

Luke 2:22-40: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 02 February 2020

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 2 verses 22 to 40. And when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.

As it is written in the law of the Lord, every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord, and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him according to the custom of the law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace according to your word.

For my eyes have seen your salvation, that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.

[1 : 14] And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is opposed.

And a sword will pierce through your own soul also, so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed. And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was 84. She did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day.

And coming up at that very hour, she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. And when they had performed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favour of God was upon him. Today, for the Feast of the Presentation, we are looking at Luke chapter 2, a passage in which the infant Christ is brought to the temple to be presented to the Lord.

[2 : 34] This is in fulfilment of Old Testament law. It's in part a sign of Christ's commitment to keep the law in every respect. But there's more going on here.

One of the first things we should note are some of the characteristic themes that we find within Luke's Gospel and in the Book of Acts, where there is an emphasis upon Jerusalem, the temple, and the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the story.

Here we have the character of Simeon, who is filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is upon him. It is revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he will not see death until he has seen the Lord's Christ. He comes in the Spirit into the temple. That's language that we more commonly have associated with a character like Ezekiel, or one of the prophets. And he encounters the infant Christ with his parents.

Now this, in many ways, is language that prepares us for a later stage in the story, as the Spirit is given to the church in association with the temple at the beginning of the narrative of the Book of Acts.

[3 : 35] And I think some of the symmetries between these events may help us to understand what's taking place here. There is a 40-day period that is involved here. In the law of Leviticus chapter 12, the male son had to be presented after 40 days in the temple.

Now what happens 40 days after Christ's death and resurrection? He ascends into the heavenly temple and is present at God's right hand. And as we see that sort of parallel, we can see

something of the broader framework within which Luke operates, where there are parallels between the beginning of Christ's life and the end of it.

There's a Mary and a Joseph at the beginning of the story. There's Mary, a number of Marys, at the end of the story, and Joseph of Arimathea. At the beginning of the story, Jesus is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger.

At the end of the story, he's wrapped in linen garments and laid in a tomb. And there are a number of these sorts of symmetries that we need to notice. And here I would suggest that the story of the presentation in Luke finds its counterpart in the story of the ascension of Christ and its associated event of Pentecost.

There are various anticipations of Pentecost at the beginning of the story of Luke. And here is one of them. I suspect that we are supposed to see in the character of Simeon some anticipation of what will be done by Peter on the day of Pentecost.

[5 : 01] There is one other character referred to as Simeon within the book of Luke and Acts. And that is the character of Peter in chapter 15 of Acts. And so we have two Simeons. Now there is a Simeon who speaks on the day of Pentecost.

Peter. His speech leads to people being cut to the heart. And the language that Simeon uses here might anticipate that. He says, Simeon then is associated with a sword in the Old Testament in chapter 34 of Genesis.

And this new Simeon is associated with a sword too. But maybe with the sword that we see in the message of Peter. And as Peter speaks on the day of Pentecost, he has a sword that cuts to people's hearts.

This child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel. Note the order of that. The fall and rising. There's a death and resurrection pattern there. And a sign that is opposed.

Christ is one who comes as a sign that provokes response. Negative or positive. People can't just be indifferent to Christ or neutral with regard to him.

[6 : 22] He is a sign that provokes response and that reveals hearts. By his very presence, people respond to him and they reveal their true character in the process.

So Simeon is an important character. But alongside Simeon is another important character called Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. First, note that she's from the tribe of Asher.

Many people would see that these tribes have been completely lost as a result of the dissolution of the northern kingdom with the invasion of the Assyrians. But it seems as though some members of those tribes still existed among the surviving tribes of the southern kingdom.

The description of Anna is important. She's described as a virgin and then a widow until she was the age of 84. What is 84? 7 times 12.

It's the number associated with Israel and then it's the number of the seven days of creation, the complete order of those weeks. And so that age of 84, she stands for Israel.

[7 : 26] There are a number of women within the book of Luke that have the age of 12. You have the woman with the issue of blood and Jairus' daughter. Both of them are associated with the number 12.

The woman with the issue of blood has that condition for 12 years. Jairus' daughter is 12 years of age and the parallel between those two is seen because they're held right next to each other.

The age then is important. She does not depart from the temple. She's worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day. And who might she remind us of? Well, there's an Anna or a Hannah in the Old Testament in the book of 1 Samuel.

And at the beginning of 1 Samuel, we see many parallels to the beginning of the book of Luke. We see things like the Magnificat and then we have the character of Anna here.

And the character of Anna is like Hannah, praying constantly, fasting, and worshipping God in the temple, not being recognised by the authorities, but yet someone who's faithful and pursuing the deliverance of Israel.

[8 : 34] And in her faithful prayer, she stands for the whole nation in its faithful character. She is the one who has a symbolic age that represents the whole people.

She's also a prophetess. As the original, Hannah was a prophetess, someone who foretold that God would do things to change the situation of Israel and turn the tables on the oppressive rich.

Now we have another Anna who's a prophetess and will declare the redemption of Jerusalem much as the first Hannah did. Now there is another thing that Anna might remind us of and that actually comes later in the story, which is the early church.

The disciples at the end of the book of Luke and beginning of the book of Acts are constantly, continually in the temple, praising God and praying. They're seeking the deliverance of Israel, the redemption of Jerusalem.

They're praying for the Holy Spirit to be given. And here we have a similar character and what happens is this character calls back to the original Hannah. She's a prophetess that anticipates the prophecy that will characterize the early church.

[9 : 45] Like the early church, she is gathered in the temple to pray constantly, seeking God's deliverance. And as we saw in the case of the first Hannah, there is a misperception of these characters.

In the case of the first Hannah, she's presumed to be drunk by the priest Eli. Later on, on the day of Pentecost, the disciples are presumed to be drunk as they speak in tongues by the leaders of the people.

And so these characters bring to light a far richer and broader picture of redemptive history, connecting us back to the early story of the start of the kingdom itself in the events surrounding Hannah and her prayer for Samuel in the temple.

But also looking forward to the great events of the day of Pentecost. And here we have a charged event that anticipates and recalls all these things.

And as Christ is presented, the infant Christ is entering into this story that is charged from that very beginning. A story of anticipation, longing, fervent prayer.

[10 : 51] A story of expectation of one who will come to be the glory of the people Israel, but not just for Israel. For light, for revelation to the Gentiles.

This is already anticipating something that we'll see in the book of Acts as the gospel goes beyond Israel and out into the nations as well. And Luke ends this account with a declaration that the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favour of God was upon him.

Now these sorts of expressions are common at the beginning of the book of Luke, referring both to John the Baptist and to Jesus as they grow up. And we also see some permutations of these referred to the early church as it grows in numbers, as it becomes strong, and as God blesses it, and it grows in favour with God and man.

Now Luke knows what he's doing. He's referring back to the story of 1 Samuel again. There we have the description of Samuel as growing in the presence of the Lord.

In verse 26 of chapter 2, Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and also with man. And then in chapter 3, verse 19, And Samuel grew and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.

[12 : 11] These are all expressions that Luke has in the back of his mind, I think, as he's using this description of Christ. Why is he using this? Because he's telling a new story of the establishment of the new kingdom.

If the story of 1 Samuel is the story of the first kingdom being established, of Saul and David, and of the prophet that set up that kingdom, this is a story of the establishment of a new kingdom.

And Luke is concerned that ready ears will hear this anticipation of what Christ is going to achieve. That Christ is like the character of Samuel.

And that John the Baptist in other respects is like the character of Samuel. They're going to establish a new kingdom and this new kingdom is going to be one that is given all authority and power.

A kingdom that will never end and a king that will never fail. These are all themes that are picked up within the book of Luke later on. And Luke is very conscious in his use of the background of 1 Samuel.

[13 : 14] He wants his readers to recognize it. And here, in the character of Anna, and then in the description of Christ, he wants people to hear what's going on.

That there is something happening here. Something stirring. And what is stirring is something that has deep resonance with events that have occurred in Israel's past.

A question to reflect upon. Simeon, we are told, has had some revelation given to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

Anna is described as a prophetess. Both of these characters have the word of God that has come to them personally. How might the prophetic character of both of these figures fit into the broader portrait that Luke is trying to paint of the events?