

The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
New Canaan, Connecticut

The Gospel of Luke

I: Luke 1-2
The Birth of the Anointed One

The Gospel begins with a carefully crafted literary prologue (Luke 1:1-4), echoed at the beginning of the Book of Acts (Acts 1:1). This prologue recognizes the existence of other narratives about the life and teaching of Jesus, perhaps the Gospel of Mark. Our author implicitly claims to present a better version, one that is “accurate” and “in order,” based on the testimony of eyewitnesses. The goal of the narrative is not objective and unbiased reporting. It is offered to Theophilus, whose name means “Beloved of God,” so that he might be properly instructed (the Greek word is “catechized”). Whether Theophilus is a real patron or an ideal recipient, the author’s goal is clear.

Luke then presents a carefully balanced picture of the origins of the Messiah. The following chart displays the careful symmetries.

	John	Jesus
Birth foretold	1:5-25	1:26-38
Good News celebrated	1:39-45	1:46-56 (<i>Magnificat</i>)
Birth	1:57-66	2:1-6
Birth celebrated	1:67-80 (<i>Benedictus</i>)	2:8-21
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	Simeon	Anna
Presentation	2:22-35	2:36-38
Jesus at 12		2:41-52

Angels foretell birth of two prophetic figures. Their proclamations are met with varying degrees of skepticism, but also with a magnificent poetic celebration, the Magnificat, by Mary, Jesus’ mother. At the birth of both prophets there is celebration. John’s birth prompts the Benedictus, a prayer of his father Zachariah. The birth of Jesus elicits the acclaim of angels and shepherds. In fulfillment of the requirements of the Law, his parents present Jesus in the Temple and two prophetic figures, Simeon and Anna, welcome him, but give portents of things to come.

The historical significance of the birth of Jesus is highlighted by the chronological notices that begin chapter 2. Those remarks also introduce a tension that will run through the whole of Luke and Acts. Imperial chronology fixes the time of the birth of Jesus; it also reminds the reader of the dominant political power that will stand in judgment over the movement begun by that birth.

The account of Jesus’ trip to the Temple as a youth concludes the overture to the gospel. The setting for this story of the precocious Jesus is carefully chosen, returning the reader to the venue where Zachariah first heard the good news of John’s birth. Through

such narrative devices, and through the constant echoes of the Old Testament in these chapters, Luke insists on the continuity of the history of God's salvific will.

The Magnificat

The hymnic pieces in this story, like choral odes in a Greek drama, comment on the significance of the narrated events. Mary's hymn, the Magnificat, whose name derives from the first word of the Latin version, is uttered on the occasion of a visit to her cousin Elizabeth. Like the matriarchs of ancient Israel, Elizabeth has become unexpectedly pregnant in old age. Mary comes to assist and to celebrate. Elizabeth's child kicks in the womb, a sign of joy at his cousin's arrival. Elizabeth offers a warm greeting. All this elicits Mary's elegiac response.

The Magnificat is modeled on the prayer of Hannah, the mother of Samuel in 1 Sam 2:1-10, who in many ways resembles Elizabeth. The canticle celebrates the surprising turns that God's providence produces. In terms that resound in modern "liberation" theologies, God is praised for his "option for the poor." The wondrous things that God has done prominently include the exaltation of the lowly and the humbling of the proud.

Scholars have explored various attempts to find a social setting in the life of Israel in which such claims might make sense and it is possible that the poem had a life prior to its use by Luke, a life that celebrated the triumph of Israel over oppressive forces. Whatever its prior history, the poem functions well to give expression to the sense of deliverance and vindication experienced by the two characters, Mary, the young woman who conceived a child out of wedlock, and Elizabeth, the old woman marginalized because she could not produce a child. The poem's imagery also foreshadows elements of the plot of the Gospel, in which other lowly folk are exalted and the mighty brought low. The poem also has a programmatic function: the good news of Jesus is somehow about such radical reversals.

But how, a sensitive reader might ask, is such a theology to be implemented in the here and now. Should followers of Jesus serve as instruments for the exaltation of the lowly and the humbling of the proud? Or are there other readings of the poem that are somewhat less radical, less obtrusive into spheres of economics and politics?

Questions for discussion:

1. How do the Magnificat and Benedictus relate to one another? Do they present a unified image of the significance of the births of the two boys? If so, what is the focal point of that image?

2. What do you make of the violent imagery of the Magnificat? Have the “mighty” been brought down from their thrones simply by the announcement of the births of John and Jesus?

3. What are the major claims made about Jesus by the actions and the dialogue in these early chapters?

4. What are the major differences between Luke and the other account of the birth of Jesus, in the Gospel according to Matthew?

For Further Study:

Raymond E. Brown, "The Lucan Canticles in General," and "The Magnificat," in idem, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1977) 346-68.

Nils Dahl, "The Story of Abraham in Luke-Acts," in Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn, *Studies in Luke-Acts* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966) 139-58.