

Luke 1:57-80: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 1 verses 57 to 80 And he asked for a writing tablet and wrote, His name is John.

And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, Blessing God. And fear came upon all their neighbours. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea.

And all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What then will this child be? For the hand of the Lord was with him. And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us, in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us, to show the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people, in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. The end of Luke chapter 1 concerns the birth and naming of John the Baptist, and the celebration of his birth.

[2 : 12] The prominence given to John the Baptist at the beginning of Luke is remarkable. In the first chapter, if we were judging by blocks of text alone, we might initially think that he received more attention than Jesus himself.

Luke underlines the relationship between Jesus and John, not just in their public ministry, but through prophecy, through songs, through signs, through family relations, and shared patterns of events.

In the prophetic songs or speeches, Luke also interprets the ministries of John and Jesus in advance. The more that we look at the parts seemingly devoted to John, however, it becomes clear that they are really primarily about Jesus.

John's ministry is clearly subordinate to, and also pointing to, Christ. By describing the conceptions and the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, Luke is also able to heighten the sense of expectation, and of divinely appointed destiny in the two.

In addition to the Old Testament prophecies that are highlighted in the other Gospels, Luke also has prophetic testimony concerning Jesus, from Elizabeth, Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon, and presents several faithful Israelites, awaiting what the Lord would do with these two miraculous children, who are surrounded by so many anticipatory manifestations of the work of the Spirit, promising a much greater outpouring of the Spirit's work in the future.

[3 : 35] By the time that this section is over, everyone is wondering what will happen next. The angel Gabriel had predicted rejoicing at the birth of John the Baptist, and that is what we see.

Rejoicing and praising God are constant throughout these opening chapters. People and angels bursting forth in praise, and singing with joy at what God is doing. When Elizabeth gives birth to John, her neighbours join her to rejoice.

And when it comes to the time of the circumcision, which would have been the time of naming, as with baptism in some Christian traditions, the general opinion seems to be that he will receive the

name of his father, Zechariah.

However, Elizabeth insists that the child shall be called John, and then Zechariah confirms it.

Perhaps we are to see Elizabeth as arriving at this name independently. Perhaps not.

He is not to be named after the father, but he is to be named for the graciousness of God. And once again, it's important to recognise the presence of a wider audience here. There are not just Elizabeth and Zechariah.

[4 : 37] There's all their neighbours, all these other people that have joined to celebrate with them. Zechariah is a figure of note within the community, and so people come around to celebrate this event with them.

And when they see the sign of his mouth being opened, they realise that this is something auspicious. There's a sign, an omen of what's going to come to pass in the future. As soon as Zechariah confirms the name of his son John, his mouth is opened, his tongue is loosed, and he blesses God.

And we can probably see parallels to Pentecost here. In Acts 2 verse 4, And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And in verses 25 to 26, For David says concerning him, I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken.

Therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced. My flesh also will dwell in hope. Zechariah then bursts forth in prophecy, as he is filled with the Holy Spirit.

His bound tongue is loosed, and not just the voice of Zechariah, but the silenced voice of prophecy from the Old Testament, bursts forth onto the scene of the new. He is filled with the Holy Spirit.

[5 : 49] Once again, the opening chapters of Luke, are full of anticipatory foreshadows of the great earthquake, that will occur at Pentecost. Lots of people being filled with the Spirit, the Spirit coming upon people, overshadowing people.

The Spirit is active here, and the Spirit is foreshadowing, what will later happen at Pentecost, when he will be poured out on all flesh. Zechariah's prophecy is packed with allusions to Scripture.

Verses 68-75 concern what the Lord is doing in Jesus, and is a benediction. Verses 76-79 speak of John's part in God's great work, and functions more as a direct prophecy, telling not what God will do, but how he will do it.

These opening prophecies and songs, again, are programmatic for Luke. They present readers and hearers with a framework to understand everything that will follow. Joel Green observes the subtle connections that the Song of Zechariah exhibits.

So, for instance, in verse 68, you have the language of visitation, God visiting his people, as he did at the Exodus. And then in verse 78, you have the language of the sunrise visiting from on high.

[7 : 00] The language of visitation attracts different connotations in these different contexts. But those different connotations are brought into relationship with each other. Likewise, the language of salvation is used in verse 69 to refer to Davidic kingship and deliverance from enemies.

But later on, in verse 77, it's the context of forgiveness of sins. Those two things belong together, and we're supposed to think about how they fit. We also have a connection between John the Baptist as the prophet of the Most High, and the prophets of old, who foretold these things.

The first half seems to present a far more politically focused vision, while the latter half is more spiritual in the narrow sense that that term is often used. However, for Zechariah, these two things very much belong together.

When considering the sort of salvation being declared in the first part, we are in danger of jumping to one of two conclusions. Either we associate it primarily with the Romans as the occupying force, or we relate it wholly to spiritualized things that are detached from more concrete forms of deliverance, deliverance from political enemies, or deliverance perhaps from poverty.

Yet in the Gospels, the oppressors are often primarily false teachers, or those mistreating the poor, demonic powers, and behind these things, Satan himself as the strong man holding people in captivity.

[8 : 23] While Luke's concept of salvation most definitely includes the political, the social, and the material world, it is not necessarily focused upon the Romans. God redeeming his people might make us think of Jubilee themes.

It's also Exodus language. We find this sort of language in places like Psalm 106, verse 10. So he saved them from the hand of the foe and redeemed them from the power of the enemy.

The Song of Zechariah is saturated in the prophetic language and imagery of expectation. Here are several voices from the prophets that you can hear in the background. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord.

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts and I will be their God and they shall be my people.

And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more.

[9 : 42] From Jeremiah chapter 31, verses 31 to 34. In Psalm 130, verse 7 to 8. O Israel, hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is steadfast love and with him is plentiful redemption and he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

In Malachi chapter 3, verses 1 to 2. Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight.

Behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap.

In Isaiah chapter 60, verses 1 to 3. Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples. But the Lord will arise upon you and his glory will be seen upon you and nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising. Malachi chapter 4, verse 2.

[10 : 47] But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. Just a few verses later in verses 5 to 6 of that chapter.

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with the decree of utter destruction.

Isaiah chapter 40, verse 3. A voice cries, In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Isaiah chapter 9, verses 2 to 7.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy. They rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

[11 : 51] For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end. On the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. Isaiah chapter 42 verses 6 to 7 What we hear in the Song of Zechariah is a glorious combination of the language of Jubilee, of Exodus, of New Covenant, of Divine Visitation, and of a New Dawn.

This rich assembly of language and imagery gives us a sense of just how charged with anticipation and hope the Old Testament is for the prospect of this coming one.

The chapter ends with a description of John the Baptist growing up, and once again this language recalls stories from the Old Testament, stories of sons whose births were announced and who were divinely destined for great things in the future.

[13 : 22] Judges chapter 13 verse 24 And the woman bore a son and called his name Samson, and the young man grew and the Lord blessed him. Genesis chapter 21 verses 20 to 21 And God was with the boy and he grew up.

He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt. Referring to Ishmael. In 1 Samuel chapter 2 verse 26 Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and also with man.

The fact that John grows up in the wilderness prepares us for the physical and the symbolically important location of his future ministry. A question to consider.

What other biblical characters were particularly associated with the wilderness?