusalem. Josephus, a Jewish historian, reports that three million Jews had returned to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration and were caught in the siege. Of those, over

one million starved or fell to disease. The Jewish revolt ended in August of that year and Jerusalem – including the Temple – was entirely destroyed.

²² It is worth noting that the Book of Acts – also called the Acts of the Apostles - tells about the first 30 years of the church and then famously stops. That is to say, things are not wrapped up in Acts 28 (the final chapter). There is no summation or closing thoughts. The implication is that additional chapters of the Book of Acts continue to be written. To this end, one mission agency is named Acts 29.