

## Christmas Fireside

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There are a lot of ways to triangulate into the story of Christmas. But I thought one thing that might be interesting to look at would be the significance of women and their role, motherhood, and the coming of children into the world, generally as a theme and then—ultimately—specifically in the case of the Christmas story. But I want to go a long way back before starting and take a look at a child that was born about 1100 years earlier, when Israel as a people had stabilized, had gotten an inheritance in the land, had been observing the law of Moses and the festivals that had been established under the law. They had a known hierarchy. They had locations where the center of worship was located. And everything had settled down into a pattern where you could clearly identify people in authority; you could clearly identify how, where, and when the religious observances ought to take place. And Israel as a people had assumed a very stable form.

**And** it was **utterly corrupt**. The center of the religion housed and was presided over by a family who engaged in drunkenness and immorality and seducing of women in the shadow of the tabernacle. And they were utterly off the mark—completely compliant with a recognized structure, unquestionably knew who was in authority, and everything about them was offensive to God.

And in the midst of this mess, an Ephraimite's wife, who was barren and couldn't have children, went up to the tabernacle on one of the festivals (because they were observing the festivals—the only reason to go up would have been on one of those occasions). She went up to the tabernacle. Don't know the date; don't know when; don't know which observance brought them there. But while there with the rest of her family enclave, she prayed that her barrenness would be removed and she be able to have a child.

And the wicked priest Eli—who tolerated his whoremonger sons, Hophni and Phineas—saw her moving her lips, but no words were coming out. And he made the normal assumption about the condition of the folks at the tabernacle at that time, and he assumed that she was drunk. And it was in the morning, and he more or less chided her for being drunk so early. (I mean, this is the kind of behavior we expect in the afternoon or the evening, but not in the morning.)

"You shouldn't be out here drunk and carrying on this early in the day." And she corrected him and said, No, she was praying. And he (without knowing what she was praying for) said, "A religious, righteous woman! May the Lord grant your prayer." The **priest** was unworthy. There was no reason why God would respect what this priest had to say. But he said to her, *[May] God...grant you your petition* (1 Samuel 1:5 RE), and this Ephraimite woman conceived and bore a son.

So, you ought to ask yourself: Why would the blessing of the presiding high priest (descendant of Aaron, sitting in the position of authority) who clearly could not raise sons in righteousness and who tolerated wickedness around the tabernacle, why would his

statement to Hannah result in God granting her petition? It's NOT because Eli's faith made her whole. It's because HER faith made her whole. She took the word of Eli, and God vindicated HER faith and gave her a son.

So really, the greatness of the story of Samu-EL—a name that means "the voice of God"—the reason why the story of Samu-el becomes significant is because of Hannah and **her faith**. God wasn't going to give to this woman of faith a son who didn't match the worthiness of the faith of the mother that sought the blessing of the son to come.

And so, Samu-el comes and is born. (I mean, the story is in the First Book of Samuel, and I've more or less summarized it.) God heard, and Samuel was born. And so, a barren woman conceives because of faith, and Samu-el comes into the world, and it changes the entire trajectory of Israel's history at that point. In fact, it will be Samu-el who's entrusted by the Lord to create the kings—first Saul and then David—create the kings that would replace the way in which things had been run. And Samuel found that offensive. But God told him, "Don't worry about it, Samuel. They're not rejecting you; they're rejecting me." And God's big enough to absorb that kind of faithlessness from His people and still bear with them.

Well, Samuel, was taken by Hannah (when he was weaned) and delivered to Eli to serve in the tabernacle—because he was a gift given to her from God, and she was returning the gift back to God after he was weaned by giving him to the high priest to raise. And Samuel grew up under the auspices of the presiding high priest in the tabernacle. And Hannah came up year by year, as the festivals were celebrated—[they] don't identify the festival, but I'm fairly confident it was the Passover—and brought a new coat to fit her son each year because Mom was not going to abandon the son, though the son had been given back to God as her offering.

We don't know the timing of the incident that happens that really changes the whole direction of where this story is going, but at one point, after making the observance that:

*And the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision. ...when Eli was laid down in his place and his eyes began to wax dim, that he could not see, and before the lamp of God went out in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of [the Covenant] was [it was a tabernacle], and Samuel was laid down to sleep — that the Lord called Samuel. (1 Samuel 2:8 RE)*

And Samuel went back to Eli ('cuz he'd been called) and asked him what he wanted, and Eli said, "I haven't said anything. Go back to sleep." That repeats itself three times, and Eli finally says, "You're being called by God. And the next time that voice calls to you, answer, 'Here I am, Lord.'"

So, the narrative tells us that Samuel did not yet recognize the voice of God—which is why he kept coming back to Eli. And then the incident happens again; the Voice calls to him, he answers and says, "Here I am, Lord." And then Samuel encounters the Lord for the first time. The extent of what happens when he encounters the Lord is not explained—it's just that the Lord spoke to him then. But as the narrative goes on, it confirms that what happened was, in fact, the "open vision" that did not exist in those days. So, you have this apostate Israel—this decadent group of people with a corrupted, central hierarchy—and

out of that, because of the faith of a woman, a child of faith is born. And the Lord deals with Hannah's son.

And from that moment, beginning at Samuel, something changes in the way in which the Lord will deal with Israel for generations. There is continuously a hierarchy and continuously a high priest, and continuously, there are Levites that are serving, and the structure remains intact. Samuel could not be the high priest because he was an Ephraimite. But he could be a prophet. And despite the structure, Samuel functioned as the voice of God to the people in those days. And he would be the one, ultimately, that anointed the king. And he'd be the one that ultimately replaced the king with the anointing of a second king.

God continued to deal with Israel through prophets throughout the Old Testament period of time. And it was an **extraordinary exception** if one of them was from the tribe of Levi and qualified to be a priesthood holder. And yet, they functioned as God's messenger, as God's spokesman—which presents a problem. Because the question is: How on earth is it that prophets can come along who don't fit into the hierarchy and match the pattern of governance that was established by Moses and respected throughout the Old Testament period? And Joseph Smith gives us the answer to that question, which is: God Himself ordained them. You had to have Melchizedek priesthood in order to enter into the presence of the Lord. But God cured that by conferring upon them the authority when He made His presence known to them, because God's a clever fellow, and He knows how to get around whatever rule there is that gets established.

So, Israel continues on their downward spiral. God peels off ten of the twelve tribes through captivity, and Assyria removes them, takes them over the Euphrates, dispossesses them of their land. They get freed, but they don't return to Israel. They're prophet-led after their scourging, after their imprisonment, after their enslavement—but they're prophet-led after they repented. But they never return. When they cross the Euphrates, upon their return, they turn north, and then they get lost. So those are the lost ten tribes.

Judah and the Southern Kingdom, they remain behind until—from 725 until about 600—so, for another one and a quarter centuries. And then they're taken captive by Babylon, and they're treated similarly. And when they return, Ezra, Nehemiah... They reestablish, and they reestablish a hierarchy (and the hierarchy matched what Moses had established). And it required that you be able to prove genealogically that you were of the house of Aaron or the tribe of Levi in order to be a Levitical priest or in order to be the governing high priest or part of the high priesthood's family in succession. And some people claimed that, that couldn't prove that, and they said, Okay, you can't function until there arise someone with Urim and Thummim that can get revelation to identify your genealogical qualifications to serve.

And so they divided up the folks that were able to return and prove (or get otherwise established by revelation) to be qualified to serve in the temple. And they divided them up into 24 courses. One of the 24 courses was the "course of Abijah." And they would come to minister in the temple on a circulating basis; every 24 cycles, you'd get back to your course (except that when there was one of the festivals, everyone showed up—you had to have all

of them in order to take care of what went on during the festival season). And so it was that Luke tells us that:

*In the days of Herod the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abijah, and his wife — being of the daughters of Aaron, and her name Elizabeth — were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless; ...they had no child. Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well-stricken in years.*

*And while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his priesthood, according to the law... (Luke 1:2-3 RE)*

So, Zacharias has come to the temple. It cycles through—you have to go outside of the scriptural record in order to put together part of what's going on. But in order to serve in the capacity that Zacharias will serve (that we're gonna read about in just a moment), you had to win the lottery (and I mean, literally—they drew lots). And if the service in the temple needed someone and you had not been selected, then you remained in the drawing of the lots. But if you had been through and you had rendered that service in the temple, you weren't in the lot drawing. And apparently, based upon the record, Zacharias was an old guy, and he'd never won the lottery (kind of like those guys that drive up, you know, to Malad, Idaho to buy the lottery ticket when the number gets high enough, and they come back disappointed year after year). Well, Zachariah had been doing that because it was considered an extraordinary honor to have been allowed to go into the temple and to participate in the service that he was gonna render, in particular.

The way that the service got performed, they kept, outside the temple, they kept the altar of sacrifice burning continuously; it was always on fire. They cleaned it up from the ash from time to time, but the coals remained behind. When the occasion required the incense to be burned in the Holy Place, there were two priests who went in, one of whom got the ashes off of the little golden altar, and the other of whom put a shovelful of coals onto the golden altar (inside, before the veil of the Holy of Holies). One came in to clean, the other came in to deposit the coals, and then they were to depart. They could not turn their back on the Holy of Holies; that would be disrespectful. So they would back out, carrying what they brought with them, and they would leave. And then the priest who was allowed to burn the incense (that's who we're gonna read about in a minute), he then put the incense on the coals, and he gave a prayer before the Holy of Holies, outside the veil, while the incense ignited and burned. And the interior (above the altar), a column of smoke would rise up, and it would spread out on the ceiling of the Holy Place, which is where he was located, while he was offering a prayer—the ascending smoke being a symbol of the prayers of Israel going up to Heaven, and then when the column reaches the ceiling, it spreads out as a symbol of the Tree of Life and representation of the salvation that God offered.

The prayer that Zachariah<sup>1</sup> offered was a set prayer. We can actually find it and read it today because Edersheim, a Jewish convert to Christianity in the 1800s, preserved the prayer. And the prayer, in its relevant part, asks God to "return the light of His countenance" to Israel.

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<sup>1</sup> Denver uses Zacharias and Zachariah interchangeably in this message. Both are acceptable renderings of the name.

So, Zachariah offers the prayer and is petitioning God to let the light of His countenance return.

(Okay, you can't tell Troy everything that's gone on, 'cuz he's just arrived. So it'll be mystifying to him.) Over here. Good to see you, by the way. Yeah, hey, it started at seven. Did you know that? [Audience laughter.] Troy's a big guy; he can take a ribbing.

So, when the prayer gets offered, the only one that is inside the Holy Place is Zachariah. He's won the lottery, he's had the opportunity, he's recited the prayer. Everyone knows what he's praying for. And on the right side of the altar—emerging from what would symbolically be the presence of God in the Holy Place—comes the angel Gabriel, who identifies himself as: *I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of God* (ibid. v.4). Okay? So Zachariah cannot make a mistake about who is talking and the authority represented by the voice of the person who's just identified himself. So, Gabriel says he "stands in the presence of God," AND "your prayer is to be answered"—so the light of God's countenance **will return** to Israel. "Your prayer's been answered; your wife is gonna bear a son." Elizabeth—who is barren and well-stricken in years, who is righteous before God, walking in holiness, observing all of the ordinances—she is going to conceive (the woman who is barren), and she's going to bear a son.

So now again, we have a woman who's going to conceive who cannot bear a child, just like Hannah before. And there's going to be a son sent into the world who's going to go before the face of God to prepare the way for the light of God's countenance to return to Israel.

And of course, Zachariah—who's there **representing Israel**, asking for God to do something for the **people** of Israel—is a little taken off-guard. "Okay, the light of God's countenance is going to return, and ~~you're Zachariah~~ you're Gabriel—you stand in the presence of God—and this is all great and wonderful, but uhhh... My wife is gonna have a child? I mean, we're both in 'assisted living' now. And this is not really... When I'm not here, we're in wheelchairs! I mean, she's got that little motorcycle cub that goes down the sidewalk, but..." It's the improbability of the mechanism that is being described for the return of God's countenance to the people of Israel that astonishes Zachariah. "I mean, wonderful, this is a **great** thing that you're going to do! And I'm happy for that. I just don't... I just don't get that one thing, you know: Elizabeth? And a son? Uhhh, that's, well, improbable. In fact, I'm calling BS. Okay, I know you're an angel and all, but I just... I'm... I'm not... I'm not seeing that."

And Gabriel says, "Oh, you want a sign, do you? So that you can have faith? Well, let me give you a sign. I mean, we've done rainbows; we've done floods. We produced leprosy on a hand, and we've removed it. We've parted waters. Let's see... Okay, I got it. You're gonna be dumb, and you're gonna be deaf. How's that for a sign? That way we're not screwing up anyone's neighborhood. We're not wrecking the irrigation system in the valley with the water of the Jordan drying up. We're not gonna do any of that stuff. We'll just do it with you. How's that sound?"

...**very calculated maneuver**, because everyone knew how long the prayer would take, and Zachariah was in there too long! So everyone perceives that something's going on that's

a bit irregular here. And one of the traditions—I'm not sure how credible it is—but one of the traditions was that the priest (who remained behind to offer the prayer) came in with a rope tied to one of his legs so that if he died while he was in there, they could pull him out, and they wouldn't go disrupt the peace of the Holy Place; they just retrieve the guy. And if that tradition be true, I'm pretty sure that Zachariah was...

"How can this be...? Gah! You know, give me some room here!" He was skeptical! But the people outside knew he was tarrying and something's going on. And it's beginning to become awkward. I mean, I can imagine people looking at one another and saying, "I don't know. What do we do? You know, you don't turn your back to the Holy Place. But we don't go in their face first. Do you back in to retrieve the carcass of the old guy? I mean, this guy's, you know... We all call him 'a raisin' behind his back—and that's being generous. I mean, what do we do? What do we do?"

He tarries long enough that it's **awkward** out there. And when he emerges, Gabriel's been really clever—because everyone wants to know, "Hey, hey, what gives?" And they perceive that something happened. And it's a way of saying, "Too sacred for you, at this point. You're not going to get the story just yet. You, Israel, in your messed-up, wretched, apostate state, you're not gonna know. I've got my priest. I've got my righteous mother who's barren, and I've got my miracle coming. But as for you people? You won't know. And furthermore, when that boy is brought to be circumcised, an angel will ordain him **on that day** to overthrow the kingdom of the Jews, so that he will come with authority."

Samu-el came to try and fix and repair; John would come to overthrow. So in the apostate condition that Israel finds itself when the angel Gabriel is sent, he's sent to allow another barren, righteous, faithful woman to bring a son into the world that will go before the presence of the Lord Himself, to prepare the way.

*Zacharias said..to the angel, How shall I know this? For I am an old man, ...my wife is well-stricken in years. ...the angel answer[ed and] said unto him, I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of God, and am sent to speak unto you, and to show you these glad tidings...*

*And [so,] in the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto the 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. (Ibid. vs. 4-5)*

So, now we have a barren woman who is going to bear a child. And in the sixth month of her pregnancy, the angel Gabriel is sent again, this time to another woman—who may not have been barren, but she was also not married—and so her ability to bear a child is going to be equally miraculous with the coming of Samuel into the world, with the coming of John into the world—and this will be the Son of God. It's in the sixth month.

Now, we actually can calculate (because they kept pretty good records) when, in the normal rotation of things, the course to which Zachariah belonged would have been serving; it would have been at one of two times during the course of any calendar year. But the problem is, we don't know whether the incident involving Gabriel appearing to Zachariah occurred on those days or on one of the festival dates in which the priests would be at the

temple and would be sacrificing and performing the daily rituals and having lots drawn—because it happened on those dates.

Well, if it was in a springtime observance, then the birth of John would be in the fall, and Christ's birth would be exactly half a year opposite one another. Whether you knew it (or recall it), the tradition in the early days of the Restoration with Joseph was that the General Conference held on April 6th was held on April 6th because that was identified as the time when the Lord was born—meaning the Lord came in the spring. And if that's the case, they then had the fall conference exactly six months later, and that would be on October 6th (so that April 6th would be Christ's birthday, and October 6th would be exactly six months later—and no one ever pointed it out, but that would have been John the Baptist's birthday—if you accept the six months and you accept those dates).

There's a symmetry to that because, in the spring, you have new life breaking forth; you have a period of time in which the fall and the winter (representing death) is overthrown with the spring and the coming of new life—and the April 6th date kind of makes sense. And the October 6th date for John kind of makes sense too because you're... That's when you're wrapping things up; it's harvest time; it's when you're closing up shop. And if you're talking about judgment, that sort of makes sense that that would be coinciding with the birth of John, who came to overthrow the kingdom of the Jews and bring it to an end.

So, what the incidents represent in the story, thus far, is that a long-suffering God, who literally has put up with the disbelief, the apostasy, the wickedness, the wretchedness of people that He had called to be His—**that** long-suffering is not without its limits. But the limits are determined by God. He's the one that sets it up, and He's the one who takes it down. And part of the Christmas story is a reminder to us that even people with whom God has a sacred relationship (who He has called and restored the light of His countenance to in the person of Samu-el and other prophets that followed thereafter, including Isaiah, Zenos, Zenock), even people to whom He has extended His hand (stretched out still, despite their faithlessness), have their limits. And it is up to God to decide when the limit has been reached. And it's up to God to decide when He will overthrow it. And when He chooses to do so, then the only thing that matters, whether anyone respected the boy or not, was that the boy be ordained to do the work. And so John's mission, once he's been commissioned by God to do so, could not prevent the overthrow of the kingdom of the Jews. It was God's will.

A lot of people thought John a mere curiosity. He may have had a **father** that served in the temple—but **John** never did. He was raised in the wilderness; he was sort of a curiosity: "Hey, I know. Grab a bag of new wine and new skins. Let's go out in the desert and watch the wild man ~~put a~~ tie-one-on and have a good laugh. The guy wears camelhair clothes. I mean, I'm chafing just looking at the guy. He eats freaking locusts, man. And, you know, he eats honey. (We can make mead out of honey, and that'll do the same trick as the wine—but he eats the honey!) I mean, let's go see him! Oh, come on, let's go out. Let's do this; let's get a good laugh. Hey, come on."

John was not someone that was welcome to the inner circle of the kingdom, of the hierarchy, of the priestly establishment. He was not bonafide in the sense that the Jews would accept. People listened, heard, and were converted. But they were largely people

who **knew** they needed to repent, who (for all the problems that Israel had) recognized that they themselves had something wrong with them. And therefore, their hearts were softened enough that they could take in the message that he had to deliver. The priests that came out? They didn't believe; they had no reason to give up what they considered as **their authority, their position, their hierarchy**. They were bonafide.

"There was no beauty in him that we should desire him" is kind of an English translation that's poetical and non-literal. What the passage (which applies equally to John and to the Lord that he went before) would be better rendered, "He had no credentials that we should respect." "There was no beauty in him that we should desire him" has created in medieval artwork these caricatures of a butt-ugly Lord. Our Lord was not an unappealing physical specimen in the flesh. But He was an outcast, and He was not someone that got respected. There was no beauty, there was no credential, there was no bona fides, there was no respectability associated with Him that we should give Him automatic respect. The Lord came (just like John came) not entitled to automatic respect. It required the words of His mouth to be heard in order to determine whether or not the man spoke for God.

To say, "I have authority! You must respect me!" is so hollow and so insipid that no one ought respect those that come with that claim. But to speak words with authority that tell you truth, that bring light, that stir you to understand things that you did not before, that open the veil by letting in more light and truth, that by persuasion and pure knowledge give you an understanding that you did not possess before, that's what matters. And that's what Christ came with. And it pierced the hearts of the people who heard.

And when they came to Christ and said, "Okay, okay, yeah... You've got a good schtick here... BUT what **authority** do you have? I mean, we can't compete with you when you get up and you deliver a sermon like the Sermon on the Mount! But what we **can** claim is that we have the position of authority; we run the temple. We possess all of the accouterments—you don't have any of the stuff that belongs to the temple in your possession. We've got it all! So tell us your authority, 'cuz we can show you ours. We've got it all." And Jesus says, "Hey, I'll tell you what: You tell me what authority John had. And if you'll answer me and tell me whose authority John had ('cuz you didn't accept him in your ranks; he was an outcast; he was not preferred within your organization), you tell me what authority he had, and then I'll tell you what authority I have." They knew that was dangerous. So, "We can't tell you." And so Christ, likewise, said He couldn't tell them what authority **He** had.

Everything about this story, thus far and continuing on into the life of the Lord, everything about this story has nothing to do with bonafide authority by people who possess rank and position—nothing to do with that! It has to do with angels. It has to do with women of faith. It has to do with the ability of women in miraculous ways to conceive and bear and bring forth sons commissioned by God to accomplish a work. And when they have that, it's the only thing that matters. It changes the outcome of the history of Israel. It changes the outcome of the dispensation of Moses. God set it up, and God took it down. And He set it up in a fabulously-obvious public way. And He took it down with an obscure guy who stayed in the desert of Judea until the day that his ministry began. (It was almost like an anti-crescendo; it went out with a whimper, **with the authority of God to accomplish the takedown of the kingdom.**)



And the people of that generation—whether they thought John was significant and who may have rejoiced at his beheading, and who thought the Lord was insignificant and who were glad to be rid of Him on the cross, and who resisted the rumors of His resurrection—the people of that generation **knew their kingdom was overthrown** when, in 70 A.D., the entirety of their construct was destroyed by a Roman army. And they literally, they literally ate the bodies of their young dead children after their children died because of the extremity that the Roman siege put them under. So the overthrow of the kingdom of the Jews was an exclamation point and unmistakable. But the moment at which the **Lord** caused it to happen was different—and unless you knew what John was up to and you listened and accepted the message, you wouldn't know it had just happened. But it did.

So, the story then turns to Mary and the accomplishment of the announcement to her (the angel Gabriel sent to her and announcing it):

*And when she saw the angel, she was troubled at his saying, ...pondered in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. ...the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you shall conceive, and bring forth a son, and shall call his name Jesus. 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. And he shall reign over the house of Jacob, **for ever**, and of His kingdom there shall be no end.*

*Then said Mary unto the angel, How can this be? And the angel answered, ...said unto her, Of the holy ghost and the power of the Highest. Therefore also, that holy child that shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth, she has 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. And Mary said, Behold the handmaid[en] of the Lord; be it unto me according to your word. And the angel departed from her. (Ibid. vs. 5-6, emphasis added)*

"Behold the handmaid[en] of the Lord," the word handmaiden (Old English term), but it literally means "God's spouse." Behold His Wife.

So, this kind of intimate knowledge... I mean, Luke is writing this story. And I mean, one obvious question that ought to present itself is: How does Luke know what Mary is "pondering in her heart" when he writes his account? See, the people who are New Testament scholars... Luke wrote the Gospel of Luke, and he wrote the Book of Acts. And in the Book of Acts, he uses the plural pronoun "we" at one point in the travels, and so they claim that Luke was a Gentile convert who got converted by Paul and joined him on one of Paul and Barnabas' missions (because the "we" plural pronoun suggests that that was when he came on the scene).

Well, the Scriptures we have in the Joseph Smith version... Joseph renders his Joseph Smith Translation version only in English. So we don't know what the Greek counterpart necessarily would be. But one of the very first things that Joseph did to change the account in Luke was to change the first sentence. And this is how the book of Luke begins in the Joseph Smith version, *As I am a messenger of Jesus Christ...* (Luke 1:1 RE), and then he goes on from there. Well, you've got "angelos" (or angel), you've got "apostolos" (or apostle) for

the word that appears here as "messenger." I mean, we don't have the Greek text to go consult. And that only appears in English. But what Luke is saying is he's either an angelic ministrant who is commissioned with a message that was given him by God, or he's an apostolic messenger who got the information that he's conveying from the Lord. But neither of the options that you have suggests that Luke was some kind of Gentile convert with Paul and Barnabas going out and finding him in the Mediterranean basin and bringing him aboard. He's talking about the earliest events that occurred in the coming forth of the Lord with intimate detail.

Luke is one of the two men walking on the road to Emmaus. He identifies by name the other person: Cleopas (Greek name, ~~similar~~ the male counterpart to Cleopatra, the female rendering of the Greek name). But he doesn't identify the other guy, because that's him. So, Luke knows things about the Lord before He comes even into conception in the womb of Mary. **And** the Lord spent the better part of the day of His resurrection walking on the road between Jerusalem and Emmaus and talking with them as they wondered about the events that had occurred of late. So Luke is no small potatoes. And Joseph Smith, I think, rightly changes the narrative to put him in a position to know these things.

Well, so, the handmaiden...

*...and the angel departed from her.*

*And in those days, Mary went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Judah, and entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elizabeth. ...it came to pass that when Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the holy ghost, and she spoke out with **a loud voice** and said... (Ibid. vs. 6-7, emphasis added)*

Isn't that interesting that Elizabeth speaks out, but what she has to say is quoted by Luke, and he makes mention that when she speaks these words, she does so in a loud voice.

You know, the "Hosanna Shout" is is not supposed to be [spoken quietly, rhythmically, and with no enthusiasm]:

Hosanna.  
Hosanna.  
Hosanna  
to God  
and the Lamb.

It's supposed to be a shout. In fact, it's supposed to be a **chaotic** shout, with everyone yelling—and not in unison. Everyone knows the words, and they repeat the words. But it's just a cacophony, a **loud** outpouring. Elizabeth is pretty much doing just that when Mary comes to meet her.

Now, it doesn't go into any great detail, but it's pretty apparent that Mary stayed with Elizabeth throughout the time period—and that when Joseph and her encounter one another again, she was "showing." And of course, Joseph wants to be discreet about it. He

has no intention of making her any further humiliated. And the angel Gabriel says to Joseph, "You don't worry about that. This is something God's doing. And you take her to wife anyway."

His genealogy mattered; Mary's genealogy mattered—He needed to be brought into that house. If the kingdom of Israel were still functioning, Christ would have been the king of Israel. It was necessary before Christ's ministry began that Joseph die so that ~~Joseph~~ [Jesus] was indeed the King of the Jews. And so, all the events that happened, happened in a very calculated way.

(Okay, Troy got here a little later, so I'll take a few more minutes. But I intended not to impose on people by keeping them beyond one hour, and it is right now one hour—well, we started a few minutes after the hour.)

Look, we tend to focus on the men when we read the stories. We tend to celebrate the coming of the angel Gabriel, and the guy to whom he spoke, and the status of someone burning incense in the temple, and John coming with authority and making the hierarchy upset, and Jesus, and the priest Eli, and Samu-el. But the fact of the matter is that the miraculous conception and birth of these men were entirely contingent upon the presence of faithful women who conceived and bore these sons into the world through faith.

It was Hannah's faith that got us Samuel, and it was Samuel that was the prototype of all of the Old Testament prophets. He was it. And following in his example—in his footsteps—were other prophets throughout the Old Testament era who came similarly called and ordained by God, in order to accomplish the various missions that they were sent. But it began with Hannah and the faith of Hannah.

When a woman who is "otherwise unlikely to conceive and bear a child" brings a child into the world as a result of the intervention of God (and my supposition is that that's happened throughout history **a number of times**), then the course of mankind's history hinges and changes upon the faith of the woman and the birth of the child. And we tend to read the Christmas story without even noticing the overshadowing presence and role of the women—just like we read the story of Samuel, and we think, yeah, yeah, he ordained Saul to be king of Israel. And then he was the one who was blind when ~~Samuel~~ [Saul] came back from the war, and he brought with him all of the sheep and the cows. And he had told King Saul to destroy everything, including the animals—and Saul's lying to him and says, "Yeah, we did what you told us. Great day. I mean, we won the game. It was a shut-out. They didn't score a single ~~shot~~ touchdown; we routed them, and we did everything you told us to do." And Samuel says, "Then what's the bleating of the sheep and the moo-ing of the cows that I hear? Can't see 'em, but I can sure hear 'em." And so Saul disappoints the mouthpiece of the Lord, and bad things follow.

Look, **God does indeed control the outcome.** And it doesn't matter who's in charge, what the hierarchy looks like, how much property they possess, whether they have all the accouterments that make them appear to possess priestly authority. **All that is ever required to overthrow any establishment that God has ordained is for Him to send one person with authority to accomplish the purpose of overthrowing it.** And it

doesn't even matter if those who are overthrown recognize it until 70 years later, when they're eating the dead carcasses of their own children to keep themselves alive, otherwise dying of hunger and thirst. It doesn't matter that they recognize or acknowledge it; it only requires that God **do it**. And if He's done it, then it's irresistible. It'll happen.

And so it is that the Christmas story includes **a whole lot of feminist issues** that we tend to overlook. I mean, the Scriptures really are replete with a whole lot more "central role of women" in the bringing of things to pass than we recognize. And the Heavenly Mother has informed us in one of the proverbs (I think it's eight, but you can look it up; I've quoted it in Our Divine Parents). She's informed us that SHE is the One who appoints kings and princes. She's the One that makes the determination. Father defers to Her when it comes to the choosing of the sons that are to be elevated. And so you risk a great deal when you fail to acknowledge the presence and the central **authority** of the Divine Mother. (I've been trying to make that point for a while now, and I don't know how much success that's had.)

Anyway, let me close by bearing testimony that miraculous conception/miraculous birth/timing—all of those things are not just done with "mighty men." The presence; the central role; the importance of the mothers who have done the work of perpetuating the species, bringing to pass the continual presence of man on Earth; the presence of women and their integral role in the whole of it is something in the Christmas story that we ought to take a moment to reflect on, as well, and not forget the vital importance of what women have and are and do and will do. *Neither is the man without the woman, [nor] the woman without the man, in the Lord* (1 Corinthians 1:44 RE) is another way of reminding us—in Paul's writings—about how the Creation itself was ordained. It was not complete until the two of them were together. The image of God did not appear on Earth until you had the man and the woman together. In the image of God *created he him: male and female created he them* (Lectures on Faith 2:8; see also Genesis 2:8). There's not a single man in this room who's complete. The completion only comes with the presence of the woman.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.