

Luke 1:1-2:52

1. Read 1:11-22, 59-66. Zechariah, like Abram, asks for confirmation of a promise from God (cf. Gen 15:8). What exactly does Zechariah do wrong which Abram (or Gideon) didn't? Was Zechariah only dumb or both deaf and dumb (1:62)? How does Zechariah's response differ from Mary's? Is Zechariah given a sign?
2. How is the honor of Elizabeth affected by the events of chapters 1 and 2? How about Mary's honor?
3. Whereas Jesus has little footprint in the extra-biblical literature (only one reference, and that one negative), Josephus says this about John the Baptist:

Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and was a very just punishment for what he did against John called the baptist [the dipper]. For Herod had him killed, although he was a good man and had urged the Jews to exert themselves to virtue, both as to justice toward one another and reverence towards God, and having done so join together in washing... And when others massed about him, for they were very greatly moved by his words, Herod, who feared that such strong influence over the people might carry to a revolt – for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise – believed it much better to move now than later have it raise a rebellion and engage him in actions he would regret. (Antiquities 18.5.2 116-119)

Luke highlights various parallels between the births of John and Jesus:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• For both sets of parents the birth was unexpected: Elizabeth was old and barren (1:7), and Mary was unmarried (1:26-27)• The angel Gabriel appears to one parent of each child (1:11-19; 1:26-38)• Both future parents are “troubled” (1:12; 1:29)• Both are told not to fear (1:13; 1:30)• Both are promised a son (1:13; 1:31)• Both are given names for their unborn sons (1:13; 1:31)• Both sons will be “great” (1:15; 1:32) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Both parents ask, “How?” (1:18; 1:34)• Both are given signs (1:20; 1:36)• There is joy over the birth of each son (1:58; 2:15-18)• Following John's circumcision, neighbors react in fear (1:59-66); following Jesus' circumcision, Simeon and Anna recognize God at work (2:21-38)• On both occasions canticles are sung (the Benedictus, 1:68-79; the Nunc Dimittis, 2:29-32)• Luke tells us of both sons, “The child grew and became strong...” (1:80; 2:40) |
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Why is Luke so careful to highlight these parallels? What does this structure communicate about both John and Jesus?

4. The emotion of fear makes various appearances in chapters 1 and 2: Zechariah is terrified and overwhelmed with fear (1:12); his neighbors are afraid (1:65); the shepherds are afraid (2:10); Mary is afraid (1:30) (not to mention those who fear the Lord, 1:50, and the promise of and end to fear for those who serve God, 1:74). What is each of these afraid of? Is any of this fear constructive or appropriate? Does fear of this sort have any role in the life of the New Covenant church? Could or should fear be a healthy or constructive part of your spiritual life?
5. There are many similarities between Matthew's and Luke's infancy stories:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus is born in Bethlehem during the days of Herod but spends his youth in Nazareth. (Mt 2:1, 5–6, 23; Lk 2:4–6, 11, 15, 39) • Jesus belongs to the family of David. (Mt 1:1, 6 ; Lk 2:4; 3:31) • Mary is the mother of Jesus, and Joseph is his legal father. (Mt 1:16–21, 25; Lk 1:35; 2:16, 41, 48) • Jesus is born from a miraculous virginal conception announced in advance by an angel. (Mt 1:18–25; Lk 1:26–38) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The name “Jesus” is chosen by God. (Mt 1:21; Lk 1:31) • The family of Jesus must undertake difficult travel due to oppressive political rule. (Mt 2:7–8, 12–18; Lk 2:1–7) • Jesus’ birth is presented as the fulfillment of scriptural promises to Israel. Even at birth, Jesus is rejected by some and inspires worship in others. (Mt 1:22–23; 2:5–6; Lk 1:54–55) • Even at birth, Jesus is rejected by some and inspires worship. (Mt 2:10, 16–18; Lk 2:7, 20)
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At least as interesting are the differences:

- In Matthew the family moves from Bethlehem to Nazareth (Mt 2:13, 19–23), not the other way (Lk 2:2–5)
- In Matthew, the genealogy of Jesus runs from Abraham to Jesus (Mt 1:1–16), not Jesus to Adam (Lk 3:23–38)
- In Matthew, Joseph is the central character of the story (Matt. 1:18–25), not Mary (Luke 1:26–56)
- In Matthew, the angel comes to Joseph (Matt. 1:20–21), in Luke Mary (Luke 1:26–38)
- In Matthew, Jesus is given the additional name “Immanuel” (Matt. 1:23); in Luke, he's given the additional title “Son of the Most High God.” (Luke 1:32)
- In Matthew, the family of Jesus must flee the wrath of King Herod (Mt 2:13–22), while in Luke, Caesar Augustus is responsible for the family’s burdensome travel. (Luke 2:1–5)
- Matthew directly cites fulfilled OT prophecies (Mt 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23); in Luke the OT scriptures provide the background for the canticles (Lk 1:46–55, 68–79; 2:14, 29–32)
- In Matthew, the birth of Jesus is noticed by the powerful and the wealthy who respond with either worship or fear. (Matt. 2:1–12); in Luke it's the peasants who respond this way (Lk 2:8–20)

From these differences and similarities, Is there anything you can infer about the communities they were written to?

6. Luke explicitly names Caesar Augustus (2:1), which refers to Octavian, “recognized in antiquity as ‘the divine savior who has brought peace to the world.’”¹ Jesus, in the same context, is presented as savior, Lord, and the one who will bring peace to the world (2:11, 14).

In addition, the angel who visits Zechariah and Mary is Gabriel, whose name means “divine warrior,” and who was known in the Jewish literature as one who destroys the wicked (1 Enoch 9:9-10; 54:6; 1QM 9:14-16; 15:14). “The appearance of Gabriel indicates already the eschatologically charged ethos in which the birth narrative is set for he is known in part to us as an interpreter of end-time visions (Dan 8:16-26; 9:21-27).”

Add to this the association of John with Elijah and the role of the Holy Spirit, and you have several indicators of end-times change and reversal. Name at least one other indicator of change in these chapters, and the time frame of that change.

7. Luke's first two chapters are distinctive because the characters keep breaking out into lyrical prayer. It's also true that Luke most important themes are introduced in these song-prayers. As Mark Allan Powell puts it, “...the analogy of an overture is appropriate: the reader hears snippets of everything that is to come, presented in an especially engaging and artistic fashion; then, as the story unfolds, these themes are reintroduced and developed more fully.”²

For instance, in the Magnificat—Mary's prayer—the theme of reversal is presented: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (1:52-53). Joanna Adams observed about Mary's prayer,

I admit that I am having trouble with my verb tenses here. “The Mighty One has done great things for me,” Mary sings, but her baby hasn't even been born yet. God has filled the hungry already, she implies, but millions of stomachs are still empty. Either she has lost her mind, or she has been blessed with double vision. She believes that heaven and earth are on an unavoidable convergence course. With eyes of faith and a hopeful ear, she is able to discern that the future God has planned is bleeding back into the here and now.³

Adams concludes, “We will be blessed if we can see, as Mary saw, the possibility of transformation for our often unjust and loveless world.” One might put this more concretely: Mary had the gift of seeing where and how God was at work. Her immediate response was to burst forth in praise. Just as important, in the years to come, it made her an ideal parent to raise the Lord, who would one day announce, “Blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry, blessed are the meek,” and create the church to do just this.

- a) Where do you see God at work in our church and our country, to accomplish the amazing things foreseen by Mary and Simeon and Zechariah? (Be as specific as you can.) What are the telltale

1 Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 58-61.

2 His NT survey text, p. 156-7.

3 *Christian Century*, 12/12/2006, p. 19. Regarding Mary teaching Jesus, see CC 12/15/2009, p. 20.

signs of God's hand?

- b) *How do or can you share this second sight with your children, so they too can both see what God is doing and participate in his plan? Did your parents help you in this way?*
8. After leaving Jerusalem and noticing Jesus was missing, his parents spent three days searching for him in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41-52). On this passage, N. T. Wright writes,

One of the best loved moments in [Luke] is the story of the road to Emmaus, in which two disciples are sharing their anguish over the three days that have elapsed since Jesus' death. Jesus meets them, and explains how 'it was necessary that these things had to happen.' Here is another couple, coming back to Jerusalem, finding after three days the Jesus they thought they had lost, and having him explain that 'it was necessary' (the word is the same in the Greek) 'that I had to be busy at my father's work.' You might call the pair of stories something like, 'On Find the Jesus You Thought You'd Lost.' And if that is the message of these two passages, maybe Luke is wanting to tell us something about his gospel as a whole: maybe he is writing, at one level at least, for people who may have some idea of Jesus but find he is more elusive than they had imagined...

We may want to reflect on whether we have taken Jesus himself for granted; if Mary and Joseph could do it, there is every reason to suppose that we can too. We mustn't assume he is accompanying us as we go off on our own business. But if and when we sense the lack of his presence, we must be prepared to hunt for him, to search for him in prayer, in the scriptures, in the sacraments, and not to give up until we find him again. We must expect, too, that when we do meet him again he will not say or do what we expect. He must be busy with his father's work. So must we.⁴

When you have lost Jesus in the past, where (how) did you find him?

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Fun Fact: Dante described Luke as “the scribe of the gentleness of Christ.”

Fun Fact #2: In the 1980s the government of Guatemala banned Mary's prayer, the Magnificat, apparently considering it subversive and politically dangerous, capable of instilling unrest. (*Christian Century* 12/15/2009, p. 20)

⁴ *Luke for Everyone*, p. 29-30.