

THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST AND THE GOSPEL TO THE GENTILES

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It is commonly accepted that the birth narratives in Luke supply an "Old Testament" prologue to the life and sayings of Jesus.¹ Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, and Anna act as prophets of the coming Messiah and of the transformations he would make in salvation history. John appears in the role of a priest who would anoint the new Messiah and king.²

Although the narrative of John's miraculous birth has been recognized as a forerunner of the miracle story of Jesus' birth,³ another function of the story bears investigation. John's birth narrative sets the stage for Luke's larger narrative goal, realized in Acts: the emergence of the gospel from the Jewish community to the Gentile world. In Luke's narrative, baptism becomes the new sign of the Christian church once the Jewish hegemony of blood lines is broken. The contribution of the story of John's birth to this larger narrative is the subject of this note.

In Acts 10 and 11 the issue is whether the uncircumcised may receive baptism and become part of the Christian community without first becoming proper Jews. The answer is presented in 10:45-48 by a heavenly sign; the uncircumcised may indeed be baptized and received into the community. The decision is confirmed by the church authorities in Jerusalem in 11:17-18. Key terms in these chapters are the words Gentiles, circumcision and

¹Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 242-243. It should be noted that some NT scholars consider the birth narratives in Luke to have been written by Luke, but not to have been included in the original Gospel. See Brown, 241; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, vol. 1, AB 28 (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1981), 310-311.

²See Brown, 267.

³Fitzmyer, 313-315.

uncircumcision, baptism, and the Holy Spirit. Whereas baptism had been the only dividing element between the early church and the circumcised outside the church, it now became the only dividing line between the church and uncircumcised Gentiles outside the church and Judaism. Baptism was the only rite of passage into the church for Gentiles as well as Jews.

The entrance of Gentiles into the church without passing through Judaism is hinted throughout Luke's Gospel. For example, Luke 8:19-21 disparages reliance on genetic ties, placing true family connections within the sphere of discipleship. In his sermon at Nazareth, Jesus raises the ire of his listeners by suggesting salvation for the Gentiles, even in preference to the Jews (4:25-30).⁴

The first of these statements that prepare the way for the Gentile mission in Acts is made by John, who affirms that descent from Abraham is of itself worthless (3:8). Descendants might even come from stones, meaning that God might produce children of Abraham who were not his biological descendants.⁵ Thus, it is no accident that Peter invokes the baptism of John as the beginning of the gospel's spread to the Gentiles (Acts 10:37). This theme is rooted in Luke's narration of the birth of John.

Luke's narrative of the birth of John borrows heavily from the Old Testament. The first and most important parallel is between John's parents and Abraham and Sarah.⁶ Like Abraham, Elizabeth and Zechariah are righteous (Luke 1:6). They are also old and childless, with no hope of descendants. Both Sarah and Elizabeth are introduced as barren (Gen 11:29-30; Luke 1:5-7). Abraham, however, receives repeated promises of numerous descendants (Gen 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 17:15-17). This promise of many descendants is suggested likewise for Zechariah and Elizabeth by the parallel Lucan narrative.

Elizabeth and Zechariah were both of priestly family (Luke 1:5). They belonged to an exclusive lineage which no one could join. Elizabeth carried the double shame of not producing descendants for Israel or for the priestly line. Her double load of shame is removed when she conceives (1:24-25, 57-58; cf. Gen 21:1-7). In their old age, Elizabeth and Zechariah have a son who will now

⁴See Jeffrey S. Siker, "First to the Gentiles": A Literary Analysis of Luke 4:16-30," *JBL* 111 (1992): 73-90.

⁵Fitzmyer, 468; François Bovon, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas*, vol. 1, *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (Zurich: Berzinger, 1989), 172.

⁶Brown, 269.

carry on their line. They will not die childless, but, like Abraham and Sarah, can expect that God will raise up a multitude of descendants through the son of their old age.

John, however, has no children. In fact, he appears to have never married. Within one generation the hopes of the aged priestly couple are withered. They might as well have died childless, since their son has no heirs; the end of the line was merely delayed by one generation. Here the parallel with the Abraham and Sarah story seems frustrated if not ignored in the Lucan narrative. Yet the break in the family chain is foreshadowed in the naming of John. The neighbors and kin wish to name the child after his forefathers; Elizabeth and Zechariah insist on giving him a name with no family connections (Luke 1:59-63).⁷

In Luke, John the Baptist fulfills two roles: he is the forerunner of the Messiah and the first to proclaim the baptism of repentance (3:3). This is the same baptism that will become the sole rite of passage into the church for Jew and Gentile alike. At the core of his message is the point that God is not held to blood lines. Not only can God reject genetic descendants of Abraham; he can also raise up descendants out of stones (3:8). Repentance and baptism are necessary for salvation. Descent is not sufficient, and indeed, not strictly necessary.

Isaac and John were both sons of promise. Both were to carry on the family line. Isaac did so literally. John did so spiritually, through his proclamation of repentance and baptism as the new way to produce true offspring for Abraham. The promise of numberless descendants was fulfilled literally to Abraham and Sarah. For Elizabeth and Zechariah the promise of descendants, implied in the birth of John in their old age, was also fulfilled, although not biologically.

John was not only the forerunner of Jesus, he was also the harbinger of the church, both Jewish and Gentile. His birth was bound up in Luke's narrative with the baptism he preached, which later undergirded the theological reflections of Acts 10-11. John was the miracle child through whom Abraham's seed was carried on spiritually. His birth prefigured the entry of the Gentiles into the Christian church.

⁷Bovon, 102-103.