

1 Luke 1:39–56

The Announcement of the Birth of Jesus

Birth announcements are a part of modern life. Parents, delighted over the arrival of newness in their lives, celebrate by sending hand-picked proclamations to family and friends. These proclamations contain vital information about the newborn such as date of birth, height, weight, and, of course, name. For most, the name claims the powerful present that exists in the newborn, but a name also connects the newborn to the past, to the history of his or her particular family. While these declarations of birth bear witness to the name of the child, they also speak about hopes and dreams that have been centered on the arrival of a child—dreams that have been fulfilled

and hopes aroused that reach out into the uncertainty of the future.

Much like modern birth announcements, the narratives with which Luke begins his Gospel represent the culmination of promises that Luke finds in the Old Testament and the introduction of hopes for the future of God's interaction with God's people. In the birth stories related in Luke 1–2, we encounter Luke's unique perspective on the interconnectedness of history. For Luke, the old familiar hymn rings true: "God is working his purposes out." God had been at work in ancient Israel through Abraham and Sarah, David, and the prophets. God will be at work in the life, ministry, and mission of the child who will bear the name Jesus—that is, "God saves." Finally, God will continue to be at work through the church that arises after Jesus' death as the narratives in Luke's companion story, Acts, reveal. The birth stories firmly place the newborn child Jesus into God's history, so that Jesus is the fulfillment of past promises and the hook upon which future hopes are hung. As Howard Marshall states, these stories are to be seen "not so much as a prelude to what follows but as the theme which is to be elaborated in the ensuing 'symphony of salvation'" (Marshall, 97).

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."—Luke 1:42

Connecting to the Past and Setting the Stage

The Stigma of Barrenness

"In the absence of knowledge about the biological process of conception and the reasons for infertility, ancient cultures usually held the woman responsible for a couple's inability to conceive children. Her 'failure' was often interpreted as God's judgment against her, by which she brought suffering and shame on her husband."—Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 28.

Luke's Gospel is steeped in the narratives and poetry of the Old Testament. Through both direct and indirect allusion, Luke ties the events of the life of Christ to the proclamations and hopes offered throughout the scriptures of the Hebrew people. These ties permeate the early chapters of Luke's Gospel, as he proclaims that God's continued plan and purpose for creation have become focused in the life and work of Jesus. Jesus' story begins like many stories of promise and newness in the Old Testament by focusing on barren women. Matthew begins his Gospel with a patrilineal genealogy (note well, however, the four "unique" women mentioned in Matthew's genealogy—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah, Bathsheba; see Matt. 1:1–18) and then a focus on Joseph. Luke, however, begins his telling with a focus on a barren couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, and a woman, Mary, whose barrenness is not due to old age but to her unmarried status. These characters remain on center

stage through the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel.

By focusing on Elizabeth and Mary, Luke picks up on a theme from the early narratives of promise in Genesis 12–50 and also from the narratives of 1 and 2 Samuel (see 1 Sam 1:1–2:10)—the theme of God's promise keeping in the face of incredible odds. Especially within the Genesis narratives, the apparent setting of the stories of father Abraham and mother Sarah is a world permeated by the promises of God, yet these promises are forever held in tension by the barren wombs of the ancient Israelite matriarchs. God promised Abraham and Sarah that their descendants would be as numerous as the stars (Gen. 12:2; 15:5; 17:6), but Sarah was old and barren. The incongruity between the perceived reality of barrenness and the promise of future descendants finds its most poignant expression in the laughter of Abraham (Gen. 17:17) and Sarah (Gen. 18:12). As the story is told, the barrenness of Israel's matriarchs becomes symbolic for the void within creation that can only be filled through the promissory action of God.

Luke's description of Zechariah and Elizabeth carries the echo of the ancient Israelite stories. They receive a description that parallels that of Abraham and Sarah (Luke 1:7; compare Gen. 11:30) but can also be seen in the stories of Issac and Rebekah (Gen. 25:21), Jacob and Rachel (Gen. 29:31), Elkanah and Hannah (1 Sam. 1:5). Like Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah responds to the proclamation of a coming child with disbelief and incredulity and this leads to his muteness until the birth of John.

While this lack of faith resonates with the earlier narratives of Genesis, it also becomes a foil that highlights both the response of true faith and the difference between the promised children, John and Jesus. In a scene similar to Zechariah's visitation, Luke informs us that Gabriel made a second visit to a young girl named Mary. In both visits the same angelic announcer appears, bringing good news of a coming birth, news that includes the future activity and name of the soon-to-be-arriving child. Yet the reactions of the hearers of this news are vastly different. Whereas Zechariah responded in disbelief and was stricken mute, Mary responds in faith by hearing and obeying the word of God. Mary's response, "Here am I ...; let it be" (1:38), sets the stage for Luke's description of faith in God and the appropriate response to Jesus, the response of hearing and obeying (Luke 8:21; 11:27-28; see Tannehill, *Luke*, 53, and Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*). The distinction between the priest Zechariah's response of unbelief, a response by a representative of the religious establishment and one acquainted with the tradition, and Mary's response of obedience, a response by a woman and an outsider to the tradition, lays the groundwork for Luke's descriptions of the response of individuals throughout the Gospel. Jesus finds acceptance by the "outsiders" such as sinners, tax collectors, and women, while he is rejected by the "insiders" like the Pharisees, priests, and scribes.

"Mary sings of the God who brings down the mighty and exalts those of low degree, who fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty, and through her Luke introduces a theme

prominent in both the Gospel and Acts. More is involved than the social message and ministry of Jesus in behalf of the oppressed and poor.... [H]ere we have a characteristic of the final judgment of God in which there is a complete reversal of fortunes: the powerful and rich will exchange places with the powerless and poor."—Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation, 30.

Mary's obedient reply to the God who works impossibilities (1:37; see Gen. 18:14) reverberates with the differences in Gabriel's proclamation about the destinies of the two children (Luke 1:16-17; compare 1:35). In these stories of the prehistory of Jesus and John, their unique respective missions and the contrasts between the two promised children are highlighted. As Luke tells the story, he pulls no punches in declaring that John is subservient to and lesser than Jesus. John will "go before" to "make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (1:17), while Jesus is the "Son of the Most High" and the ruler of a kingdom that will never cease (1:32). God is working God's purposes out in both John and Jesus; both have been expected, but in Jesus the central plan of salvation finds its home and meaning.

Much like throwing a rock into a pond, the announcement stories found in the first pages of Luke's Gospel send forth ripples in all directions. They are ripples that engage the past, highlighting again the providential purposes of God from creation, through the children of Israel, and now in the life of Jesus. The ripples also reach forward into the future, opening up new chapters and new vistas for God's continued salvific actions.

The Meeting of Mary and Elizabeth (1:39–45)

The first step in the unfolding drama of salvation comes in the meeting of Elizabeth and Mary. As the two promise bearers draw together, the past promises of God and the future hopes of salvation lie at the center of their interaction. Alerted by the earlier announcements by Gabriel to Zechariah and Mary, Luke's audience knows that these women carry the "hopes and fears of all the years" within their wombs. Their coming together occasions further expression of God's salvific plan along with the relationship that John and Jesus will have to God's activity.

Luke does not provide any insight into the reason for Mary's journey to see her relative Elizabeth, but upon her arrival powerful signs are given that confirm the uniqueness of the children within the women's respective wombs. Hearing the voice of Mary, the child within Elizabeth's womb leaps in a manner that is later described as a leap of joy (1:44). Fred Craddock harks back to an earlier "leaping" within the womb by suggesting that Luke has tied his audience to yet another Old Testament story, that of Esau and Jacob in the womb of Rebekah. "The historical allusion is to Rebekah in whose womb Esau and Jacob struggled, the message being in both cases, 'The elder shall serve the younger' (Gen. 25:21–23). The theological point is that prenatal activity, because it precedes all merit or works, witnesses to the sovereign will of God" (Craddock, 29). Following the pattern set earlier in the chapter, the superiority of Jesus to John becomes further established through this

historical allusion, where in both cases the blessed child is the younger child.



Mary and Elizabeth

The role of Jesus in God's sovereign plans finds confirmation not only in John's leaping in the womb, but through the greeting that Elizabeth offers Mary. Three pieces of Elizabeth's greeting are of special note: First, much like a prophet under the influence of the spirit of God, Elizabeth calls Mary and her unborn child "blessed." The New Testament scholar Raymond Brown points out that there are two words in Greek that speak to the concept of blessing: one is *makarios*, which is familiar from the Beatitudes ("Blessed are the poor ...") and suggests a "state of happiness," while the other is *eulogetos*, which "invokes a blessing of God" (Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 333). Using the latter word, Elizabeth claims that Mary has been chosen by God, a powerful statement given the social ostracization that would normally have been directed toward an unwed teenage mother-to-be. While spoken about the present situation, Elizabeth's blessing also prophetically looks forward to the fulfillment of this blessing in the life of Mary's unborn child.

Second, Elizabeth signals the identity of the child in Mary's womb by ascribing the title "Lord" to Jesus for one of the first times in Luke—"And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" (1:43; see also the brief reference in 1:17). While this is one of the several designations that are found in Luke in reference to Jesus, the emphasis occurring here ties Jesus to the divine. "Lord" is the term frequently used for the God of Israel (Luke 1:9, 11, 15, 25, 46, 68, etc.), thus connecting Jesus to God and God's

plan of salvation. Unlike Matthew, who uses "Lord" to distinguish the faithful from those who misunderstand Jesus, Luke plays on the connection to the divine that the title affirms in Jesus. The title professes the central place of Jesus in God's unfolding plan, in fact equating Jesus to God as participant in and mover of that plan.

Finally, Elizabeth's greeting confirms the appropriate response to God's unfolding plan—hearing and obeying. Earlier, Mary's response to the angel laid the framework for Luke's depiction of faith in Jesus. Elizabeth's final "blessing" toward Mary points again to the significance of the response of faith, a faith in a God who fulfills promises. Using the other word for blessing, *makarios*, Elizabeth confirms the state of happiness that rests with Mary because she has believed that God will fulfill the promises that have been made to her. These words once again paint a picture of faith's response to the unfolding of God's blueprint of salvation; the faithful are those who hear and obey.

Mary's Song (1:46–56)***Mary and Hannah***

Mary's song of joy and celebration is often called "The Magnificat" after the first line of the poem: "My soul *magnifies* the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46b–47).

Compare this with Hannah's words in 1 Samuel 2:1: "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God...."

The focus of the narrative now moves to the mother of the Lord, as Mary breaks forth into a song praising the faithfulness of God. This song, known as the "Magnificat" because of its first word in the Latin translation, has been seen by some scholars to make better sense coming from the mouth of Elizabeth, a reading for which they find support in a few ancient manuscripts and the supposed flow of the narrative. Yet the ascription of the song to Mary carries the weight of the manuscript evidence and the internal sense of the song, as the narrative has clearly identified Mary as the bearer of blessing through Elizabeth's earlier greeting, adding weight to this attestation (see Craddock, 29–30). As with the stories encountered earlier in the first chapter of Luke, Mary's song sends forth ripples that connect it to the past and open up themes that will work themselves out in the narrative that follows. Throughout the Old Testament, key players in the story break forth into song when confronted with the powerful, redemptive activity of God in the face of overwhelming odds. In response to God's stunning victory at the sea, Moses and Miriam break forth into song that affirms God's glory and power (Exodus 15). In response to an improbable victory over the Canaanites, Deborah declares God's providential care for lowly Israel (Judges 5). In the face of lifelong barrenness, Hannah rejoices in the life-giving power of God that opened her womb and produced Samuel (1 Samuel 2).

Each of these "songs" celebrates the activity of a God who keeps promises in the midst of overwhelming odds. Echoes from these celebrations can be heard in the song Mary now sings in response to Elizabeth's greeting. The closest parallel, however, is to the song of Hannah in response to the birth of Samuel. As we have seen earlier, barrenness is a key theme highlighting the ability of God to work in seemingly impossible situations. The narratives in 1 Samuel indicate the barrenness of Hannah and the remarkable melody that she sings in response to God's life-giving action that results in the birth of Samuel. Hannah has gone from barren and empty to life-giver, from a second-class citizen in a society that held the bearing of male children in high esteem to the mother of a firstborn son; that is, from death to new life. This reversal of fortune is clearly sounded in her words:

The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.
The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn.

(1 Sam. 2:4–5)

"That she should sing this song that links God's blessing of her in her 'lowliness' to God's promises for the whole people makes Mary into the lead singer in a chorus of all those whose

dreams and yearnings are given voice in its words.”—Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, Westminster Bible Companion, 34.

Hannah celebrates the implosion of grace into the world that turns the world upside down.

In Luke, Mary also celebrates the effects of God’s grace impacting human history through the child that she now bears in her womb. Her song can be broken down into two stanzas, verses 46–49 and verses 50–55. The first stanza focuses on Mary and recalls the statements that have been made about her by Elizabeth. Praising God with names that will become attached to the child in her womb, Lord and Savior (1:46–47), Mary celebrates her unique role in God’s purposes for creation. Her self-characterization, which moves from lowly servant to one called blessed by all generations, recalls the reversals that God worked in Hannah’s story, and also sets the stage for the coming events that will continue to turn the world upside down. As Fred Craddock notes, what happens to Mary is already “evidence” for the “eschatological reversals” that will be characteristic of Luke’s description of God’s activity within history (Craddock, 30).

The second stanza of Mary’s song centers on God’s merciful power and how that power intertwines with human history. Mary begins this stanza with a word that refers to a central characteristic of God, translated mercy, or steadfast love, which an audience familiar with the Old Testament would have known quite well. From the repeating refrain of Psalm 136, “... the

steadfast love of the LORD endures forever,” to the classic formulation of Exodus 34:6–7, “The LORD, the LORD ... abounding in *steadfast love* ... keeping *steadfast love* for the thousandth generation,” the mercy/*steadfast love* of God is a central tenet of the faith of the Old Testament that Mary now highlights and connects to the next generation. In fact, God’s mercy brackets the second stanza of Mary’s song, setting the context in which the following verses are to be understood (v. 50) and providing the summary statement for the action of God that these verses describe (v. 54). Central to Luke’s Gospel is the understanding that everything described therein arises out of the mercy of God, a theme stated directly here in Mary’s song.

What is the impact of the mercy of God on human history? Following the opening proclamation of God’s faithfulness, Mary describes the effects of God’s mercy through a series of reversals of fortune, which will become thematic for Luke. The poetry of this section is finely tuned, so that many have seen the hint of a chiasmus. This poetic figure, using the structure ABCCBA and especially suited for showing reversals, shows forth the turnabouts that God has wrought and will continue to bring forth in history:

He has shown strength with his arm; (A)
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, (B)
 and lifted up the lowly; (C)
 he has filled the hungry with good things, (C₁)

and sent the rich away empty. (B₁)
 He has helped his servant Israel.... (A₁)

(Luke 1:51–54a)

Bracketed by the parallel concepts of showing strength and helping, the inner verses highlight the transpositions that the mercy of God exacts from history. Those who are proud, powerful, and rich find themselves scattered, brought down, and sent away empty, while those who are lowly and hungry are lifted up and filled. These reversals, which turn the order of the world upside down, set the theme of salvation that is described in Luke's Gospel—the restoring of right relationships, the lifting up of the estranged (i.e., women, the poor, tax collectors, etc.), and the humbling of the proud. The salvation of God disrupts the orders of the world, healing and making some whole while challenging and humbling others.

Two features of Mary's description of God's activity deserve further note. First, the verbs used to portray this action occur in the past tense. The use of this particular past tense suggests that the events wrought by God's mercy are completed and, in a sense, timeless. The present and the future are ensured by the past. Even though the song points toward the future activity to be concluded in Jesus, "So sure is the singer that God will do what is promised that it is proclaimed as an accomplished fact" (Craddock, 30).

Mary's song "speaks of three of the revolutions of God. (i) *He scatters the proud in the plans of their hearts.* This is a *moral* revolution. Christianity is the death of pride.... (ii) *He casts down the mighty—he exalts the humble.* That is a *social* revolution. Christianity puts an end to the world's labels and prestige.... (iii) *He has filled those who are hungry ... those who are rich he has sent empty away.* That is an *economic* revolution.... There is loveliness in the *Magnificat* but in that loveliness there is dynamite. Christianity begets a revolution in each man and revolution in the world."—William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, Daily Study Bible, 15–16.

Second, the shifts in status between the rich and the poor should not be seen as an occasion of rejoicing that the rich will finally receive their just deserts. It is important to recognize how the framing celebration of God's mercy and the center describing the reversal of fortunes interpret each other. Within the frame of God's mercy, the center loses any tone of vengeance or triumphalism. Instead, a world marked by scarcity and competition is replaced by a world of generosity in which all have enough: Those who are hungry now enjoy good things, and those who are rich do not add to their riches. The powerful no longer exercise power over others, but nothing is said about the "lowly" now doing what has been done to them (Ringe, 33).

Mary completes her song with the closing reference to the mercy of God, but now ties God's mercy to God's remembering. Here again, the introductory words of Luke's Gospel pick up and elaborate a theme common from the Old Testament, the memory of God. In the central salvation story

of the Old Testament, the freeing of the Hebrew slaves from the Egyptian pharaoh, one of the crucial factors behind the redemptive activity of God is God's remembering the covenantal promises made earlier to Abraham and his kin: "God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Issac, and Jacob" (Ex. 2:24; see also Ex. 6:5; Lev. 26:42, 45; and Ps. 105:8ff.). Likewise, the psalmist proclaims that God's memory is central to understanding God's mercy and God's action on behalf of the oppressed and distressed: "For their sake he remembered his covenant, and showed compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love" (Ps. 106:45; see also Pss. 89:47, 50; 98:3; 136:23). Thus, Mary's song closes with a definitive statement of God's long-standing memory, which connects the current situation of a mother bearing a child with the continued unfolding of God's plan for the world, a plan that is tied to the ancient history of Abraham's people.



Want to Know More?

About songs of praise? See Jerome F. D. Creach, *Psalms*, Interpretation Bible Studies, especially pp. 2, 13–21.

About women in the time of Jesus? See Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *Women's Bible Commentary*, expanded ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 251–59, 482–88.

As Luke tells the story, the birth proclaimed in these passages sent ripples through human history. Jesus' birth spotlights God's past activity, while moving forward to shine the light of God's salvific plan on the future. For Luke, God has been, God is, and God will be active in the world. The question is, can we make the connections so that we too may hear and obey?



Questions for Reflection

1. Compare Luke 1:46–55 to 1 Samuel 2:1–10. In what way are these passages similar? How are they different? In what ways are the women who spoke these words alike?
2. The writer of this passage used the past tense to describe God's mercy. Why is this significant?

3. What is the significance of Luke's beginning his narrative with the stories of two women, both of them barren? Recall the stories of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 16), Jacob and Rachel (Gen. 29:31–30:24), and Elkanah and Hannah (1 Sam. 1:5–20).
4. The mother of Jesus was an unwed teenager. Is this an aspect of Mary that Christians today are prone to ignore or downplay? What does God's choice of Mary teach us about God?