

1.2 The Birth Narratives I

The Beginning

The infancy narrative sets the scene for the entire narrative which is to follow. This introduces the audience to what is going on here in providing theological context for understanding Jesus ministry and the ministry of the emerging Christ-movement. The theme throughout the infancy narrative, and particularly in the three angelic announcements and the three hymns, is the saving purpose of God. Significantly the infancy narrative arouses expectations which are not immediately fulfilled in the following narrative of the Gospel. A tension is built up from the very beginning which seems to provoke the audience to react or think about the issues told in the narrative. The narrative from 1.5 to 2.52 seems to focus entirely on salvation for the Jewish people except for the brief passage 2.20-23. Salvation seems to imply political freedom – but Jesus will be rejected in Jerusalem and, as the audience must be aware of, the course of events is leading to Jewish defeat by the Romans.

The Structure

It has been noted that the Lukan infancy narrative is constructed as a parallel story of the birth of John and Jesus:

Both men's birth is announced by angels (Lk 1.5-23 and 1.26-38). In both cases the human reaction to this is one of disturbance. Both, Mary and Zechariah, are reassured by the angel, with the same words 'do not be afraid' (Lk 1.13; 1.30). In both cases the message contains the announcement of the coming birth of a son and the name of the child. In both cases the angel indicates that the son will be great, and the Holy Spirit is associated with both children. It is also worth noting that a parallel of three can be found in these chapters: three angelic annunciations are made, to Zechariah Lk 1.11-2, to Mary Lk 1.26-38, and to the shepherds Lk 2.8-14, and three hymns are proclaimed, which in later liturgical tradition are called the Magnificat Lk 1.46-55, the Benedictus Lk 1.67-79, and the Nunc dimittis Lk 2.29-32

These elements indicate that the birth narratives are carefully structured and by introducing both, John the baptizer and Jesus, the author clearly tells the audience who Jesus is.

The Use of Scriptures

There are numerous allusions and citations from the Jewish scriptures in these birth narratives, but not only there. To fully appreciate the first three scenes the reader/hearer needs to know the story of Abraham and Sarah (Gen 15.1-18.15) the story of Hannah (1Sam 1.1-2.11), the prophecy of the messenger who will prepare the Lord's way, that is, the Elijah tradition (Mal 3.1 and 4.5-6) and the promise to David that his descendant will regain the throne and be recognized as son of God (2 Sam 7. 4-17). Luke's narratives carry memories and hopes associated with a tradition which he seems to presuppose is known by the audience.

This is significant for the presuppositions contemporary readers may bring to Luke-Acts. The story Luke is about to tell is not a story of dispute and dissonance between Jewish tradition and faith in Christ. He makes it clear right at the beginning that the roots and the context of the Gospel of Jesus Christ are found in the Jewish tradition. It is essential that Luke depicts this Jewish tradition from the very beginning in a positive way. Luke even imitates the style of the Septuagint (LXX) in the style of his narrative. He thus presents his narrative about 'the events which have been accomplished among us' (1.1) in the language of the Scriptures of his time and tradition.

History or Biography or the Question of the Genre of Luke-Acts

From his introductory statement it can be concluded that Luke wanted to create a historical account, that is 'an orderly account' (Lk 1.3) of the events 'as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word' (Lk 1.2). But is he a good historian ? Or is he more a biographer than a historian as e.g. Loveday Alexander recently advocated, or a combination of both ?

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century the question of the reliability of Luke's work was not even an issue. If one wanted to know how the church was born one had to read the Book of Acts. Doubts concerning its reliability began to be formulated with the emergence of the historical-critical method in the 19th century. The narrative and data of Acts were compared with the rest of the New Testament, particularly with the Pauline letters. The narrative of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus in Acts 9.1-30; 15.1-35 did not match Paul's own account in Gal 1.13-2.21. And Paul's version of the Jerusalem assembly and agreement in Gal 2.6-10 was perceived as contradicting Luke's account in Acts 15.20.29a.

When evaluating the historicity of Luke-Acts, and in fact of the other Gospels as well, the question which needs to be asked is, in what sense and according to what concept or theory of history or/and biography and historical, biographical literature are these narratives classified as one or the other. The 19th century concept of historical truth as being equivalent to documentary facts is now seen as a hermeneutical construct which is critically discussed in the disciplines of history as well as philosophy and theology. Insights from these discussions are helpful in Biblical Interpretation in general and for the interpretation of Luke-Acts in particular. On these issues see the essays by Marguerat and Meeks included in the module handbook.

The reading of Luke-Acts in this module follows a narrative approach, but does not exclude research into the cultural, political and religious context of the narrated time as well as of the time of the narrator. Issues concerning the sources, theories of literary dependency, and redactional work of the narrator will only be touched upon occasionally. In that sense this module presents a limited perspective on Luke-Acts. References to other approaches are included where relevant, and some additional material is included in the handbook.

Essential Readings:

- ** 1.3 Meeks, Wayne A., 'Assisting the Word By Making (Up) History : Luke's Project and Ours' in *Interpretation* April 2003, pp.151-161.
- ** 1.4 Marguerat, 'How Luke Wrote History' in *The First Christian Historian : Writing the 'Acts of the Apostles'*, pp.1-25

Further Readings

'Luke-Acts, Book of' in ABD 1992

Aune D.E., 'Luke 1.1-4: Historical or Scientific Prooimion ?' in A. Christopherson, C.Claussen, J. Frey, B. Longenecker eds., *Paul, Luke and the Greco-Roman World*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2002, pp. 138-148.

Alexander Loveday, *The Preface to Luke's Gospel: Literary Convention and Social Context in Luke 1.1-4*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993.

