

1.3 The Birth Narratives II

The first narrative scene (Lk 1. 8-23) after the introduction (1.1-4) is set in the temple of Jerusalem, that is, right at the centre of Jewish faith and piety. It is worth noting that this is also the location where the Gospel of Luke ends (24.53). The first characters introduced in Lk 1.5-7, are people of priestly descent who are depicted as pious adherents of the tradition of their ancestors. There is no polemic in these characterizations, the temple, serving as a priest and keeping the commandments of the Lord are presented as positive aspects of Jewish life.

The Annunciation to Zechariah (Lk 1.8-23)

Moreover the temple is perceived to be an appropriate place to receive an angelic message (1.8-20). In a detailed account we learn what Zechariah was doing when he saw the angel and received his message. The offering of incense was something that was done inside the temple, whereas most other offerings were given on outside altars. Thus this offering was special as it allowed the priest to enter the temple building and to be as near to the 'holy of holies' as possible! The angelic message was delivered to Zechariah in close proximity to the innermost part of the temple. But to encounter a divine messenger is not a joyful event in the first instance but something terrifying. Zechariah needs reassurance by the angel through the words 'Do not be afraid' (Lk 1.13) – words which we also find in 1.29 because Mary obviously needs the same kind of reassurance. In the following verses, 14-17, the angel clarifies who this first announced child is and by way of implication the reader learns who he is not! He will be a special child (v.13), whose birth will be welcomed (14), he will devote his life to God (15), be filled with the Holy Spirit (15), turn the people Israel to the Lord (16) and walk in the power and spirit of the prophet Elijah (17). The annunciation of the angel is full of allusion to the Scriptures and these indicate clearly that he is not the messiah but in the vein of Elijah the one who prepares the way for the one who is to come. There are a number of issues concerning the relationship between Jesus and John which are already indirectly touched upon in the two birth narratives – questions concerning their relationship and the relationship between their disciples. These issues will be dealt with later in the module, but it should be noted here that according to Acts 19.1-3 there were disciples of John in Ephesus, and the baptism of John was remembered according to Acts 18.25 well after his death.

Luke emphasizes through the narrative of the annunciation of the birth of John in scriptural language (90% of the language used in Luke 1-2 originates from the LXX) that John actually is someone of great importance, 'he will be great before the Lord' (v.15, cf. also Jesus opinion in 7.28). But he is not the Messiah, he is the one who **prepares the way – in preparing people through his message and baptism of repentance**. He is the one who is sent to prepare people to receive God's salvation and to prepare the restoration of Israel. In identifying John with the prophet Elijah, he is identified with the Jewish tradition stemming from the book of Malachi which formulates the belief that prior to the coming of the day of the Lord, which in later expectations is also seen as the day of the coming of the Messiah (Mal 3.1 and 3.22-23/4. 5-6), Elijah would come again. John is thus put in line with prophets of old, he is depicted in the vein of the prophetic tradition of Israel. (The renunciation of wine and strong drink is an act of special consecration, part of the vow of the nazirite, one who is separated for the Lord, cf. Num 6.2-3)

Zechariah responds with doubts similar to those of Abraham and Sarah when the birth of a son is announced to them (Gen. 15.2-3; 18.12) and for this he is 'punished' and loses his speech.

The Annunciation to Mary (Lk 1.26-38)

Six months into the pregnancy of Elizabeth the angel is sent to Mary – this time the angel has a name – Gabriel and tradition has it that this is the same angel who appeared to Zechariah! Mary is introduced as a very young woman engaged to a man. From a historical perspective this indicates that she was around 12 -13 years of age, as this was the age a girl was deemed to be a young woman which was identical with the legal age for marriage. Young men usually were about 16-18 years of age when they got married. The engagement was a binding legal agreement between two families. The engagement was part of the legal process of arranged marriages. When looked at from this perspective the encounter with the angel and the angelic announcement of a pre-marital pregnancy (not from Joseph) must have been a frightening experience as the girl would be seen as having been involved in adulterous activities. Viewed from outside and with a view to the cultural standards of the day the special role which is attributed to Mary by the angel is not obvious at all. It is only from an insider perspective, that is as part of the narrative which is embedded in the promises and hopes of the Scriptures and the traditions of the Jews that it does become obvious that Mary has found favour in the eyes of God. The angel Gabriel informs Mary who this child she will get pregnant with is going to be. The terminology used does not leave any doubt that this is the one who is to come – the Messiah: he is called ‘the son of the most high, he will be on the throne of his ancestor David, of the house of Jacob, the one whose kingdom will never end (1.32-33). These terms indicate clearly that the one who will be born by Mary will be fulfilling the promises of Israel, that is, the Jewish people not a Christian church. These terms are the language of messianic expectation – which encompassed expectations of freedom for the people Israel as well.

Whether the emphasis in the narrative is on the virginal conception or on the divine power which is at work here through and in this child is open to interpretation. Special emphasis is certainly put on Mary’s openness to be God’s servant, which is a title of honour according to the Scriptures, where prophets and people who are called or anointed to special tasks are called servants. Some interpreters are of the view that the narrative of a conception of a child without participation of a male is an indication that a power is at work in this child which differs fundamentally from the powers of this world (the power of the father in Graeco-Roman society is in view here).

The following scene of the encounter of the two expectant mothers has found numerous expressions in works of art – and illustrates again the joy, but also the hierarchy, between the two miraculously conceived children.

Mary’s Song – the Magnificat 1.46-55

Gabriel announced not merely the birth of a son to Mary but also explained that this child will be the fulfilment of the promises of the prophets, that is, the promised king of Israel who will succeed on David’s throne. This is an emphasis which will be found throughout Luke’s work. It is a theme which is developed in the Benedictus, the hymn which makes it clear that this hope implies rescue from foreign oppressors (1.69-71), and has connotations of political freedom.

The Magnificat, the song of Mary, focuses not on the arrival of the child but rather on the intervention of God on behalf of his people. It is significant that the first praise in Luke-Acts is a praise of God. This indicates that whatever follows in the narrative is first and foremost related to God.

The Magnificat is a hymn of praise, in other words a psalm, which is composed of elements of psalms of the Jewish Scriptures – sung by a Jewish girl/young woman.

This is not without precedent. One is reminded of Hannah's song of praise, the psalm which is offered to the Lord in 1 Sam 2.1-10 which resonates with a number of themes of the Magnificat. There are allusions to other psalms and some prophetic and narrative passages from the Scriptures throughout the hymn:

- 47 Hab 3.18
- 48 Ps 113.6.7
- 49 Ps 126.3 and 111.9
- 50 Ps 103.13;17
- 51 Ps 89.11 and 2.Sam 22.28 and Isa 51.9
- 52 Ps 147.6; Job 5.11
- 53 Ps 107.9
- 54 Isa. 41.8 and Ps 98.3
- 55 Gen 17.7; 18.18; 22.17

The structure of the hymn adds a particular emphasis to the content, in that, in the original Greek at the beginning of each line we find a strong verb referring to an activity. The subject is always God himself. This grammatical peculiarity adds to the emphasis of the hymn on God as acting on behalf of his people. The translation below is an attempt to imitate the structure and emphasis of the Greek original:

- 46 *Magnifies/* my soul/ the Lord
- 47 *And has found gladness/*my spirit/in God/my Saviour
- 48 *For he has regarded/*the humble state/of a slave girl
For behold henceforth/will call me blessed/all generations
- 49 *For has done for me/*great things/the mighty one
And holy/his name
- 50 and his mercy/to generations/and generations/
for those who fear him
- 51 *He has done/* a mighty deed/with his arm
*He has scattered/*proud people/in thoughts/of their hearts
- 52 *He has put down/*mighty rulers/from thrones
and *has exalted/*humble people
- 53 *He has filled/* hungry people/H/with good things
He has sent out/ And rich people/empty
- 54 *He has helped/*Israel/his servant
To remember/ mercy
- 55 *As he spoke/* to our fathers/to Abraham/and his
seed/forever.

(Italicized word translates one Greek word – the divisions within the lines indicate that there is a rhythm of phrases or words in the poem)

Theological Emphases of the Magnificat

Mary depicts herself as lowly and later she speaks of what God has done for the lowly that is the oppressed and the hungry. It is God's action for the lowly and the poor which initiates and drives the story of Jesus and his witnesses, which implies that it is God's story which unfolds here.

And God is described here as most powerful as the one who has mercy and power, he is the one who has looked upon the slave girl and has helped Israel his servant/slave. He is the mighty one who has done a mighty deed with his arm – scattering and putting down humans who claim to be mighty. The two types of description come together in what seems to be the climax of the song : 52-53 – God's mercy for the humble and poor is manifested in the mighty overthrow of the powerful and rich who oppress them. This reversal motif can be found throughout Luke-Acts. In addition it is significant to note that in v. 54 God is praised for his intervention on behalf of Israel, and there is no mentioning of anybody else. First of all the promises which are confirmed in the arrival of this child are the promises made by God to his people Israel.

The Magnificat speaks of God's mighty and powerful deeds in the past tense – although what gives rise to such hopes is only in the process of happening – and as the reader knows has not been fulfilled in their time! This remembering of what God has done in the past for his people nourishes the hope for the future. This is a pattern found frequently in the psalms: when there is no sign that gives reason for hope in the present it is the act of remembrance which nourishes hope beyond the present.

The Magnificat is a theological psalm which states right at the beginning of the narrative who is present and thus shaping what is unfolded in the narrated events.

It seems that the author wants the audience to understand, who it is who is present and at work here: God who is mighty but who uses his might to turn the world upside down, who has mercy towards the weak, who is upsetting human hierarchies, keeps his promises, and in so doing acts against human oppressive and dominating power.

The Birth and Naming of John the Baptizer

The narrative of the birth of John in 1.57-58 is very brief. The focus is on the eighth day after his birth, the event of his circumcision which is the moment when the name of the child is made public (1.59-66). Against the will of the people/relatives around, Elizabeth insists that the baby should not be named after his father but that his name should be John. (There is a gap in the narrative as we do not learn how Elizabeth came to know about this)

Zechariah agrees to that name and thereby demonstrates his obedience to the angel's command and moreover acknowledges that he now believes the angelic annunciation of the special role of this child. With this acknowledgement the power of speech is given back to Zechariah, a power which he uses to praise God.

The questions raised in 1.66 give Zechariah the narrative opportunity to reply to these questions via a praise of God.

Zechariah's Song – the Benedictus 1.68-79

This is a relatively long hymn/psalm in which surprisingly only verses 76-77 refer directly to the child just born, John.

The Benedictus pulls together *themes from the two annunciations and the Magnificat* and moreover introduces some new themes which will be developed in the angel's words to the shepherds and in Simeon's words in the temple.

The main part *celebrates God's act of salvation for Israel* of which John will be a part.

The emphasis on the restoration of David's kingdom, which we found in the annunciation to Mary (1.32-22) and the emphasis on the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham, found in the Magnificat (1.54-55) are united here (1.69; 1.72-73). To this implications for Israel of both the promise to David and to Abraham are added (1.74-75).

The Benedictus is like the Magnificat composed of and alluding to elements from the Hebrew Scriptures – which would be heard by anybody familiar with those.

Thus e.g. Lk.1.68-69 celebrate God's act of redemption for his people – through raising up a 'horn of salvation in the house of David'. A Horn of a bull or buffalo is a symbol of strength, the reference to a 'horn of salvation' which is 'in the house of David' is a clear reference to the strength and power of the Messiah.

The redemption for which God is praised, again as in the Magnificat is Israel's redemption. This king is expected to bring salvation from enemies, so that Israel be free to serve her God without fear. The fulfilment of the promises to Abraham and David seem to include a hope that the restriction of life caused by foreign rulers may come to an end. The hymn could have contextual overtones here in that enemies are neither individuals nor are they merely some spiritual powers. The political and cultural context of the Christ movement in the first century CE is not without relevance for understanding certain aspects of the narrative of Luke-Acts in as much as the Scriptural, that is, intertextual context is important. Fear might refer to foreign rulers like Antiochus Epiphanes who tried to obliterate Jewish practice of worship and identity by hellenizing it beyond recognition, Herod Antipas and his officials, rich collaborating landowners and Romans who from time to time threatened the rights of Jews to practise their faith. Opposition to foreign rule, and at the narrated time of Roman rule in particular, did not only manifest itself as armed upheaval. There were different forms of resistance to Roman rule and power, E.P. Sanders has identified 4 groups of resistance, the fourth group 'praying quietly for God to liberate his people' (examples of such quiet resistance can be found in the 'Wisdom of Solomon, Philo and Josephus).

According to the Benedictus salvation includes political freedom, but is not restricted to it. This hope tragically did not come to fulfilment as yet since freedom and peace were lost for the Jewish people in the destruction of the temple and of Jerusalem in 70CE.

Nevertheless, freedom from slavery is seen here as a prerequisite to enable Israel to worship God without hindrance. Zechariah's interpretation of the promise of Abraham should be seen not as narrow nationalism but rather as an expression of hope for freedom so Israel can shape its own identity in worshipping God in her own way.

Lk.1.77 mentions salvation as forgiveness of sins. This is not in tension with the political dimension of the hymn just mentioned since there was no distinction between the religious and the political. In antiquity such dimensions as sin and salvation were intrinsically intertwined with the political and public life. The religious and political dimension of life were not so much concerned with the life of the individual as with the corporate dimension of it, that is, the life of communities.

In the two verses which actually do refer to John the Baptizer (1.78-79) it is made clear that he is not the Messiah. It is evident that he has a role to play in the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah is introduced via the image of light which is familiar from the book of Isaiah (Isa. 60.1-2). It is an image which the narrator will take up later and which will be extended to the gentiles (Lk 2.32; Act 13.47) For Israel as well as the gentile nations the activity of salvation in and through Christ indicates that divine light is breaking the power of darkness/Satan (Acts 26.18.)

The Birth of the Messiah

The registration decree of Augustus served taxation purposes. Historically this is complicated as for the time of Augustus, who ruled the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus birth, (27 BCE – 14 CE), no tax registration request is known in the regions of Galilee and Judea. The reference to Augustus may thus serve a number of purposes which are not so much historical as theological.

In the narrative the decree functions to get Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the city of David. This is significant since some prophetic tradition expected the Messiah to come from Bethlehem (Micah 5.3). But theologically more could be indicated here. Augustus claimed to be the saviour of the world, the one who had ended decades of civil war in the

Roman Empire by defeating his rivals, and thus had provided peace and justice to the Empire. In setting the narrative of the birth of the Messiah in this imperial context an inherent challenge to this Augustan claim to bring peace is set up.

The first to learn about the birth of this child are shepherds. A number of reasons have been postulated for this:

- a) They are ordinary people who would not feel out of place in a stable.
- b) They were outcasts of their society – the message is first and foremost addressed to them.
- c) There is some connection with Bethlehem as the city of David. He was shepherd, before he was anointed to become king (1 Sam 16.11); later he is told that 'It is you who shall be shepherd of my people' (2 Sam 5.2). There are other traditions which refer to a future David as the shepherd over Israel (Ez 34.23) and Micah refers to a ruler who will come from Bethlehem and who will 'feed his flock in the strength of the Lord' (Micah 5.4).

The angelic annunciation to the shepherds also resonates with the annunciation of the birth of the special child Caesar Augustus, and thus with aspects of imperial ideology ! Augustus had not claimed divinity for himself but he had willingly let himself be hailed as *divi filius* (son of a divine). The ruler's birth was referred to as 'good news' (*euangelion*), the title of saviour was applied to him and he was hailed as the one who brought peace and justice (*pax at iustitia/ eirene kai dikaiosis*) to the entire world (*orbis mundi/oikoumene*). The Roman province of Asia minor at the narrated time had adopted a new calendar with Augustus' birthday and in the Greek city of Priene an inscription states that 'The birthday of the god has marked the beginning of good news for the world'. The language and allusions in the birth narratives are not explicitly political and they are certainly do not represent a revolutionary programme. But it should not be overlooked that these narrative bear overtones which are beyond the private realm and concern for individuals. They introduce a message which has implications for the communal life of people, and claim that this messages has an effect on the entire life of people, public and private, political and 'religious', cultural and economic.

The Presentation in the Temple

Doubts have been raised in scholarship as to the historical accuracy of this account which need not concern us here. What seems to be relevant is that Luke wants to present the parents of Jesus/the Messiah as pious adherents of the traditions of their ancestors, the Jews, and it is no mere accident that their obedience to the law is mentioned more than once here (2.22-24 and 27 and 39)

Moreover the setting in the temple sets the scene at the centre of Jewish piety, as was the case with the annunciation of the birth of John.

It should be noted here that with Simeon and Anna we find another male-female pair in the birth narrative, after Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph. Luke will introduce more such pairs later in the narrative. We will return to this characteristic later in unit 3.

Simeon and Anna take up themes which are already present in Mary's and Zechariah's hymns (peace, salvation, light). Simeon is 'looking forward to the consolation of Israel' (2.25), and Anna is among those who were 'looking for the redemption of Jerusalem' (2.38). These sentences reflect the language and message of consolation also found in Isaiah 40 -66 (particularly Isa 52.9), a part of the prophetic book which has strong influence on Luke-Acts throughout (anticipating the restoration of the exiles and the rebuilding of the ruined city Jerusalem). But in addition there is a theme that has not been introduced before: it is in this context that the first inclusion of the gentiles in salvation is mentioned, which alludes to the inclusive perspective of second Isaiah (see Isa 42.6; 49.6 and 40.3-5).

The text of Lk 2.32, 'a light for revelation to the nations/gentiles - and for glory to thy people Israel' is a parallel construction which emphasizes that salvation and light are for both Gentiles and Jews, and the extension to the gentiles certainly does not mean exclusion of the people Israel.

After hymn of celebration and welcoming, Simeon delivers a rather sinister oracle to Mary which indicates that there will be problems, even violent opposition to the Messiah. The narrator here after the joyful atmosphere created in the birth narratives, introduced a theme which will later in the gospel become central, the suffering of the Messiah. The reference to the 'falling and rising' can mean two things: some fall and others rise (which would resonate with the theme of the rich and poor of the Magnificat); or the same people will fall and rise, which would resonate with themes of the book of Isaiah which is prominent in this passage already. A possible reading then would that the narrator indicates that those who fall (Jews) might later rise (cf Isa 51.17).

Simeon's hymn and oracle serve as guidance for Luke's audience for the narrative that follows. The events of which the narrator intends to give Theophilus an orderly account concerns God's saving purpose for both Jews and Gentiles, which does not unfold unhindered but eventually will be fulfilled.

Essential Readings

- ** 1.5 Tannehill R.C., *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation. Vol 1: The Gospel According to Luke*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1986, p.15-44(26-38)
- ** 1.6 Perkins, Pheme, 'Reading Luke's Gospel' in *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2007, pp. 202-253.
- ** 1.7 Alexander, Loveday, 'Reading Luke-Acts' in Verheyden, J. ed. *The Unity of Luke-Acts*. Leuven: Leuven University Press 1999, pp. 419-446

Further Readings

Tannehill, Robert C., *Luke*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press 1996, pp. 33-76

Brown Raymond E., *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke*. New York: Doubleday 1993.