

Luke 1:24-56: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 1 verses 24 to 56 After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary.

And he came to her and said, Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you. But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

And the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

[1 : 0 3] And Mary said to the angel, How will this be, since I am a virgin? And the angel answered her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

Therefore the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren, for nothing will be impossible with God.

And Mary said, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her. In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah.

And she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 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.

[2 : 1 7] 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. For the second time in Luke chapter 1, the angel Gabriel appears to someone declaring the birth of a child.

[3 : 20] He has already appeared to Zechariah in the temple to announce the birth of John. The angel Gabriel is known to us already from Daniel chapter 8 verse 16 and 9 verse 21, where he declares the fates of nations and empires.

John is going to be the prophet like Samuel, and Jesus is going to be the Davidic king. In verse 76, John is declared to be the prophet of the Most High, and here Jesus is described as the Son of the Most High.

We've already seen parallels between the two annunciations. The angel Gabriel appears to both of them. Both of them respond in fear. Both of them are reassured, told not to be afraid, and are told that they will have a son.

John will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb, and the Holy Spirit will come upon Mary. The future missions of both are described in detail, and what they will do.

Both Zechariah and Mary respond with seemingly similar questions. How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years. And then in the case of Mary, how will this be, since I am a virgin?

[4 : 25] Although it is not explicitly mentioned here, as it is in the Gospel of Matthew, Isaiah chapter 7 verses 10 to 17, is lurking behind the text in the reference to the virgin here.

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, Ask a sign of the Lord your God. Let it be deep as Sheol, or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.

And he said, Hear then, O house of David, Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel.

He shall eat curds and honey, when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted.

The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah, the king of Assyria.

[5 : 28] The foretold birth of the child to the young woman, or in some translations the virgin, in Isaiah chapter 7 is a portentous sign to the king of Judah. It's a sign of God bringing about a reversal in history in a short period of time.

And here there's something more going on. It's a sign of new creation. God is starting something new in history. This is not just another descendant of Adam. A new humanity is being formed in Mary's womb.

This child will be the son of the Most High. Now, this looks back to 2 Samuel chapter 7 verses 12 to 14, and the covenant with David. But there is something more going on here.

The expression son of God functions in a stronger sense here. Jesus is not just going to be the Davidic king. He will also be called holy, the son of God, because of the manner of his birth.

His birth is not of man, not of a human father, but of God himself. And so his sonship seems to be referring not solely to his status as the Davidic king, but as one who has come from God himself.

[6 : 55] Here it is important that Mary is betrothed to a man of the house of David, to Joseph. It's through Joseph that Christ's royal heritage comes. And the place of Joseph within the story is not so foregrounded within the book of Luke, as it is in Matthew.

But Joseph's place should not be forgotten here. Both Mary and Joseph have crucial parts to play. It is very important for those of us who are Gentile Christians, who are accustomed to dulling ourselves to the political themes of the gospel, and to the references to Israel as a nation, to see just how charged the annunciation of Christ's birth and the songs and the prophecies that follow are with references to kingship, with references to David, with references to the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, and God's blessing and visiting his people Israel.

Jesus will be the Davidic king. He will be the deliverer of his people. His birth comes in a context charged with the expectation of Israel. In the context of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

In the context of Mary and her Magnificat. In the context of Simeon and Anna, who are praying for the deliverance of Israel. If reading the beginning of Luke's gospel, we start to feel some sense of discomfort about our spiritualized version of the Messiah, and the way in which we've detached the Messiah from political themes and kingdom themes, then that's good.

That's exactly as it should be, because those themes are an important part of this story, and we need to be careful not to erase them. The spirit will overshadow Mary, just as it hovered over the waters of creation, and how it covered the tabernacle in Exodus chapter 40.

[8 : 40] It's power from on high. And this is also something that anticipates Pentecost. Many have spoken about this as a Marian Pentecost, and I think that's exactly right. There is a connection between the conception of Christ and the womb of Mary, and the way in which the Spirit comes upon the church at Pentecost, so that Christ is formed in his people.

Perhaps we are supposed to hear themes of the reversal of the fall in the reference to the blessed fruit of Mary's womb. The womb once mediated judgment to the woman, in Genesis chapter 3.15, and now it becomes the means of blessing.

In the same way, the tomb was the great sign of the judgment upon Adam. And now, at the end of the Gospel of Luke, we'll see the tomb opened up as a new womb, and Christ coming forth as the firstborn of the dead.

The fruit of the garden, which led to condemnation, is replaced by the fruit of Mary's womb, who brings salvation. Jesus is the seed of the woman, and the woman in particular, as Mary is a virgin.

This is not the seed of a woman who has had relations with a man. It's the seed of the woman in particular, and he's the first of a new humanity to replace that of Adam. The description of the Spirit coming upon and overshadowing suggests the creation of a new tabernacle or temple.

[10 : 02] Mary, her womb, and her child are spoken of using temple imagery. And, like Acts, Luke begins then with the establishment of a new temple. It's a sign of things changing.

Nothing will be impossible with God, recalls the angel's words to Sarah in Genesis chapter 18, verse 14. Mary is told that Elizabeth, her relative, has also had a miraculous conception.

Their stories are interwoven, and the mothers of these two sons, who will together deliver God's people, are brought together at this point. This would serve as an assurance to Mary, but also a sign to them both.

Elizabeth also, as a respected woman, could vouch for Mary, that she was a woman of good character, and that this was not a child born of unfaithfulness. She herself was given a sign of that, as her infant leaped in her womb.

Having asked the question of how those things would be, not as a question of unbelief, as in the case of Zachariah, but as a question of belief, Mary then speaks of herself later as the servant of the Lord.

[11 : 05] She submits to the Lord, readily accepting the vocation that's laid upon her. When she visits Elizabeth, John the Baptist leaps in the womb of Elizabeth for joy.

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, 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. The language, my Lord, is a very powerful testimony to the importance of the child that Mary is bearing, and again would be a sign to Mary, an assurance to her.

Mary is blessed in much the same way as Jael is in Judges chapter 5, verse 24. Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed.

Jael was famous for crushing the head of Sisera, and Mary and her child will be involved in crushing the head of the serpent. Mary's song, as we shall see, is also like Hannah's from 1 Samuel chapter 2, verses 1 to 10.

[12 : 26] What we're seeing here is that Mary is cut from the same cloth as the great heroines of the Old Testament. In Mary, we have a charged condensation of much of the imagery and symbolism associated with women in the Old Testament, of the great women of the Old Testament.

Their characteristics meet in her, and she is someone who stands for the woman that's spoken of in Genesis chapter 3, verse 15, and the promise of victory over the serpent.

Many Protestants get nervous about this. They get concerned that we don't have too high a view of Mary. But yet Scripture has a high view of Mary. She is someone in which the destiny of God's people comes to a head.

She is someone who is an archetype and an exemplar of the Church and the people of faith. Nevertheless, contrary to the way that Mary is often treated in Roman Catholic circles, this doesn't require exalting Mary above the ranks of mere mortals and treating her as if she was somewhere between God and humanity.

Rather, she is like other characters in Scripture, characters like Abraham or Sarah or Rebecca or Rachel. She is a character who stands for a lot more than just an individual. There is a confluence of destinies within her, so that past stories reach their climax in her actions, and later realities and persons can trace the origins back to her.

[13 : 45] She is not unique in this respect. While the Church can appropriately see her as a mother figure that represents the Church itself and Israel itself, Sarah is also presented in a similar way, as is Rachel.

And in the case of men, Abraham is the one that sums up the history of Israel and himself, playing it out in advance. Abraham is described as the father of us all.

We greatly underplay characters like Mary or Abraham if we just see them as individuals who manifest faith and are exemplars of faith. Yet their status is greatly overstated when there is the development of certain forms of devotion to them.

Forms of devotion that collapse the greater realities that are at work in and manifested in those characters into a single individual. Mary is one of a number of symbols of the Church and of Israel, and the meaning of these greater realities is neither exhausted by or fully realised in her.

Mary stays with Elizabeth from the sixth to the ninth months of her pregnancy. Darkness was over the land from the sixth to the ninth hours in Luke chapter 23 verse 44.

[14 : 56] Is there a connection? Perhaps. One of them seems to harken back to the ninth plague which preceded the death of the firstborn. And this is something that might look forward to the birth of the firstborn.

But I wouldn't put much weight on it. One of the first things that readers of Mary's song notice is its similarity with the prayer of Hannah in 1 Samuel chapter 2 verses 1 to 10.

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 him 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.

[16 : 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 exalt the horn of his anointed.

This prayer is alluded to in 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 psalm sung at the Passover, and hearing it in the background here, we might recognise a new Exodus-style deliverance in the making.

[17 : 11] Mary's Magnificat expands its focus from the Lord's attention to her particular situation to his attention to that of Israel as a whole. As in the prayer of Hannah, we here can see that God's attention to this young woman called Mary is his attention to the entire people.

His answer to her prayers is his answer to the prayers of his people. God's deliverance of his people Israel does not come with dramatic fanfare. It comes, as in the case of 1 Samuel, in response to a humble woman's prayers.

God's kingdom is one that comes like no earthly kingdom. It comes not to the great and powerful of the earth first, but to the meek and lowly. It comes not in the thunder of chariots and the snorting of their horses, but in the secrecy of a virgin's womb.

Mary's Magnificat ends with a reference to God's promises to Abraham, and we've seen a number of allusions to Abraham within this chapter, and these are not the last of the allusions to Abraham that come.

The descriptions of Zechariah and Elizabeth recall Sarah and Abraham in their old age. The annunciations of the birth of Jesus and of John the Baptist recall the annunciations of the birth of Ishmael and of Isaac, and the response of Zechariah recalls the response of Abraham and Sarah.

[18 : 29] If Jesus comes as the son of David, he also comes as the great son of Abraham, the one who is the greater Isaac, the beloved son that will later lay down his life in obedience to his father.

A question to consider. Thinking of the other places in biblical narrative where we have songs or great poems of the type that we see in Mary's Magnificat, what might be the significance of its presence at this point?