

Thought For The Week

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Who Are These People?

Exploring the Historical Reliability of Scripture Through Luke 3

On the evening of May 24, 2026, preacher John delivered a compelling sermon titled “Who Are These People?” at his church. Drawing from Luke chapter 3, verses 1-4, the message addressed skepticism about the Bible’s origins and trustworthiness. In an era where many question ancient texts, John presented the Scriptures not as abstract religious writings but as a reliable record anchored in verifiable history. His accountant’s eye for detail and 25-plus years of study shone through as he unpacked a single passage filled with names, places, and events that can be cross-examined against extra-biblical sources.

The sermon began with a powerful Scripture reading. In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar’s reign—when Pontius Pilate governed Judea, Herod ruled as tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip governed Iturea and Trachonitis, Lysanias ruled Abilene, and Annas and Caiaphas served as high priests—the word of God came to John son of Zacharias in the wilderness. John preached a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins, fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.”

John paused after the reading, marveling at the density of proper names—eleven including the Jordan River. As an accountant, he naturally counted them. This observation set the stage for the sermon’s central question: Who exactly were these individuals, and why does their historical reality matter for modern faith?

The Spark: A Conversation with a Skeptic

The sermon’s inspiration came from a recent dialogue with a non-Christian acquaintance. The individual expressed doubt: “I just can’t see how one person wrote all that, and now we’re expected to just accept it and live by it?” John recognized this as a common objection. Rather than dismiss it, he used the moment to explain that the Bible was never claimed to be the work of a single human author. The Old Testament spans multiple writers across centuries, while Paul authored much of the New Testament. This diversity strengthens rather than weakens its credibility.

John emphasized that believers do not rely on blind acceptance or circular reasoning (“The Bible says it, so I believe it”). Instead, he outlined multiple pillars supporting Scripture’s reliability: extensive manuscript evidence, archaeological discoveries, fulfilled prophecy, scientific foreknowledge, and—central to this sermon—historical corroboration. The Bible records real events involving real people in real time. When examined against outside sources, it consistently aligns with known history.

Testing Scripture Like a Lawsuit

Referencing Proverbs 18:17—“The first to plead his cause seems right, until his neighbor comes and examines him”—John encouraged cross-examination of biblical claims. He cited Lee Strobel, the former atheist investigative journalist for the **Chicago Tribune** who later became a prominent Christian apologist. Strobel’s newsroom principle required at least two credible sources before printing a story, illustrated by the wall quote: “If your mother says she loves you, check it out.” John applied this journalistic standard to Luke 3, demonstrating how the passage stands up under scrutiny.

The text pinpoints John the Baptist’s ministry to the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, approximately A.D. 29. This is not vague mythology but a datable historical marker. John displayed a family tree of the Roman Caesars, highlighting figures mentioned in Scripture. Tiberius, whose full name was Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus, became the second emperor after his stepfather Augustus died on August 19, A.D. 14. Simple arithmetic confirms the timeline: A.D. 14 plus fifteen years lands precisely at A.D. 29.

An artist’s rendering of Tiberius brought the emperor to life as a flesh-and-blood ruler, not a fictional character. The Jordan River, another named element, remains a tangible geographical feature today—flowing south from the Sea of Galilee into the hypersaline Dead Sea, where buoyancy is so great that swimmers can float effortlessly.

Pontius Pilate and the Herodian Dynasty

The sermon moved to Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea from A.D. 26 to 36. History knows him primarily as the Roman official who presided over Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, dramatically washing his hands before the crowd. His governorship is well-documented in both biblical and secular records.

Next came Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. Herod the Great earned lasting infamy for ordering the slaughter of boys two years old and younger in Bethlehem after the Magi failed to report back. When Herod the Great died, his kingdom was divided among three surviving sons, each becoming a tetrarch—a ruler over roughly one-fourth of the territory, from the Greek **tetra** meaning four.

Herod Antipas governed Galilee and Perea from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39. He is perhaps most notorious for executing John the Baptist. John read the full account from Mark 6:17-29. Herod had imprisoned John for publicly condemning his illegal marriage to Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife. During a birthday banquet, Herodias’ daughter Salome danced, so captivating Herod that he swore an oath to grant her request “up to half my kingdom.” Influenced by her mother, Salome demanded John’s head on a platter. Though regretful, Herod honored the oath to save face before his guests. John the Baptist was beheaded, and his disciples buried his body.

John drew an interesting parallel from the corporate world: even offering “half the kingdom” left Herod with ultimate control, much like a 51% owner retains authority in a business. John described the scene as deeply disturbing—the powerful reducing a holy man to a gruesome party favor.

Corroboration from Flavius Josephus

To demonstrate that these events are not isolated to Scripture, John turned to an extra-biblical source: Flavius Josephus' **Antiquities of the Jews**. Josephus, a first-century Jewish general who later served as a Roman historian, provided independent confirmation. In Book 18, he described Herodias divorcing her husband Philip to marry Antipas, and mentioned their daughter Salome. This alignment between biblical narrative and Josephus' historical writing strengthens confidence in the accounts.

John stressed that faith rests on cumulative evidence. While not every biblical detail has an external parallel, the consistency where sources overlap is remarkable. The Bible supports reality rather than contradicting it.

Annas, Caiaphas, and the Trial of Jesus

The sermon also examined Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests mentioned in Luke 3. Drawing from John 18, Annas was the former high priest and father-in-law of Caiaphas, who held the office during Jesus' trial. Caiaphas had earlier advised that "one man should die for the people."

John read from Luke 23, detailing how Pilate, finding no fault in Jesus, sent Him to Herod Antipas upon learning Jesus was Galilean. Herod, excited to finally meet the man he had heard so much about, hoped to witness a miracle. When Jesus remained silent amid questioning—and while chief priests vehemently accused Him—Herod and his soldiers mocked Jesus, dressing Him in an elegant robe before returning Him to Pilate.

The irony was not lost on the congregation: this was the same Herod Antipas who had executed John the Baptist, Jesus' relative. John invited listeners to imagine the scene, noting the profound contrast between Jesus' dignity and Herod's shallow demand for entertainment.

A Cast of Verifiable Historical Figures

Other figures received attention as well. Philip ruled Iturea and Trachonitis in the northern regions. Lysanias governed Abilene. John the Baptist, son of the priest Zacharias and Elizabeth, emerged as the prophetic voice preparing the way for the Messiah. The prophet Isaiah, quoted in the passage, lived centuries earlier yet spoke with divine accuracy.

John returned to the Caesar family tree slide, describing a complex web of intermarriages, political intrigue, and power struggles. These were real people navigating ambition, family dysfunction, and imperial politics. Their existence is attested not only in the Bible but by Roman records, coins, inscriptions, and historians like Josephus and Tacitus.

Why Historical Reliability Matters

The sermon's power lay in its cumulative case. John did not claim the Bible contains every historical detail—such a volume would be impossibly large. Instead, he showed that where Scripture makes historical claims, they hold up under examination. This reliability extends beyond names and dates to the central message: God's redemptive plan through Jesus Christ.

For believers, this historical grounding provides confidence. The same God who orchestrated events in the first century continues to speak through His Word today. For skeptics, it offers an invitation to investigate rather than dismiss. John closed by expressing gratitude for the Scriptures, ending with a heartfelt “Amen.”

John’s sermon “Who Are These People?” challenges modern audiences to move beyond surface-level doubts. By examining the individuals populating Luke 3—Tiberius, Pilate, the Herods, Annas, Caiaphas, John the Baptist, and others—we discover a faith rooted in history, not myth. The Bible does not demand blind acceptance but thoughtful engagement with evidence that has endured centuries of scrutiny.

In a world quick to question ancient texts, John reminded his listeners that the voices crying in the wilderness still echo with truth. The people of Luke 3 were real. Their stories intersected with the greatest story ever told. And that story continues to transform lives today.

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Who Are These People?

A Sermon on Biblical Reliability

On May 24, 2026, preacher John delivered an insightful evening sermon titled “Who Are These People?” based on Luke 3:1-4. The passage sets the ministry of John the Baptist in a precise historical context: the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, during the governorship of Pontius Pilate, the rule of Herod Antipas as tetrarch of Galilee, and the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.

John began by reading the text, noting its eleven proper names, including the Jordan River. As an accountant with over 25 years of Bible study, he used the passage to address a skeptic’s challenge: “How can one person write all that, and why should we live by it?” He clarified that the Bible was written by many authors over centuries, not a single individual.

The sermon emphasized Scripture’s historical reliability. Far from myth, Luke 3 names real people and events verifiable through extra-biblical sources. John displayed a Roman imperial family tree highlighting Tiberius (emperor A.D. 14–37) and referenced Pontius Pilate’s governorship (A.D. 26–36). He detailed Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, who ruled Galilee and famously beheaded John the Baptist after a rash oath at his birthday feast—an account corroborated by historian Flavius Josephus in **Antiquities of the Jews**.

John also covered Annas and Caiaphas’ roles in Jesus’ trial, illustrating the interconnected web of political and religious power in first-century Judea. Drawing from Proverbs 18:17 and journalist Lee Strobel’s investigative standards, John encouraged cross-examination of biblical claims. He argued that archaeology, manuscript evidence, prophecy, and historical records all support Scripture’s credibility.

Rather than circular reasoning, faith rests on cumulative evidence. These “people” were real—emperors, governors, tetrarchs, and prophets—whose lives intersected with God’s unfolding plan. John concluded by praising God for His trustworthy Word.

This sermon invites believers and skeptics alike to examine the Bible’s historical foundation, discovering a faith grounded in verifiable truth.

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