

Unit 1 Introduction

A Savior Is Born

When considering Luke's account of Jesus' birth and surrounding events (1:5-2:52), words from a familiar Gaither song come to mind: "something beautiful, something good." Tranquility and awe are conveyed through shepherds keeping watch over their flocks at night when suddenly interrupted by a dramatic appearance of an angel of the Lord. The angel declares: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord" (1:10-11). This declaration discloses Jesus' identity, reveals the significance of His coming, and points to a proper response by hearers of this message.

Introductory Issues

As author of both the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, Luke is traditionally known as a physician, a traveling companion of Paul, and a Gentile. As a Gentile, he primarily writes to other Gentiles living in the broader Hellenistic world in the later portion of the first century AD. While directly addressing his work to Theophilus (a name meaning "one who loves God"), his gospel is also intended for the broader community he represents.

In his formal preface (1:1-4), Luke reveals his intent to affirm the reliability of what his hearers had been taught about Jesus through reliance on both written and eyewitness traditions. Other than Luke, only Matthew narrates the extraordinary events preceding Jesus' baptism by John (1:1-2:23).

Historical Context

Luke's infancy narrative occurs within the historical context of God's creation of a people Israel beginning with the call of Abraham and continuing through such figures as Moses, Jacob, and David. While this story stresses the development of God's people Israel, God's call to Abraham involved his becoming "the father of many nations" (Genesis 17:5), a promise clearly embraced by Luke. Gentiles should care about Israel's story for it is their story as well. The faithful God revealed in Scripture will be faithful to them.

In Israel's long history, this faithfulness was not always readily discerned. Following deliverance from slavery in Egypt and eventual unification in the land of promise under the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon, the nation experienced dispersion by the Assyrians (8th century BC) and exile by the Babylonians (6th century BC). After Babylon's destruction and a return from exile under the Persian leader Cyrus, there were hopeful but unrealized events relating to Israel's restoration. Persian domination was followed by Greek rule.

The Maccabean revolt of the Jews against the Greeks brought an independent Jewish state in the centuries immediately preceding Jesus' birth. This short-lived state came to an end in 63 BC with the Jews experiencing Roman rule during Jesus' lifetime.

A key belief of the Jews was that Israel's present experience resulted from its sin, but this circumstance was not God's final judgment. Israel's scattering and domination by other nations was temporary with future restoration certain. Hope for God's sending a Savior, a Messiah, or ideal king of the house of David was prevalent (2 Samuel 7; Isaiah 11:1). In anticipation, God's people were to be repentant of their sin and faithfully devoted to His gracious law.

Overview of the Narrative

In Luke 1:5-25, preparatory events leading up to Jesus' birth are recounted. In a story reminiscent of Sarah and Abraham, a devout yet childless Jewish couple, Zechariah of the priestly order Abijah, and Elizabeth, a descendent of Aaron, are promised a son who is to be named John. They are "upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly" (1:6). Their son "will be great in the sight of the Lord" and "filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth" (1:15). He is to call the people of Israel to repentance in preparation for its restoration through the coming Messiah of the house of David.

God's promise is delivered by the angel Gabriel in the context of Zechariah's sole priestly opportunity to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. His hesitancy to believe the promise results in his inability to speak until after John is born.

In Luke 1:26-38, the identity of the coming Messiah is revealed by Gabriel's announcement to Mary, a virgin engaged to Joseph of the house of David. Mary has "found favor with God" and will give birth to a son who is to be named Jesus. He will be called "Son of the Most High" (1:30-32a).

Gabriel declares: "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." (1:32b-33). Mary's dedication to God is revealed through her affirmation of servanthood to the Lord: "May it be to me as you have said" (1:38). Gabriel's revelation to Mary of her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy leads to the next events.

In Luke 1:39-56, the relationship between the unborn children of Elizabeth and Mary is established with Mary quickly going to a town in the hill country of Judea, entering Zechariah's house, and greeting Elizabeth. At the sound of Mary's voice, the child within Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy, and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. She

pronounces a blessing on Mary for her fidelity to what God was doing through her.

In words reminiscent of Hannah, mother of Samuel (1 Sam 2:1-10), Mary responds with words of a song referenced as the *Magnificat* referring to the Latin translation for its first word “Blessed.” The song praises God as Mary’s Savior, the Mighty One, the faithful God who has helped His servant Israel and forever shown mercy to Abraham and his descendants.

In Luke 1:57-80, after Mary has returned home, Elizabeth gives birth to her child and surprises relatives and neighbors by naming him John. Upon Zechariah’s affirmation of this name, his speech is restored, and Zechariah gives a Spirit-inspired prophecy concerning both Jesus and his son John.

God is praised for His redemption of Israel through raising up a “horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David” (1:69). In remembrance of His holy covenant and the oath sworn to Abraham, this “horn of salvation” will provide deliverance and rescue from Israel’s enemies. The goal is that Israel may be able to serve God “without fear and in holiness before him all our days” (1:75).

In the *Benedictus* (a song beginning with the words “Blessed be the Lord God”), Zechariah reveals the role of his son as a “prophet of the Most High.” John is to prepare the way for what God is going to accomplish through Jesus. His role involves providing Israel “knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins” (1:76-77).

In Luke 2:1-7, circumstances surrounding Jesus’ birth are placed within the broader context of history, referencing the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus and Quirinus as the governor of Syria. Luke reinforces a primary concern that Jesus’ story is not just of significance for the Jews, but for Gentiles as well. Upon Caesar’s declaration of a census requiring payment of taxes, Mary and Joseph travel from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea, the town of David, because Joseph is of “the house and line of David” (2:4b). The lowly setting for Jesus’ birth is stressed by His birth in a location used to house animals and by his bed as a place to feed them. While a humble setting surrounds the place of Jesus’ birth, such is not the case with what immediately follows.

In 2:8-20, Luke describes shepherds out in fields tending their sheep at night. During this time, any positive associations with being a shepherd, in view of David the shepherd, had long disappeared. Shepherds were now considered a disreputable group. It is to this lowly group, however, that the announcement of all announcements comes from the appearance of an angel of the Lord. The shepherds’ initial terror turns to joy as the angel declares the birth of Israel’s Savior who is the Christ (the Messiah). They are instructed to go to

the town of David where they will find the child lying in a manger. Hearing the proclamation from a heavenly host: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men” (2:14), the shepherds depart and find Jesus as promised. They share the angel’s message, and all are amazed. Mary treasures all these things and ponders them in her heart.

In Luke 2:21-40, after Jesus’ circumcision and naming, Luke presents Mary and Joseph as faithfully following all the prescriptions laid down by the Law involving their firstborn son and Mary’s purification after childbirth. While in the temple, they encounter Simeon and Anna, two witnesses to Jesus’ identity and coming role.

Simeon is “righteous and devout” and “waiting for the consolation Israel” (1:25). God promises that he will not die before seeing the Lord’s Messiah. Recognizing Jesus as the realization of this promise, he praises God with a song now designated as the *Nunc Dimittis* (Latin for its first words “Now let depart”). The song celebrates God’s salvation for all people in Jesus who “is a light for revelation to the Gentiles” and who will bring glory to God’s people Israel (2:32).

After the song, Simeon blesses Mary and Joseph and turns attention to Jesus’ mother. He indicates that her son will cause “the rising and falling of many in Israel” between those who will and those who will not accept God’s salvation through Him. Jesus’ rejection by some will lead to pain for Mary, as well as Jesus.

Anna, an elderly prophetess, is the “daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.” At age 84, she is constantly in the temple worshiping, fasting, and praying. She too associates Jesus with the coming of the messianic age involving the redemption of Jerusalem (2:37-38).

Having “done everything required by the Law of the Lord,” Jesus’ family returns to Nazareth where Jesus “grew and became strong.” He “was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him” (2:40).

In 2:41-52, Luke uniquely narrates an event that takes place when Jesus is 12. He is inadvertently left behind by His parents upon their departure from the celebration of the Feast of Passover in Jerusalem. Three days later, He is reunited with them in the temple courts where He is sitting with the teachers of Israel, amazing them with His understanding and answers to their questions. Referencing the temple as His “Father’s house,” Jesus returns with Mary and Joseph to His hometown where He grows “in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (2:52).

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