

PARALLEL GUIDE 11

The Gospel According to Luke, Part I

Summary

The Gospel According to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles form a two-part work. The treatment of Luke's Gospel is the subject of Chapters Eleven and Twelve. Chapter Eleven looks at the question of authorship, the relationship of Luke to the other Gospels, and some of the unique material in Luke's Gospel which narrates stories about the birth of Jesus and his early life.

Learning Objectives

- Read **the first two chapters of the Gospel According to Luke**
- Learn the **author, date, and probable origin** of the Gospel According to Luke
- Learn the structure of the Gospel According to Luke
- Learn the characteristics of the Gospel According to Luke
- Discover the significance of the Muratorian Canon

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. What is the significance of the placement and different point of view of the Gospel According to Luke when compared to the other Synoptic Gospels?
2. What is the significance of the story of the birth of Jesus? How is this sometimes misunderstood?

Preparing for Your Seminar

Look at the stories of the birth of Jesus and how we have evolved our Christmas tradition. How do you reconcile the narrative in this Gospel with the other Gospels? How does the narrative in Luke reflect other traditions which relate stories of miraculous births?

If the Christmas mood is not present, come to your seminar prepared to discuss the significance of a single author for both Luke and Acts. How might this information merge with what we know about Paul and who Luke may have been?

Works Cited

Bibliographical resources are given in Chapter Twelve. Numerous stories of miraculous births exist in literature. Some are given here in brief.

Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* II.94.1-7

In the book, *Theologumenon* by Asclepias of Mendes, I read that when Atia (Augustus' mother) had come in the middle of the night to the solemn rite of Apollo, when her litter had been set in the temple, and while the other women slept (or,

went home), she slept. A snake slipped up to her and, after a little while, went out. When she awoke, she purified herself as if coming from her husband's bed. And immediately on her body there appeared a mark colored like a snake, and she could never get rid of it. Therefore, she always avoided the public baths. Augustus was born in the tenth month after this and because of this was considered the son of Apollo.

Atia herself, before she gave birth to him, dreamed that her womb was carried up to the stars and spread out over all the earth and sky. Octavius, the father, dreamed that the radiance of the sun rose from Atia's womb.

Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, Alexander 2.1-3.2

Alexander was a descendent of Herakles, on his father's side, through Karanos; on his mother's side he was descended from Aikos through Neoptolemos; this is universally believed. It is said that Philip (Alexander's father) was initiated into the mysteries at Samothrace with Olympias (Alexander's mother). He was still a youth and she was an orphan. He fell in love with her and conjoined a marriage, with the consent of her brother, Arumbas.

The bride, before the night in which they were to join in the bridechamber, had a vision. There was a peal of thunder, and a lightning bolt fell upon her womb. A great fire was kindled from the strike, then it broke into flames which flashed everywhere, then they extinguished. At a later time, after the marriage, Philip saw a vision; he was placing a seal on his wife's womb; the engraving on the seal was, as he thought, in the image of a lion. The men charged with interpreting oracles were made suspicious by this vision and told Philip to keep a closer watch on his marital affairs. But Aristander of Telmessus said (the vision meant that) her husband had impregnated her for nothing is sealed if it is empty, and that she was pregnant with a child whose nature would be courageous and lion-like.

Origen, a Christian teacher in the 3rd century, in *Against Celsus*, I, 37

It is not absurd to use Greek stories when talking to Greeks in order that we might not seem to be the only ones to be using such an incredible story as this one (viz., about Jesus' birth from a virgin). For it seemed proper to some people to record—not concerning the ancient histories of the heroes, but even of men born rather recently—as if it really happened that Plato was born of (his mother) Amphiktione while (her husband) Ariston was prevented from having sexual intercourse with her until she had given birth to the offspring of Apollo.

(Cartlidge and Dungan, 1980, 130-133) I

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE, PART I

Approaching Luke-Acts

The books we call “the Gospel According to Luke” and “the Acts of the Apostles” are two parts of a single work, as we can see from their prologues (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-2). The end of the Gospel According to Luke (24:45-49) summarizes what the first two chapters of Acts present much more fully, and the beginning of the Book of Acts (1:3-5) summarizes what the last chapter of Luke presents in much more detail. The division into two books is satisfactory from a reader's viewpoint, since each part has its own focus. “The Life of Jesus” and “The Rise of the Church,” respectively, would be possible subtitles. The division is also a matter of practical necessity, for the work was originally written on scrolls, and scrolls become impossible to handle if extended beyond a certain length. Taken together, Luke and Acts occupy a quarter of the space in the entire New Testament.

Relating two parts of a single work was certainly not unparalleled in the ancient world. For example, Josephus did almost exactly the same thing (about 100 CE) in his treatise *Against Apion*. He begins the first part thus:

In my history of Antiquities, most excellent Epaphroditus, I have, I think, made sufficiently clear to any who may peruse that work the extreme antiquity of our Jewish race. . . . Since, however, I observe that a considerable number of persons, influenced by the malicious calumnies of certain individuals, discredit the statements in my history concerning our antiquity, . . . I consider it my duty to devote a brief treatise to all these points, in order at once . . . to correct the ignorance of others, and to instruct all who desire to know the truth concerning the antiquity of our race.

(Against Apion 1.1-3)

And he begins the second part thus:

In the first volume of this work, my most esteemed Epaphroditus, I demonstrated the antiquity of our race. . . . I shall now proceed to refute the rest of the authors who have attacked us. (2.1)

Similarities with Luke-Acts, even in phrasing, are obvious enough.

Luke and Acts do not appear together in ancient manuscripts of the New Testament or in ancient lists of books to be read in church (“canons”). From the beginning Luke was gathered with the other Gospels, John being the last of the four because of its distinctiveness. This ancient placement of Luke says nothing about its literary relationship to Acts. While it is almost certainly from the same author as Luke (or the same compositional community and process, to allow for more hands to the work), Acts is not a Gospel, and that difference has been crucial from the beginning. For that reason the Gospel According to Luke (Chapters Eleven and Twelve) are treated separately from the Book of Acts (Chapters Nineteen and Twenty).

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Author, Date, and Origin^{top}

The Muratorian Canon claims that Luke and Acts were written by “Luke, the physician . . . [whom] Paul had taken with him like a legal expert.” (The so-called “Muratorian Canon” is an anonymous fragment in very bad Latin. It interests church historians because it appears to be a translation of an early fourth-century list of books accepted as apostolic by the Eastern church.) Other early sources of church tradition make similar claims (e.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.2). Presumably they mean the same “fellow worker” of Paul (Philem. 24) who is called “the beloved physician” in Colossians 4:14 and commended for faithfulness in 2 Timothy 4:11. None of these passages mentions any writing activity by Luke, which is interesting since many scholars think that Colossians and 2 Timothy were composed by disciples of Paul, at least in the form we now have.

In obvious support of this identification, it is notable that many passages, sometimes referred to as the “we” passages in Acts, are written in the first person (e.g., Acts 16:10-18; 20:4-21:26; 27:1-16). This stylistic pattern suggests that the author was indeed a companion of Paul who used personal records (perhaps a diary) as source materials for parts of Acts. The “we” passages seem to have been written by the author of the rest of the work. Some have tried to show that the writer’s vocabulary implies medical training, but such arguments are found unconvincing by most scholars. The vocabulary of Luke-Acts is simply that of anyone reasonably well educated in Greek at the time.

Many scholars doubt the Lukan tradition of authorship, although none of the objections they raise is unanswerable. The picture of Paul’s ministry presented in Acts is different in a number of respects from the picture presented by Paul in his letters—letters the Book of Acts never mentions. Little of Paul’s theology as worked out in the Pauline letters appears in Paul’s preaching in Acts. But companionship, sympathy, and even admiration do not necessarily involve complete understanding or complete agreement, so that discrepancies of this kind do not necessarily rule out authorship by a companion of Paul.

Was the author of Luke-Acts Jewish or Gentile? Most commentators assume that he was a Gentile, usually on the basis of Colossians 4:10-14, which is taken to distinguish between those “of the circumcision” (4:11) and Luke (4:14). If the writer of Luke-Acts was a Gentile, he was very well informed about Judaism—as some “God-fearers” (Gentiles attracted to Judaism but as yet formally unconverted) certainly were. Further, there was in those days—as in our own—considerable variety among Jews with regard to learning, practice, and opinion.

Luke 21:20-36 seems to reflect some knowledge of the fall of Jerusalem, and scholars have generally dated the Gospel about 85 to 90 CE. The chief problem with this dating is that we should then expect Acts to refer to the death of Paul (usually reckoned to be 64 CE), rather than ending as it does with Paul preaching in Rome “with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31). A possible solution could be provided by some version of the Proto-Luke hypothesis (Chapter Seven), whereby we might suppose an original version of the Gospel (and therefore perhaps Acts as well) to have been written before 64, and to have been revised in the eighties.

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There may well be a theological reason for ending Acts with Paul’s unhindered preaching: the readers know that, by the time they are reading Acts (or hearing it read), Paul is dead. Nevertheless, they have assurance in the book itself that the apostolic preaching continues in the church, and the book closes on that triumphant note. As for the place of writing, a second-century preface to the Gospel, followed by St. Jerome (ca. 342-420), says that it was written in Achaia, the southern Greek peninsula which includes Corinth and Sparta. Since Paul worked extensively in that region, such a location is consistent with the view that Luke was a companion of Paul.

The Gospel According to Luke

Luke’s prologue (1:1-4) is highly developed in style, and almost every word is heavy with meaning. This prologue concludes by making clear that Luke has a purpose: “So that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed” (Luke 1:4). But what is the sense of this statement? Is Luke objecting that others have given incomplete or inaccurate accounts? Possibly, given the word translated here as “truth,” which is not the ordinary *alētheia* but the comparatively infrequent *asphaleia*, which emphasizes reliability and therefore reassurance. If we knew anything about Theophilus, to whom the Gospel is addressed, we might be surer of the nuance in this purpose statement. It is evident that Luke finds his addressee in need of what he is writing, either to correct what Theophilus has already heard, or to add to it further information on which Theophilus may rely.

Luke also points out that he has relied on sources—“those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word” (1:2). We have one of those sources, namely Mark. Luke tries to use this source faithfully, occasionally improving Mark’s Greek. He eliminates Mark’s more obvious doublets, like the two feeding stories (Mark 6:30-44; 8:1-10; cf. Luke 9:10-17). In general Luke follows Mark more closely, especially in his order of events, than Matthew does. We may reasonably suppose that Luke follows his other sources in a similar way. Like any writer, he includes what interests him and eliminates what does not.

Like other evangelists Luke is chiefly concerned to hand on the apostolic proclamation as clearly as he can. His Gospel falls into the pattern of that proclamation: the story of the Passion and Death and Resurrection of Jesus, with an extended introduction about Jesus’ ministry, shaped so that there emerges clearly the identity of both Jesus and whoever would be his disciple.

Structure

1:1-4— Evangelist’s prologue

1:5-2:52—Jesus' birth and infancy
3:1-4:13—Jesus' preparation
3:1-22—John the Baptizer's preaching; Jesus' baptism and recognition
3:23-38—Jesus' genealogy
4:1-13—Jesus' temptation
4:14-9:50—Jesus' Galilean ministry
9:51-19:27—Jesus' journey to Jerusalem
19:28-21:3—Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem
22:1-23:56—Jesus' Passion and Death
24:1-53—Jesus' Resurrection and Exaltation

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Luke's pattern does not differ significantly from that of Mark and Matthew. It preserves the kerygma, which is presented again in summary form on several occasions in Acts (2:14-40; 3:12-26; 10:34-43; 13:16-41).

Characteristics of the Gospel

Luke emphasizes that the gospel message of Jesus is for all people. Early in the Gospel Simeon is moved by the Holy Spirit to declare that Jesus is "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" as well as "for glory to [God's] people Israel" (2:32; cf. 3:6). All the Gospels make this point, but Luke makes it most emphatically. In contrast to Matthew, Luke's genealogy of Jesus traces his ancestry back to Adam rather than only to Abraham (3:23-38; cf. Matt. 1:1-16). Similarly, as will be discussed in Chapters Nineteen and Twenty, Luke emphasizes that Paul's calling is to be God's instrument to carry the gospel to the Gentiles.

Perhaps related to Luke's interest in the Gentile mission is his determination to make Christianity appear respectable in the eyes of those concerned for the proper maintenance of Roman law and order. In Luke's version of the trial of Jesus, both Pilate and Herod find Jesus not guilty (Luke 23:6-16). "Respectable Roman figures such as soldiers and civil servants often appear in quite a good light (e.g., Luke 23:47). Luke insists that the gospel is good news for the poor, the outcast, and the sinner. Although this concern is very much a part of the tradition, Luke's Gospel alone among the evangelists includes the Magnificat, with its eager celebration of the reversal of roles as society sees them (1:52-53). Luke alone contains the parables of the rich fool (12:13-21), emphasizing the futility of material wealth, and that of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31), with its implication that material wealth without concern for justice is damnable. Luke alone includes a parable and a healing episode in which members of the despised Samaritan community play central and even exemplary parts (10:29-37; 17:11-19). Luke alone includes the parables of the lost coin (15:8-10) and the prodigal son (15:11-32), emphasizing that Jesus is the friend and forgiver of sinners. Luke alone includes episodes such as Jesus' prayer for those who are crucifying him (23:32-34; cf. Acts 7:60) and his promise to the good thief (23:39-43). These passages make clear that even those responsible for the Crucifixion are not perceived as outside the sphere of God's redemptive purpose and mercy (Acts 3:17-21). Not inaptly did the poet Dante describe Luke as *scriba mansuetudinis Christi*—"the scribe of the gentleness of Christ".

Luke emphasizes the centrality of women in the gospel story. His account of Jesus' birth, in contrast to Matthew's, is told from the viewpoint of Mary (2:19, 51b). According to Luke it is another woman, Mary's cousin Elizabeth (rather than her husband Zechariah), who with prophetic inspiration gives the first human witness to Jesus as Lord while he is still in Mary's womb (1:41-45) and who later names the forerunner John (1:60). Luke alone includes episodes involving women such as the widow's son at Nain (7:11-17), the woman who was a sinner (7:36-50), Martha and Mary (10:38-42), and the woman with the spirit of infirmity (13:10-17). He emphasizes the place of women in the ministry of Jesus, as well as their witness to his Resurrection (8:1-3; cf. 23:55; 24:10-11). In Acts, contrary to most Christian iconography, Luke seems to intend us to understand that the women too were present with the Twelve at Pentecost and received the gift of

Luke has no doubt that the gospel is for Israel. Jesus comes as Davidic Messiah, to whom the Lord God will give “the throne of his ancestor David” (1:32b). Luke is as eager as any of the other evangelists to show that all Jesus does and suffers is in fulfillment of Torah and prophecy (24:25-27, 44-47; cf. Acts 2:22-26; 3:18, 22-23). What happens in the life of the church is also in fulfillment of the words of the prophets (see Acts 2:14-21; 3:24-26; 13:40-41; 15:15-18; 28:25-28). The Gospel begins and ends in the Temple at Jerusalem. Acts begins with the disciples as “witnesses in Jerusalem” and continues with them as witnesses “in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8), thus fulfilling what the prophets had foretold (Isa. 2:3b; Mic. 4:2b). Jesus’ family and those who recognize him are, from the beginning, loyal Israelites who are zealous for Torah (1:6; 2:22, 25, 37, 41), just as Paul is a loyal Jew who believes that God’s promises are being fulfilled (Acts 22:3-21; 23:1-6; 26:2-27).

Although Luke does not, and presumably could not, entirely omit the tradition of opposition between Jesus and the Pharisees (see 5:39; 11:53-12:1; 16:14-15), he considerably softens it. Whereas in Mark and Matthew the Pharisees plot to “destroy” Jesus after the healing of the man with the withered hand (Matt. 12:14; Mark 3:6), in Luke the scribes and Pharisees (6:7) only consider “what they might do” with him (6:11). Whereas in Matthew the Pharisees accuse Jesus of casting out demons by demonic power (Matt. 9:34; 12:24), and Mark makes “the scribes” the accusers (Mark 3:22), Luke speaks only of “some” among the crowds who make this accusation (11:14-15). Thus Jesus’ attitude toward the Pharisees is critical but not condemnatory (e.g., in Luke 7:36-50; 13:31-33; 14:1-6), and we recall that the central figure of Luke’s second volume (Acts) is a Pharisee (Paul).

“Nothing Can Stop the Gospel”

The two matters so far considered are really only particular expressions of Luke’s main theme: the triumph of the gospel. According to Luke, the gospel is for all people and the gospel is for Israel, because the gospel is God’s, and nothing can stop or contain it. One scholar has suggested that the title of Acts might be “Nothing Can Stop the Gospel.” It could, indeed, stand for Luke-Acts as a whole.

Scholars have often said that there is something cyclic about the arrangement of Luke- Acts. Both books start with Mary and a manifestation of God’s word and promise. The early miracles and teaching of the disciples in the Book of Acts correspond to a certain extent to the first part of the ministry of Jesus. The journey of Paul to Rome corresponds to the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem. But these parallels are largely a matter of literary style; they do not go deep. In a profound sense Luke-Acts is not cyclic at all. It is a narrative “in order.” It begins in the Temple at Jerusalem and ends in lodgings in Rome (just as Genesis begins “in the beginning” and ends “in a coffin in Egypt”). Between the beginning and the end, things have massively changed. God has acted. A new force is at large in the world—the gospel. Nothing can stop it. Nothing can stop the gospel, for the “power” of the Lord to heal is with Jesus (5:17, 6:19, 8:46-47). Nothing can stop the gospel, for even the opposition of “that fox Herod” only serves God’s purpose that a prophet shall not perish away from Jerusalem (13:32-33). The apparent disaster of the cross turns out to be Christ’s “exodus”

(NRSV “departure”), which he will “accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31). As we see in Chapters Nineteen-Twenty, Acts sees the progress of the gospel as being just as inexorable.

Prophetic Inspiration

Luke not only sets forth the events of Jesus' life and the history of the young church as the fulfillment of scripture; on various occasions he also shows that what will happen is foretold with prophetic inspiration by characters within the narrative. Thus the sufferings of Jesus are foretold not only by Jesus himself but also, from the very beginning, by the aged Simeon. Simeon's explicit reference to Jesus as "destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed" (2:34-35) also prepares us to understand the difficulties of the church's ministry to Israel. Luke alone reminds us after the Resurrection that the predictions of Jesus' death have been fulfilled (24:6-8, 44; cf. 9:22, 44; 18:31-33). Jesus' promises of "power from on high" and baptism "with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:5) are fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). The promise of baptism with the Spirit is itself explicitly connected with the Baptizer's preaching (Luke 3:16; cf. Acts 1:5). Luke's description of Pentecost even includes a fulfillment of the Baptizer's additional word, that the baptism will be "with fire" (Luke 3:16; Acts 2:3).

Guidance by the Spirit of God

Luke repeatedly emphasizes that those who lead the church are guided by God, not by human wisdom. The Gospel begins with outpourings of prophetic inspiration on Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon, and Anna (Luke 1:41, 67; 2:24-28, 36). Jesus is born by the power of the Spirit (1:35). The prophetic word of God comes to John the Baptizer (3:2). Jesus begins his ministry filled with the Spirit (3:22; 4:1, 18). The outpouring of the Spirit on Jesus' followers is a mark of his exaltation and a sign that the last times have come (24:45-49; cf. Acts 1:4-5; 2:2-4, 14-21). As we see later the same pattern is prevalent in the Book of Acts as well.

The Prologue 1:1-4

Luke's prologue seems to follow the literary convention for a public oration, particularly one in honor of a benefactor. We have no idea who "Theophilus" was, or even if he was a real person at all. Luke may have intended him to be seen as a literary device, like Rudyard Kipling's "best beloved" in the Just So Stories. "Theophilus" means "lover of God," so that the name could stand for anyone who is positively disposed toward religion—or the Jewish religion, or the Christian religion. Or Theophilus may be a real person, perhaps an official of the occupying Romans, perhaps a "God-fearer" who had already indicated a willingness to hear more about Jesus, perhaps someone in a position to ease the church's burden vis-à-vis officialdom. In any case, Luke addresses Theophilus as someone whom one can most effectively approach by telling him the truth.

But what is "truth"? Pontius Pilate (John 18:38) is not the only one with this question, either in Luke's day or in any other. Luke seems to regard as insufficient whatever information Theophilus already has and as essential whatever information Theophilus might gain from him. Accordingly he promises Theophilus "an orderly account" (1:3), and Luke's Gospel is characterized by a step-by-step unfolding of the life and work of Jesus that is often called "schematic" or "linear." (The traditional church year uses more peculiarly Lukan narrative elements than those from any other Gospel:

Annunciation, Nativity of John the Baptizer, Circumcision, Presentation (Purification), Epiphany, Ascension, Pentecost.) Luke means his account to be "orderly" in the sense of "readily understood," and the understanding he hopes for is not simply historical but theological. Luke wants Theophilus not just to "know what happened" but to accept it as a reliable account of the meaning of "what happened." If this is "history," it is "salvation history," the story of the deliverance of God's people by one who requires not only honor but also discipleship. At what stage on the road to faith **Theophilus** finds himself is something we cannot know, but we can be confident that the goal of the Third Evangelist is not very different from that of the fourth (cf. John 20:30-31).

Jesus' Birth and Infancy 1:5-2:52

The birth story is beautifully told in Greek that seems deliberately reminiscent of the Septuagint. This skillfully constructed narrative is peculiar to Luke; Matthew's birth narrative is entirely different. Matthew emphasizes the promise to Israel in the prophecies now being fulfilled, while in Luke the promises are made to John's father and to Jesus' mother. As often in biblical narrative (cf. Gen. 2:4b-3:24) three sections form a triptych (i.e., a set of three associated pictures side by side). In the first section we have the two annunciations (1:5-37), described in a way that makes them parallel to each other, with the former preparing for the latter. (Compare the way Matthew parallels John the Baptizer and Jesus in Matthew 3-4.) The central section contains the visit of Mary to Elizabeth (1:39-56), in which the unborn forerunner acknowledges the unborn Messiah (1:41a, 44). Elizabeth gives prophetic witness (1:41b-45), and Mary interprets what is to come (1:46-55). The third section, balancing the first, contains the two births, described again in a way that makes them parallel to each other, with the former preparing for the latter (1:57-2:21).

Scholars naturally compare Luke's story (1:5-2:21) with other ancient stories of miraculous birth, such as the birth legends of Alexander and Augustus, although they are very different in tone from the Lukan narrative. More relevant and informative for comparison are several stories of miraculous birth in the Hebrew Scriptures, such as the birth of Samuel to Hannah (1 Sam. 1:1-2:11) or of Samson to the wife of Manoah (Judg. 13:2-25). The stories in the Book of Judges, 1 Samuel, and Luke are not concerned with kings and emperors, but with humble people who are trying to lead their lives faithfully. Zechariah is a country priest and Mary a girl of no apparent pedigree. Joseph has Davidic descent but still must bow to Caesar's decree. The key figure in the whole story will be born in a stable because there is no room for him at the inn. Luke's narrative, like 1 Samuel (rather than Judges), focuses on the women rather than the men. **These people are humble**, but they are also "righteous" (1:6). They keep the Torah (1:6; 2:22-24). They are faithful (1:38). And their story very naturally begins with worship in the Temple at Jerusalem, where it has fallen to Zechariah to officiate at the altar of incense.

A series of speeches sets out the importance of the events to be described. First, Gabriel's words to Zechariah show that Israel's hope for the return of Elijah (Mal. 4:5) is to be fulfilled in John, who is to make ready for God "a people prepared for the Lord" (1:17) just as God promised (Mal. 4:5-6). But Zechariah objects that he and his wife are old—the same objection that Abraham's wife Sarah made when

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she laughed at the promise of a son to her (Gen. 18:9-15) and, for that matter, that Nicodemus makes to Jesus at the prospect of new birth from above (John 3:4). Gabriel's message to Zechariah is good news, "gospel" (euaggelion; cf. Luke 1:19), and nothing can stop the gospel of God.

Gabriel announces to Mary the birth of a child who fulfills certain forms of the messianic hope associated with David (1:31; cf. Isa. 9:7; 2 Sam. 7:12-16) and with Daniel (1:33b; cf. Dan. 7:14). In response to Mary's question (1:34) the angel even suggests a parallel between the coming birth and the creation of the world (1:35a; cf. Gen. 1:2). What is needed is a new creation (cf. Gal. 6:15), and nothing will stop it. Thus the promises to Zechariah and Mary are part of the overall promise to Israel—and, through Israel, to the whole world.

For Luke the significance of Mary's virginity has nothing to do with her virtue or "purity." The point for Luke is that in Mary we see the supreme sign that God alone is the source of human fruitfulness, as the angel shows by immediately comparing the promise to Mary with the fact that Elizabeth also, "who was said to be barren," will bear a child, "for nothing will be impossible with God" (1:36-37). To a Jew any barren woman suddenly pregnant recalls Sarah, mother of the race. Comparison with 1 Samuel and Judges 13 makes this aspect of the narrative even more obvious. For Luke and for the whole scriptural tradition, behind the motif of the true source of human fruitfulness lies something more important still: the awareness that deliverance—whether by hero, or prophet, or even Messiah—is always God's gift and dependent on no human creativity or

power. God's deliverance often comes at the boundaries of human possibility and in the moment of its exhaustion.

“Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? 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” (Ps. 113:5-9). This song of Israel is what both Elizabeth and Mary sing, in effect. Mary's reply to the announcing angel—“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (1:38)—makes her, as has long been recognized, the perfect model of discipleship. It also makes her, as surely as the Messiah's response makes him, the “servant of the Lord.”

Mary's song (The Magnificat) is closely parallel to Hannah's song (Luke 1:46-55; cf. 1 Sam. 2:1-10). It speaks of what God has done as evidence of what God will do. It speaks of deliverance and mercy (1:49-50), of the reversal of human values (1:51-52), and of God's concern for the poor and the hungry (1:53). It speaks of all these things as the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel (1:54-55). So the Messiah is born in Bethlehem, the city of David, in fulfillment of prophecy (2:4, 11; cf. Mic. 5:2). The first to witness his birth are shepherds, reminiscent of David as king (1 Sam. 16:11) yet also among the humblest in the land.

After the two annunciations come the two birth stories, first John the Baptizer (1:57- 80) and then Jesus (2:1-7). These birth narratives are peculiar to Luke; Matthew has

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no account of John's birth and a rather different one of Jesus' birth. The first one, about John, includes a story within a story: the account of how the baby came to be named John, recalling the annunciation to Zechariah. Now, as soon as he writes the boy's name that Gabriel had given him, Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and his tongue is loosed. His first utterance is the great hymn of salvation, The Benedictus (1:68-79), full of the praises and promises of Israel's Scriptures, so that the gospel (and the Gospel According to Luke) are unmistakably identified as continuing the story of the life of God in the world. The new creation is the old one reborn; God does not reject what God has already created, and chosen, and blessed. “The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel” (1:80). The stage is set; the herald awaits the one he is to announce.

Then comes the birth of Jesus, in Bethlehem because of the registration required. Matthew says Jesus was born in Bethlehem in order to fulfill scripture (Matt. 2:5-6). Luke has no prophecy, and Matthew no registration. But they differ in how they tell the story, not in the story they tell. Similarly, in Luke the newborn Jesus is hailed by angels and adored by shepherds (2:8-20), but in Matthew wise men come from the east to worship him. After eight days, as Torah requires, Jesus is circumcised and named; his name is Jesus (the equivalent of Joshua, “the Lord saves”), just as the angel promised (1:31).

Two further episodes are appended by Luke to the birth story proper. Both are peculiar to the Third Gospel. First comes the presentation of Jesus in the Temple (2:22-40). Jesus' parents are people who are careful to do everything in accordance with Torah, and witness is borne to Jesus by the devout, a man (Simeon) and a woman (Anna), establishing for Luke's readership from the beginning that Jesus is to be presented as a faithful Jew. Simeon's great hymn *Nunc dimittis* (2:29-32) speaks of Jesus as “salvation” and “glory” to Israel. Having seen that, he has found what he has been seeking: “the consolation of Israel” (2:25). Anna's reaction is “to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38). But two other notes are introduced also. Simeon echoes Isaiah in speaking of Jesus as a “light for revelation to the Gentiles” (2:32a; cf. Isa. 40:5) and, in darker tones, of Jesus as “destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too” (2:34). The connection here of “revelation to the Gentiles” with difficulty for “many in Israel” is by no means accidental and will emerge as

an important theme in Luke's narrative.

At the same time, the acute ear will hear the echo of Genesis 3:15 as well, where Mary's foremother Eve hears the Lord God say to the serpent that her offspring "will strike [AV "bruise"] your head, and you will strike his heel" (NRSV). Eve and Mary are paired in the church from its earliest days, and both have cause for joy and for grief in what happens to their offspring.

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The second episode is from the boyhood of Jesus (2:41-52). Once more Luke emphasizes how careful Jesus' parents are to observe Torah (2:41). The account also reminds us of 1 Samuel 1:7. By telling us this story Luke contrasts Jesus' relationship to God with his relationship to Joseph and Mary, and by extension his heavenly mission with his earthly life. They did not understand when he asks if they did not know "that I must be in my Father's house" (2:49). This is the first in a long list of "must" passages in Luke that indicate the divine necessity Jesus was under to fulfill his mission. Then he returned to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. Mary "treasured [AV "kept"] all these things in her heart" (2:51), as she did the shepherds' report of the angelic acclamation of Jesus' birth (2:19).

Finally, the story of Jesus' infancy closes with a statement (2:52) very like the conclusion to the story of John the Baptizer's birth (1:80). Both boys grew. In part, the second statement may represent Luke's opposition to those who would deny to Jesus a real humanity, the sort of "docetism" that the church had to combat from the first. It was always easier for people to believe that Jesus was divine than to believe that he was really human, which is why the second article of the creed is so detailed.

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end of chapter

Origen ^{back}

Is Origen saying he didn't believe it either?

>

Respectable Romans^{back}

And perhaps more accurately.

Theophilus^{back}

"Lover of God" *or* "Loved by God"

>

Where on the road?^{back}

If he exists

Humble^{back}

And the exact opposite of the Old Testament matriarchs who got miraculously pregnant. They were from society's top draw, as far as it had drawers, and very far from humble.

>

Pure/barren^{back}

Here the KJV is much closer to the Greek: "seeing that I know not a man." It might be special pleading, but you could even translate the phrase as "*since I'm not seeing anyone at the moment.*" But absolutely yes, the young and fertile Mary is an obvious contrast to the older and barren Elizabeth. Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, could be seen as the last of the miraculously pregnant heroines of the Old Testament.

The different stories^{back}

I don't know about you, but my childhood experience of the different stories as one seamless narrative is buried so deep in my mind that I can't really separate them. Pity. Or, to the faithful, does it really matter?

>

"in her heart"^{back}

The implication is that Luke knew Mary, or draws on someone who did. If she **lived for a number of years after the crucifixion**, that could well be true.

