

TYNDALE NEW TESTAMENT
COMMENTARIES

TNTC

LUKE



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InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.

COMMENTARY

1. PROLOGUE (1:1–4)

Context

In approaching any literary work, we will always find that genre matters. This should be obvious enough on considering the differing strategies readers adopt when they take in a newspaper article as opposed to, say, a science-fiction story. Consciously or unconsciously, we rely on certain textual signals as we discern a text's genre. This was as true in antiquity as it is today. As Luke beckons his readers into his story through the doorway of this prologue, he immediately offers us the calling card of a historian. Everything about Luke 1:1–4 seems to say in so many words, 'This is serious history.'

Modern Western readers tend to associate 'serious history' with a dispassionate and objective recounting of events. Good historians, we tell ourselves, at least *try* not to let on that they have a particular agenda. Nothing could be further from the case when it comes to ancient historiography. For the ancient historians, it was exactly their commitment to the facts *and* interpretation that qualified them to speak authoritatively. That is why Luke never

claims to be objective, either here or at any other point in his two-volume set. He is unapologetically committed to the facts, true enough, but he is also – equally unapologetically – motivated by his theological interests. Like those before him who also had ‘undertaken to set down an orderly account’ (namely, Matthew and Mark), Luke wants to impress upon his readers the wonders of the earthly and Risen Lord Jesus Christ, as well as the necessity of placing faith in him.

Comment

1. Luke states that *many have undertaken to set down an orderly account* (*diēgēsis*), similar to the story he is about to tell. The word *diēgēsis* was a semi-technical term, referring to a ‘well-ordered, polished product of the historian’s work’.¹ This would certainly support the Evangelist’s attempt to position his material as credible history. But in Luke’s writing, the verbal cognate of the same noun is regularly used in connection with God’s mighty acts.² This implies that the author seeks to provide not just a biography of Jesus but also a narrative of *God’s works through Jesus*. These mighty works include certain salvific events which *have been fulfilled among us*. For Luke, then, the story which he is about to tell must be set in the broader context of God’s purposes – past, present and future.

2. Eager to vouch for the accuracy of his own account, Luke next informs his readers that the materials he received were *handed on* (*paredosan*) by *eyewitnesses and servants of the word*. The verb here often refers to the transmission of official traditions (1 Cor. 11:23; 15:1–3; 1 Thess. 4:1–2), suggesting that the process of passing on ‘Jesus stories’ was a carefully executed, even solemn task. Meanwhile, governed by a single article, the nouns *eyewitnesses* and *servants* actually refer to two aspects of the same role. The mediators of this tradition are eyewitness-servants, who are likely the apostles themselves (cf. Acts 26:16).³ The apostles *serve* God’s people by

1. Van Unnik, ‘Prologue’, pp. 12–13.

2. Green, p. 38.

3. Though see Kuhn (‘Beginning the Witness’), who wants to extend the term to select individuals from Luke 1 – 2.

collectively standing by their traditions as authoritative *eyewitnesses* of the events they relate. As such they are also the self-identified guarantors of the gospel truth which now stands to be perpetuated through established ecclesial structures.

3. Luke himself claims to have investigated everything (1) *from the very first*, (2) *carefully* and (3) in an *orderly* fashion. The phrase *from the very first* (*anōthen*) speaks of Luke's decision to begin with the birth narrative, as well as to the overall comprehensiveness of his biographical account.⁴ Working within the framework of transmitted traditions yet building upon them, Luke claims to have done fresh investigative work according to the best historiographical practices of his day. He does so for the sake of one *Theophilus*, a figure who was either a fictitious construct representing every friend (*philos*) of God (*theos*) or, as maintained above, an actual person.

4. The point of all this is to assure the *truth* (*asphaleia*) or certainty of the proclaimed gospel – in regard to not only the isolated historical facts but also their apostolic interpretation. For Luke, salvific event and interpretation are inseparable; together both must stand up to scrutiny. History and faith together stand as the bedrock for the gospel story he is about to tell.

Theology

Luke calls his story an 'orderly account' or a 'narrative' (ESV) of events. Now, as Aristotle pointed out, the very concept of narrative – complete with a beginning, a middle and an end – assumes a logical sequence of events. The concept of sequence is important. Far too often, modern readers of the Gospels have treated the authorized stories of Jesus as a hodgepodge of random incidents and teachings with little discernible relationship to one another. The same readers may wonder whether there is any rhyme or reason to the ordering of the stories, aside from a rough chronological interest. But by identifying his story as a *diēgēsis* and therefore an orderly account, Luke is claiming that his plot has a

4. Some commentators (e.g. Fitzmyer, p. 298), however, understand *from the very first* as from the start of Jesus' ministry in Luke 3:23.

linear progression. This means that the Evangelist's readers need to be sensitive to the narrative as a whole, even when examining the shortest of sayings or stories. Nothing is arbitrary: every word, sentence, paragraph, must be appreciated in relation to that which precedes and that which follows. Because Luke offers an organic narrative, the responsible interpreter must constantly look to the Gospel writer as his own best interpreter.

Moreover, because the Evangelist sees the events surrounding Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension as having been 'fulfilled among us', he also sees his own narrative as an authorized extension of the Old Testament narrative, the writings of the likes of 'Moses, the prophets, and the psalms' (24:44). If the second-century heretic Marcion reduced the four Gospels to a pared-down version of Luke's story simply because the third Gospel seemed to have the least to do with the God of Israel, it is only because he badly misunderstood that story in the first place. According to our Evangelist, the revelation of Jesus Christ is a progressive revelation, which fits snugly within the larger, overarching framework of the story of Israel.

2. INFANCY NARRATIVE (1:5 – 2:52)

A. Two birth announcements (1:5–38)

Context

The narrative action begins by focusing on Jesus' forerunner John, as well John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth. In all four Gospels, John the Baptizer plays an inestimably important role. Yet it is Luke, more than any other Gospel writer, who highlights John's significance. In 1:5–38, Luke puts the prenatal histories of John and Jesus side by side. He does so to anticipate their mutual association and to establish a contrast. As great as John was, Jesus was greater.

To put Gabriel's dual birth announcements in the same category as the many angelic appearances in Luke–Acts would be to miss the point. Gabriel stood at the top of the angelic hierarchy (cf. 1 En. 40:9). His appearance at the beginning of Luke's story strikes an auspicious note. Further, Luke's more well-versed readers would have been aware that when Gabriel first appears in Scripture, in the book of Daniel, he comes to reveal a flickering light of hope at the

far end of the dark tunnel of exile (Dan. 8:16; 9:21). Now that flickering light, Luke begins to hint, is about to come into view.

The birth announcements of John and Jesus parallel each other in step-by-step fashion. Both conceptions announced by Gabriel are miraculous; both involve the Holy Spirit; finally, both are singled out as having redemptive significance.¹ Of course, there are contrasts as well. Two are salient. First, whereas the announcement of John's birth takes place in the temple in Jerusalem, news of the coming Messiah's birth is first broadcast in an insignificant and out-of-the-way location. Second, while the priest Zechariah disbelieves the angel's message and is rendered mute, the obedient response of a barely pubescent girl finally culminates in a declaration of God's praises (1:46–55). The movement from unbelieving priestly man to believing common girl, from officially sanctioned sacred space to newly established sacred spaces, augurs the overall thematic concerns of the Gospel itself.

Comment

i. Announcement of John's birth (1:5–25)

5. Luke sets the opening chapters of his Gospel in the time of Herod the Great (73–74 BC). *King Herod* was a ruthless and violent ruler, much feared and much despised. The very mention of his name in the lead-up to the births of John and Jesus would have reminded readers just what kind of world the Messiah and his kinsman forerunner were coming into.² The first characters introduced in Luke's story are John's parents. *Zechariah* belonged to the *priestly order of Abijah*, one of twenty-four priestly clans (1 Chr. 24:1–19) descendent from Aaron. His wife *Elizabeth* was also a *descendant of Aaron*. John's priestly pedigree, inherited from both sides of the family tree, anticipates his own unofficial priestly role which he will assume on entering the wilderness.

6–7. Luke now conveys three further pieces of biographical information regarding John's parents: they were morally upright, childless and advanced in years. Zechariah and Elizabeth's moral

1. On these and other similarities, see Nolland, p. 40.

2. On Herod, see Bond, *DJG*, pp. 38–82.

stature and childlessness invoke other scriptural characters: Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 18) as well as Elkanah and Hannah (1 Sam. 1). These linkages prepare us for the fact that God is once again about to intervene in the story of Israel, and that once again through a most unlikely biological process. The point is not simply to emphasize the extraordinary nature of John's birth but to demonstrate that the great forerunner, like Jesus after him, would be as integral to a renewal of the Abrahamic covenant as Abraham and Sarah were to its initiation, and as pivotal to the reinauguration of the Davidic covenant as Elkanah and Hannah were to that covenant's instigation. It was appropriate, too, that John and Jesus, who would each in their own way create something out of nothing, should be brought into existence virtually from nothing in biological terms.

8–10. On the week that his division is on duty, Zechariah is chosen by lot to burn the holy incense (cf. Exod. 30:34–38; m. Tamid 5:2).³ Performed every morning and evening, this ritual would require – as Luke explains to his uninitiated readers – the priest to enter the Holy Place, while the worshippers remained at a safe distance. An important component of temple life, the incense-burning ritual symbolized the people's prayer going up before God. Little do the gathered worshippers know that their pleas for Israel's redemption – a recurring focus of Israel's corporate prayer as attested in the daily Jewish prayer of the Amidah – are about to be answered. The timing of this particular revelation could not have been any more appropriate.⁴

11. For now, the divine messenger is simply identified as an *angel of the Lord*. Because, as we shall learn from verse 13, the angel comes in direct response to Zechariah's prayer, it is only fitting that he appear *at the right side of the altar of incense* (a gold-enamelled fixture measuring some 3 ft high and 18 in. wide and deep), the central symbol of faithful prayer. The angelic encounter recalls Isaiah's

3. The set rotation involved each division serving two separate weeks per year; on this institution, see Fitzmyer, p. 322.

4. Divine visitations coinciding with this ritual were not unprecedented in Judaism; cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 13.282–283.

vision of the Lord at the temple, which also occurred when the smoke of incense filled the inner sanctuary (Isa. 6:4). Other similarities obtain between Isaiah and Zechariah's visions, not least the fact that both episodes culminate in the sending of a prophet to preach to Yahweh's remnant (cf. Isa. 6:8–13). It is almost as if the Baptizer were destined to close out what Isaiah, the preacher of exile, began. The angel's position next to the altar of incense, itself stationed directly in front of the temple veil, foreshadows the rending of the same veil at the end of the story (23:45). A veil at the beginning and at the end: seemingly like the Holy of Holies itself, Luke's Gospel, which contains the presence of God in the story of Jesus Christ, can be entered and exited only through the temple veil!⁵

12. On seeing the angel, Zechariah is understandably *terrified* (*etarachtbē*). (The same verb *tarassō* characterizes the disciples' response to the Risen Lord; cf. 24:38.) Luke emphasizes the point by adding that *fear overwhelmed him*. In Luke (1:30; 2:10), as in other Scripture, fear is a common response to angelic appearances. But here the Evangelist seems to draw a line back to Daniel, who was likewise overcome by fear (Dan. 10:8–9), even as the same prophet was assured – again like Zechariah – that his prayers had been heard, and that no less at the hour of prayer (Dan. 9:21). The similarities are hardly accidental. Just as Daniel had longingly prayed for Israel's restoration from exile, Luke implies that the prophet's prayers were now being answered: restoration was on its way through the impending acts of God.

13. Employing elements characteristic of other scriptural visions, not least the command *Do not be afraid* (e.g. Gen. 21:17), Luke signals that this angelic sighting is a redemptive-historical milestone. And yet the vision carries a highly personal tone, as the angel addresses the aged priest by name, informing him that *your prayer has been heard*. In this respect, the name *Zechariah*, meaning

5. As early as the second century, we find Irenaeus (*Haer.* 3.11.8) comparing the Gospels to sacred space, when he identifies the four Gospels as pillars (*styloi*), that is, the posts that marked off the boundary of the tabernacle.

‘God remembers’, is not insignificant. As a result of Zechariah’s prayers, the angel assures him, his *wife Elizabeth* will indeed give birth to a *son* who is to be named *John*, meaning ‘God is gracious’. As the ensuing narrative makes clear, that graciousness extends not just to Zechariah and Elizabeth as childless individuals but to Israel as a whole (cf. Isa. 54:1).

14–15. As the angel describes John’s destiny, he emphasizes the *joy and gladness* that this new life will bring to people, not least to Zechariah himself. The reason for this joy is stated in the last clause: *for [gar] he will be great in the sight of the Lord*, much as Jesus will be ‘great’ (v. 32). The angel continues by issuing a stipulation and a promise. The stipulation, forbidding John from partaking of any wine or perhaps beer, may be a version of the Nazirite vow (Num. 6:1–8) or simply an expansion of priestly protocol (Lev. 10:9). John’s enforced abstinence would at any rate become one of his defining traits (Luke 7:33), even as it more immediately puts him in company with Samson (Judg. 13) and Samuel (1 Sam. 1:11) – a deliverer and a prophet, respectively, who were also conceived through divine intervention. John’s connection with Samuel is especially striking, given the latter’s role in anointing David as king, for soon enough the Baptizer would anoint Jesus the new David (Luke 3:21–22). The promise that John will be filled with the Spirit *even before his birth* is later confirmed when John *in utero* leaps for joy at Jesus’ presence (1:41). But John’s Spirit-filling is only relative to a more robust filling that would later come on Jesus (cf. 1:35; 3:22; 4:18–21). In being *filled with the Holy Spirit*, John is marked out not simply for extraordinary spiritual experiences but for a specific prophetic purpose (cf. 1:41, 67; Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9).

16–17. The messenger now speaks of John’s mission, namely, his task of bringing *the people of Israel* back to Yahweh. The Baptizer’s vocation will not be without controversy, for although *many* will respond positively to God’s overtures, not all will. Here and elsewhere in Luke (2:34; 5:15; 7:21; etc.), the term ‘many’ doubles as an elective term, as it does elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures.⁶ That John will *go before him* (i.e. Jesus the Lord, v. 16)

6. See Marshall, p. 57.

in the manner of Elijah (Mal. 3:1) underscores the Baptizer's Elijah-esque quality. Most basically of all, he will model himself on Elijah by gathering a faithful remnant in the face of powerful and wicked forces.

The allusion to Malachi 3 – 4 is not fortuitous. If Malachi 3 foresees the coming of a messenger 'before me [i.e. the Lord]', Malachi 4 promises the sending of an Elijah who will turn the 'hearts of parents to their children' and vice versa (Mal. 4:5–6). Functioning as the new Elijah, therefore, John is destined to go before the Lord as his forerunner with the twin goals of securing proper worship (Mal. 3:1–4) and forestalling the judgment of God (Mal. 4:6b).⁷ To accomplish this, in keeping with Malachi's stated expectation, John will first *turn the hearts of parents to their children* and the disobedient to wisdom. The implication is clear enough: on a corporate level, renewed covenantal obedience would naturally manifest itself through stable family relationships (even as the predicted tribulation would entail the dissolution of family ties; cf. Luke 21:16); on an individual level, the coming restoration would result in the ungodly repenting of their sin. The goal of John's ministry, then, is *to make ready a people prepared [kateskeuamenon] for the Lord*, which is also to prepare (*kataskeuasei*) the way for the Messiah (Luke 7:27).⁸

18. Zechariah's response to this astounding announcement is anticlimactic, to say the least. Like Abra(ha)m (Gen. 15:8), he wishes to have some palpable confirmation of the amazing promise (cf. also Judg. 6:17–24). This is unsurprising, for just as Sarah and her husband were getting on in years (*probēbēkotes hēmerōn*, Gen. 18:11, LXX), so too was Elizabeth *getting on in years* (*probēbēkuia en tais hēmerais autēs*). Perhaps Zechariah is looking for the same kind of confirmation that was provided to Abram (Gen. 15).

7. See Perrin, *Kingdom of God*, p. 77.

8. The verb *kataskeuazō* is frequently applied to building and furnishing, and in the Hebrew Bible to the building and furnishing of the temple (BDAG, p. 418). That God's people should constitute a temple is a common conceit in the NT writings (1 Cor. 3:10–17; 6:19; Eph. 2:19–21; 1 Pet. 2:4–8).

19–20. Regardless of Zechariah’s intentions, the angel interprets the priest’s response as an expression of unbelief and rebukes him accordingly. In the meantime, he identifies himself as *Gabriel* (‘mighty man of God’), the one and the same angel who clarified Daniel’s visions of oppression and comfort (Dan. 8:16; 9:21) and spoke of the advent of the Messiah at the close of the appointed seventy weeks. It was only appropriate now for the same Gabriel to return in order to announce that the appointed period of waiting had run its course. Offering his own credentials as one who stands *in the presence of God* (perhaps at God’s right hand, even as he stands at the ‘right hand’ of the altar), he now speaks of his ambassadorial role, claiming to be the bearer of *good news* (*euangelisasthai*).

A strategic word choice, the verb *euangelisasthai* would have struck two different chords. On the one hand, in the Jewish Scriptures, the proclamation of good news is associated with Yahweh’s declaration that exile has run its course and that Yahweh himself now rules (Isa. 40:9; 52:7; 61:1). On the other hand, ‘good news’ also invokes Caesar’s propagandistic communications, designed to remind the Roman subjects of the emperor’s prowess and his divine right to rule. Gabriel’s claim to preach good news hints that the Isaianic promise of ‘good news’ is now at long last coming to fruition, even as it suggests that Caesar’s pretentious political claims will soon be shown up for what they are.

Zechariah’s unbelief will not go without consequences. From this point forward, the aged priest will be rendered *mute* (and apparently deaf too; cf. 1:62–63) *until the day these things occur*. As it turns out, Zechariah’s silence is not just a punishment but a sign: if Daniel could not speak until his mouth was opened by divine enablement (Dan. 10:15–16), the same would be the case for Zechariah, the new Daniel. The realities which Daniel foresaw were now set to transpire.

21. Given the repetition of the daily ritual of incense burning, one might fairly predict how long it should take for the priest to enter the Holy Place, light the incense and come back out again. This was not necessarily a trivial data point. Priests who entered the inner rooms of the temple were discouraged from dilly-dallying, lest their delay cause the people to wonder whether God had struck down the officiant in judgment (m. Yoma 5:1). As

Zechariah is delayed, the people begin to wonder and keep wondering (imperfect: *ethaumazon*).

22–24. True to Gabriel’s words, when Zechariah does emerge he *could not speak to them*. Obviously, this would have been frustrating not only because his muteness would have prevented him from pronouncing the closing blessing (an honour which typically fell to the presiding priest), but also because he had quite a bit of news to share! Though Zechariah *remained* mute from this point forward, he finishes out his week, and then returns to his home in the Judean foothills (1:39). Eventually, Elizabeth is found to be pregnant in fulfilment of Gabriel’s words and stays *in seclusion* for five months. Since three to five months is roughly the time period before a pregnant woman’s stomach begins to show, perhaps she preferred to delay announcing the pregnancy until it was subject to public confirmation.

25. In Ancient Judaism, childlessness was typically regarded as a curse; the inability to bear children carried an inherent shame (Gen. 17:17; Judg. 13:2; 1 Sam. 1:2, 5, 11; Isa. 54:1). Freed from this shame, Elizabeth announces her pregnancy in the words of the once-childless Rachel (Gen. 30:23). Rachel was chosen by God to help perpetuate Israel’s seed line, and now Elizabeth stands poised to serve the same purpose.

Although the present episode began by focusing on Zechariah, now he yields centre stage to Elizabeth. And for her part, having been granted the ability to bear children, Elizabeth participates in one of the blessings of Israel’s covenantal obedience (Lev. 26:9). At the same time, through Elizabeth’s body God has symbolically revealed that Israel’s hour of redemption has come: the curse will be reversed and the nation will bear its shame no more. In this respect, Elizabeth embodies exiled yet soon-to-be-restored Israel.

ii. Announcement of Jesus’ birth (1:26–38)

26–27. Careful to situate the announcement of Jesus’ birth alongside the previous passage, Luke notes that some six months after Elizabeth’s conception Mary receives from Gabriel news of her own baby. Gabriel’s exalted position within the angelic hierarchy is juxtaposed with the lowliness of Mary’s social station as a young girl. She is a virgin in a *town in Galilee called Nazareth*; she

is also betrothed to Joseph, who is, not insignificantly, *of the house of David* – already anticipating that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Davidic promise in 2 Samuel 7. If Elizabeth’s post-menopausal pregnancy is a miracle of one kind, the conception within Mary’s womb is an even greater miracle.

28–29. Gabriel’s words of *greetings*, blessing (*favoured one*) and assurance of divine presence (*The Lord is with you*) draw to mind Yahweh’s comforting words to exiled Israel in Zephaniah 3:14–17; the Greek behind the last phrase (*ho kyrios meta sou*) is reminiscent of Judges 6:12 (*‘The LORD is with you’*; LXX: *kyrios meta sou*), part of a larger passage (Judg. 6:11–18) where the angel of the Lord appoints Gideon to be Israel’s delivering judge. Such language indicates that the divine deliverance wrought through Gideon and promised to Zephaniah is now again about to be realized. Hearing *his words*, Mary is *much perplexed* (*dietarchtē*) or ‘deeply disturbed’ (JB), wondering about the import of this greeting.⁹ Mary knows her Scriptures (1:46–55) and she knows too that the angel’s words signal God’s intervention on Israel’s behalf.

30. Gabriel’s command not to fear is not only a pastoral response to Mary’s perplexity but also a stock component of theophanic encounters. Nor is it insignificant, given earlier parallels between Gabriel’s announcement and Zephaniah 3, that the imperative *Do not be afraid* also occurs in Zephaniah 3:16, further confirming Mary as a living metaphor of exiled Jerusalem. As if to drive home that she retains the status of ‘favoured one’ (*kecharitōmenē*), the angel offers that the young girl has *found favour* (*charin*) with God. Although this last phrase may give the impression that Mary has somehow merited divine attention, the expression simply denotes God’s elective purposes.

31. The wording of this verse closely parallels the wording of the angelic announcement to Zechariah in verse 13, drawing attention to the close comparison between John and Jesus, as well as to God’s close involvement in both births. Between Luke 1:13 and 1:31 there are of course differences as well. Among these is the

9. For other reasons as to why Mary might resist Gabriel’s announcement, see Reid, ‘Overture’, pp. 428–429.

fact that in the case of John's birth announcement (1:13), it is the father who is given the child's name, whereas here it is the mother who *will name him Jesus* (cf. Matt. 1:18–25). Whereas Matthew's birth account tightens the connection between the name Jesus, which means 'God is salvation', and its significance for his future saving role (Matt. 1:21), Luke makes no comment along these lines.

32–33. The demonstrative pronoun 'this one' (*houtos*) or – more mundanely – *he* (NRSV) emphasizes Jesus' unusual qualities. First, like John (1:15), Jesus *will be great*, an assessment which will be shared by Jesus' contemporaries (7:16). Yet it is a greatness that can also in some sense be replicated through the disciples' humble service (9:46–48; 22:24–27). Second, he will also be called *Son of the Most High*. Since *the Most High* is normally a Gentile designation for Yahweh, its occurrence here in a conversation with a Jewish girl is puzzling, but can perhaps be explained as a nod to Luke's thematic interest in Gentiles. More to the point, since the divine epithet is especially characteristic of Daniel (occurring a staggering thirteen times), Gabriel seems to be reinforcing that that which he had conveyed to Daniel centuries earlier is now about to materialize. Climactically, Gabriel promises that Jesus *will reign over the house of Jacob for ever*, fulfilling the Davidic promise of an everlasting kingdom.

34. Although Gabriel's announcement did not specify as much, Mary somehow infers – correctly as it turns out – that her conception will occur entirely apart from Joseph's involvement.¹⁰ Naturally, she is curious as to the biological process, since *I am a virgin*. Other complications would have quickly occurred to Mary, including daunting social and legal repercussions. For if, as we can only assume, she and Joseph were betrothed according to standard Ancient Jewish practice, her forthcoming marriage would have already been made legally binding through the betrothal deed and payment of the bridal price. This normally took place when the girl was roughly twelve. The last step of sexual consummation would occur about a year later.

10. For a persuasive handling of the source of Mary's insight, see Landry, 'Annunciation to Mary', pp. 65–79.

35. Gabriel speaks of the miraculous means of conception through two parallel promises. First, here at the beginning of the Gospel, the angel assures her that the *Holy Spirit will come upon you* (*pneuma hagion epeleusetai epi se*), just as, at the beginning of Acts, the angels assure the disciples that the Holy Spirit will come upon them (*epelthontos tou hagion pneumatos ep'hyman*; Acts 1:8) for the sake of their witness. Second, Gabriel mentions an overshadowing by the power of God. On account of this event, the angel continues, Mary's baby *will be called Son of God*. The title is as appropriate to Jesus' divine conception as it is to his role as Davidic Messiah.¹¹ Just as Gabriel predicts, the epithet will be applied to Jesus by demonic beings (4:3, 9, 41), Caiaphas (22:70) and finally the apostle Paul (Acts 9:20).

36–37. The incredible nature of Gabriel's promise is made slightly more credible by what God has already done in the life of Elizabeth. The angel draws attention to this with the startling force of *And now* (*kai idou*) or 'And behold' (ESV). If God has the power to enable Mary's relative to become pregnant in her *old age*, is it really so incredible that he should do the same for this young virgin? The bottom line – in words reminiscent of the divine prediction of Isaac's miraculous birth in Genesis 18:14 – is this: *nothing will be impossible with God*. The promise made to Abraham concerning Isaac was an initial fulfilment of that which would come to fuller fruition in Mary's womb. The very story that closes out on Jesus' being raised from the dead begins with God bringing Jesus virtually out of nothing.

38. Gabriel has been emphasizing the fact of divine intervention through the interjection 'And now ...!' (*idou*; 1:31, 36): Mary responds in kind by saying, *Here am I [idou], the servant of the Lord*. In declaring herself a *servant of the Lord*, she acknowledges her elective status, as well as her place alongside the prophets (1 Kgs 14:18; 18:36; 2 Kgs 14:25; Isa. 20:3; cf. 1 Sam. 1:11), even as she soon will exercise a prophetic voice of her own (1:46–55). Mary's succinct response reflects her willingness to comply with God's purposes,

11. At the same time, by identifying Jesus as 'Son of God', Luke is 'moving toward a more ontological (and not only functional) understanding of Jesus' sonship' (Green, p. 91). Also see below on Luke 3:38.

no matter how potentially complicating those purposes might be: *let it be with me according to your word*. Once the mother of the Davidic saviour signifies her own submission to the plan, the angel's task is complete and he is free to depart.

Theology

Like Mark and John, Luke begins his story with Jesus *and* John. But unlike the other Gospel writers, Luke's elaboration of their respective ministries lays special emphasis on their shared relationship to the Holy Spirit. John's greatness as a prophet is ultimately chalked up to the Spirit's presence (1:15); Mary's pregnancy is possible only because of the overshadowing power of the Holy Spirit (1:35). For Luke, the Gospel story cannot even get off the ground apart from the Spirit. As the Spirit is key to the beginning of Jesus' story, he would be no less central to the beginning of the church's story (Acts 2).

That the Spirit is Luke's point of departure for both his Gospel and Acts is no mere coincidence. For just as the Spirit hovered over chaos in the first creation (Gen. 1:2), now the same Spirit comes again, Luke implies, this time to bring about *new* creation. This is not unlike what God would do when Jesus was raised from the dead, a moment which Paul tells us could not happen apart from the Spirit's close involvement (Rom. 1:4; Eph. 1:17–20). Whether in the creation of life or its recreation, the Spirit is the agent of *creatio ex nihilo*.

This would have been powerful consolation for Luke's original readers who in many cases saw themselves as having nothing, or close to nothing. If the first-century believers found themselves socially marginalized on account of their faith, and if (perhaps as a result) they were lacking in resources or position, this was no cause for despair. The Spirit has a long track record of comforting and empowering people in such circumstances. When God the Spirit moves, this passage would seem to say, he does so ordinarily through the most unlikely of individuals. This not only shames the strong and the powerful, such as Herod who haunts the Gospel from the very beginning (1:5), but shows that true power resides with God – and God alone. In a world twisted by abuses of power, the power of creation and *recreation*, the power of the Spirit, provides deep and abiding comfort.

B. Mary's visit to Elizabeth (1:39–56)

Context

Struggling for answers, Mary pays a visit to her relative Elizabeth. The effect is a temporary convergence between the two conception stories. (In 1:57 – 2:52, the stories of John and Jesus will again part ways.) Elizabeth's reaction to Mary's arrival is remarkable. Not only does the foetus John prove sensitive to the Messiah's presence, but also his mother is inspired to offer an extraordinary blessing, theologically rich and chock-full of supernatural insight – all a clear confirmation of Gabriel's promise. This prompts Mary to respond with what traditionally has come to be known as the Magnificat, a song focused on God's actions on behalf of Mary (vv. 46–50), on behalf of the humble (vv. 51–53) and on behalf of Israel (vv. 54–55). The seamless interchange between Mary's personal interests and the interests of Israel renders the ensuing double-birth accounts both a tale of two families and, more significantly, the story of God's redemptive visitation.

Comment

39–40. Eager for some encouragement as she contemplates the challenging months ahead, not least the burden of the social shame she would incur as a result of a premarital pregnancy, Mary beats a hasty path – almost certainly not alone – up through the Judean *hill country* to her cousin. At length, she arrives and greets Elizabeth, an appropriately deferential gesture for an adolescent girl approaching a much older relative.

41. But the normal hierarchy of honour is about to be reversed, as Mary's greeting triggers a twofold response. First, deep within Elizabeth's womb John leaps in reaction to the Messiah's presence, signifying among other things that – in a head-on challenge to the rampant Roman practice of child-exposure – the human unborn are capable of humanity's highest calling of worship. Second, Elizabeth herself is *filled with the Holy Spirit*. The same Spirit who has created new life within Mary (1:35) is also now inspiring Elizabeth to *interpret* the significance of that life through a providentially arranged meeting. This sequence prepares for the Spirit's dual function in Luke–Acts: recreating the cosmos through resur-

rection, and inspiring human agents to give witness to this new creation.

42. Elizabeth's *loud cry* of joy is not only consistent with a human response to divine action (Josh. 6:16; Pss 20:5; 98:4; Isa. 12:6; 58:1; etc.), but also points more specifically to the awaited messianic birth pangs (Isa. 26:15–21; cf. Isa. 66:5–11). Two blessings follow from Elizabeth's lips: one directed to Mary and the other to Jesus – no small comfort considering the trials ahead!¹² This double macarism (blessing) anticipates the blessing which Jesus will impart to his disciples at the Gospel's close (24:50).¹³ Ensclosed between these two bookends are the blessings promised to heirs of the kingdom (6:20–23). Over the course of the narrative, then, Jesus the blessed one par excellence becomes the blesser par excellence.

43. Still under divine inspiration, Elizabeth expresses her astonishment that she is in fact welcoming *the mother of my Lord*. The statement is remarkable, since the older woman has not – as far as we know – been informed of Gabriel's announcement to Mary (1:26–38). Seemingly, Elizabeth's greeting is born out of supernatural insight. Whereas the Evangelist has already – drawing on various messianic epithets – revealed Jesus as the Son of the Most High, the heir of the Davidic kingdom and Son of God (1:32–33, 35), now the phrase *the mother of my Lord* hints at Jesus' divine status.

44–45. Feeling her baby bounding about within her, Elizabeth gathers that the inauguration of the messianic age, sometimes signified by leaping for *joy* (Isa. 35:6; Mal. 4:2), is now underway. Accordingly, she delivers a final blessing on Mary. More exactly, it is a blessing on anyone who believes *that there would be a fulfilment* of God's promises. God's blessings are not unconditionally and indiscriminately granted but are subject to a living faith anchored in the covenantal promises. Once again, Jesus' mother functions as a model for all those who take God at his word.

46. On receiving confirmation of the annunciation, Mary *magnifies* the Lord by ascribing to God a wide range of attributes

12. That Mary is *blessed . . . among women* is qualified by a more fundamental blessing falling on all those who obey God (11:27–28).

13. So Bovon, p. 59.

and functions. Like the song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1–10), Mary's rhythmic outburst celebrates a divinely facilitated birth; like so many psalms of praise (e.g. Pss 18; 145; etc.; cf. 1 Chr. 16:8–36; Rev. 11:17–18), it declares praise as well as its reasons. Though Mary's canto has been carefully stylized, this does not mean that its substance is either a community invention or a Lukan fiction.¹⁴ The Magnificat's poetic form may easily be credited to Mary. Furthermore, although it is *generally* unlikely that the historical Mary was literate, this does not mean she would have been unfamiliar with Torah as it would have been read aloud in the regular services. It is quite possible, in other words, that the song's shape and many scriptural references (e.g. Deut. 10:21; 1 Sam. 2:1; Ps. 34:1–3) derive from the very voice (*ipsissima vox*) of Mary.

47. As Mary rejoices in God my Saviour (*ēgalliasen . . . epi tō theō tō sōtēri mou*), her words recall Habakkuk who likewise rejoiced 'in God my saviour' (*agalliasomai . . . epi tō theō tō sōtēri mou*; Hab. 3:18, LXX). The parallel is likely intentional: just as the ancient prophet looked forward to Israel's eventual release from its pagan Chaldean overlords, so now Mary looks ahead to a final and lasting release from the latest resident pagans lording it over God's people – all to be accomplished through Jesus. Though the NRSV and many other versions have Mary rejoicing in the present, *ēgalliasen* is a perfective aorist. It is more on target, then, to say that Mary 'has rejoiced'. That this and other verbs in the canto carry perfective force suggests that although the reign of the Messiah will unfold in the future, the very certainty of that reign permits Mary to speak of events as if they have already occurred in the past.

48–49. True to the form of the Hebrew psalm of praise, Mary now reveals the reasons for her acclamation: for starters, the God of Israel has had regard for her *lowliness* or humiliation (*tapeinōsis*). The humiliation is not simply hers but is shared by all of Israel – it is the humiliation of exile, painfully evidenced by the indignity of Gentile political control over the fortunes and sacred space of Israel. Because the messianic promise, which includes the promise of reversal of exile, is now about to be fulfilled even in her body,

14. Contra Brown, *Birth*, p. 347.

there is some sense in which Mary mediates the benefits of that promise to Israel. Cognizant of this reality, and cognizant too of the significance of the moment, she goes on to declare – with intimations of the Abrahamic blessing (Gen. 12:3) – that successive generations will declare her blessed. If Mary can say that *the Mighty One has done great things for me*, it is because the divinely wrought *great things* that Israel's exiles could only dream about will now soon come to pass (Ps. 126:2–3).¹⁵ God *has done great things* for Mary, because God will soon use her in an extraordinary way to accomplish his purposes.

50. Having earlier been instructed not to fear on receiving the news of the messianic child (1:30), now Mary speaks of the *mercy* awaiting those who exhibit a very different kind of holy *fear*.¹⁶ This implies, along with other texts (e.g. 10:37), that while God does not unconditionally guarantee mercy to the nation of Israel, he does guarantee mercy to those within Israel who fear God. This principle is nothing new but has been operative *from generation to generation*.

51. The core of Mary's song catalogues a series of reversals that foreshadow the many reversals to come in the narrative, not least the scattering of those who are proud *in the thoughts of their hearts*. On Luke's understanding, though such dark thoughts are not as flagrant as public sins, they are no less pernicious (5:22; 6:45; 12:15–21; 16:15; 24:25, 38). And when God repays such thoughts of the heart with judgment, it is tantamount to a display of divine arm-strength, as when Yahweh had *shown strength with his arm* to Egypt (Exod. 3:19; 6:1; 13:9, 16; 32:11; Deut. 4:34; 5:15; 7:19). For Mary, when inward thoughts are judged accordingly in real time (Luke 2:35; 5:22; 6:8; 11:17), this corroborates that a new and final exodus is underway.

52–53. Although the precise outworkings of this envisioned messianic revolution remain to be seen, the certainty of its socio-political impact can hardly be doubted. Society's movers and

15. I am grateful to Bryan Eklund for pointing this out to me.

16. Luke is replete with divine encounters that inspire temporary fear (2:9–10; 5:10; 8:25; 9:34; etc.), but the point of these encounters is to lay the groundwork for the fear of the Lord.

shakers (the likes of Caesar, Herod, Pilate, Caiaphas and the priests) will be brought down *from their thrones*; those who are *lowly (tapeinous)* like Mary herself (v. 48) will be exalted (cf. Isa. 11:4; 49:13). Meanwhile, the hungry will be filled *with good things*, while the rich will be dismissed empty-handed. The former vision anticipates meal scenes in Luke where the hungry are filled (9:10–17; 22:14–23; 24:28–34; cf. 11:3); the latter, encounters where ‘the haves’, like the well-resourced ruler of 18:18–30, suddenly find themselves among ‘the have-nots’.

54–55. God *has helped his servant Israel* in keeping with his merciful character and in remembrance of the Abrahamic promise (Gen. 12; 15; 17), which will be touched on two more times in this foundational stage of Jesus’ story (Luke 1:73; 2:29).¹⁷ The heart of that promise, it is to be recalled, pertained to land and seed. The promise of land is not unconnected with Luke’s theme of Jubilee, centred on the restoration of land (4:16–19). The Abrahamic promise of a seed, through which the nations would be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3), presages the raising up of various children for Abraham (Luke 13:10–17; 16:19–31; 19:1–10; Acts 3:25; 7:2, 7–8; 13:26), along with the Gentile mission.¹⁸ As Mary well knew, the promise of Messiah entailed the twofold promise of a newly constituted worshipping people *and* a newly constituted space.

56. Mary stays with Elizabeth for *about three months*, perhaps not coincidentally the same length of time that Jochebed hides her son Moses. She stays, that is, until the time of John’s birth (since Elizabeth was now six months along). At the end of this time, Mary returns not to Joseph’s house but to *her* house, assuring the reader that her virgin status remains intact.

17. As Jipp (‘Abraham’, pp. 113–114) rightly observes, given the obvious parallels between the miraculous births of Isaac and Jesus, Luke’s concern is ‘to portray to the reader that God’s merciful kindness to Abraham has not been forgotten, and that . . . God is continuing the story and promises he had initiated with Abraham in Genesis’.

18. See Hartman, ‘Children of Abraham’.

Theology

With the sentimentalization of the Christmas story in so much contemporary culture, it is easy to lose sight of the remarkable burden weighing on Mary following the angel's announcement – a burden matched by an equally remarkable obedience. If Mary's family adhered to the standard betrothal practices of the day, she would have been not much past twelve or thirteen years old at the time of Gabriel's announcement. One can hardly imagine the pressures on an adolescent girl tasked with giving birth to and eventually raising Israel's Messiah – this on top of the reputational damage that would tarnish her the rest of her years. How many among Mary's contemporaries would have believed her story? Some, like Elizabeth, yes; many others, not at all. Even before Jesus is born, those who are in on the messianic secret are called to share in the Messiah's pressures and shame.

Nor can one fail to observe the Magnificat's far-ranging vision – a vision of hope. Mary recognized that the promise of the ages was living inside her, that the fruit of her womb would cash out the promises made to Abraham of land and seed, and would close out the exodus initially set in motion under Moses. Yet with the image of the proud being deposed from their thrones, we also see glimpses of the Davidic covenant: one day those who walked in the footsteps of the false king Saul would yield their throne to Israel's rightful anointed, the seed destined to sit on the throne (2 Sam. 7). Within the tight confines of Mary's physical body, all the covenants – and in fact all of human history – were about to reach their climax.

The announcement of the Messiah's coming is not necessarily good news for all. Though many religious and political power brokers in Luke's day supposed that their positions would be consolidated either with the coming of the future kingdom or with the perpetuation of the current kingdom, such hopes are refuted by Mary's assertion that the existing power structures would be flipped. The announcement of Jesus' birth is an early warning that those on top would soon find themselves at the bottom; those at the bottom, on top. At the very least, the coming of the kingdom spells bad news for the social, economic, political and ideological systems

that stand opposed to God. When the kingdom arrives, nothing in creation will be safe from its catalytic effects. For all his readers whose lives are embedded in present ‘kingdom structures’, Luke intends the Magnificat to elicit not just joy but heart-searching.

C. Two births (1:57 – 2:20)

Context

Having recounted the two stories leading up to the births of John (1:5–25) and Jesus (1:26–38), as well as the bridging of these two storylines in the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth (1:39–55), Luke now focuses on the boys’ births. Structurally this section is analogous to 1:5–38. Each in turn, first comes the birth of John (1:57–80) and then the birth of Jesus (2:1–20). The chronological order of the two births, not to mention the order in which the births are related, parallels the temporal sequence of the two figures’ respective roles in salvation history.

The present section foreshadows just how intertwined the destinies of John and Jesus are, and how their extraordinary ministries were anticipated by their equally extraordinary origins. The events following John’s birth bring to a close Zechariah’s muteness and inspire the once-disobedient priest to speak of the Baptizer’s future (1:67–79). In this passage, traditionally identified as the Benedictus, he prophesies in a manner similar to Mary with her Magnificat (1:46–55). As breathtaking as events surrounding John’s birth might be, Jesus’ birth provokes a reaction of a higher order. John’s role as the messianic forerunner is predicted on earth by the likes of Zechariah; Jesus’ identity as Messiah is proclaimed in heaven by the angelic host (2:1–20). John may come first in time but Jesus comes first in significance.

Comment

i. Birth of John (1:57–80)

57–58. Roughly three months after Mary’s arrival, *the time came* (*eplēsthē ho chronos*) or ‘was fulfilled’ (YLT) for Elizabeth to give birth – to a son, as Gabriel had promised (1:13). The sense of fulfillment conveyed by *the time came* pertains not simply to the baby

reaching full term but also to a new day in salvation history.¹⁹ Impressed that Elizabeth was able to give birth despite her years, her neighbours and kin celebrate along with her (with some parallels to two certain Lukan celebrations over lost items; cf. 15:6, 9). They rejoice because *the Lord had shown* [*emegalynen*, ‘magnified’] *his great mercy* to Elizabeth, just as Mary had magnified (*megalynei*) the Lord on account of his mercy (1:46). Their joy is the very fulfilment of the angel’s promise (1:14).

59–61. The extended family gathers *to circumcise John on the eighth day*. The irony should not be lost on the reader: while Elizabeth’s friends and neighbours circumcise John to fulfil the demands of not just Torah (Lev. 12:3; m. Šabb. 18:3) but, more centrally, the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17:12), the same child would go on to play a crucial role in God’s fulfilling of that same covenant (Luke 1:73). That the baby should be named on the day of his circumcision is unusual, since Jewish babies were typically named at birth (e.g. Gen. 4:1; 25:25–26). For whatever reason, however, perhaps under Greek influence, the newborn’s family delays naming the baby until more than a week after birth.²⁰ Equally unusual is the fact that the relatives are determined to name him (conative imperfect: *ekaloun*) Zechariah, for a baby boy was usually named not *after his father* but after his grandfather. Whatever the motives of the friends and family, Elizabeth firmly rejects the idea (as the strongly worded Greek *ouchi alla*, ‘no but rather . . .’, indicates) and insists that the infant be named John, in keeping with Gabriel’s instructions (1:13). On hearing Elizabeth’s proposal, puzzled family members object on the grounds that the name is unprecedented in the family history.

62–63. Wanting to get a second opinion, the gathered group now solicits Zechariah’s input. That they should communicate with hand and head motions indicates that Zechariah is deaf as well as mute (1:20), as *kōphos* in 1:22 allows. At that point, Zechariah summons a *writing-tablet* to confirm his agreement with his wife. He writes: *His name is John*, meaning ‘Yahweh is gracious’ (Hebrew:

19. So too Fitzmyer, p. 373. This is likewise the case for 2:6 below.

20. Brown, *Birth*, p. 369.

Yôhānān). The couple's shared determination to contravene baby-naming convention – not to mention their choosing the same name independently of each other – corroborates the reality of Gabriel's revelation. Inspired by awe, onlookers are duly *amazed* (*ethaumasān*).²¹

64. Once Zechariah has submitted to the divine purposes, his *mouth is opened and his tongue is freed*. After many months of speechlessness and still soaking in the significance of this new human life, the unlikely father finds that the only words appropriate to the situation are words of praise: 'Zechariah sings because he has now begun to believe.'²² His singing is emblematic of an emerging corporate reality: whereas the dramatic shift from muteness to praise was predicted to mark Israel's return from exile (Isa. 35:5–6), the aged priest unwittingly presents himself as the embodiment of eschatological Israel, upon whom the promises have now come.

65–66. The uncanny chain of events makes a conspicuous impact. At a local level, the same *fear* (*phobos*) that had befallen Zechariah (1:12) now falls on *all their neighbours*, even as it would come upon the shepherds following Jesus' birth (2:9). But news of this event also extends to the surrounding *hill country of Judea*, where Mary had travelled earlier (1:39). While *all these things are talked about*, the populace lay up the extraordinary occurrence in their hearts (*ethento . . . en tē kardia*; cf. 2:19), all the while speculating on the infant's future calling.

But what narrative purpose might all this reportage have served? First of all, Luke is meeting his audience on their own terms, for in ancient biographies extraordinary birth accounts were typically brought in to help lay the groundwork for the recounting of an extraordinary life. In addition, the miraculous events straddling John's birth may also help explain the people's readiness to respond

21. At 1:21, the people wondered (*ethaumazōn*) at Zechariah's delay in the temple. Now they register the same response in reaction to Zechariah and Elizabeth's joint decision to name the baby John. The verb *thaumazō* 'in both secular Greek and the LXX often refers to the reaction of people to the presence and action of a deity' (*EDNT*, p. 135).

22. Bovon, p. 69.

to his invitation some decades later (3:3–6). If historians are obliged to conform to genre expectations and explain causality where they can, Luke does not disappoint.

67–68. Just as his wife Elizabeth was inspired by the Spirit on Mary's visit, Zechariah *was filled with the Holy Spirit* as he pronounces prophetic revelation. Adhering, as Mary did in the Magnificat, to the genre of the Hebrew *berakab* (blessing), the aged priest infuses a familiar form of praise with new Christological meaning. The canto begins by declaring the blessedness of God, who is worthy of such blessing because *he has looked favourably [epeskepsato] on his people and redeemed them*. Forming an *inclusio* with the same verb in verse 78, the verb *episkeptomai* ('to inspect, go visit') has negative connotations when referring to divine judgment (e.g. Exod. 20:5; 34:7; Lev. 18:25) and positive connotations (e.g. Pss 65:9; 106:4; Jer. 27:22) when referring to divine redemption. Elements of both judgment and redemption are arguably in view here.

69–70. The working out of that redemption depends on God's raising up (*egeiren*) a *mighty saviour* (*keras sōtērias*, lit. 'horn of salvation'), that is, a mighty source of salvation *in the house* of David (cf. Deut. 33:17; Ps. 132:17). Jesus' origins from the house of David have already been well established (Luke 1:27, 32). Now his oblique identification as the Davidic saviour/horn indicates that Yahweh will 'visit' Israel in and through his person. Zechariah's use of *egeirō* ('to raise up') in connection with salvation is partially informed by its denotation of resurrection (Luke 7:14, 22; 8:54; 9:7, 22; 11:31; 20:37; 24:7, 34; Acts 15:13–18). But a more direct connection to Amos 9:11 ('On that day I will *raise up* / the booth of David that is fallen, / and repair its breaches, / and *raise up* its ruins, / and rebuild it as in the days of old'; emphasis added) seems to be in play as well, since the prophetic text speaks about the 'raising up' of a Davidide and comes to be applied to the resurrection (Acts 15:13–18). Though it is uncertain how much of this the character Zechariah (as opposed to Luke) understood in the moment, he is persuaded, as Mary was, that God is about to fulfil the terms of the promise made to David (2 Sam. 7).

71. The principal outcome of this imminent divine action is Israel's release from *all who hate us*, that is, *our enemies*. Such enemies no doubt include human political and religious autocrats, such as

we will meet by name in Luke 3:1–2, as well as all those who will come to hate Jesus (19:14) and his followers (6:22, 27). But they also include the dark spiritual forces standing behind the hapless human pawns (11:14–23). For the Evangelist, salvation is unimaginable apart from the vanquishing of those powers and principalities that stand opposed to God.

72–73a. In his saving activity, Zechariah continues, God has shown *mercy* . . . to our ancestors (*tōn paterōn hēmōn*). Judging by a comparison with 1:55, it seems that the *ancestors* or ‘fathers’ in question are Abraham along with Isaac and Jacob (cf. Acts 3:13, 25), though the term may also include the believing lineage after Jacob. Impressed by God’s power to secure Israel’s redemption through his wife’s unlikely womb (on the pattern of Sara), Zechariah follows Mary’s lead (1:55) in interpreting the preternatural birth in view as a fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise. The fulfilment of the same covenantal promise is a show of *mercy* because in the Scriptures mercy is pre-eminently ascribed to Yahweh in his capacity as redeemer, whether leading his people out of Egypt (Exod. 33:19; 34:6) or out of exile (Deut. 30:3; Isa. 49:9–11).

73b–75. The goal of this divine redemption is not only the inheritance of land (as per the terms of the Abrahamic covenant) but also that God’s people *might serve* (*latreuein*) Yahweh in priestly fashion (1) *without fear*, (2) *in holiness* and (3) *in righteousness* – conditions which will be provisionally met in the community after Pentecost (Acts 4:31–35).²³ By the same token, the phrase *all our days* signals that the experience of the apostolic church only presages a more perfected worship in the fullness of the eternal kingdom.

76–77. Now turning to his newly born son, Zechariah issues a prophecy regarding the boy’s future calling, effectively answering the people’s question in verse 66a (‘What then will this child become?’). The core prediction about John complements the identity of Jesus: just as Jesus was to be ‘Son of the Most High’ (1:32), John will *be called the prophet of the Most High*. In this prophetic

23. ‘The word for “serve” . . . connotes priestly service in worship (Exod 3:12), fulfilling the ancient ideal that Israel would be “a kingdom of priests” (Exod 19:6)’ (Edwards, pp. 62–63).

role John will *go before the Lord to prepare [betoimasai] his ways*, that is, Jesus' ways. This phrasing not only circles back to Gabriel's promise that John would appear as Malachi's eschatological Elijah (1:16–17; Mal. 4:5) who would also prepare the way (Mal. 3:1), but also looks ahead to the Baptizer's later identification as the Isaianic figure tasked with preparing (*betoimasate*) the way in the desert (Luke 3:4–6; cf. Isa. 40:3). The linking of Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 (through the key terms 'prepare', 'way' and 'Lord') is not unique to Luke (cf. Mark 1:2–3) and likely occurred in pre-Christian interpretation of the Scriptures. John is also tasked with bestowing a *knowledge of salvation* through the *forgiveness of their sins*. This prediction obviously looks ahead to John's ministry of baptism, which would be for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3). Yet Luke's Zechariah stakes his claim carefully: John is the source not of salvation, but of the '*knowledge of salvation*'.

78–79a. This forgiveness of sins which Zechariah anticipates comes only on account of the *tender mercy* or 'bowels' (*splanchna*) of *our God*. In Hebrew thought, the intestines were regarded as the seat of deep feeling and affection. Accordingly, it is Yahweh's *splanchna* that compel him to rise up on behalf of his people. On account of the same mercy, the *dawn from on high will break upon us*. Trading on prophetic language which couples the eschatological dawn with the glorious presence of God (Isa. 60:1–2; Mal. 4:2), Zechariah's words look ahead to the Pentecostal granting of the Spirit (Acts 2), who is also the '*power from on high*' (Luke 24:49, emphasis added).²⁴ Once so empowered by the Spirit, God's people will be positioned to *give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death*, who are, according to Isaiah (Isa. 9:2), one and the same as the Gentile nations yet to be incorporated into Yahweh's fold. If Zechariah is to be believed, the Spirit's first and foremost role is missional.

79b. A second consequence of this promised salvation is peace. For when the dawn of God appears, it will direct the feet of God's people *into the way of peace* (cf. Rom. 3:17). In Luke's narrative,

24. For Strauss (*Davidic Messiah*, pp. 103–108), the dawn is either salvation or the Messiah himself.

beneficiaries of such peace will include the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears (7:50), the haemorrhaging woman (8:48) and the disciples on welcoming the Risen Lord (24:36). In all these instances, peace is connected with salvation, forgiveness and wholeness. This is consistent with the Hebrew concept of *shalom*.

80. Luke rounds off his account of John's birth by summarizing his development from his youth up until his ministry. Here are two points of interest. First, Luke tells us that John *became strong in spirit*, presumably meaning effective under the power and suasion of the Holy Spirit. In this respect, John falls into the same distinctive category as Jesus who, like John, is not only conceived through the Spirit's activity but would also go on to be empowered by the same Spirit. Second, the Evangelist notes that John – unlike Jesus – remains *in the wilderness* until the commencement of his public ministry in the desert. John's seclusion from Israel's day-to-day life for a sizeable portion of his life confirms both the unique nature of his calling and the importance of personal preparation for that ministry. Moreover, his seclusion *in the wilderness* only reinforces the importance of the desert for John's calling (1:17, 76; 3:4). How and where the Baptizer spends his youth stands in contrast to young Jesus' activities and whereabouts (2:41–52).

ii. *Birth of Jesus (2:1–20)*

1. Humiliated by Roman taxation and an occupying military presence, Palestinian Jews at the time of Jesus' birth, along with many of Luke's own Jewish hearers, would have chafed at the mention of a fresh *decree* from Rome. In addition to bearing the economic burdens associated with a census (which were implemented for the purposes of taxation if not also military conscription), the Jews also had to reconcile themselves to the fact that their chief overlord *Emperor Augustus* was widely acclaimed as the principal mediator between humanity and the gods – Pontifex Maximus. His edict mandates that *all the world* (*pasan tēn oikoumenēn*) should be registered. Here, as in Acts 11:28, the term *oikoumenē* is used in the specific and more narrow sense of the Roman Empire.

2. Commentators here have long noted the historical difficulties posed by Luke's statement that this was the *first registration* (*apographē prōtē*) under the watch of Quirinius as *governor of Syria* (*hēgemoneuontos*

tēs Syrias). Whereas Quirinius served as the Syrian governor in AD 6–9 and did in fact implement a notorious census towards the beginning of his administration, this is far too late a date to be linked with Jesus’ birth which, judging by other bearings, must have occurred at least ten years earlier.²⁵ Perhaps the most promising solution to this problem is not to reject Luke’s accuracy without further ado (since it is unlikely that an author of Luke’s historiographical aspirations – as stated in Luke 1:1–4 – would commit such an obvious blunder), but to ask instead whether traditional translations have it wrong, especially in regard to the adjective *prōtos*. To wit, if we translate *hautē apographē prōtē hēgemoneuontos tēs Syrias* not as *This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria* (NRSV) but rather as ‘This was the registration *prior* to when Quirinius was governor of Syria’ (as is grammatically justified; see *LSJ*, p. 1535), then Luke is simply distinguishing this census from a more famous census which would occur some years later.²⁶

3–5. Like so many others (Luke’s *all* is meant as an informal generalization), Joseph must travel to his home town – an unusual though not unprecedented protocol. For Joseph as well as for Mary, who is both betrothed *and* pregnant, this meant going up to Bethlehem in Judea, situated some 70 miles south of Nazareth in the Galilee – a journey of roughly four days. On the basis of 1 Samuel 17:12 and other texts, Luke calls Bethlehem *the city of David* and explains that Joseph is required to go back to his home there because he is *from the house and family of David* (as already observed in 1:27; cf. also 1:32, 69). For the Evangelist, Joseph’s return to Bethlehem cinches Jesus’ genealogical connection to David, an important qualification for any would-be messiah (Mic. 5:1–2; cf. Matt. 2:5–6). Luke does not state outright that the couple’s journey to Bethlehem serves to fulfil Scripture, as Matthew implies (Matt. 2:1–6). But to the extent that his readers would have understood

25. See Young, *DJG*, pp. 72–84.

26. This is precisely Luke’s use of *prōtos* in Acts 1:1; see also John 1:15, 30; 15:18. The argument is supported by Nolland, pp. 99–102. For further discussion of this complex issue, see Marshall, pp. 97–104.

Joseph's return to his home town as a 'fulfilment' of Scripture, they might well have noticed that just as Roman political interests were the means by which God would achieve his purposes surrounding Jesus' birth, the same Roman self-interests would again be instrumental in advancing the divine plan when it came to Jesus' death (Luke 23:2).

6–7. During the couple's stay in Bethlehem, Mary's pregnancy comes to full term: 'the days are fulfilled' (*eplēsthēsan bai hēmerai*; cf. 1:57). Luke's description of their spare quarters confirms the humble character of Jesus' origins. The holy family settle down in a space normally reserved for livestock, because *there was no place for them in the inn* (*katalymati*). Although *katalyma* has been traditionally translated as *inn*, this is almost certainly incorrect. Only slightly more plausible is that the term refers to a public wayside shelter. But more likely still, Luke had in mind guest quarters of some kind near to a private home, much the same sense of *katalyma* in 22:11. That Jesus was born in a cave is amply attested by tradition (e.g. Justin, *Dial.* 78.4), and given first-century practice of keeping livestock in caves, not improbable. Jesus' placement *in a manger* (*en phatnē*) indicates that he was either laid in a feeding trough repurposed as a crib or kept in an animal stall repurposed as a nursery. Though the first of these two meanings of *phatnē* occurs more frequently, Luke's subsequent use of the same noun with the latter meaning (13:15) inclines us to imagine that Jesus was actually laid not in a manger but on the floor of a makeshift stall.

Certain details foreshadow what would later occur. Mary's wrapping of Jesus in *bands of cloth* anticipates the day of Jesus' death when his body would again be wrapped (23:53a), only then in a shroud. Meanwhile, Mary's laying (*aneklinen*) Jesus in a stall or cave points to the moment when his passive corpse is laid (*ethēken*) in the tomb (23:53b). Finally, Jesus is identified as Mary's *firstborn* (*protōtokon*), presaging the Risen Jesus' status as firstborn (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 1:5) in early Christianity.²⁷ As firstborn, the Risen Christ would be declared to be the heir of renewed creation, and Luke hints at nothing less here.

27. Bovon, p. 85.

8–9. The narrative lens now swings to the nearby open countryside, where shepherds are *keeping watch over their flock by night*. There an angel of the Lord *stood before them* in the midst of the *glory [doxa] of the Lord*, much to the shepherds' trepidation (cf. 1:78–79).²⁸ If the *doxa* is in fact a fresh manifestation of the divine pillar of cloud that had occupied Solomon's temple (1 Kgs 8:10), then this is a theologically wrought moment. What could this mean except that the divine presence, which had long since departed with the exile (Ezek. 11:23), was now poised to redescend, not in a physical temple in Jerusalem but – of all places – in the Judean countryside. With the manifestation of God's glory to ordinary shepherds, who occupied the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, Mary's vision of reversal (1:52–53) is already beginning to materialize. In this new era, the glory of God would now occupy the most unexpected of places and reveal itself to the most unexpected of individuals.

10. True to the form of biblical theophanies, the angel commands the shepherds not to be afraid. He then goes on to proclaim (*euangelizomai*) the meaning of the event. The verb choice not only harks back to Isaiah's description of return from exile (Isa. 52:7; 61:1), but also takes off on a standard term associated with imperial propaganda. The former context suggests that the angelic announcement is part and parcel of Isaiah's vision of restoration (especially Isa. 9:1–7); the latter backdrop implies that Caesar's vain attempts at self-promotion have finally met their match in the birth of another Lord. Not surprisingly, then, the message promises to be a source of *great joy* [balancing the 'great fear' of the shepherds] *for all the people (laō)*, that is, the believing community.

11. The essential reason for this joy, as conveyed by the causal particle *hoti*, is the birth of the Saviour and Lord Christ. Appropriately, this 'Christ' (*Messiah*) is declared to be born *in the city of David*, heir of the royal promise that David would always have a descendant ruling on the throne (2 Sam. 7). That this Christ should also be deemed *Saviour (sōtēr)* and *Lord (kyrios)* aligns him in the first

28. Just as angels announce the entrance of the Messiah into the world, so too will angels announce his departure and imminent return (Acts 1:10–11).

instance with Yahweh himself, who is designated by both terms (Isa. 43:3, 11; 45:15, 21; 49:26; 60:16; 63:8; LXX). Yet insofar as these two terms were also applied to Caesar, Luke is implying that the exalted epithets normally accorded to Augustus must now be transferred to Jesus.²⁹

12. Even though the term *sign* (*sēmeion*) occurs here for the first time in Luke's narrative, the angel's parting words to the shepherds mark the third and final angelic corroboration.³⁰ And yet here the sign, matched by the 'opposed sign' of 2:34, seems to perform a distinctive function similar to the Mosaic signs of the exodus which were performed both as an indictment and as a barometer of faith (e.g. Exod. 7:1–6). The sign is that the shepherds will find the baby *wrapped in bands of cloth and lying* in a stall (if not a manger). If early Christian interpretation is correct, then the fact that Israel's Messiah should be swaddled in an animal stall is not unrelated to Isaiah 1:3, a verse which laments Israel's failure to recognize its Lord.³¹

13–14. Quite *suddenly* an army (*plēthos stratias*) of angels now appears *praising God* and offering a blessing of peace *on earth* among 'people of favour' (*en anthrōpōis eudokias*), that is, the elect (cf. 1QH IV, 32–33). If one of the recurring watchwords of the Roman imperium was 'peace and safety', the heavenly host now declares the establishment of a new peace settling in on the elect community. Here *peace* is to be understood not merely as the absence of conflict but as the eschatological state of blessing, health and wholeness. That an 'army' (NRSV *multitude*) of angels (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19; 2 Chr. 33:3, 5) should declare peace suggests that a holy war is underway against those who resist God's purposes; these can only vainly resist the divine fiat and are best served suing for peace (cf. 14:32).

29. See Perrin, 'Imperial Cult', pp. 124–134.

30. The first was Zechariah's muteness (1:20); the second, issued to Mary, Elizabeth's pregnancy (1:35–37).

31. 'The ox knows its owner, / and the donkey its master's crib; / but Israel does not know, / my people do not understand' (Isa. 1:3). So also Green, pp. 135–136.

15–16. By the time *the angels had left them*, the shepherds have enough information to begin looking for the child. In their excitement, they move quickly and eventually *found* [*aneuran*] *Mary and Joseph*, but only after some intense investigation – Luke’s verb of finding connotes nothing less.³² And with Mary and Joseph is the baby, *lying* just where the angel had promised. For the Evangelist’s homiletic purposes, the shepherds’ swift responsiveness and careful diligence provides a model of discipleship.

17–18. When the shepherds relate their experience in the fields, Mary and Joseph, together with the other witnesses of the shepherds’ words, express their astonishment. But we must also imagine Jesus’ parents having a sense of comfort that comes with confirmation. Meanwhile, making its rounds around the region, the shepherds’ story would have surely functioned as a kind of independent witness to Jesus’ Messiahship, even as it would confirm the veracity of Mary’s story. In the midst of her shame, Mary finds much-needed corroboration for the almost unbelievable account of her pregnancy and birth – and that from the most unlikely of quarters.

19. Mary *treasured* (*syntērei*) the shepherds’ words while ‘pondering’ (*syballousa*) them in her heart. The former verb (*syntēreō*) expresses the value which Mary attached to the shepherds’ account; the participial form of *syballō* implies that she was connecting all kinds of dots in her own mind. Mary’s awestruck processing of the shepherds’ revelatory experience is a template for how Luke would have his hearers engage with his Gospel.

20. Unwilling to leave their sheep alone for too long, the *shepherds returned* to their fields. But as they go, they imitate the heavenly host by *glorifying and praising God*. Though the shepherds’ response may seem like an incidental detail, in the Jewish thought-world the synchronization of heavenly and earthly worship was signal enough that the kingdom of God had arrived. Between their own experience of the divine self-revelation and the story related by Mary (*as it had been told them*), the shepherds are compelled to worship.

32. BDAG, p. 65.

Theology

For the better part of the modern era (for reasons that cannot be entered into here), biblical interpretation has largely ignored the political dimension of the Gospels. Today, while scholars will disagree as to what exactly Luke thought of Rome, there is little doubt *that* he must have done quite a bit of thinking about the Eternal City, if only because the Roman Empire was the dominant religious and political force of the day. Along with many first-century Jews, not to mention a handful of New Testament writers (1 Pet. 5:13; Rev. 17), Luke seems to have interpreted Rome as a kind of Babylon, perpetuating Israel's exile. After all, when Zechariah looks forward to Israel being 'rescued from the hands of our enemies' (1:74), or when the angels describe Jesus in terms typically reserved for Caesar (2:11), such data points suggest that Jesus' coming kingdom was destined to challenge Rome head-on: not because there was something exceptionally egregious about this particular empire but because, like other empires that had gone before and would come after, it was hell-bent on conforming God's people to its viewpoints and values.

Whereas the Roman Empire had touted itself as history's greatest kingdom, Luke announces the arrival of a new kingdom. The nature of this kingdom is indicated by John's future role as the Isaianic forerunner who would prepare the way in the desert (1:76). It was after all to be a return-from-exile kingdom, the adherents of which would inherit the salvation, peace and glory promised long ago by Isaiah. What is more, this kingdom would be ruled by a Davidic king (1:69; 2:4, 11), who would operate by an entirely different *modus operandi*. When this king prepared to pass through the womb, his parents would be forced to share borrowed space with livestock. And when this newborn king finally entered the world, he would be greeted not by the rich and powerful but rather by, paradoxically enough, a heavenly host *and* a set of poor shepherds who were living in an out-of-the-way field. In a surprising twist, yet in keeping with the scriptural promise, it turns out that the salvation, peace and glory that Isaiah had promised and Rome tried to manufacture were actually to be found in a child with the most humble and inconspicuous of beginnings. Insofar as Rome sought to define salvation, peace and glory according to the

terms of its own narrative, Luke's presentation of Jesus' birth challenges and redirects that narrative altogether. In this respect, Jesus' kingdom *is* a political kingdom. But it is political in a way that no-one had ever expected.

D. Young Jesus at the temple (2:21–52)

Context

The two episodes recorded in 2:22–40 and 2:41–52 straddle Jesus' childhood, the former occurring just after his first week of life and the latter occurring when he was twelve. The two passages' mutual relation is further augmented by the repetition of closing editorial comments bearing on Jesus' growth in wisdom and physical stature (2:40, 52). Whatever Luke's motives for including this material, the two stories underscore the fact that the full-grown Jesus did not suddenly materialize out of thin air, as if by magic. Rather, he developed just as any human being would develop. Meanwhile, Jesus' movement from the north country (2:1–20) back to the temple in the south (2:22–38), matched by a repetition of the same geographical motion in verses 39–52, anticipates the larger-scale journey when Jesus would begin his ministry in the Galilee (4:14) only to set his face towards Jerusalem (9:51). At the same time, the present passage builds on earlier narrative. Providing complementary witness to a previous voice, Simeon's song about Jesus (2:28–32) parallels Zechariah's song about John (1:67–79), with earlier themes of salvation, peace and glory staying squarely in the foreground. Finally, while the story of the twelve-year-old Jesus does nothing to diminish Jesus' earthly parents, it now becomes clear that Jesus' title of 'Son of the Most High' (1:32) indicates a unique filial relationship, soon to be confirmed through the baptism (3:21–22).

Comment

i. Presentation at the temple (2:21–40)

21. Having recounted the remarkable occurrences surrounding John's circumcision (1:57–80), Luke narrates an even more remarkable chain of events at Jesus' circumcision. The scene is set as follows: *After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus.* The alert reader will not fail to note the

parallelism between, on the one side, Zechariah and Elizabeth's naming of John in accordance with Gabriel's directive (1:13), and, on the other side, Joseph and Mary's naming of Jesus *also* in accordance with the archangel's words (1:31). God's oversight of the infants' respective namings reinforces the complementarity of their roles as well as their co-participation in the divine mission.

22–24. Following the day of circumcision, Scripture requires a thirty-three-day quarantining of the birth mother, on account of her uncleanness. Ideally this period would culminate with appropriate sacrifice (Lev. 12). Accordingly, once the period of *their purification* has run its course, Joseph and Mary proceed to the temple. The couple's offering of two birds (whether *turtle-doves* or *young pigeons*) instead of a sheep indicates their poverty. It is far from clear, however, whether their straitened circumstances had anything to do with their decision to consecrate Jesus rather than pay the ransom price for the firstborn (Exod. 13:2, 12, 15).³³ In waiving their right to redeem their firstborn son (cf. 2:7), the holy couple follow the example of Hannah (1 Sam. 1:11, 22, 28) in order to convey Jesus to God. They do so out of conviction of Jesus' future messianic significance.³⁴

25–26. Simeon of Jerusalem is described in threefold fashion: he is *righteous and devout* (*diakaios kai enlabēs*), *looking forward to the consolation of Israel* and in communion with the Holy Spirit. First, as a *righteous* figure, Simeon finds himself in the company of *dikaioi* Elizabeth and Zechariah (1:6); as *devout*, he mirrors the demonstrably pious Anna (2:36–38). Such a character reference gives credibility to his impending pronouncement. Second, Simeon was renowned as one who awaited *the consolation of Israel*, the long-awaited return from exile (Isa. 40:1–2; 49:13; 57:18; 61:2). Whether Simeon's expectation was merely an inference on Luke's part or a publicly acknowledged fact (the latter seems more likely), Luke's descriptor

33. So, e.g., Green, pp. 141–142.

34. One might even go so far as to say with Reicke ('Jesus, Simeon, and Anna', p. 106) that through Jesus the 'sanctification of the firstborn son mentioned in Exodus 13.2 had taken place in a way that consummated the proper meaning of this Scripture'.

now serves to legitimize him as a qualified spokesperson for the righteous remnant.³⁵ Third, Simeon's distinguished character is related to the fact that the Holy Spirit *rested on him* (*ep' auton*), much as the Spirit would also be on (*ep' eme*) Jesus as Messiah (4:18). Simeon's Spirit-wrought conviction, that he would see the Messiah before going to the grave, is on the cusp of being confirmed. For Luke, whatever the distinction between the Spirit's activity in the era before Jesus' birth and in the days after Pentecost (Acts 2), that distinction is relative, not absolute.

27–28. In Luke–Acts, the phrase 'in the Spirit' tends to accompany significant redemptive moments (Luke 4:1; 10:21; Acts 19:21). For this reason, when Simeon enters the temple 'in the Spirit' (*en tō pneumati*), or perhaps led *by the Spirit*, or even 'by the power of the Spirit', the reader's expectations are high. The Spirit's guiding role is crucial not only in terms of timing (only by providential intervention could Simeon cross paths with Jesus' parents) but also in terms of inspiring prophetic speech. By the same token, the Spirit's role is necessary in alerting Simeon to the Christ child. Just as one righteous man in the temple foretells John's destiny (1:67–79), now another righteous man in the temple speaks of Jesus' future. Once again, Luke maintains the parallelism between John and Jesus in order to confirm their divinely ordained alliance *and* to bring out salient differences between the two.

29–30. Simeon's prayer begins in an unusual way, since it addresses God as *Master* (*despota*), a term which in the New Testament occurs only here and in Acts 4:24, where it is also used as part of a prayer. The word emphasizes, appropriately enough in this divinely orchestrated rendezvous scene, God in his sovereignty. Having seen the Messiah with his own eyes, Simeon realizes that he will soon close out his days *in peace*. On fulfilment of the Spirit's word (notably, tantamount to a divine promise), he now senses the time of his release. He realizes that in his arms is not just the human Messiah, but Israel's very *salvation* – more precisely, the means by which God will secure *salvation* for his people. The

35. This Simeon was possibly one and the same as the Sim(e)on who famously predicted Archelaus's dethronement (Josephus, *J.W.* 2.113).

angelic declaration of Jesus' coming and resultant peace (2:11, 14) is now being corroborated by human witness.

31–32. The salvation envisioned by Simeon is also a *light for revelation to the Gentiles* which God has *prepared in the presence of all peoples*. Here Luke's Simeon may have in mind Psalm 132:17 where God promises to *prepare 'a lamp for my anointed one'* in connection with a divine sprouting of the horn of David. If so, then this would be drawing from the same reservoir as Zechariah (see commentary on 1:69–70). The lamp is at any rate one and the same as the light dawning on the Gentiles (Isa. 9:2). Emphasizing the universal aspect of Jesus' mission, the convergence of biblical images, focusing on restoration and the Gentile mission, shares many of the same themes as Zechariah's song.

33. Although Mary and Joseph have already witnessed extraordinary events up to this point, they do not cease to be *amazed* at the thrust of the unfolding revelations surrounding their son.³⁶ Perhaps the bulk of their surprise revolves around the intimation that Gentiles will now – through *their* son – be included within God's plan. In Luke, wonder is in fact a recurring motif, a consistent human reaction to the revelation of God (1:63; 2:18; 4:22; 8:25; etc.). Mary and Joseph will soon be amazed again (2:48).

34–35. Having *blessed* the baby Jesus, Simeon now predictively blesses the child's parents, primarily Mary – her second blessing (cf. 1:42). According to Simeon's prophecy, Jesus will precipitate *the falling and the rising of many in Israel*, and that is because, given the phrase's allusions to Isaiah 8:14–15 and 28:16, Jesus is the scandalizing temple cornerstone (Luke 20:17–18). The text is slightly ambiguous: whether the 'fallers' and 'risers' constitute two different categories of many people or a sequence of experiences befalling the same group of *many* is uncertain. However, because Jesus is next described as a *sign that will be opposed* (the same confrontational sign who was wrapped in swaddling clothes, 2:12), I would maintain that the two categories break down as follows: on the one side are those who oppose the sign of Jesus, and on the

36. Their wondering here (perhaps unexpected) is no evidence for the story having been invented out of whole cloth; see Marshall, p. 115.

other side are those who finally rise after falling (Isa. 24:20; Prov. 24:16).³⁷ Examples of the latter category, such as the apostate Peter, the persecutor Saul or even the prodigal son, will for a time stumble over Jesus' identity, only to experience rising (*anastasin*), spiritually speaking in terms of their repentance and physically speaking in terms of their ultimate resurrection. Jesus' role as a sign means that he sheds light not just on God's purposes but also on the spiritual-moral character of those who observe him. As a result of his ministry, the *inner thoughts of many will be revealed*.³⁸

Precisely on account of this fact, a sword will also pierce Mary's soul. While some commentators interpret this to refer to a mother's sorrows at her son's crucifixion, the expression more likely pertains to her own internal struggle regarding Jesus' messianic aims (2:48; 8:19–21; 11:27–28).³⁹ In the Scriptures, to allow the sword to pass through is to administer a judgment that sifts the righteous from the unrighteous (Exod. 32:27; Ezek. 14:17). Applied to Mary's soul, the phrase speaks not just of her internal doubts (as argued as early as Origen) but more fundamentally of her own halting allegiance to Jesus' messianic programme – liabilities perhaps not fully overcome until she joins the assembled church in Acts 1:14.

36–37. Like Simeon, an octogenarian by the name of Anna is of upstanding character and piety; unlike Simeon, she is explicitly designated as a *prophet*. Her remaining details (her genealogical descent, her short seven-year marriage, her devotion to ceaseless prayer and fasting) are marked by a certain verisimilitude, betraying the kind of accurate reportage Luke promises in his prologue. Her activities mirror those of a well-known Jewish heroine, Judith, who also gave herself to ceaseless prayer and fasting (Jdt. 8:1–8; 11:17; 16:21–25).

37. Similarly, Marshall, p. 122.

38. Examples of such revealed thoughts are found in Luke 3:7–9; 5:21–22; 7:40–47; 8:16–18; 9:18–20; 20:20–26; Acts 5:1–11; 8:9–25; 9:4; 12:19–24; 13:4–12.

39. Though the former approach is popular (held, e.g., by Nolland, p. 122), Bock (p. 249) rightly observes that its 'major problem is that Luke in his passion account does not explicitly mention Mary as present at the cross (23:49)'.

38. At ‘that time’ (*tē bōra*; NRSV *moment*, but *bōra* can refer to a longer period of time), Anna approaches the couple and echoes the benediction of Simeon. She *began to praise* God and to *speak about* him (*peri autou*). The antecedent of ‘him’ (*autou*) is ambiguous. Whether it refers to God (NASB, KJV), the immediate antecedent, or to the baby Jesus (NRSV, NIV), as per the larger sense of the passage, is unclear. The latter seems preferable. Interestingly, her message is not for all but only for those who, like Simeon, *were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem*. This perhaps sheds light on the division alluded to in Simeon’s speech, that is, between those destined to fall and rise, on the one side, and those destined to oppose the sign of Jesus, on the other. In other words, Luke may be hinting that those who longed for Israel’s restoration would be more likely to receive the Messiah.

39. The present verse forms an *inclusio* with the beginning of the passage, in two ways. First, standing opposite the remark in verse 22 that ‘they brought him up to Jerusalem’, the geographical note here frames this as a scene that has been self-consciously set in Jerusalem, establishing a parallel between the Jerusalem-based Jesus and the Jerusalem-based pre-Pentecost church (Acts 2:1–21). For both Jesus’ ministry and that of the early church, the Jerusalem setting is apposite, since for the Ancient Jews salvation for the nations would issue from Zion (Isa. 2:1–4; Mic. 4:1–2). Second, we recall that the very reason Joseph and Mary had set out from Galilee in the first place was to satisfy the demands of the ‘law of Moses’ (v. 22) or the ‘law of the Lord’ (v. 23). Now we find that that mission, so to speak, has been accomplished. Again, Luke is keen to show that before and after Jesus’ birth, the law had been scrupulously maintained – and indeed fulfilled.

40. The details of Jesus’ early childhood were either largely unknown to Luke or irrelevant to his narrative purposes. The Evangelist did, however, have enough information to speak on a general level, so as to summarize this period of Jesus’ life. Like any human boy, Jesus *grew and became strong*. Moreover, Jesus is described as being *filled with wisdom*, while the grace of God is *upon him*. Such biographical reminiscences, reaching back to childhood, are characteristic of the biographical genre (*bioi*) Luke employs.

ii. *Sitting among the teachers (2:41–52)*

41–42. Instituted in remembrance of the first Passover night and ensuing exodus, the Passover was the greatest of all Jewish celebrations. According to Jewish belief, the date of Passover (14 Nisan) was also the date of the Aqedah (Isaac's near sacrifice on Mount Moriah, i.e. the Temple Mount), even as it was the date on which the Messiah was expected to return to his temple. Luke's note that Mary and Joseph made the annual trek to Jerusalem is meant not so much to reveal their piety, since annual Passover attendance was a point of duty observed by countless Jews (Deut. 16:1–8), as to set the stage for the young Messiah's second entrance into the temple (the first occurring in Luke 2:22–40, the third in 19:45–48). That this episode should occur when Jesus was just twelve not only underscores his remarkable precociousness (an important element for Luke's readers accustomed to Graeco-Roman *bioi*), but also may give expression to Jesus' messianic status as the embodiment of Israel (twelve years corresponding to the twelve tribes).⁴⁰

43–45. When the Passover week had run its course, Jesus *stayed behind* in Jerusalem, leaving his parents' caravan to head back north without him. Given the parallelism between the Spirit's descent on Jesus at his baptism (3:21–22) and the Spirit's descent on the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4), the young Jesus' remaining in Jerusalem may be meant to parallel the disciples' remaining in Jerusalem (Luke 24:49). If so, then on the analogy with Pentecost, we have a right to wonder whether this episode is to be understood as somehow preparatory for the baptism. After a day of travel, Mary and Joseph eventually realize that the boy is not among trusted family and friends. Panicked by this realization, they head back to Jerusalem.

46–47. On their arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus' parents do not find their son right away but only *after three days* (give or take a day for

40. On the former point, see de Jonge, 'Sonship, Wisdom, Infancy', pp. 340–342. Graeco-Roman biographies often involved stories of their subjects at age twelve (Jonge, pp. 345–346) and apparently Luke is not willing to disappoint in this regard.

the trip back to Jerusalem). Mary and Joseph's three-day crisis, involving a Jesus gone missing, looks ahead to the distraught three-day period between the cross and resurrection, when Jesus also, so to speak, goes missing. When they do find the boy, he is in the 'midst of' (*en mesō*) the teachers, *listening* and *asking them questions* – a scene which sharply contrasts with the confrontational exchange which occurs the next time Jesus is in the midst (*eis ton meson*) of the teachers (5:17, 19). Apparently, the young Jesus is doing more than simply *listening* and *asking them questions*, for those who hear him marvel at his understanding and answers. Forebodingly, Jesus' theological and rhetorical agility presage his highly contentious debates which will occur during the final week of his life (20:1–44).

48–49. Mary and Joseph are likewise *astonished* at Jesus' abilities. But they are also perplexed by Jesus' seeming thoughtlessness and nonchalance over his absence. When Mary confronts her son, he responds not with an apology but with a counter-challenge comprising two questions. Jesus' first question (*Why were you searching for me?*) may, on the one hand, be Jesus' way of insisting on his personal prerogative to carry out God's will, which in this case demanded his remaining unencumbered in Jerusalem. On the other hand, he may be wondering why they had not first started their search for him at the temple, which, given the nature of his calling, is where they should expect to find him. If we translate the Greek of Jesus' second question (*ouk ēdeite hoti en tois tou patros mou dei einai me*) along the lines of the NRSV (*Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?*), the second option appears more likely. But if we translate the question as 'Did you not know that I must be about my Father's *things?*', then it appears that Jesus is making a broader assertion about his vocation and its priority over his human filial obligations. In either case, Mary's emphasis on Jesus' obligation to *your father and I* is met by Jesus' insistence on his duty to his heavenly Father. It is a duty occasioned by divine necessity, marked by the impersonal verb *dei*, recurring in Luke.⁴¹

41. See also 4:43; 9:22; 12:12; 13:14, 33; 17:25; 19:5; 21:9; 22:37; 24:7, 44. See Cosgrove, 'Divine'; Green, pp. 28–37.

50. Apparently, Mary and Joseph – no less than modern-day commentators! – are mystified by Jesus’ response. At least they are unable to grasp just what he means at the present moment. In due course, as the narrative develops, the meaning of Jesus’ words will become clearer. If Jesus can call God his Father, then he truly is ‘Son of the Most High’ (1:32) and the messianic Son promised in Psalm 2 (cf. Luke 3:22).

51. Notwithstanding Jesus’ shifting focus from his earthly father to the divine Father, he accompanies his parents back to Nazareth, thus bringing his family’s geographical movements full circle (2:4). There, for the remainder of his upbringing, he continues to obey Mary and Joseph. Once again, Luke observes, Mary takes the event to heart (cf. 2:19); the editorial comment ‘registers Mary’s attempt to grapple with its significance’, even as it ‘serves with 2:52 as the conclusion of the Lukan birth narrative as a whole’.⁴²

52. Luke closes out his account of Jesus’ pre-ministry years with a concluding statement, parallel to a similar summary issued regarding John (1:80). Building on the earlier assertion of 2:40 (the two verses form an *inclusio*), Jesus is said to have *increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour* – as amply illustrated by the present passage marked off by verses 40 and 52. Here the emphasis falls squarely on Jesus as a developing human being. In Luke’s Christology, Jesus’ status as fully divine yet fully human does not preclude personal growth but rather demands it.

Theology

Sometimes Christian believers, to their detriment, tend to think of Jesus’ humanity as being swallowed up by his divinity. But this is a grave error. Luke insists that Jesus *grew* physically, mentally, socially and spiritually (2:40, 52). How exactly this holds together with the fact that Jesus is also the divine Lord (2:11) is not always easy to explain. But, as the Evangelist hopes to show, the humanity of Jesus logically entailed a process of development – and vice versa. Jesus came to empathize with humanity precisely as he experienced humanity, namely, in and through the limitations imposed by

42. Green, p. 157.

human finitude and the natural process of maturation. Though the Spirit was fully on Jesus, this fact did not eliminate his need for personal development. And if Jesus' maturation as a human necessitated his *growing* in wisdom and stature, the same principle surely applies to the Gospel's readers. This means, in the first instance, that possession of the Spirit is no excuse for refusing educational resources that promise to expand wisdom and understanding. In the second instance, the incarnation also means that the Spirit's presence does nothing to devalue the physical body, justify its neglect or ignore its relevance to personal identity. Neither fundamentalistic anti-intellectualism nor attempts to separate human personhood from the biological body are compatible with Jesus' full humanity.

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