

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS AND THE FIRST FAMILY – PART I

THE INTRODUCTION TO THE INFANCY NARRATIVES IN LUKE

I. The infancy narratives in the Gospel according to Luke describe the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, comparing and contrasting them in the context of presenting God's love for all peoples and the subtle, but revolutionary nature of His kingdom.

A. The infancy narrative in Luke, like all of his Gospel, very much emphasizes the importance of openness to God's message, of joyfulness and humility, of the role of the angels, and of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

1. Thus, for example, Mary and Joseph (not honored by the world) are higher than Elizabeth and Zechariah. Later, John the Baptist would stand in contrast to the secular powers and condemn them in his preaching. See Luke 3:1-9.

2. The infancy narratives are marked with joyfulness, with that them repeated four times in the first two chapters and 19 times in the Gospel.

3. There is also a great deal of poetry in the infancy narratives, with the canticles of Mary, Zechariah and Simeon.

B. There is a parallel between John the Baptist and Jesus. There is an annunciation for the one, then the other, and the birth of the one, then the other. Later, the spirit will come upon John, then on Jesus, and John will be martyred as a precursor to Jesus.

1. The two come together in the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth.

2. John, as the climax of the Old Covenant, will be holy but always less than Jesus. The irony is that the world will know about John's birth and expect great things from him, while the world ignores Jesus.

C. As with all of the Gospel, Luke in the infancy narratives refers to secular history (e.g., King Herod, the Emperor Augustine), but rather in passing, as if to emphasize that what he is describing makes this secular history pale in comparison.

D. Thus, the first four verses of the Gospel according to Luke, at one level, reflect a classic Greco-Roman historian's approach of interviewing witnesses and organizing data in a clear, organized fashion. On the other hand, the very similarity of style makes this Gospel stand in stark contrast to the worship of power and wealth that would commonly be the theme of Greco-Roman historians. ("Of men and arms I sing," begins Virgil's Aeneid.)

II. The Annunciation to Zechariah begins the age of the Messiah.

A. Luke does not mention it, but King Herod (reigned 37-4 B.C.) contrasts with Zechariah and Elizabeth, as an unjust ruler to a just priestly family.

B. Zechariah (whose name means "Yahweh has remembered") and Elizabeth (whose name means "God is my fullness") were just but childless. They recall a theme of the Old Testament of God giving children to just parents, such as Rachel, the beloved wife of Jacob, Manoah, the mother of Samson, Hannah, the mother of Samuel, and above all Sarah, the wife of Abraham. See Gen. 17:1-21, 30:1-8; Judges 13; 1 Sam. 1:1-19. Their situation, as elderly and childless, is most like that of Abraham and Sarah.

C. The priests, descendants of Aaron were divided into 24 groups of about an average of 1000 each because they were too numerous all to serve at the Temple at the same time. Each group would perform service at the Temple for two one week periods each year. Two priests from the group would be chosen by lot (a sort of lottery) to offer an incense sacrifice each day, one before the morning prayers and one after the evening prayers. The result was that a priest was likely to offer the sacrifice only once or twice in a lifetime. If God were to perform a miracle, this time would be an expected one.

D. The angel's message to Zechariah tells him that he would be the father of the long awaited prophet who would prepare the way of the Lord.

1. The first words of the angel were, "Be not afraid," for the glory of an angel was so powerful that naturally causes people to fear. See, e.g., Judges 6:22-23, 13:22; Tobit 12:16. The angel commands joy instead in its place.
2. The son, John (whose name means "God is gracious" or "God has shown favor") would be consecrated to God from birth, as Samuel and Samson, along with other sacred people were.
3. The reference to the spirit and power of Elijah recalls prophecies that Elijah would return before the day of the Lord.

See Malachi 3:22ff.; Sirach 48:10.

E. Zechariah's request for proof is answered, albeit in a surprising way.

1. The angel identifies himself as Gabriel, the angel who had appeared to Daniel to explain visions of evil nations arising from Persia, the Medes, and finally Greece, but all being swept away by God and His people restored after "70 weeks of years" and a final suffering. See Dan. 8, 9:20-27

2. Zechariah's muteness and apparent deafness is both a purifying penance for a lack of faith, and a preparation for the restoration of prophesy in Israel, which had been silent for over 400 years since the time of Malachi the prophet.

F. The people are outside, impatiently waiting for a blessing, not realizing that they will receive much more than they expect.

III. The Annunciation to Mary is more surprising and subtle, reflecting the idea that God does speak in clear ways, but even more in unexpected times.

A. Luke quickly identifies Mary as betrothed to Joseph of the house of David. This subtle reference indicated that the promises of a restoration of Israel through an heir to David were about to be fulfilled. He also refers to Nazareth, a backwater town of about 150. The annunciation here is far different from what the people would expect.

B. Gabriel's message to Mary and Mary's response reflect a glory greater than that given to Zechariah.

1. The word for "hail" or "rejoice" is used in the Septuigint to refer to rejoicing at God's salvation after a time of penance. E.g., Joel 2:21-23; Zephaniah 3:14-15; Zechariah 9:9.

2. Word for "full of grace" or "most favored" reflects an effect brought about by this grace or favor.

3. The term "the Lord is with you" reflects the name "Emmanuel", or "God is with us."

C. Mary is troubled, not so much because of the angel, but rather because of the message. She seems to address the angel in rather familiar terms.

D. The angel gives the name Jesus, from Joshua, which means "God saves." Joshua, because of his faith and courage, was able to lead the Chosen People into the Promised Land. The angel also refers to the prophecies of a just king ruling forever. E.g., Isaiah 11:1-9; Jer. 23:2-6.

E. Mary's response "How will this be?" implies a confidence that Gabriel's words would be fulfilled, but a desire for understanding. It also indicates a vow of virginity; for otherwise the answer would be obvious.

F. Gabriel's answer recall's God's presence overshadowing the Ark of the Covenant, where God was especially present to His people. See Ex. 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:10-11.

G. . Mary's response, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord." is the reversal of Eve's rebellion against God.

IV. The Visitation joins Mary and Elizabeth, and thus Jesus and John the Baptist together in preparation for their glorious missions.

A. Mary's vocation leads immediately to charity. She is concerned first for her cousin Elizabeth, with no jealousy that Elizabeth is more highly honored by the world.

B. Elizabeth's greeting reflects joy on her part and that of her unborn son, recalling the joy at the Ark of the Covenant. See 2 Samuel 6:9-15. Her reference to "the mother of my Lord" implies an understanding that Jesus is God, for the term "Lord" is used by her to refer to God. See verses 25, 45.

C. Mary then gives her great Canticle, which has three overall sections

1. Verses 46-49 thank God for His blessing to her.

2. Verses 50-53 describes God's providence, which turns the world upside down.

3. Verses 54-55 describe God's fulfillment of His promises to His people.

D. The prayer demonstrates true humility. Mary does not deny any of the gifts God has given her or her people, but rather puts them into the context of His love for all people. Even the structure reflects humility, for it is most like the prayer of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, whose situation was more like that of Elizabeth insofar as she was of a priestly family and felt unmerited disgrace because of her childlessness. 1 Sam. 2:1-10. Mary was thus drawing Elizabeth into her prayers.

E. The first section of the canticle reflects joy and humility.

1. There is a joy in being lost in the midst of God's love. Joyfulness is deeper than happiness; it is a sense of thrill of holiness in the presence of God. Thus, the early apostles could rejoice even at suffering for the name of Jesus and for the Church, and the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of Jesus stretching out His hands for the Cross for the sake of the joy that lay before Him. See Acts 5:41; Col. 1:24; Heb. 12:2.

2. Mary may also be presenting herself as the personification of all of Israel, rejoicing in God as His handmaid. See Isaiah 61:10, Psalms 116:16; 123:1-2. Verses 54-55 pick up on this theme.

3. She then recognizes God's holiness as the source of all of her own glory. Moses reminds the people of this just before their entry into the Promised Land. Duet. 10:21.

4. This section concludes with a reflection on the holiness of God's name. The power and sanctity of God's name, and then of Jesus' name is a constant theme of Scripture. See, e.g., Ps. 9:11, 33:21, 111:19, 124:8, 135:1; Luke 10:17; Acts 3:6; Phil. 2:10.

F. The second section describes God's providence in more universal terms., reflecting on His past deeds. The verb tenses are mostly in the past, indicating that these verses are a reflection on history, but a history that will now be fulfilled in an even greater way.

1. The term for mercy (elios) is used in the Septuigint to translate hesed, the Hebrew word for God's love and absolute fidelity to His covenant. This love and fidelity means that He will guide His people always and keep calling them back regardless of their sins. See, e.g., Ps. 89:1-2; 103:16-17, 136. God's punishment continues for a time, but His love and

mercy forever. See Ex. 7:9-10; Duet. 7:9-10

2. Mary uses common Jewish anthropomorphism in describing the arm of the Lord overcoming the enemies of His people. See, e.g., Ps. 89:10-11; 119:10-16; Jer. 32:21.

3. Contrasting with the humility of rejoicing in God's presence is the arrogance of those who oppose God. By contrast, in ancient classical civilization, and arguably today, pride was in many ways considered a virtue. See Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics IV.3. The Bible frequently portrays God as casting down the powerful of the world. See Isaiah 14-23; Daniel 7; Ps 2, 110.

4. There is a dramatic description of the reversal of fortune that God will bring about.

a. The Old Testament presents wealth sometimes as a reward for goodness, see Ps 1:1-3; 11:8-10; 128:1-2, but also as a temptation to folly, see Ps 49:6-8; 52:7. And the Old Testament certainly described God as caring for the poor. See Ps 107, 147:6; 1 Sam. 2:8.

b. This passage brings this idea further and indicates that the downtrodden are gaining more merit not only despite their condition, but because of it. See Matt. 5:3; Luke 6:20.

5. Even God's punishments of the powerful and wealthy can be seen as a part of His mercy insofar as the struggles may bring them back to God and therefore to salvation. See Wis 3:1ff.; Prov. 3:11; Heb. 12:5ff.

G. The next section of the canticle indicates that this overhaul of society is not merely a change, but a restoration and fulfillment of God's ancient promises.

1. Now Israel as a whole is described as the servant of God whom He raises up. The context is Israel's domination by a foreign power.

2. Mary recalls God's promises to Abraham, a people, a land, and blessings for all nations. See Gen 12:2, 18:18, 22:15. The reference to Abraham and Sarah, an elderly childless couple again brings Elizabeth into the prayer.

H. Mary stays about three months, leaving either just before or just after the birth of John the Baptist. She probably left to allow the family of John the Baptist to have center stage for awhile before Jesus' time would come. The three months also reflects the time that the ark stayed at the house of Obed-edom.

V. The birth of John the Baptist then prepares the way for the birth of Jesus Christ.

A. Once again, the circumstances are such that the public easily sees that John will become great. This response contrasts with its ignorance about the greater events surrounding Jesus.

B. Under Jewish law, a newborn son would be circumcised on the eighth day of his birth and then given a name, which usually had some meaning behind it. The people are astonished that Zechariah, the representative of order and tradition, is now introducing a new name into his family.

C. When Zechariah indicates his name will be John, his muteness (and what was apparently deafness) then leaves. It is clear to everyone, both because of the birth at a late age to Elizabeth and because of Zechariah's vision and silence that a miracle has occurred.

D. The Spirit who came to Elizabeth at the Visitation now come to Zechariah, whose blessing and canticle represent the voice of prophesy at last returning.

1. This canticle picks up on the end of Mary's canticle and develops the theme of God's fulfillment of His promises to His people. It also has three sections: (1) verses 68-73 reflect on God's salvation and freedom for His people in the context of a royal Savior, unknown to the people; (2) verses 76-77 describe the glory of his son, John in the context of preparing the way for the Savior; and (3) verses 78-79 describe the Savior in terms of bringing light and peace.

2 The introduction, "Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel" recalls the ending of each section of the Book of Psalms. See Ps 41, 72, 89, 106, 150.

3. The next verses bless God for setting His people free so that they may worship Him.

a. There is an implication that God is now especially present to His people. This presence could be the return of the

Messianic king, the return of prophesy, or even the return of God's presence as He was in the Ark of the Covenant. See, e.g., Micah 5:1-4; Mal. 4:1-5; Ez. 43.

b. Zechariah describes God as providing freedom for the sake of holiness. The law was connected to freedom as both the cause and purpose of liberty. See Ex. 20:1-2; Duet 12:15; Ps. 125:3.

c. This freedom is presented in the context of a new king, of the line of David. The monarchy had fallen in 586 and never been restored. But many of God's greatest promises were in the context of a successor to David. See Ps 2, 89, 110; Isaiah 11:1-6; Jer. 33:19-22.

4. Zechariah then describes John as the one who would bring back prophesy, which had been silent for over 400 years since the time of Malachi. Malachi's prophesies end with a vision of Elijah returning again to prepare the way of the Lord.

5. The next section places freedom in the context of forgiveness of sins and the resulting peace. The idea is that there can be no real peace or freedom without the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness begins a new covenant. See Jer. 31:34ff; Micah 7:18-20.

- This forgiveness, freedom and peace is symbolized by a new light shining. Luke uses the Greek word for daybreak, which the Greek version of the Old Testament used to describe the heir to David who would bring in the messianic era. See Jer 23:5ff; Zechariah 3:6-12.

E. The Gospel then introduces the theme of the desert, where the people of God had been purified long ago in their passage to the Promised Land. Here, John will go again, now to prepare the final purification before Jesus begins the new and glorious era.