

The Presentation in the Temple



Giotto di Bondone, *Presentation of Christ in the Temple* | Lower Church in the Basilica of San Francesco, Assisi | PD-US

²² When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, ²³ just as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord,” ²⁴ and to offer the sacrifice of “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons,” in accordance with the dictate in the law of the Lord. ²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel, and the holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Messiah of the Lord. ²⁷ He came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him, ²⁸ he took him into his arms and blessed God, saying: ²⁹ “Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you prepared in sight of all the peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel.” ³³ The child’s father and mother were amazed at what was said about him; ³⁴ and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted ³⁵ (and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” ³⁶ There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived seven years with her husband after her marriage, ³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer. ³⁸ And coming forward at that very time, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem. ³⁹ When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. (Luke 2:22–40)

The Story in Context

Luke is the one gospel writer who makes his narrative intentions clear from the beginning prologue:

“Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, ³ I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received.” (Luke 1:1-4)

Luke wants to capture the testimonies, the stories, and accounts - all from the earliest of days - and write it all down in *“an orderly sequence”* so that the good news can be handed on with accuracy and received with certainty.

Luke then begins with the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah and Elizabeth, a couple who were *“were righteous in the eyes of God, observing all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly”* (Luke 1:6) This is followed by Luke’s account of the Annunciation to Mary: *“you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus”* (vv. 25-38). Immediately we hear the narrative of the Visitation when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, and Elizabeth, pregnant with John, meet in the hill country surrounding Jerusalem (Luke 1:39-45). The focus of the story then shifts back to Mary as she proclaims the prayer now known as the *Magnificat/Canticle of Mary* (vv. 1:46-56). The focus then returns to Elizabeth and Zechariah upon the occasion of the birth of John the Baptist - upon which we hear the *Canticle of Zechariah (Benedictus; vv. 57-80)*.

In the 2nd Chapter, Luke turns his attention and the focus of the narrative to Jesus in the familiar accounts of the Birth of Jesus (Luke 2:1-15), the arrival of the Shepherds (vv. 14- 21), and on the 8th day after the birth, the Circumcision and Naming of Jesus, told simply in a single verse (v. 21). It is at this point our gospel reading begins: *“When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord”* (v. 22).

A lot going on

In a matter of two verses (vv.21-22) Luke presents a host of religiously themed action: circumcision, naming, purification, presentation, consecration. He writes as though this was an orderly flow of events of what you would do in the Jewish tradition upon the birth of a child. It seems as such to the modern reader unfamiliar with 1st century Jewish birth traditions - as they perhaps were to Luke, by tradition a gentile convert to Christianity.

The sequence raises several questions for modern Scripture scholars. Why wait until the eighth day to name the child? Zechariah named his son “John” on the day of his birth. Why speak of their purification, when the purity law applied only to Mary? Why relate the presentation (2:22b) to a scriptural text concerned with consecration and redemption? Indeed, why mention the presentation at all? Apart from these questions, Luke’s focus remains clear. He presents Jesus’ family as obedient to the Lord, unquestionably pious.

- (1) they circumcise Jesus on the eighth day (Gen 17:9–14; Lev 12:3);
- (2) they give the child the name mandated by the Angel Gabriel (Lk 1:31); and
- (3) they act according to the law with regard to purity following childbirth (Lev 12),
- (4) bringing Jesus to Jerusalem (Exod 13:2, 12, 15) and
- (5) offer the sacrifice for Mary’s purification (Lev 12:8).

The Book of Exodus required the presentation and redemption of the first-born son because the first-born sons “belong” to the Lord who saved them when the Egyptian first-born were destroyed at the Passover (Exod 13:15). Leviticus described the ceremony for the ritual purification of the mother forty days after

giving birth (Lev 12:1–8). On this occasion she was to offer a lamb and a pigeon or a turtledove, but a poor couple was permitted to bring only two pigeons or doves.

Joel Green [140-141] writes: “In effect, Luke highlights not what they do but why they do it, and the results of their actions: (1) Their piety is disclosed... and (2) the child is called Jesus.. and designated ‘holy.’ Hence, these ‘normal’ occurrences are laden with narrative purpose, redirecting attention to the plan of God, revealing again that Mary and Joseph are willing supporters of God’s aim, and certifying that Jesus will operate from within God’s purpose.”

Focus and Spotlight

From the prologue to our present verses, the focus and spotlight of the narrative has moved around highlighting many characters in the infancy stories of Jesus. Upon arrival at the Temple the movement is narrowed, but nonetheless attention needs to be paid to where the author is leading us.

In one aspect the spotlight is on Jesus. For example, even Mary’s purification becomes Jesus’ presentation (2:22–24), and the time devoted to providing character references for Simeon (2:25–27) and Anna (2:36–37) underscores the veracity of their claims about Jesus. Similarly, Simeon turns to address Mary directly (2:34–35), but his words to her concern Jesus. The child does nothing, but all words and deeds are oriented around him.

Then again, the spotlight shines on Jesus only in a qualified sense, for Jesus is repeatedly characterized in relation to God. He is presented to the Lord (2:22), and identified as “*the Messiah of the Lord*” (2:26) and God’s salvation (2:30). Moreover, the sight of the child is enough to cause both Simeon and Anna to praise God (2:28, 38). This narrative remains thoroughly centered on God and what God is doing through his Son, the Incarnate Word of God.

A Man Names Simeon

²⁵ *Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel, and the holy Spirit was upon him.*

Luke records the inspired reaction of Simeon to the bringing of Jesus into the temple. We seem always to think of this man as old, though there is no evidence apart from his cheerful readiness to die (v.29; cf. 26). Attempts to identify him as a priest or an important citizen are without foundation. The name was a common one; apart from this story we know nothing about him. But the story does indicate that he was “righteous” and “devout.” The first accolade is likely meant to tell us that he was in a right relationship with God and man alike. The second accolade, “devout” (*eulabes*) is a word, only used by Luke in the New Testament, describing a person who was attentive and careful about religious duties and obligations.

The expression “*awaiting the consolation of Israel*” is not a quote from an OT prophet nor an expression found in rabbinic writings, but it is not unwarranted to hear the echo of Isaiah 40:1-2 - *Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service has ended, that her guilt is expiated.*” The word “service”, elsewhere in the OT describes servitude or exile or combat service. “Expiated” means that person has been redeemed and pardoned. By the time of Simeon, Israel has been a vassal, subjected nation for almost 600 years while still holding to the promise of the restoration of the throne of David and a new age for the city of Jerusalem. The hope for such consolation was believed awaiting fulfillment in the promised Messiah.

²⁶ *It had been revealed to him by the holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Messiah of the Lord.* ²⁷ *He came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him,*

It is of note that St. Luke's emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in *Luke* and *Acts of the Apostles* is already on display in these infancy narratives. Zechariah was a righteous man associated with the Temple who prayed the *Benedictus* after the birth of John the Baptist. Simeon, another righteous man associated with the Temple, also in the Spirit, will be led to his own unique prayer (vv.29-32).

In fulfillment of the promise the Spirit brought Simeon into the temple at the same time as Joseph and Mary. Simeon was 'in the Spirit', which includes being inspired by the Spirit but seems also to indicate something more: a special sensitivity. Simeon blessed God by offering up a prayer of praise

²⁸ he took him into his arms and blessed God, saying: ²⁹ "Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you prepared in sight of all the peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel."

Through the gift of the Holy Spirit he had lived to recognize the Messiah in the infant Jesus and was now able to leave this life in peace knowing that the salvation long promised in the covenants and proclaimed by the prophets was coming to bear for the sake of the world. But the words of the prayer have many allusions to the history of salvation as revealed in the Old Testament scrolls.

- The promise to Abraham: "*For my part, here is my covenant with you: you are to become the father of a multitude of nations.*" (Gen 17:4) It has long been the hope/prophecy that the fates of those within and outside Israel are connected.
- It was a theme often repeated by the Prophet Isaiah: "*In days to come, the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills. All nations shall stream toward it.*" (Is 2:2) When nations arrive their desire will be that God "*may instruct us in his ways, and we may walk in his paths.*" (v.3).

The prayer shows that this salvation is not for any one nation but for all. This is clear enough in the expression "*all peoples,*" but Simeon spells it out by speaking of both the Gentiles and the people of Israel. Some have seen a distinction in the expression "*a light for revelation to the Gentiles,*" as compared to "*and glory for your people Israel.*" But as Leon Morris notes [p.105]: "It is probably only the poetic structure that links a light for revelation with the former and glory with the latter, for he would bring revelation to Israel as to others. But there is appropriateness in linking glory with Israel. There is much about glory in the Old Testament, particularly in connection with God's manifestations of himself to his people. But Israel will see glory in its truest and fullest sense when it sees the Son of God (cf. John 1:14). His being a light to Gentiles means no diminution of Israel's glory, but rather its full realization."

So there is more at play than simply the fulfillment of a divine promise to one righteous man. It is a gift of wisdom and insight that this one righteous man recognized that all the promises of God were being fulfilled in the infant being carried into the Temple.

In these few verses, the focal point of the narrative involves the presentation of Simeon as a reliable witness: a righteous and pious man, an agent of the Holy Spirit, his physical location in the Jerusalem temple, and his understanding of the message of Isaiah not only in terms of covenant promise fulfillment but also in expressing his praise to God.

The Parents

When the shepherds arrive at the manger in Bethlehem, Luke records: "*they made known the message that had been told them about this child. All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.*" (Luke 2:17-19) "All" no doubt includes Joseph and Mary who by now would have been used to messages being delivered by angels, understood to be the messengers of God. They were amazed at the message, but they understood how the shepherds came to know. Not so with Simeon. "*The child's father and mother were amazed at what was said about him.*" While the first part of Simeon's message had already been received, the

message perhaps expanded far beyond what Mary had been reflecting on, and in any case, how did this random person in the Temple come to know these things? How was it revealed to him?

But there was more: “*Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, ‘Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted (and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.’*” (Luke 2:34-35) Salvation, revelation and glory will come at a heavy price.

Speaking of the fall and rising of many in Israel leaves in some doubt if Simeon means to speak of one group who for a variety of reasons place their own achievement about the mission and teachings of Jesus. They must fall and take the lower place, but then they will be able to rise like the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in the parable of Luke 18:9-14. But if Simeon has in mind two groups, it means that Jesus will divide people: those who reject him will in the end fall and those who accept him will rise, they will enter into salvation. (*Note: elsewhere in Luke the word used for “rise” always refers to the Resurrection.*)

It is hard to know exactly what Simeon is saying when he proclaims Jesus will “*be a sign that will be contradicted*” One might suggest that his teaching (e.g. Sermon on the Plains in Luke 6:20 and following and other places) often carry the meta meaning “who have been taught by I say...” taking on the role of the divine teacher and one who explains the deeper meaning of the Law.

All was noted, all of this comes at a cost, especially to Jesus’ mother Mary. The sword that will pierce her heart is *rhomphaia*, a particularly large sword. It is not difficult to imagine that points to the death of Jesus. Given all that has been told to Mary and Joseph about the origin and destiny of their child, the mission and promise, to have it seemingly end on the cross is to be cut to the quick both in witness and memory.

The prophetess, Anna

This is nothing known of Anna apart from these verses. While the language is not exactly clear if she had been widowed 84 years or was 84 years old, either way she was elderly. There had been no prophet in Israel for hundreds of years, so it is noteworthy that God had raised up this prophetess. Perhaps she was recognized as such by Temple authorities given it is possible to understand that “*She never left the Temple*” to mean she had quarters in the Temple precincts.

There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived seven years with her husband after her marriage, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer. And coming forward at that very time, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.

We are not told the content of her prayer of thanks, but it is clear that she understood the connection between the promise of God to redeem Jerusalem and this particular child. Anna’s testimony is added to that of the angels (2:10–14) and Simeon (2:28–35), who respond to the appearance of this wondrous child by praising God and interpreting the significance of Jesus’ coming.

Return to Nazareth

When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.”

Luke rounds off this part of his narrative with the return of Joseph and Mary to Nazareth. He makes no reference to the flight into Egypt (Matt. 2:13ff.) and there is no way of knowing whether he knew of it or not, and whether it preceded or followed the visit to Jerusalem. He speaks of the completion of the law’s

requirements after which they returned to Galilee. Jesus' childhood is described briefly in terms of development; there was growth, physical, mental and spiritual.

Sources

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