

Luke 1:39-56: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 1 verses 39 to 56. For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy, and blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.

And Mary said, My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed, for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, he has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of humble estate.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her home. The spirit's overshadowing of Mary in Luke chapter 1 might draw our minds back to the cloud of the spirit coming upon the tabernacle and the temple when they were dedicated.

[1 : 4 0] It might also draw our minds forward to the event of Pentecost. It also helps us to understand what comes next, as Mary, her womb and her child are spoken of using temple imagery, and drawing upon stories of the temple from the Old Testament.

Like Acts, Luke begins with the establishment of a new temple. King David leapt and danced before the Ark of the Covenant, as it was brought into Jerusalem in 2 Samuel chapter 6 verses 14 to 16, dressed in the garments of a child.

As Mary, the new Ark bearing God's presence, comes to Elizabeth, the infant forerunner John dances before Jesus, God's presence, just as David danced before the Ark, bringing the presence of the Lord into Jerusalem.

Elizabeth speaks of Mary as the mother of her Lord, and the leaping of her baby is taken as a sign of the superiority of the one over the other. And not just the superiority, but the interconnection between the two.

These are two infants with a shared mission. Intertwine destinies that will play out in the future. Elizabeth blesses Mary in much the same language as Jael is blessed, in Judges chapter 5 verse 24.

[2 : 5 0] Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heba the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed. Jael is famous for crushing the head of Cicero, driving a tent peg through his temple.

This would seem a strange story to recall in the context of meek Mary, and we might be inclined to discount the connection, but I don't think we should. In Genesis chapter 3 verse 15, enmity is placed between the woman and the serpent, and between their respective seeds.

And we are told that the seed of the woman will crush the serpent's head. Jael is an example of someone who crushes a tyrant's head, a serpent figure. And Mary is the mother of the promised seed, the one who will crush the serpent's head.

And she, in her faithful response to the Lord, is instrumental in that crushing herself. Not only is she like Jael, she's also like Hannah. The song that she later sings is like that of Hannah in 1 Samuel chapter 2 verse 10.

Mary is cut from the same cloth as the great heroines from the Old Testament. She's continuing their story. In the character of Mary, we see a glimpse of many of the traits of the great heroines of the Old Testament.

[3 : 58] Mary stays with Elizabeth from the sixth to the ninth months of her pregnancy. Later in the Gospel, darkness is over the land from the sixth to the ninth hours. In Luke chapter 23 verse 44, there may be a connection between these two things.

The parallels between Mary's Magnificat and the prayer of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, in 1 Samuel chapter 2 verses 1 to 10, are readily noticeable. And Hannah prayed and said, My heart exalts in the Lord.

My horn is exalted in the Lord. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation. There is none holy like the Lord, for there is none besides you. There is no rock like our God.

Talk no more so very proudly. Let not arrogance come from your mouth. For the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by his actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength.

Those who are full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who are hungry have ceased to hunger. The barren has born seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The Lord kills and brings to life.

[5 : 02] He brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich. He brings low and he exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust. He lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour.

For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world. He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness. For not by might shall a man prevail. The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces. Against them he will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to his king and establish the horn of his anointed.

Mary is probably also drawing upon material, such as Psalm 113, verses 7 to 9. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people.

He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord.

This is the first of the cycle of the Psalms sung at the Passover, and there is a new extant style deliverance in the making here.

[6 : 06] The Magnificat is marked by the sort of parallelism that you find in Hebrew poetry. In such poetry we'll usually see the juxtaposition of two lines, one which develops the thought of the one that went before.

The Magnificat explores the contrast between the humility of Mary and the mightiness of the Lord. The Lord who can bring the mighty low and lift up those of poor degree is the one who looks upon the humble and the meek and the lowly of the earth and takes regard for them.

And the song, which begins with Mary's own experience, soon expands into the experience of Israel. What happens to Mary is exemplary for the whole people. The deliverance that she experiences will expand to a larger group.

Like the other songs and prophecies at the beginning of the book of Luke, it serves to sum up and characterise the larger mission that Jesus is about to engage in, in the Gospel as a whole.

With these other songs and prophecies and prayers, it introduces the ministry of Christ and of John the Baptist with great themes of rejoicing and celebration and anticipation. An event that seems minor, the birth of a child, is seen to hold within it the promise of the redemption of a people.

[7 : 18] A seed of redemption is here germinating, a seed which will not truly pierce the surface of the earth until thirty years hence. God's great acts often have long gestation periods, and what we see in the story of Mary and Elizabeth is that it begins in surprising places.

It begins with the prayers of faithful women, not in the courts of kings. This, of course, is in keeping with the theme of Mary's song, that the Lord, the mighty God, is the one who pays attention to the humble and the meek and the lowly of the earth.

He's the God who turns the tables. Those who seem to be mighty and of great repute are those who are going to be brought low. The rich are going to be impoverished, and the poor are going to be lifted up.

And all of this should be assigned to Israel itself. Israel, that is so often inclined to put its hope in the great leaders and rulers, or to live in dread of them, can so easily forget that their God is a God who works with the meek and the lowly.

He's a God who hears their prayers. He's a God who acts on behalf of those who are neglected and oppressed and abandoned. There is no reason why they should be enthralled to the mighty of the world, when the mighty one of Israel is on their side.

[8 : 28] Mary, like Hannah before her, is an example also to those in Israel who might think of themselves as of little consequence. The Lord is not merely concerned with the affairs of kingdoms and nations.

He pays attention to individuals, even those that no one else pays attention to. A question to consider. Why might the relationship between Elizabeth and Mary be significant?