

Comments on Luke 2

The Gospel of Luke differentiates itself from the other two Synoptic Gospels in part by spending more time on the women involved in the story. Matthew and Mark rather single-mindedly pursue Jesus alone in their narratives. Luke gives us more detail on the surrounding events, especially with respect to Mary the mother of Jesus.

In the last chapter there was considerable text devoted to events surrounding Elisabeth and Mary. This chapter is a running commentary on Mary's thoughts concerning the child she has borne. Luke presents her as reserved and thoughtful, while nothing is said of Joseph's thoughts at this time.

1 AND it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. 2 ([And] this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) 3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) 5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. 7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

v1-7 A tax decree from Caesar (v. 1-2) results in Joseph and the very pregnant Mary (v. 5) moving to Bethlehem (v. 3-4)

Luke presents the rulers of the earth, who at this time are wicked oppressors of the Jews, as pawns in God's hands. The various events come about because God engineers them to fulfil His prophetic predictions.

The context of the census imposed by Caesar suggests a theme of people in general missing the birth of the world's spiritual king because of worldly bustle. The earthly king creates a huge event wherein all must defer to him, while the spiritual king quietly and unassumingly appears on the scene.

v1 The IV has "his empire" in place of "the world". "All the world" at that time was effectively the Roman Empire.

v4 "city of David...Bethlehem", while the "city of David" is commonly equated with Jerusalem-Zion, it is also applied to Bethlehem in specific because it was the village of his nativity, cf. 1 Sam. 17:12.

The name "Bethlehem" in Hebrew means "house of bread". The Anchor Bible (AB) comments on this name stating the Hebrew name

is derived from the original Canaanite name for the town "Bit-Lahmi", which means "house of [the god] Lahmu". If this is the case, then the Jews appear to have altered the idolatrous Canaanite name into a more suitable non-idolatrous one. Thus, it ironically is transformed from the house of an idolatrous god, to the house of the God of Israel.

v7 "her firstborn son", the firstborn has the right to the double portion of all the father has and is in line for the father's blessing. Thus, the OT practice becomes a type of the exaltation of the Son. If Jesus' father is God the Father, then his birthright and blessing is from God. What is his double portion? All that the Father has, plus those things he made with his own hands.

"wrapped him in swaddling clothes", he is dressed in normal earthly clothes just like any other mortal is at birth. They become a symbol of his mortality as he does not wear heavenly garments of glory like angels do, or like he formerly did. His condescension is complete. Note in v. 12 it is a sign that he is wrapped in swaddling clothes, a sign because he is the mortal Messiah who formerly was the Lord.

"in a manger", this is typically equated with being housed in a stable, which is not the case. A "manger" is a grain trough for cattle. While the birth took place in a stable, Mary wrapped him in clothes and used a trough for a cradle. The symbolism is that he is become the food of life, born in Bethlehem, the house of bread.

Also, the idea of Isa. 1:3 is invoked, "The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider." The Messiah is born with cattle as witnesses while the rest of the world is heeding the commands of Caesar.

"no room for them at the inn", the idea of Jer. 14:8 is invoked. The Savior of Israel comes as a stranger to his people.

8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. 10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. 12 And this [shall be] a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 Glory to God in the highest,

and on earth peace, good will toward men.

15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. 16 And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. 17 And when they had seen [it], they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. 18 And all they that heard [it] wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. 19 But Mary kept all these things, and pondered [them] in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

v8-20 Angels appear to lowly shepherds in the field and announce the birth of the Messiah (v. 8-14). The shepherds then go and worship the newborn Messiah and tell everyone what the angels announced them (v. 15-20).

The import of these verses is threefold. First, it is ironic. The OT Prophets presents the religious leaders of Israel as figurative shepherds who are to guide the people of Israel gently and lovingly as a shepherd would his flocks. But, here, the angels do not go to the spiritual shepherds of Judah, they go to the physical shepherds instead. The physical shepherds are receptive to the message while the spiritual shepherds are not, per the prediction of Malachi 3. The physical shepherds go in haste to see the Messiah, they bear witness of what they have heard, and praise God for having seen it. This is the exact opposite of the religious leaders. The very fact the religious leaders of Judah at that time are absent from the scene predicts the adversity to come.

The second point is Jesus is the true and ideal shepherd of Israel, cf. John 10:11-14. Thus, shepherds are summoned to acknowledge and defer to him, and they do, unlike the supposed spiritual shepherds.

Third, a connection is established with the ancient David of Bethlehem, who was a shepherd himself, cf. 1 Sam. 16:11. The shepherd David of Bethlehem deferred to the Lord, and so do the present shepherds of Bethlehem. The connection with Bethlehem is important because of the prediction of the Davidic king found in Micah 5:1.

v11-14 The pronouncement of the angels is the "gospel" defined. The gospel, or "good news", is that a Savior, the Lord incarnate, has been provided to redeem Israel.

v17-18 Again, a relatively large group of people being told about these events, as was the case in 1:65-66. Yet it apparently doesn't result in people doing anything different,

just talking about it.

v19 Mary is presented as thoughtful and meditative. She remembers these things and thinks about them, cf. v. 51. The Greek for the KJV "pondered" would be better translated "parleyed" or "tossed about". It means she is deliberating over them, and sifting through them to determine their meaning. These statements suggest that Mary came to understand the full import of what was happening to her over time, cp. v. 33.

These statements also serve to single Mary out as uniquely thoughtful and dedicated concerning this child and his imminent mission.

21 And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called JESUS, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb. 22 And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present [him] to the Lord; 23 (As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;) 24 And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.

v21-24 Jesus' parents are astute to observe the Law concerning the birth of a newborn son.

v21 Circumcision on the eighth day is prescribed in the Law, Gen. 17:12, Gen. 21:4

v22 "days of her purification", the KJV presents it as singular "her" when the Greek is in fact plural "their". At the birth of a child both the child and the mother undergo ritual purification according to the Law, cf. Lev. 12. Note in Lev. 12, the ritual purification for the mother is half that for male babies than for females, ostensibly because the male baby bears the other half through the circumcision. Hence the plural "their" in the present verse.

v23 The point of Law cited here is found in Exod. 13:2.

25 And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name [was] Simeon; and the same man [was] just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him. 26 And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law, 28 Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, 29 Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy

word: 30 For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, 31 Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; 32 A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel. 33 And Joseph and his mother marveled at those things which were spoken of him. 34 And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this [child] is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; 35 (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

36 And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity; 37 And she [was] a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served [God] with fastings and prayers night and day. 38 And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

v25-38 A devout and holy man is inspired by the Spirit to witness the newborn child is the Messiah (v. 25-35), as is a devout and holy woman (v. 36-38).

Luke presents two witnesses who testify Jesus is the Messiah of the Jews, cf. 2 Cor. 13:1. Note both are very devout Jews who are in the Temple when they testify, both are inspired, and both identify him without anything but the Spirit guiding them.

Also note the events at John's circumcision in 1:57-79 parallel those here in that the events are attended with inspired testimony concerning the callings of each child.

v25-35 Simeon, a spiritual and devout man who eagerly looked forward to the restoration of Israel, was promised before his death to see the Messiah (v. 25-26). That day he is led by the Spirit to meet Jesus and his parents as they are leaving the Temple (v. 27). Simeon recognizes Jesus, by inspiration, as the Messiah (v. 28), and testifies concerning the salvation he is to bring to all nations (v. 29-31, cp. Isa. 49:6-9) and glory to Israel (v. 32, cp. Isa. 46:13). Joseph and Mary are amazed at what Simeon says about Jesus (v. 33). Simeon then turns and blesses Joseph and Mary and gives another prediction concerning Jesus, paraphrasing messianic passages from the Prophets. Jesus shall be a pillar of judgement for Israel with some being lifted up by him and some falling against him. He will be a symbol that will be rejected (v. 34, cp. 1 Sam. 2:6-7, Mal. 3:2-5). His soul will be pierced so that judgement may come upon all people and their true natures revealed (cp. Isa. 53:10-11, Zech. 12:10).

v35 The IV has "spear" instead of the KJV "sword", probably alluding to John 19:34.

v36-38 Anna the prophetess, apparently an independently wealthy widow who spends a great deal of time in the Temple, comes up when Simeon is testifying concerning Jesus and follows his example. She tells everyone who is at all interested in the redemption of Jerusalem about this Jesus whom she has seen.

39 And when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth. 40 And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him.

v39-40 After finishing all that was required at the Temple, they return home to Galilee. Jesus grows up strong and wise, with God's grace. The text then skips 12 years from this point to the next verses.

v40 Compare John 1:80 for an identical statement. Also see v. 52 for a similar statement. The statement in this verse is probably derived from 1 Sam. 2:21, 1 Sam. 2:26.

41 Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the passover. 42 And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast. 43 And when they had fulfilled the days, as they returned, the child Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem; and Joseph and his mother knew not [of it]. 44 But they, supposing him to have been in the company, went a day's journey; and they sought him among [their] kinsfolk and acquaintance. 45 And when they found him not, they turned back again to Jerusalem, seeking him.

46 And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. 47 And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers. 48 And when they saw him, they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing. 49 And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business? 50 And they understood not the saying which he spake unto them.

51 And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them: but his mother kept all these sayings in her heart. 52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.

v41-51 Joseph and Mary annually observe the Passover Feast at Jerusalem, and at the age of 12 they bring Jesus with them (v. 41-42). They observe the Feast and leave and after some time realize Jesus is not in the caravan they are traveling with (v. 43-44). They return to Jerusalem and anxiously search for him (v. 45). After three days they finally find him in the Temple where

he is questioning and listening to the teachers (v. 46). Everyone who hears him is amazed at his understanding and responses (v. 47). When his parents confront him about his behavior (v. 48), he states he is going about his Father's will (v. 49). But his parents do not yet understand that he is referring to his Father in heaven (v. 50). He then departs with them for home and from then on subjects himself to them, apparently out of respect for their parental authority (v. 51).

v44 "the company", i.e., a caravan. The AB states, "The reason for a traveling-party of pilgrims going from Galilee to Jerusalem was the need to pass through inhospitable Samaritan territory or to avoid attacks by highway robbers (see Luke 10:30)."

v46 "after three days", as they had traveled out from Jerusalem one day (one), they would have to travel back one day (two), and then on the next they find him in the Temple (three).

v48-49 "father...Father", notice the way Jesus contradicts Mary's statement that Joseph is his father.

v49 "about my Father's business", the "business" is an addition not present in the Greek. Most modern translations render it "in my Father's [house]", with the "house" being from context.

v50 Despite the various angel's testimonies and mortal testimonies, Joseph and Mary still don't seem to be grasping the full extent of Jesus' ministry. One would assume they are anticipating a physical Messiah-king, as was everyone else at that time.

v51 "and was subject to them", the seeming disobedience to his earthly parents is replaced by complete obedience. Jesus appears to be concerned enough about the sensitivities of his earthly parents to avoid causing them aggravation.

v52 This verse repeats the subject of v. 40 and implies that by adulthood he exceeds the wisdom and stature of men. How so? If in v. 40 at the age of 12 he has achieved a certain level of strength and wisdom where he can question and confound the teachers in the Temple, and we are then informed that he continues to increase in, wisdom, stature, and favor with God, then he has exceeded what typical mortals are capable of.

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