

CHRISTMAS REFLECTION: LUKE 1:26-2:20

By Jim Seghers

Introduction

Christmas is my favorite time of the year. The celebration of our Lord's birth brings many fond memories of warm gatherings with family and friends. However, amid the gift sharing and the hustle of preparation the real meaning of Christmas can easily get lost. Reflecting on Luke's "Infancy Narrative" helps keep things in perspective. The Greek is written in a markedly Semitic style, which differs from the rest of Luke's Gospel. This along with details known only by Mary suggests this part of Mark's Gospel is based on Mary's reminiscences.

The Incarnation

The mystery of the Incarnation, the Son of God assuming a human nature, staggers the intellect. The distance between God's nature and ours is so vast that the human mind can't wrap around it. Any attempts to compare this mystery with something in nature, such as a drop of water to an ocean or a human to an amoeba - breaks down by the sheer inadequacy of the analogy. The distance between the objects compared is always too small. Why would a divine Person who possesses perfect happiness and infinite power lower himself to become a man? How can we, who love so poorly, understand the God who "is love" (1 Jn 4:16)? Everything about Jesus is shocking, because he turns our distorted upside down thinking right side up. This can be very unsettling.

Then we encounter the marvel of *how* the "Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14). Adam was not conceived in his mother's womb, so it was unnecessary for the "last Adam" (1 Cor 15:45) to be conceived in Mary's womb. That God chose to do so speaks volumes about the dignity of women and motherhood as well as the importance of the human family.

The Arc of the Covenant

The Arc of the Covenant was the holiest object in ancient Israel. God was very exact in describing how it was constructed (Ex 25:17-22). Built out of acacia wood it was lined with pure gold plating both on the inside and the outside. This made it a fit receptacle for the golden vessel containing the manna (Ex 16:34), the rod of Aaron that blossomed showing that he was to be the high priest (Num 17:10), and the two stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed (Ex 25:10-16). It was housed in the holy of holies. The Arc of the Covenant is also connected with the "glory cloud," the *shekinah*, which was a visible manifestation of the presence of the divine Spirit. Jeremiah hid the arc on Mount Nebo before the Babylonians destroyed the Temple "until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy" (2 Macc 2:7).

The New Testament reveals that the Arc of the Covenant was a type or foreshadowing that looked to a fulfillment in Mary and her conception of the Messiah. Her womb contained the eternal high priest (Heb 4:14), the giver of the new law (Jn 13:34-35), and the "bread of life" (Jn 6:35). Both Mark and John show that Jeremiah's prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus through Mary.

John sees a vision of the Arc of the Covenant in Revelation 11:19, the first time it is mentioned in the Bible since Solomon’s Temple was destroyed in 586 B.C. He gives its description as “a *women* clothed with the sun” (Rev 12:1f), and describes her *son* as “one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron” (Rev 12:5). The use of the word “woman” connects this passage with the prophecy of Genesis 3:13: “I will put enmity between you [the serpent] and the *woman*, and between our seed [offspring of the devil] and her seed [Jesus, the seed of the woman]; he [Jesus] shall bruise [or crush] your [the serpent’s] head, and you [the serpent] shall bruise his [Christ’s] heel.” The only other sentence in the Bible that contains the dragon, the woman, and the male child of Genesis 3:15 is Revelation 12:13.

Luke begins his identification of Mary with the Arc of the Covenant in the Angel Gabriel’s unusual greeting, “Hail, full of grace” (Lk 1:28). The Greek word used (*kecharitomene*) is the past perfect participle of the Greek verb *charitoo* (“graced” from *chairs*). Verbs in “oo” are causative, that is, they indicate an action which *effects* something in the object. As a past perfect participle, it means that God prepared Mary, the real Arc of the Covenant, by perfecting her in grace as a fitting tabernacle for his Son.

Subsequently, Gabriel informs Mary: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will *overshadow* you” (Lk 1:35). The Greek word translated as “overshadowed” (*episkiazo*) the same Greek word used to describe God’s Spirit, the *shekinah*, coming on the Arc of the Covenant in the Temple.

Later when Luke describes Mary’s visit to Elizabeth he purposely draws a comparison with the Arc of the Covenant coming into Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 6.

2 Samuel 6:9-16	Luke 1:39-56
Arc goes to Jerusalem, which built on 7 hills (2 Sam 6:12, 15-16)	Mary goes “into the hill country, to a city of Judah (Lk 1:39)
Arc goes to the house of Obededom (2 Sam 6:10)	Mary goes to the “house of Zechariah” Lk 1:40
“David danced before the Lord” (2 Sam 6:14)	John leapt in his mother’s womb (Lk 1:44)
David said: “How can the ark of the Lord come to me” (2 Sam 6:9)	Elizabeth said: “And why is it granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me” (Lk 1:43)?
David and the people rejoiced (2 Sam 6:14)	Mary rejoices (Lk 1:47)
David and the people greet the arc with shouting (2 Sam 6:15)	Elizabeth “exclaimed with a loud cry” (Lk 1:42)
The arc remained in the house of Obededom for three months (2 Sam 6:11)	Mary remains in the house of Zechariah for three months (Lk 1:56)

Furthermore, David was informed: “The Lord has blessed the household of Obededom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God” (2 Sam 6:12). The angel informed

Zechariah that his son “will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb” (Lk 1:15). When Jesus came into John’s presence it is likely that this was the moment John was filled with the Holy Spirit and why he leaped in his mother’s womb.

Mary’s Response

Gabriel addresses Mary as “full of grace,” but Mary identifies herself as the “hand- maid” or slave girl of the Lord. She directs everything to God. In her Magnificat Mary recognized God as her “Savior,” because she is “full of grace” only because of the saving merits of her Son. She recognized her “low estate” not only in the eyes of the world, but especially in relationship to God. Yes, Mary will be called “blessed,” but only because “he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” Mary recognizes her nothingness before God and is totally submissive to his will: “Let it be done to me according to your word.”

Mary is the perfect model of how a Christian should relate to God – in humility and surrender. She is also a perfect model of how we should relate to others. It is amazing that her thoughts are immediately directed to serving an older women. Luke tells us that she went to Elizabeth “with haste” (Lk 1:39). There is absolutely no sense of “Look at me, I am the mother of God.”

The Birth of Jesus

I can identify with the humility and submission of Mary, even when my behavior falls far below that mark. However, the humility and submission of the Son of God is beyond my grasp. I can only gape in awe! Luke simply tells us Mary laid Jesus “in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” The creator of the universe, the king of heaven and earth, was laid in a feeding trough for animals! It takes my breath away!

Do you think there would have been a place for Jesus in the inn if Joseph and Mary were rich? I suspect the answer would be, “Yes.” Our society considers wealth as a great blessing, but the Son of God and his earthly parents were so poor the baby Jesus had a manger for his bed. Maybe we should rethink our values.

The words “there was no place for them in the inn,” begins a rejection of Jesus that climaxes on Calvary and continues today. Even at the joyous event of Jesus’ birth, the Cross looms in the background. John simply leaves us this sad note: “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not” (Jn 1:11).

Conclusion

Through the centuries men have responded to Christ with the open trust of the shepherds (Lk 2:8-20), and the assiduous searching of the Magi (Mt 2:1-2). Others have reacted with the indifference of the chief priests and scribes (Mt 2:3-6), or with the hatred of Herod who attempted to kill Jesus (Mt 2:16-18). A careful examination may discover that we have responded in all four ways at various stages of our life: with the innocent trust of the shepherds, with the difficult searching of the Magi, and with the indifference of the chief priests and the scribes. Yes, we may have also responded with the hatred of Herod if we have succumbed to mortal sin (1 Jn 5:16-17), which killed the life of Jesus in our souls!

But Christmas is not a time of self-recrimination. Regardless of our past, the birth of Jesus recalls the “great joy” that the “Savior” is born. Like Mary we should rejoice in God *our* Savior. She reminds us: “his mercy is on those who fear him . . . and [he has] exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things.” Like the shepherds let us return to our routine “glorifying and praising God “ for all we have heard and seen through the gift of faith.