

Nunc Dimittis, Luke 2:22-35

Overview

Since we have already interrupted our studies in Isaiah, and we are at the traditional Christmas season, I thought it might be useful to study a passage more directly associated with the birth of our Lord. Recently, our studies in Isa 42:6 led us to contemplate Simeon, who bore witness to the infant Jesus in the temple. Let's consider his testimony in more detail.

The story unfolds in three stages. First, we are given a description of the activities of the Holy Family in the weeks after the birth. Then we are introduced to Simeon, a godly patriarch in Jerusalem. Finally, the two come together, and Simeon offers two blessings, one to God, the other to the Family.

22-24, The Holy Family

Luke repeatedly points out their conformance to the Law: Mary's purification (22), the redemption of a firstborn son (23), and the sacrifice for childbirth (24). All three emphasize the human condition into which our Lord was born, "made of a woman, made under the law" (Gal 4:4).

22 And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished,--According to Lev 12:1-4, this would be forty days after the birth.

The vast preponderance of mss (including Stephanus) read "their purification." Certainly Mary needs to be purified, but who else? Joseph, because of his association with her? Hardly. But we have just read that the infant Jesus was circumcised, a symbol of purification¹, and in ch. 3 he will submit to the baptism of repentance. Though without his own sin, from the first he is in all things made like unto his brethren (Heb 2:17), bearing the likeness of sinful flesh (Rom 8:3). I am amazed to contemplate the Lord of Glory taking on the form of a helpless baby; it is even more amazing to contemplate the sinless one submitting to these emblems of defilement. The next verse carries this theme even further:

they brought him to Jerusalem,--There were two reasons for this visit, the first occasioned by the fact that this is Mary's firstborn, the second required for any child.

to present him to the Lord; 23 (As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;)--The first reason is occasioned by the fact that this is Mary's first child. The command is in Exod 13:

Exo 13:1-2, 14-15 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, 2 Sanctify unto me all the firstborn, whatsoever openeth the womb among the children of Israel, *both* of man and of beast: it is mine. ... 14 And it shall be when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, What *is* this? that thou shalt say unto him, By strength of hand the LORD brought us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage: 15 And it came to pass, when Pharaoh would hardly let us go, that the LORD slew all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man, and the firstborn of

¹ Deu 30:6 And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live. Jos 5:9 And the LORD said unto Joshua, This day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you.

beast: therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all that openeth the matrix, being males; but all the firstborn of my children I redeem.

In other words, God spared Israel's firstborn when he slew the Egyptians, therefore Israel's firstborn belong to the Lord. In the case of clean animals, they must be sacrificed. Human first-born sons are subject to the same sentence of death, but the law provides a way for them to be redeemed, Num 18:15, 16:

Num 18:15 Every thing that openeth the matrix in all flesh, which they bring unto the LORD, *whether it be* of men or beasts, shall be thine: nevertheless the firstborn of man shalt thou surely redeem, and the firstling of unclean beasts shalt thou redeem. 16 And those that are to be redeemed from a month old shalt thou redeem, according to thine estimation, for the money of five shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary, which *is* twenty gerahs.

So the first purpose for the visit to the temple is to make this redemption payment. So fully does he identify with his people that he is subject to their sentence of death. The redeemer must himself be redeemed.

24 And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.--The second reason for the visit is to mark the end of the uncleanness that is associated with every childbirth.

Lev 12:1-4, 6, 8 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, 2 Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, If a woman have conceived seed, and born a man child: then she shall be unclean seven days; 3 And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised 4 And she shall then continue in the blood of her purifying three and thirty days; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying be fulfilled. ... 6 And when the days of her purifying are fulfilled, for a son, or for a daughter, she shall bring a lamb of the first year for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon, or a turtledove, for a sin offering, unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, unto the priest: 8 And if she be not able to bring a lamb, then she shall bring two turtles, or two young pigeons; the one for the burnt offering, and the other for a sin offering: and the priest shall make an atonement for her, and she shall be clean.

Again, we are struck with our Lord's condition.

- Once again, as partaker of our humanity, his birth occasions a sin offering.
- He did not come into a prosperous family, but one that could only afford to offer the minimal sacrifice.

25-26, Simeon

25 And, behold,--Mary and Joseph are minding their own business, when suddenly Simeon appears. It's an unexpected, and so far unexplained, event.

there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon;--In fact, there were probably dozens of men in Jerusalem named Simeon. But this one had three distinctions.

and the same man was just and devout,--The first word describes his moral character; the second, his

carefulness in adhering to religious duties. Both inwardly and outwardly, he served the Lord.

waiting for the consolation of Israel:--Personal piety is coupled with affections that are aligned to the Word of God. To see this, consider the verb, and its object.

The object of the verb, “consolation,” means “comfort,” and recalls the command to the herald in Isa 40:1,

Isa 40:1-2 **Comfort** ye, **comfort** ye my people, saith your God. 2 Speak ye **comfortably** to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins.

This message continues through the latter half of the book:

Isa 49:13 Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains: for the LORD hath **comforted** his people, and will have mercy upon his afflicted.

Isa 51:3 For the LORD shall **comfort** Zion: he will **comfort** all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody.

Isa 61:1-2 The Spirit of the Lord GOD *is* upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to *them that are* bound; 2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to **comfort** all that mourn;

Isa 66:13 As one whom his mother **comforteth**, so will I **comfort** you; and ye shall be **comforted** in Jerusalem.

Since the fall of the monarchy, Israel has been humbled and in mourning. But God promised to comfort and restore her. Simeon does not consider this promise to have been fulfilled with the return from Babylon. He still anticipates a future restoration.

Now consider the verb, “waiting for.” There may have been many in Israel who had head knowledge of the coming consolation, but who went about their lives without giving it much thought. Not so Simeon. He was waiting for it expectantly, as servants wait for their Lord to return (Luke 12:36). That expectation colors his every thought.

In every age, this is the attitude of a godly believer. Daniel knew Jeremiah’s prophecy of a seventy-year captivity (Jer 25:12; 29:10), and was in prayer before God as the time drew near (Dan 9:2). In the NT, we are told to set our affection on things above, not on things on the earth (Col 3:2), to live as those whose citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20), and to love our Lord’s appearing (2 Tim 4:8).

and the Holy Ghost was upon him.--Neither piety nor an appetite for the Lord’s return can exist in the strength of the flesh. Both are evidence of the third characteristic of this godly man: even before Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is upon him. Throughout the introduction to Luke, we meet godly Jews who are distinguished by the action of the Holy Spirit:

Luk 1:15 he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb.

Luk 1:35 And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee,

Luk 1:41 Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost:

Luk 1:67 And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost,

The permanent indwelling of the Spirit is a precious benefit of Pentecost. But in every age, the Spirit of God has enabled the Lord's people to serve him. Only thus can the corrupting influence of the flesh be overcome.

26 And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ.--God has given him a special promise: he will see the Messiah. It is perhaps not surprising that he is selected for this blessing, since he is particularly devoted to this promise.

27-34, The Encounter

27 And he came by the Spirit into the temple:--Now the Lord is about to fulfill his promise. He prompts Simeon to enter the temple just when Mary and Joseph bring the infant Jesus.

and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law,--This rare expression says something about the piety of Joseph and Mary. They customarily did what the Law required. It was not something exceptional to them, but their daily habit.

Simeon offers two blessings. First (v. 28), he blesses God for the arrival of the Messiah. Later (v. 34), he addresses Mary and the child. Unlike modern Christmas representations, both blessings look beyond the manger. The first focuses on the sacrifice of Calvary, while the second focuses on the response of those to whom that sacrifice is presented.

28-33, Simeon Praises God

28 Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God,--Imagine the scene. You enter the temple with your new baby. A total stranger walks up, reaches out for the child, and begins to pray.

and said, 29 Lord, ... servant--The Greek word δεσποτης specifically indicates the role of the master toward a servant. Simeon views himself as the Lord's bondservant (δουλος), as does Paul after him. In particular, he may see himself as a watchman that God has appointed to announce the coming of the Messiah.

now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:--"Thy word" is the promise of v. 26, that he would not die before seeing the Messiah. Now that he has seen the Messiah, he is ready to die. "Let depart" απολυω means to dismiss, but is often used (as here) to refer to dismissing from life.²

His announcement is the last of five songs of praise in the opening chapters of Luke. The others are Elizabeth's greeting to Mary (1:42-45), Mary's magnificat (1:46-55), Zechariah's prophecy on the birth of John (1:68-79), and the angels' announcement of the birth (2:14). Like the others, it draws heavily on the OT scriptures.

30 For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, 31 Which thou hast prepared—"Thy salvation" expression is usually understood simply as a title for the Messiah as the one who brings salvation. He is indeed God's salvation, but the title carries overtones that are commonly overlooked.

² It is the term that our Lord uses to describe how a marriage can be ended in case of fornication, per Deut 22.

“Salvation” σωτηριον is not the usual noun σωτηρια. It does mean “salvation,” and like σωτηρια is often used to translate ישׁוּ and derivatives. But its most common use in the LXX, and one that σωτηρια never shares, is as the translation for שְׁלֵמָה “peace offering.”³ In addition, the verb “prepare” is used to describe arrangements for a sacrifice.

1Es 1:6 Offer the passover in order, and **make ready the sacrifices** for your brethren, and keep the passover according to the commandment of the Lord, which was given unto Moses.

It is the verb used in the synoptics to describe the preparation for the passover, e.g.,

Luk 22:8 And he sent Peter and John, saying, Go and **prepare us the passover**, that we may eat.

Consider the setting of the scene: Mary and Joseph have prepared their sacrifices, as required by the law, a burnt offering (indicating worship) and a sin offering (for purification) (Lev 12:8). Simeon meets them, and taking up the infant Jesus, acknowledges to God that this is the real sacrifice, the one that God has prepared to be a peace offering, bringing man and God into harmony.

This understanding is even more striking when we compare Zep 1:7, the only other passage where God is said to prepare a sacrifice.

Zep 1:7 Hold thy peace at the presence of the Lord GOD: for the day of the LORD *is* at hand: for the LORD hath **prepared a sacrifice**, he hath bid his guests.

There, the image is of a great slaughter, as fulfilled in Rev 19:17-18,

Rev 19:17-18 And I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the fowls that fly in the midst of heaven, Come and gather yourselves together unto the supper of the great God; 18 That ye may eat the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men, and the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them, and the flesh of all *men, both* free and bond, both small and great.

Twice in the history of the world, God prepares a sacrifice. We can be guests at the peace-offering that he prepared at Calvary, or we can be the main course at the Lord’s second coming. That day of divine wrath will come. But first, Simeon joins the angels (Luke 2:14) in declaring God’s good will toward men.

before the face of all peoples;--The heart of the peace offering is a fellowship meal between the worshiper and God. Participation in this meal was rigidly restricted to those who met ritual qualifications:

Lev 7:20-21 But the soul that eateth *of* the flesh of the sacrifice of peace offerings, that *pertain* unto the LORD, having his uncleanness upon him, even that soul shall be cut off from his people. 21 Moreover the soul that shall touch any unclean *thing, as* the uncleanness of man, or *any* unclean beast, or any abominable unclean *thing*, and eat of the flesh of the sacrifice of peace offerings, which *pertain* unto the LORD, even that soul shall be cut off from his people.

The passover, the greatest of all the peace offerings, was restricted to those who had joined the covenant community:

³ See notes for comparison of LXX usage of σωτηριον and σωτηρια.

Exo 12:48 And when a stranger shall sojourn with thee, and will keep the passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as one that is born in the land: for no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof.

But God now prepares his peace offering before the face of all peoples (plural), opening the door to those who were excluded from Israel's peace offerings. And the sacrifice is no mere passover lamb, but this baby, the Servant of the Lord.

32 A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.--In our studies in Isaiah, we suggested that this is a reference to 42:6,

Isa 42:6 I the LORD have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a **covenant of the people** [singular, Israel], for a **light of the Gentiles**;

He may also have in mind 49:5, 6 (notice the reference to the womb, suggesting an infant, and to God's universal salvation, though with σωτηρια instead of σωτηριον):

Isa 49:5-6 And now, saith the LORD that formed me **from the womb to be** his servant, to bring Jacob again to him, Though Israel be not gathered, yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the LORD, and my God shall be my strength. 6 And he said, It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to **restore the preserved of Israel**: I will also give thee for a **light to the Gentiles**, that thou mayest be my **salvation** unto the end of the earth.

It is amazing enough that Simeon should see Israel's promised Messiah. It is even more amazing that he recognizes the broader blessing that will flow to the Gentiles through him.

33 And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him.--This insight goes far beyond what Joseph and Mary anticipated.

34, Simeon Blesses the Family

34 And Simeon blessed them,--The pronoun must refer to Mary and the baby, for they, not Joseph, are the only ones he mentions. This usage would be compatible with our explanation of the plural pronoun in v. 22, "their purification.

and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set--He now describes the purpose for which the child has been sent. It is twofold:

for the fall and rising again of many in Israel;--Simeon does not speak of "the fall or rising," as though some fall and others rise, but "the fall **and** rising again," suggesting that those who fall are also those who rise. This usage is in keeping with other instances throughout scripture that mention "fall and rising" together⁴: except in one case where the subjects are clearly different, they refer to the same subject. Simeon is describing the process of repentance and faith.⁵ The first purpose for which this Child is sent is to call Israel to acknowledge their sinful condition ("the fall"), and then to find new life through God's peace offering ("the ... rising again"). Thus Simeon prophetically anticipates what the risen Lord commands his disciples at the end of the gospel,

4 See the notes.

5 Thus Alford.

Luk 24:47 that repentance [“the fall”] and remission of sins [“and rising again”] should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

and for a sign which shall be spoken against;--Not all will “fall and rise again.” Not all will respond with repentance and faith. Their unbelief does not mean that the Child has failed, for he has a second mission, to leave those without excuse who reject him. As he himself said to his audiences,

Luk 11:29-30 This is an evil generation: they seek a sign; and there shall no sign be given it, but the sign of Jonas the prophet. 30 For as Jonas was a sign unto the Ninevites, so shall also the Son of man be to this generation.

In spite of the evidence he provides, culminating in his resurrection, they will still oppose him.

35 (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,)--It is customary to interpret this of the pain that Mary feels seeing the rejection of her son. But Luke uses very similar language in Acts to describe the repentance that leads to life:

Act 2:37 Now when they heard *this*, they were pricked⁶ in their heart.

She too must experience the repentance that leads to faith.

that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.--In leading on the one hand to repentance and faith, and on the other to rejection, this Child performs the function of the Word of God, as described by the writer to the Hebrews:

Heb 4:12 For the word of God *is* quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and *is* a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

On the one hand, he is God’s peace offering, inviting all men to fellowship with their creator. On the other hand, he forces people to reveal their sin, either by repentance and faith, or by persistent rebellion.

Conclusion

The modern focus on Christmas, if it includes the Lord Jesus at all, limits him to the place of a baby. Simeon shows us the true significance of this birth, which reaches far beyond the manger. First, it extends to Calvary, where the Lord is offered as the peace offering that God has prepared to reconcile sinful people to himself. Second, it extends to the modern preaching of the gospel, which reveals the hearts of the hearers as they either fall in repentance and rise in saving faith, or as they reject the good news to their own condemnation.

⁶ The compound *κατανύσσομαι* always has a figurative sense, but the root verb *νύσσω* means to stab with a sharp implement, as was done to the Lord on the cross (John 19:34).

Notes

Falling and rising

Review the cooccurrence of *πιπτω* and *ανιστημι* throughout the Greek Bible. Only once does it refer to two different groups. It usually describes the same subject, who either does or does not succeed in rising after first falling.

Two different groups?

Psa 20:7-8 Some *trust* in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the LORD our God. 8 They are brought down and **fallen**: but we are **risen**, and stand upright.

Same group?

Falls and then rises

Pro 24:16 For a just *man* **falleth** seven times, and **riseth** up again: but the wicked shall fall into mischief.

Mic 7:8 Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy: when I **fall**, I shall **arise**; when I sit in darkness, the LORD *shall be* a light unto me.

Jer 8:4 Moreover thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the LORD; Shall they **fall**, and not **arise**? shall he turn away, and not return?

Jer 46:16 He made many to fall, yea, one **fell** upon another: and they said, **Arise**, and let us go again to our own people, and to the land of our nativity, from the oppressing sword.

Falls but Cannot Rise

Pss 3:10 He adds sin upon sin in his life; and, because his **fall** is serious, he will not **get up**.

Amo 5:2 The virgin of Israel is **fallen**; she shall no more **rise**: she is forsaken upon her land; *there is* none to raise her up.

Amo 8:14 They that swear by the sin of Samaria, and say, Thy god, O Dan, liveth; and, The manner of Beersheba liveth; even they shall **fall**, and never **rise** up again.

Isa 24:20 The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard, and shall be removed like a cottage; and the transgression thereof shall be heavy upon it; and it shall **fall**, and not **rise** again.

Jer 50:32 And the most proud shall stumble and **fall**, and none shall **raise** him up: and I will kindle a fire in his cities, and it shall devour all round about him.

Jer 25:27 Therefore thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Drink ye, and be drunken, and spue, and **fall**, and **rise** no more, because of the sword which I will send among you.

Epj 6:26 27 They also that serve them are ashamed: for if they [idols] **fall** to the ground at any time, they cannot **rise** up again of themselves:

σωτηρια vs. σωτηριον

| | σωτηρια | σωτηριον |
|--------------------|---------|----------|
| שלם peace offering | 0 | 70 |
| שלום | 3 | 1 |
| זבח | 0 | 1 |
| מושיע | 3 | 0 |
| ישועה | 39 | 34 |
| תשועה | 27 | 5 |
| ישע | 15 | 9 |
| תושיה | 2 | 0 |
| פליטה | 6 | 0 |

Note the use of ετοιμαζω for sacrifices:

1Es 1:6 Offer the passover in order, and **make ready the sacrifices** for your brethren, and keep the passover according to the commandment of the Lord, which was given unto Moses.

Zep 1:7 Hold thy peace at the presence of the Lord GOD: for the day of the LORD *is* at hand: for the LORD hath **prepared a sacrifice**, he hath bid his guests.

Importantly, it is the term that the Lord uses in the gospels to instruct his disciples to prepare the passover: Matt 26:17, 19; Mark 14:12, 16; Luke 22:8, 13.