

MARY VISITS ELIZABETH AND JOHN IS BORN

THE VISIT TO THE SOUTH (Lk. 1:39-45, 56):

Mary lost no time in visiting her relative Elizabeth. The annunciation to Mary was in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy (1:26), and Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months, presumably



"The Visitation" by Rembrandt (Detroit Institute of Arts)

until after the birth of John (1:56). Thus, she must have traveled south almost immediately after the annunciation. If one knew the time of year, one might also speculate as to how Mary, presumably not much more than a girl, traveled to her relative's home. Certain seasons, especially during any of the great religious festivals, would have been conducive to pilgrim traffic, and Mary could have been taken by either her immediate family or friends of the family. The location of Zechariah's and Elizabeth's home is only generally given as in the mountains of Judea.

The meeting of Mary and Elizabeth carried a tremendous impact for both women. For Mary, the obvious pregnancy of Elizabeth, who was now at the end of her second trimester, was a confirmation of the sign explained to her by Gabriel (1:36). For Elizabeth, the sudden and joyful spasm of the fetus in her womb at

Mary's greeting was accompanied by the prophetic Holy Spirit that filled her. Even in the womb, John's prenatal response showed his function as the forerunner of the Messiah, a role that was impressed upon him also by the Holy Spirit (1:15).

Elizabeth's blessing has been set by Luke into poetic meter after the Hebrew manner of parallelism:

*Blessed [are] you among women,
and Blessed [is] the fruit of your womb!*

Elizabeth immediately recognized that Mary carried within her the *Kyrios* (= Lord), a title that is Luke's favorite for Jesus.¹ Her double blessing upon Mary rests upon two grounds, the role which

¹ Luke's favorite title, which appears with more frequency in Luke-Acts than any other NT book, is *Kyrios* (= Lord) which appears some 219 times. While he uses it a few times in the more limited sense of "owner" or "sir," by far his

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Mary was to play as the mother of the Lord,² and the faith which Mary displayed toward God's promise. This beatitude toward Mary is repeated later in Luke's Gospel when a woman in the crowd also pronounced a blessing upon Mary as the mother of the Lord (Lk. 11:27). Here, however, Luke places the two beatitudes in a priority. The role of faith is more important than the role of giving birth to the Lord (Lk. 11:28). Mary, for her part, was doubly blessed, but the more significant reason to honor her is that she was a woman of faith.

THE MAGNIFICENT (1:46-55)

Once more Luke sets forth his narrative in Hebrew poetic parallelism. Like many of the speeches in the birth narratives, it anticipates the great redemptive action of God which would follow. The hymn is far more Jewish in character than Hellenistic, and it draws from both the language and imagery of the ancient Song of Hannah (1 Sa. 2:1-10) as well as from the Hebrew Psalter and the prophets. It may easily be divided into two parts, the first which is personal to Mary herself (1:46b-49) and the second which is corporate and looks outward toward all God's people (1:50-55).

DIVINE TITLES AND ACCLAMATIONS

The titles used of Christ in the New Testament are often counter-cultural and almost certainly used deliberately. These include not only words like "Lord" and "Savior," but also terms like epiphaneia (= the appearance of a god), makaria elpis (= blessed hope), philanthropia (= love for humanity), and chrestotes (= kindness), all of which were also used to describe the Caesars. The euangelion (= good news, gospel), which annually announced Caesar's birthday, was used by the Christians to describe the message of Jesus.

Mary considers herself to be an object of God's salvation. The title "Savior" is highly significant in Luke's writings, especially since he was writing as a Greek under the patronage of another Greek and for a Greek-speaking audience (1:3). In the Greco-Roman world, the verb "save" and its cognate noun "savior" was used to describe political leaders as benefactors to their subjects, particularly benefactors who establish peace (cf. 22:25,

NIV). Among the Ptolemies and Seleucids, who ruled Judea prior to the Maccabean Revolt, the title *soter* (= savior) was an official one. The same title was adopted by Julius Caesar, Caesar Augustus, and later, Caesar Nero. Luke seems to deliberately use this title to describe Jesus, the great Benefactor of humankind, and to describe God, the Savior, who gives Jesus to the world as the greatest benefaction. While the other synoptic gospels use the verb *sozo* (= to save), only Luke uses

most frequent usage is to refer to either God (where *Kyrios* is the normal Greek translation for the Hebrew name Yahweh in the LXX) or Jesus as the Messiah and the Savior (cf. Lk. 2:11; Ac. 2:36; 5:31, etc.). Though Jesus' credentials as Lord were verified and amplified by his resurrection, Luke is quite clear that Jesus did not become something after the resurrection which he was not before the resurrection. Even in his prenatal state, Jesus was the Lord, the complete master of all.

² A number of the early Church Fathers applied the title *theotokos* (= bearer of God) to Mary, and this title was accepted by the Council of Ephesus (AD 431) as well as by the 16th century Reformers Luther and Zwingli, and in more modern times, by the highly regarded Swiss theologian Karl Barth. While many evangelicals are reluctant to accept this title because they fear Mariolatry, it should be pointed out that Mary as the "bearer of God" does not imply the same thing as Mary as the "Mother of God" (Latin, *Dei Genetrix*) as used in Roman Catholic theology. The title for Mary as the "bearer of God" is not objectionable as long as one understands it to describe Mary's role in the nativity and the full deity of Jesus from conception and not as giving to her a role of *coredemptrix* (Latin = co-redeemer) or as opening the door for the worship of Mary. Mary was an object of special grace, and in this she stands unique in the human race. It is entirely appropriate that all generations should call her "blessed" (1:48).

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the title Savior and the cognate noun “salvation” in describing Jesus.

Mary’s “humble state” expresses her unworthiness to be the bearer of God’s Son. The virginal conception was an act of divine grace, not a reward for merit. Due to this grace, Mary receives the highest station of honor among women. Her exclamation regarding the holiness of God’s name should be understood in the ancient sense in which someone’s name stood for his/her whole person (cf. Ps. 111:9).

The phraseology in 1:50 is drawn from Ps. 103:17. It emphasizes that God’s redemptive acts are for those who revere him. This idea is significant inasmuch as it depends on the remnant motif so prevalent in the Old Testament prophets. From the remnant who returned from exile, Luke extrapolates the idea of a remnant who believe. Later, Luke will describe John the Baptist as thundering out the message that a direct lineage from Abraham carries no weight with God, but rather, repentance and faith. God could fulfill his promises to Abraham even to those who were never a part of the Jewish community (cf. 3:7-9).

God’s redemptive work would mean a reversal in socio-political categories. (1:51-54).³ The proud, the rulers, and the rich stand in sharp contrast to the humble and the hungry. These words anticipate the great proclamation of Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue concerning his mission to the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed (4:18; cf. Ac. 10:38) as well as the beatitudes and reversals he pronounced upon the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and the persecuted (6:20-26). Such a reversal of categories reflects God’s fundamental favoritism toward the powerless and needy as preached by the 8th century Old Testament prophets in their message of social justice. While signs of this reversal are surely to be seen in Jesus’ miraculous cures and exorcisms, the anticipation is ultimately eschatological (cf. 12:4-10, 35-37; 13:22-30).

In Jesus the covenantal promises to Israel are to be fulfilled (1:54-55). The title “his servant Israel” comes from the promise in Is. 41:8-9 that God had not rejected Israel in spite of her exile to Babylon. God’s promises to Israel, most clearly expressed in the covenants he made with Abraham and David, are to be realized by the people of faith. This becomes a recurring emphasis for Luke (24:21; Ac. 1:6-8; 3:13, 19-26).

THE BIRTH OF JOHN (Lk. 1:56-66, 80)

Three months after the arrival of Mary in Judea, Elizabeth’s and Zechariah’s child was born, just as

THE MAGNIFICAT IN ANGLICAN LITURGY

Also known as the Song of Mary, the Magnificat (the title comes from the first word of the song in the Latin Vulgate) is a part of the liturgical tradition of the Eastern Orthodox, the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran, and the Anglican churches. As one of the four early Jewish-Christian canticles (including Zechariah’s Benedictus, the angels’ Gloria in Excelsis Deo, and Simeon’s Nunc Dimittis), it is usually recited or sung during Evensong (1928 BCP page 26).

Against the background of centuries of oppression, the Magnificat emphasizes the tremendous reversals that are inherent in the coming of the Messiah: the scattering of the proud, the demotion of the mighty, the exaltation of the humble, and the blessing of good things to the hungry. The climax is the fulfillment of God’s covenant promises to Israel.

³ The six aorist tenses in 1:51-54 should be taken as either ingressive aorists (that is, God has already begun to do these things) or prolepses (describing God’s future acts as though finished so as to emphasize their certainty).

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the angel had promised. Since it was a boy, on the eighth day after birth his parents prepared for his circumcision, the initiatory rite into the covenant of Abraham's family (cf. Ge. 17:10-14; Lv. 12:3). At this time the child would customarily be named. The friends and relatives supposed that the boy would be named after his father,⁴ and they were surprised that Elizabeth wanted to name him John, a name not found in the family ancestry. However, when Zechariah had been consulted, he indicated in writing the very name which Elizabeth had already given, and instantly his mute condition of nine months was suspended. As is typical of Lukan vocabulary, Zechariah's prophetic praise is attributed to being "filled with the Spirit" (1:67). Awe fell upon all who knew of these events, for by their very nature they indicated that the child would be special. As the boy grew, he spent his youth in the desert, the traditional home of prophetic inspiration for Moses and Elijah, Israel's two greatest prophets.

THE BENEDICTUS (Lk. 1:67-79)

THE BENEDICTUS IN ANGLICAN LITURGY

The Benedictus (the title derives from the initial word in the Latin Vulgate) is one of the canticles in Morning Prayer (1928 BCP page 14). It announces the birth of John as belonging to the long-awaited visitation of God. As in the Magnificat, the redemptive actions of God are described in a completed way in order to emphasize their certainty. The time of fulfillment had come!

Zechariah's speech, like Mary's, is captured by Luke in poetic parallelism. The poem may be divided into two parts, the first a celebration of the fulfillment of the messianic promise (1:68-75), and the second, which shifts from the 3rd person to the 2nd person, an address to the future role of the newborn son (1:76-79). The word *lytrosis* (= redemption) recalls the great Old Testament redemptive event, the exodus, and compares it to the New Testament redemptive event, the manifestation of Christ.

Zechariah's song points to the fact that in the Christ event the Old Testament promises will be fulfilled, not

in the politics of the old order but in the new Israel of faith and the kingdom of God. The imagery of a "horn of salvation" is thoroughly Semitic, the horn being a symbol of strength (cf. Ps. 18:3; Dt. 33:17). In these poetic lines Luke stitches together various phrases from the Septuagint (Ps. 106:10; 105:8; 106:45; Lv. 26:42; Ps. 105:9; Ge. 22:16; 26:3; Mic. 7:20; Je. 22:5; Ge. 22:17b).

In a direct address to the newly named child, Zechariah describes John's future role, not as the primary figure of God's redemption, but as the forerunner, a prophet who would fulfill the predictions about a ministry of preparation (Is. 40:3; Mal. 3:1). His ministry would focus on the knowledge of salvation and the forgiveness of sins, phrases that anticipate John's baptismal message of forgiveness, salvation, and the gospel (3:3, 6, 18). John's ministry was nothing less than an act of divine grace.⁵ God's redemptive action, first to be preached by John, was the dawning of the messianic age (cf. Mal. 4:2). The hope of deliverance that began in the darkness of exile would at last be realized (cf. Is. 9:2; 42:7; 58:8; 60:1-2).

⁴ The Greek imperfect tense of the verb *kaleo* (= to call, to name), if taken as an iterative, suggests not so much that the relatives tried to name the child outright as much as that they had gotten into the habit, during the eight-day interval, of calling him "little Zechariah."

⁵ Lit., "bowels of the mercy of our God"; *splanchna* (= bowels, entrails) was considered in antiquity to be the seat of emotion, much as we think of the heart in modern times.