

## THE DEDICATION

Luke takes pains to point out how carefully Mary and Joseph as well as Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna were all Torah observant. Theologically, this devotion to the law seems intended to demonstrate that the one who is truly committed to the spirit of the law will be ready to receive Jesus as the Christ. It was Mary's and Elizabeth's and Zechariah's openness to God's redemptive action in the context of Old Testament thought that enabled them to respond so favorably to what God was doing in the birth of Jesus. The Magnificat and the Benedictus surely suggest as much. The devotion of Simeon and Anna indicate the same thing, as these two elderly Israelites looked for the consolation of Israel and the redemption of Jerusalem, only to find that God would fulfill both in the child who was being presented to the Lord.

### THE CIRCUMCISION AND MARY'S PURIFICATION (Lk. 2:21-24)

Jesus was circumcised according to the law and named when eight days old. Levitical law regulated ceremonial holiness, and Mary would have been strictly segregated for the first week after the birth and forbidden to participate in temple worship for thirty-three days after Jesus' circumcision (Lv. 12:1-4). During this period she would wait for her postpartum discharge to cease. It is not unlikely that she and Joseph spent this time with Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary's relatives.

At the end of this period, she was to appear at the sanctuary with both an 'olah (= holocaust)<sup>1</sup> and a *hatta't* (= sin offering)<sup>2</sup> for her ceremonial purification, which also included a water immersion in a *mikveh*. Luke indicates that Joseph's and Mary's offering was the one prescribed for those who were poor (Lv. 12:6-8; cf. 5:7-10), though it may be noted that there was available to them an offering for those even less

#### CONCEPTS OF SIN AND IMPURITY

*Sin and impurity should be distinguished. Usually, sin is rebellion against God, either deliberately and defiantly or unconsciously as a result of weakness. Impurity, on the other hand, is the by-product of sin resulting in either ethical impurity (idolatry, bloodshed, sexual sins, etc.) or ritual impurity (corpse contamination, scale disease, genital discharge, etc.). The primary agent for remedying sin and impurity is blood, since blood "ransoms" the sinner. The sacrifice of an animal serves as a substitute for the life of the sinner and purges impurity (Lv. 17:11).*

*The premise behind the purity laws is that God is holy, and thus, his people must prepare themselves to enter his presence. Contact with blood creates impurity, and thus childbirth created uncleanness in the mother. While it was possible to contract impurity from an external source (contact with a corpse, for instance), childbirth created impurity from an internal source. Significantly, ritual impurity did not in itself include any punishments unless a person brought impurity into contact with the sanctuary. Rather, impurity temporarily restricted a person from coming into contact with the sacred (Lv. 22:3).*

<sup>1</sup> The holocaust or burnt offering was to be wholly consumed by fire as a gift to Yahweh in order to ensure his favor (Lv. 1:10-17).

<sup>2</sup> The sin offering was intended to secure divine pardon, though it should be pointed out that such offerings were for accidental transgressions (Lv. 4:1-2, 32-35). The act of giving birth, by its very nature, brought the mother into contact with blood, and while it could not be avoided, it was still to be treated as impurity (cf. Lv. 5:3, 5-7).

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capable (Lv. 5:11-13). This seems to suggest that while Joseph and Mary were poor, they were not at a level of desperation. After her purification, Mary could be readmitted to the Court of the Women in the temple.

### THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE (2:25-28)

The presentation of the infant Jesus to Yahweh was a ceremony separate from Mary's purification, even though Mary and Joseph accomplished both rituals on the same visit. Only firstborn male children were presented to Yahweh, because they symbolized the firstborn males who were saved during the final plague of death that occurred in the exodus (cf. Ex. 13:1-2, 12, 15; Nu. 18: 15). Theoretically, all firstborn males, whether human or animal, were devoted to Yahweh inasmuch as on the night of the first Passover, all firstborns were marked for death. However, the law would hardly permit human sacrifice, and in lieu of child-slaughter, the firstborn son was to be symbolically presented to Yahweh and bought back (redeemed) for the price of five shekels of silver (Nu. 18:15-16; cf. Lv. 27:6).<sup>3</sup>

#### SIMEON AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

*Simeon is described as having the Holy Spirit upon him and as being moved by the Spirit to visit the temple courts on this particular day. These references to the Holy Spirit are part of the cluster of such references with which Luke emphasizes that the quenched Spirit had returned. Simeon is not specifically said to have been "filled with the Spirit," as was Elizabeth (1:41), Zechariah (1:67) and John (1:15), a phrase that for Luke indicates divine inspiration for prophetic speech. Nevertheless, he utters a prophetic speech, and it is to be assumed that Luke intends his readers to regard Simeon as being filled with the same prophetic Spirit as the others.*

The narrative regarding the presentation of Jesus in the temple (2:22-24, 39-40) is interrupted with an incident involving Simeon and Anna (2:25-38).<sup>4</sup> Nothing is known of Simeon other than what Luke tells us. He was careful about his religious duties,<sup>5</sup> but given the way that he comes to the temple under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, there is no reason to suppose that he was a priest or that he came to perform priestly duties. According to an ancient Jewish custom, parents brought their child to the temple for an aged rabbi to bless it and pray for it, and it may be that Simeon was fulfilling such a role, though whether or not Simeon was a rabbi is also unknown.

Simeon performs a symbolic role as well. Inasmuch as he was waiting for the "consolation of Israel," he represents all those Israelites who were awaiting God's eschatological redemptive action. This description parallels very closely that given by Luke to Anna (2:38), and later, to Joseph of Arimathea (23:50-51). The phrase

"consolation of Israel" is drawn from the passages in Isaiah which predict the return of the Jews from exile (Is. 40:1-2; 52:9; 66:12-13).

Once more, as in the Magnificat and the Benedictus, Luke calls upon the reader to perceive that the true fulfillment of these promises is to be in the kingdom of God preached by Christ. While awaiting

<sup>3</sup> Five shekels of silver (a biblical unit of weight) is about two ounces (55 grams).

<sup>4</sup> The literary technique used here is called "framing" or "sandwiching." This method, in which there is an episode within an episode, appears several times in the gospels. Into the purification and presentation narrative has been inserted another narrative which tends to emphasize the relationship between the two. Luke previously used this technique when he inserted the Magnificat (1:46-55) into the narrative describing Mary's visit to Elizabeth (1:39-45, 56). He also used it when he inserted the Benedictus (1:67-79) into the narrative of John's birth and childhood (1:57-66, 80).

<sup>5</sup> The descriptive word *eulabes* (= devout) generally indicates religious devotion.

Israel's consolation, Simeon had been assured by God that his life would not end before he had seen the inauguration of the fulfillment through Yahweh's messiah.

### THE TESTIMONY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT (2:29-38)

The first oracle of Simeon is traditionally entitled the *Nunc Dimittis* (Latin for "now dismiss," the opening words of 2:29 in the Latin Vulgate). Like the Magnificat and the Benedictus, it is written in the style of Hebrew poetry. Addressing Yahweh in the prayer mode of a slave addressing his master,<sup>6</sup> Simeon affirmed by his emphatic "now"<sup>7</sup> that God's long-awaited time of salvation had dawned. The term "salvation," like the term consolation, is especially an Isaianic term that refers to the restoration of the exiles from Babylon (Is. 45:15-17; 46:13; 49:6, 8-9; 52:7, 9-10). However, even though the exiles did indeed return from Babylon, they never saw the glorious future envisioned in the later chapters of Isaiah. Instead, they faced the bitter disappointment of hard times and continual domination by pagans. "Now," Simeon declares, "Yahweh's salvation has been revealed."<sup>8</sup>

Luke also records a second oracle of Simeon, this one in prose. If the first oracle speaks of a glorious, universal salvation, the second speaks of rejection and catastrophe. While Joseph and Mary were still experiencing amazement over the first oracle, Simeon directly addressed Mary with the second oracle. Her child had a destiny especially for the nation Israel in that he would cause many to fall and to rise.<sup>9</sup> This theme of polarization arises later in Luke's account (12:51-53), and the falling/rising imagery possibly alludes to the quarried stone (Is. 28:16) which was rejected by Israel but which became the cornerstone of the new temple, the church (Is. 8:14-15; Ps. 118:22; Lk. 20:17-18). The rejection of the stone became a standard way for NT writers to explain why many in Israel rejected the messiah, while many among the Gentiles accepted him (cf. Ro. 9:30-33; 1 Pe. 2:6-8).

#### LUKE'S UNIVERSALISM

*There is a certain universalism in Isaiah's vision of salvation. The Nunc Dimittis speaks of God's salvation as a "light to the Gentiles" (Is. 42:6; 49:6) to be accomplished "in the sight of all people" (Is. 52:10). Of course, this salvation was for the glory of Israel also (Is. 46:13, LXX), and when Luke quotes the phrase "all the nations" (Is. 52:10), he adjusts it slightly to make his interpretation more lucid by rendering it "all the people." "All the people" includes both Israelites and Gentiles, for the Gentiles, also, are God's people, and this is a recurring theme for Luke (Lk. 24:47; Ac. 1:8; 2:39; 11:18; 15:14).*

<sup>6</sup> Simeon's vocabulary, *doulos* (= slave) and *despotes* (= master or owner), suggests as much.

<sup>7</sup> Word order in the Greek text is not without significance. The general tendency is that any emphasis on an element in the sentence causes that element to be moved forward, and the fact that Luke places the Greek word *nun* (= now) as the first word in the sentence makes it emphatic.

<sup>8</sup> It may be noted that Luke has drawn from the LXX version of Is. 40:5, which differs slightly from the Hebrew text: "And the glory of the Lord shall appear, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God, for the Lord has spoken" (my translation of the LXX). The Hebrew Bible reads, "And the glory of Yahweh will be exposed, and all flesh together will see (it), for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken" (my translation of the MT).

<sup>9</sup> It is possible to interpret the "rising and falling" as referring to the same group, i.e., some would first fall and then rise. Any interpretation depends primarily on how the term "fall" is understood. If it is used figuratively for humility or misunderstanding, then the above interpretation is possible so that the phrase points to humiliation before glory or doubt before faith. However, if the term "fall" is understood in terms of the stone imagery of the OT, as I have done here, then the "falling" group is different than the "rising" group. Those who fall are those who reject Christ, and those who rise are those who accept him.

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Furthermore, the child was to be a sign against which many would speak. Jesus' life would be a catalyst, causing people to decide either for or against God's redemptive work. Their inner thoughts, whether faith or unbelief, would be exposed by their response to Jesus. The final imagery, a sword piercing Mary's soul, is a vivid metaphor for the disruption in Mary's life which her son would bring, and it may well anticipate her grief when Jesus would be executed as a criminal.

As Simeon finished his second oracle, another figure entered, Anna, an elderly prophetess. In ancient Israel, such women leaders were rare.<sup>10</sup> That she was considered a prophetess is remarkable

### ANNA AND THE LOST TEN TRIBES

*Anna was from one of the northern tribes, Asher, which had been crushed by the Assyrians in 721/722 BC. Shortly before this exile, many northern refugees had fled south to Judah, and apparently Anna was descended from one of them. She symbolically represents the so-called "lost ten tribes" of the northern nation, though these tribes were not as "lost" as is sometimes alleged inasmuch as representatives survived who could trace their lineage back into antiquity.*

*The flight of northern refugees to the southern nation is suggested by archaeological evidence indicating that Jerusalem underwent a major expansion in the 8th century BC by a factor of three or four times its former size, cf. M. Broshi, "Part of the Lost Ten Tribes Located," BAR (Sept. 1975), 27, 32, and "The Expansion of Jerusalem in the Reigns of Hezekiah and Manasseh," Israel Exploration Journal 24 (1974), 21. We also know that during the reign of Hezekiah, northerners were invited to celebrate in temple worship in Jerusalem (2 Chr. 30:1ff.), and some Asherites responded (2 Chr. 30:10-11). While the Chronicler states that they returned home after the festivals (2 Chr. 31:1), it is not unlikely that some may have remained.*

inasmuch as the common Jewish opinion was that the prophetic Spirit had ceased after Malachi, the last of the writing prophets. However, the incident supports Luke's theme of the revived prophetic Spirit, and particularly, it is in keeping with the fact that even women would be blessed with the prophetic gift in the dawn of the time of salvation (cf. Ac. 2:17).

Anna was old, though it is not clear from the Greek text whether she had been a widow for 84 years (which would make her very old indeed) or was herself 84

years old. Daily, she spent her time fasting and praying in the temple, and like Simeon, she represents the devout in Israel awaiting the messianic age. The phrase "redemption of Jerusalem" again draws from Isaiah's oracles (Is. 52:9), and like the *Nunc Dimittis*, it speaks of the fulfillment of the ancient promises to be accomplished through Jesus. The redemption of Jerusalem would indeed occur; however, it was not to be a political redemption but a spiritual one. The old Jerusalem, as Luke later makes clear, would be desolated (19:41-44; 21:20-24). The "redemption of Jerusalem" must be understood in the Christian sense, not the Jewish one.

### THE RETURN TO NAZARETH (2:39-40)

Here Luke picks up the narrative which was broken off in 2:24. After their temple requirements had been met, Joseph and Mary returned to Nazareth in Galilee. Luke makes no mention of the trip to Egypt (cf. Mt. 2:13ff.), so perhaps he was unaware of this tradition or for whatever reason did not consider it essential to his narrative. The child Jesus, for his part, continued to mature physically and intellectually, a child pleasing to both God and others.

<sup>10</sup> According to the Talmud, there were only seven in Israel's history: Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther (*Megilla* 14a).