

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS AND THE FIRST FAMILY – PART IV

EVENTS IN THE FIRST YEARS OF THE LIFE OF JESUS

I. Forty days after Jesus was born, His parents brought Him to be offered to God in the Temple.

A. This presentation involves a combination of two Jewish rites.

1. First, according to the law given originally on Mount Sinai, the first-born son of a couple must be consecrated to God and "redeemed." See Ex. 13:2, 11-15. He would be "redeemed" by an offering of five shekels, which equaled about a week's pay. See Num. 11:16. This consecration and redemption was both a reflection of the slaughter of the first born in Egypt before the Exodus and recognition that children are a gift of God and must be offered back to Him.

2. Second, after childbirth, a woman was considered ritually unclean. (This uncleanness had nothing to do with guilt; it was a ritual matter.) Therefore, forty days after giving birth to a boy, or eighty days for a girl, a woman would be ritually purified and give an offering of a dove or pigeon and a sheep for a priest to sacrifice. For poorer people, the offering was reduced to two doves or pigeons. See Lev. 12:2-8.

B. Despite the fact that they are by rights free of the Mosaic Law, Mary and Joseph make this offering in the Temple, indicating a support of the ritual law for the few decades it has left before fulfillment. Cf. Matt. 17:22-27.

- The fact that they offered two turtledoves (the shekel offering is omitted, or perhaps was combined with the turtledoves) indicates that they were of modest means. The dove was a symbol of beauty, especially in the eyes, see Song of Songs 2:10, 14, 4:1, 5:12, of sorrow, see Is. 38:14, 59:11, and of innocence, see Matt. 16:10. Jesus would show forth the glory of heaven, precisely by His sorrowful sacrifice of His innocent life.

C. This presentation is the first fulfillment of the prophecies that the Lord would return to His Temple. Almost six hundred years earlier, Ezekiel spoke of the glory of the Lord leaving the Temple because of the people's sins. However, he and

other prophets spoke of the day when the Lord would return to His temple. Ez. 10:18-23, 43:1-9; Mal. 3:1-2; see also Is. 62:11; Zech. 9:9. These prophecies would be again fulfilled in glory as Jesus entered Jerusalem in glory on Palm Sunday. See Matt. 21:4-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 18:28-40.

D. The text then switches over to Simeon, the representative of prophesy, returned one last time.

1. The name Simeon means "God has heard," a fitting reference to the promise made to Israel, the fulfillment of which Simeon will see. There is perhaps a cross reference to the first message that Gabriel gave to Zechariah, "Your prayer has been heard." Luke 1:13.

a. The prophet Isaiah had promised consolation to Israel, see Is. 40:1, 66:12-14, and Simeon cared deeply about the prophecies.

b. The Holy Spirit comes to him to guide him and give him the promise that the long awaited Messiah was to be born. The Holy Spirit had guided prophets and kings and the just in general before, see, e.g., Is. 61:1-2, 62:11 (guiding prophets); 1 Sam. 10:10, 16:13; Is. 11:2-9 (coming upon kings); Ps. 51:13; Wis. 1:15, 9:17 (being with the just. The prophets spoke of a day when the Holy Spirit would come upon all of God's people. See, e.g., Num. 11:29 (Moses making this prayer); Ez. 36:26, 37:4; Joel 2:28-29 (the spirit coming to all peoples in the last days.) Simeon here fulfills the roles of prophet and just man, and the Spirit guiding him is a first promise of the Spirit that will be poured forth upon all the faithful at Pentecost.

2. Simeon's Canticle picks up on the theme of light and peace at the end of Zechariah's Canticle and applies it to himself, to Israel and to and all nations.

a. Simeon declares that he able to go (probably meaning die) in peace. The Old Testament figures did not fully die in peace, for there was always something that they awaited. For example, Moses died before he could enter the Promised Land. Thus, by seeing the Savior, this quiet servant of God is being given a gift that the great figures of old awaited. See Luke 10:24; 1 Peter 1:10-12.

- Even those few prophets who could see the glory of God trembled at His presence. See, e.g., Isaiah 6:1; Daniel

7:28, 8:27. The ability to welcome God as a child would be above anything the Chosen People would expect.

b. Simeon reflects true patriotism, seeing the glory of his own people fulfilled by her gifts to all nations. He builds upon the prophecies of all nations coming to Jerusalem and receiving the presence of God promised to His People. See Isaiah 2:1, 42:6, 49:7, 66:22; Ps. 87:4ff. Isaiah had spoken many times of God's salvation being seen as the light to all nations, and those prophecies are now being fulfilled. See, e.g., Is. 40:5, 42:6, 49:6, 52:9-10.

c. This prayer forms part of the Night Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours, which prayed every day by all priests, deacons, and consecrated religious brothers and sisters, as well as many of the laity.

3. Mary and Joseph are astonished at Simeon's words. Even though Mary is immaculate and Joseph just, they still grow in understanding over the course of time

4. Simeon then gives Mary prophecies about Jesus and herself.

a. He says that Jesus will be the rise and fall of many in Israel. He will raise those looking for salvation, but for those who reject it, the occasion will bring about judgment. See, e.g., John 3:16-21. Later, Jesus would speak of the Beatitudes for those who are least in the world and the woes for those who are self-satisfied. Contrast Matt. 5:3-12: Luke 6:20-23 with Matt. 23:13-36; Luke 6:24-26.

b. There will be no final neutrality with Jesus. Early on, anyone who is not against Jesus can be thought of as for Him. See Luke. However, as time goes on, anyone not for Jesus is against Him. See Luke 9:50, 11:23. The one who is crucial to redemption will be as a rejected stone, which becomes the cornerstone (or capstone) holding everything else together. See Matt. 21:42; Ps. 118:22. The first letter of Peter will likewise speak of Jesus as both the capstone of salvation for those willing to accept Him, and as the stone that others stumble over. See 1 Pet. 2:8.

c. Simeon also speaks of the sword piercing Mary's heart, for she will join with the sufferings of Christ and thus become our most powerful intercessor other than Himself. This very sorrow would bring about the revelation of what is really in people's heart. The prophets and later the letter to the Hebrews and the Book of Revelation would

speak of the sword of the Lord as separating the good from the evil and bringing about . See Is. 66:16-17; Ez. 21:13-22; Heb. 4:12; Rev. 1:16. According to St. Ambrose, Mary is an image of the Church, and the sword an image of the persecutions that the Church will face; such sorrows reveal whether a person's faith is real or not. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew, Cantena Aurea 2:36.

E. Then Anna the prophetess comes and likewise declares that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah.

1. There had not been a prophet in Israel for over 400 years. Thus, describing her as a prophet indicates that she is bringing back the glorious age of prophesy before the Messianic era will begin. There had also been only a few female prophetess in the Old Testament: Miriam (Moses' sister), Deborah, Huldah, Isaiah's unnamed wife, and Noadish. See Ex. 15:20, Judges 4:4; 2 Kings 22:14; Is. 8:3; Neh. 6:14.

2. The biographical details for her make her an inspiration to other people who struggle in the world.

- a. She had been married only eight years, and had been a widow ever since. Normally, young widows would remarry, and so her life begins to suggest a notion of consecrated single life.

- b. She had been waiting from the time her husband died (perhaps when she was about 26) until she was 84. She represents the patience of the faithful through many years, a patience rewarded with great joy.

- c. She was from the tribe of Ashur. That tribe, whose land was along the Mediterranean Coast in the far north of the Promised Land, had not seemingly done very much. There were early prophecies of its prosperity shown forth to other peoples. See Gen. 49:20; Duet. 33:24-25. However, they were exiled with the rest of the Northern Kingdom when the Assyrians had invaded in 723 B.C.; and the prophecies had seemed to end. But here, one last member of the tribe returns to glorify God and, with the shepherds, be among the first evangelists of the Gospel.

3. Anna is also paired with Simeon, as many men and women are paired together in the Gospel according to Luke: (1) Zechariah and Elizabeth as the representatives of the transfer from the Old Covenant to the New; (2) Namaan and the widow of Zerephatha as foreigners who received God's providence when His own people did not, see Luke 4:25-28; (3) the centurion of Capernaum and the widow of Nain as people whose children Christ raised, see Luke 7:1-17; (4) Simon the leper and the sinful woman as people whom Christ restores, see Luke 7:36-40; (5) the women at the tomb and the disciples on the way to Emmaus as witnesses to the Resurrection, see Luke 23:55-24:35.

F. The witness of Simeon and Anna would have prepared the way for the magi by giving the people of Jerusalem a first promise of the Messiah, which would then be confirmed by the message that the magi brought.

II. When the magi returned without speaking to Herod, that king then tried to kill Jesus through the slaughter of the innocents.

- A. Herod, so called the Great, was a very powerful ruler of the area, but also very violent, having put to death three of his sons and one of his wives. He was by this time in his 60s, but still concerned above all else about establishing his family as the dynasty to rule over the area.
- B. Now for the second time, an angel appears to Joseph, warning him about King Herod and instructing him to take the Holy Family into Egypt.
 1. At that time, there were many Jews living outside of Israel as a particularly common location for them. Thus, the Book of Wisdom, which appears to have been written within the 120 years before Jesus, was also apparently written in Egypt and in particular in Alexandria. Likewise, the Septuagint, which was the most commonly used Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures was apparently written in Alexandria about 250 B.C.

2. In addition, the Holy Family was now making the reverse of the Exodus, returning again to Egypt. Thus, Jesus, the Son of God from all ages, would replicate, now in holiness and perfection, what Israel, the people whom God adopted as sons, had done very imperfectly and sinfully before. In addition, Jesus' "exodus" from Egypt, which is often seen as a symbol of slavery to sin, would prepare for our exodus from such slavery. See Rom. 6:6-7; 1 Cor. 10:1-4.
 - a. The prophesy of Hosea that Matthew quotes speaks of Israel's ingratitude at God's providence. Jesus will here make up for that ingratitude.
 - b. The prophesy goes on to speak about how, after God has punished His people, He will call them back out of Egypt and the other lands to which they have been exiled. See Hos. 11:8-11. Jesus will take on this punishment and Himself be the first promise of that return.

3. Joseph presumably provided for the Holy Family there through his work as a carpenter (tektos), which meant a person who worked with wood or stone. However, the gold of the magi would presumably have helped greatly as well.

C. Meanwhile, the delay while Herod was waiting for the magi gave the Holy Family time to escape. Then Herod, consistent with his character, decided to get rid of whom he thought of as a rival by having all of the boys in Bethlehem under the age of two slaughtered.

1. Because Bethlehem was a town of about 500, with perhaps another 500 people living nearby, the slaughter would have been of about 20-30 boys. Because Herod had done such things before, it would be condemned, but would no longer stand out in secular news. For example, when he first became king, he had most of the Sanhedrin, the people who governed in Jerusalem, killed. Later, he had 300 of the members of his court killed at once. When Herod was dying, he gave an order, never carried out, that the several hundred leading citizens whom he had imprisoned by slaughtered on the day of his death so that someone would mourn on that day.

2. St. Matthew associates the slaughter of the innocents with the mourning of Rachel over her children, as described by Jeremiah.
 - a. Rachel, the beloved wife of Jacob, was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. She died while giving birth to Benjamin and thus her original sorrow was by her death, rather than that of her children. See Gen. 36:16-20. She was buried in Ephrathah, which would later become Bethlehem.
 - b. About 1200 years later, the people of the southern kingdom were exiled by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. when he conquered Jerusalem. He apparently gathered them near an area called Ramah to take them off to Babylon. And so the prophet Jeremiah portrays Rachel of old now mourning that her people, including the tribe of Benjamin, will be sent off to a faraway land. See Jer. 31:15.
 - c. However, there is a note of hope here, for the next passage in Jeremiah speaks of the return of the people to their own land. See Jer. 31:16-17. Thus, there is a note of promise as well for the children who are killed, that they will be reunited with their parents.

3. This event is also a reflect of the attempt by Pharaoh to kill all of the newborn boys of the Hebrews in order to destroy that people. See Ex. 1:15-22. (The girls would have been married off to Egyptian men and thus become Egyptian, or so the Pharaoh thought.) One implication is that God would raise up from this slaughter a new savior; the culture of death would itself die.

4. The Church has historically honored the Holy Innocents as saints, dying for the faith, even though they did not understand it. They had what was analogous to baptism through the sorrow of their parents. See The Gospel According to Matthew, Navarre Bible fn. to ch. 2, verses 16-17.

D. After the death of King Herod, Joseph brings the Holy Family back to the Promised Land, but here back north to Nazareth.

1. King Herod died in 4 B.C. after a very painful disease. According to Eusebius, the court historian of the Emperor Constantine, the disease set in shortly after the killing of the innocents See Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History Book I, ch. 8, sections 4-5.

2. In the last of his six wills, Herod had his kingdom split among his three favored surviving sons: (1) about half of his kingdom (Judea, Samaria and the outlying areas) was left to Archeleus; (2) Galilee to the north and Perea to the south-east was left to Herod Antipas; and (3) the areas to the northwest were left to Philip.
 - a. Archeleus, because he was the main heir, asked Augustus Caesar to appoint him a king. However, Augustus, rightfully doubtful of him, said that he would be an ethnarch (a half-king) and would be appointed king if things worked out. They did not, and Archeleus was such a violent and incompetent ethnarch that Augustus removed him in 6 A.D. and the Romans began appointing governors over Judea and Samaria.
 - b. Herod Antipas and Phillip became tetrarchs (quarter kings.) Later Phillip would marry Herodias, but Herod Antipas persuaded her to leave him and marry himself, Herod. That would set up the conflict with John the Baptist.
3. St. Joseph, realizing early on that Archeleus was a very violent ruler, headed back to Mary's hometown of Nazareth, where he had also presumably lived for sometime.

- St. Matthew then uses this occasion to say that Jesus thus fulfilled the prophesy, "He shall be called a Nazarene." The most likely explanation is that the prophet Isaiah has said of the future king, "A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and a branch (nezer) shall grow out of its roots." Is 11:1. Jesus would be the nezer (Nazarine) who would restore the line of David, the line of kings, now cut down for almost 600 years since the Exile. Nazar is also close to the Jewish word for "holy" and so the reference may also have been to the Holy One to come in general. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on Matthew, Cantena Aurea, commentary on 2:21-23. It is also possible that, because Nazareth was a town that people often despised as being at the same time too backward and also too open to pagans, the fact that Jesus was called a Nazarene may also have been a reference to the fact that He would be despised because of His origin. See, e.g., John 1:46; Acts 24:5.

III. Jesus' childhood, generally in Nazareth, consecrated seemingly ordinary human life.

- A. As Pope Paul VI pointed out in a homily on the Feast of the Holy Family, each family takes lessons in prayer, work, education, mutual sacrifice, etc. from the Holy Family. Part of this homily is recorded in the Office of Readings of the Liturgy of the Hours for the Feast of the Holy Family.
- Most of what the Holy Family did was not recorded, perhaps in part so that every family could see their lives (which are also generally not recorded) as reflecting that of the Holy Family.
- B. The town of Nazareth was itself fairly small, perhaps about 200 people. However, because it lay along a common north-south road, many travelers would have passed by, giving its residents a feel for people all around the Roman Empire. That connection with the pagan world is perhaps one reason why Nazareth may have been looked down upon by other Jews.
- From Nazareth, it was also not a long journey to the majestic Mount Hermon, honored by the Jews and others as a mystical site. Likewise, it would not be a long journey to journey up hills that overlook the Mediterranean Sea to the west or the Sea of Galilee to the southeast. Fathers and sons would frequently go on such short journeys.
- Under Herod Antipas, Galilee was at least more at peace than the regions to the south and east.
- C. Joseph worked as a carpenter, i.e. a worker of wood and stone (there was much soft stone in that area, and houses were frequently carved into hills.) He may well have worked on the new buildings being established in nearby Sepphoris, which Herod Antipas made his new capital. Joseph would have taught Jesus the craft from an early age.
- D. Religious education took place both at the home and at the synagogue on the Sabbath as the rabbi gave instruction to all of the local people. Although Jesus as God knew all things, and had the Beatific Vision even as man, he would still have

learned things in His human nature. Thus Luke says that Jesus grew, physically, mentally, and in favor with the people. See Luke 2:40, 52.

E. The people of the villages would work for some hours during the daylight, six days a week. They then got together every evening in separate groups (men and women) to discuss current events. Those gatherings would usually be followed by stories, songs, debates, etc. Most people did not know how to read or write, but they were in their way very cultures.

F. It was customary (although probably not always possible) for families to go to Jerusalem three times a year, for the feasts of Passover, the Feast of Weeks(Pentecost) and the Feast of Booths. See Exod. 23:14-17, Duet. 16:1-17.

IV. The Finding in the Temple is the one event of Jesus' life after the age of 2 that the Bible records.

A. When Jesus was 12, it would have been a year before the bar mitzvah, in which he would assume the full religious duties of a Jew. Thus, this event occurs in what would be in Jewish thought the threshold of manhood.

B. The event once again emphasizes that the Holy Family was upholding the Jewish ritual law for the years it had remaining. Jesus would change things, but only in the right time. See Catechism 583.

C. Because travel was generally dangerous, people tended to travel in very large groups, especially of relatives. There could be a couple of hundred people in a group.

a. In addition, the men and women usually travelled in different groups, often moving at different speeds. The groups would then get together at night.

b. The young boys would be in the women's group, with the older boys in the men's group. At the age of twelve, Jesus could be in either group. As a result, both Mary and Joseph probably thought that he was in the other group.

c. During the Passover, there would be up to a million pilgrims in and around Jerusalem. They would camp in the

valley surrounding the city. '

d. Even after the Passover, the city would probably still be filled with people who had stayed behind, or even foreigners who were curious. As a result, it would be very difficult to find anyone there

D. Rabbis would teach and hold discussions in the courtyard of the Temple. Jesus, both because He was the Messiah, and also because He was even naturally an intelligent and wise youth, was drawn to these discussions.

E. The misunderstanding between Jesus and His parents shows that both of them still were learning in their way. Jesus may not have fully understood His parents' expectations, and they still did not fully comprehend His calling.

- Here, and in Luke 1:19, Mary's contemplation, her careful consideration and growth in knowledge, becomes clear.

F. The episode ends with Jesus beginning to reveal who He is by saying that He must be in His Father's house. Generally, Jews would refer to God and their Father collectively. But to refer to God as His Father personally begins to give the idea to the Holy Family and the reader about who Jesus is.

G. The event then describes the rest of Jesus' youth by saying that He was obedient to His parents in Nazareth. Even though He had complete authority as God and also, even in His human nature, as the Messiah, He showed His willing to sacrifice early on by this obedience to a human authority.