



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

SERIES I

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE AND ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Lesson 3 Commentary Luke 1

Lesson 4 Questions Luke 2:1 –21

THE ANNUNCIATION STORIES OF LUKE Luke 1

I. LUKE AS A WRITER

A. The Sources. Luke says he tracked down previous written sources, official traditions, or oral traditions. We can trace where he found some of these. At Antioch, where he became a Christian, he probably met Manahan, boyhood friend of Herod Antipas, and Joanna, wife of Herod's steward, Chuza. These also became Christians. This could be his source for the Herod stories.

At Ephesus, the disciples of John the Apostle were a source, possibly even Mary herself. However, it is more likely that he received much of the story from the Jerusalem community, for John, who took care of Mary, remained in Jerusalem with the other Apostles for at least fifteen years after Jesus. Paul, another strong source for Luke, was in Jerusalem about four times after Jesus' death. Once he was taken there after his conversion in Damascus to escape the Jews' fury. The second time coming later for two weeks to meet the Apostles, the third time when he took a collection to Jerusalem during the

famine in 46 A.D., and finally at the Council of 49 A.D., with the Apostles.

Luke spent two years in Caesarea, where he had time to question the deacon Philip, while Paul was imprisoned there. He was close enough to Jerusalem and Judea to visit the countryside around Bethlehem, around Elizabeth and Zechariah's area, where "all who heard their story were amazed." He could have visited Jerusalem, even John's old disciples and his Jordan baptizing area. Paul, himself, could have done this and passed it on to Luke.

Since 60% of Mark's 661 verses occur almost word-for-word in Luke, and also in Matthew, many think that they had Mark as a source, or even that all three had another document, earlier than theirs as a source, which was later lost.

It is clear, however, that the ultimate source of much of chapter one and two of Luke had to be Mary. The intimate details and description of her reactions could have come only from her.

Scholars have noted the strong similarity between the Infancy narrative and the Pentecost story, both written by Luke, and both describing the birth of Christ, and the birth of His Church. In both, Mary is named and the Holy Spirit came powerfully to bring into being the Messianic age. From this parallel (a favorite device of Hebrew writers) comes the view of Mary as mother of the Church, as well as of Jesus, its founder. She is also seen from these stories as the first believer, the first Christian.

It has also long been thought that the source of these stories was the Jerusalem post-Pentecostal community in which Mary had lived, and that she was so understanding of the Christians' desire to know Jesus that she shared with them her special knowledge of His infancy and upbringing.

Some scholars believe that Luke wrote his Gospel around 62 A.D. when Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea, north of Galilee; others during Paul's Roman captivity, which would make it later.

B. The Structure. The Infancy section is like a diptych with seven episodes, presented in two phases set up in this scheme:

1. Before the births, three episodes: Announcement of John's Birth, Announcement of Jesus' Birth, and a complementary episode, the Visitation.

2. Births, four episodes: Birth of John, of Jesus, Circumcision, Finding in the Temple.

C. The Style. Luke's style is hymnal, doctrinal, and meditative. His Gospel has an atmosphere of peace, joy, prayer, and union with God. In the Infancy narrative, it is that of a private tradition, or a popular tradition, and has the earmarks of a miniature Gospel. There is definitely a Jewish background with an emphasis on redemption, long expected by the Jews. The parallelism is a Jewish literary habit. Some

conclude that this originated as a written document which Luke studied and from which he absorbed its Semitic (Hebrew) style, such as the assonance of Messiah and Savior in the original Hebrew.

There is theology in the Infancy narrative based on episodes—fact, for Luke claims his account is history. But these facts he associates and interprets in the light of Old Testament texts that either he, a Greek, found in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), or which Paul had found and Luke incorporates. We will see some of these when we discuss the Infancy narratives.

It is also clear that Luke is writing for non-Jews, as He explains Jewish terms which Jews would know; he omits what would offend Gentile readers, and some violent scenes, for instance, the murder of John the Baptist.

The Infancy narratives, though some scholars have thought so, are not midrash (a scripture text followed by interpretative application by Jewish rabbis), nor haggadah (fictional stories explaining the law of Jewish faith or morals). They are, says Luke, "events which have been fulfilled in our midst" which he claims for his Gospel in the introduction. Though the angel, for instance, could be a genuine spiritual experience presented by Luke in a traditional and consecrated style, some scholars note that the angel is named as he is in Daniel 10. This seems more supportive of a being who is real, in a real episode.

The Canticles in the Infancy narratives are found in several Old Testament texts leading scholars to think that they were meant to bring out the spiritual significance of the episode he has just told. It is unlikely that word-for-word they were remembered by someone who said or heard them, but they do express Zechariah's remembered reactions and Mary's feelings and her very real knowledge of Jewish scripture and faith; and of course, they are inspired by God who spoke

through Zechariah, Mary, and Luke. The first lines of Mary's Canticle regarding herself, and the last ones of Zechariah regarding his child, are very likely the base and the authentic words of the account Luke received.

II. ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE BIRTH OF JOHN

A. A Childless Couple (Luke 1:5-7).

Luke alone gives this infancy story of John. He situates it in history and in a genealogy. The priest Zechariah was one of the Abijah class, that is, a descendant of the 24 grandsons of Aaron, as was Elizabeth, his wife. They were holy Israelites "blamelessly following all the commandments of the Lord." Like Abraham and Sarah, they were advanced in years, and Elizabeth had had no children. This was called "sterile" in relation to the woman; today, of course, we know that either of the couple could be sterile to cause no birth to them. All Jewish women considered it a disgrace not to bear a child to further the family line and the People of God.

Elizabeth is thus like the other God-fearing women in the Scriptures, and as the story advances, she is also like them in God's intervention. Sarah, Abraham's wife (Genesis 17:15-19), Samson's mother (Judges 13:2-25), Samuel's mother (1 Samuel 1:1-27), were all praying for a child, and received a son who was special to Israel, as did Elizabeth.

Luke begins the Infancy narrative with Zechariah's turn of a week's service as a priest in the Temple. Thus the infancy narrative begins and ends in the Temple, as we shall see. We can imagine the holy old man feeling awed and proud as he alone steps into the Holy Place and offers incense, while the "full assembly of people" stood outside. Zechariah was "deeply disturbed at the sight" of the angel and, as is usual with humans in contact with heavenly beings or God, was "overcome by fear." There are reminders of Daniel here (Daniel 10:8-12) when the prophet

Daniel saw the same angel, who names himself then as he did to Zechariah, and revealed the time to expect the coming Messiah, so both refer to the opening of the Messianic age.

B. Zechariah and the Angel Gabriel (Luke 1:8-25). The angel Gabriel, however, speaks plainly to Zechariah, "Your wife will bear a son whom you shall name John (Yahweh has shown favor). The prophetic news of the greatness of John comes to Zechariah in the words, "Many will rejoice at his birth."

Then Gabriel tells words about John similar to Samson's characteristics: "a Nazarite who will not drink strong drink, but instead will be filled with the Holy Spirit." The last phrase is a Biblical way of identifying a prophet or prophecy. John will be that "from his mother's womb" which the visitation of Jesus in Mary will bring about.

His role is then described further by the angel, as similar to that of the great prophet Elijah whom the Jews always expected to return. Jesus later remarked that John was greater than Elijah, and that no man born to woman was greater! Clearly, He was leaving Himself out as a man, and more than a man.

Now Zechariah begins to question, and not wisely, for he seems to doubt the prophecy, and is gently but firmly told that he will not speak further until the prophecy is fulfilled.

After he returned home, Elizabeth conceived and went into seclusion. Whether this was custom, or that she was so overwhelmed with joy and yet embarrassment at Zechariah's sudden inability to speak or hear, we do not know. What must this holy couple's home have been like, in these months of silence and retreat? We can believe that they were often in prayer there and pondering on the meaning and words of God, and growing closer to God as the child grew in the womb. It is easy to see the great contrast in this older woman, so wanting a child, and some of today's fears and

rejection of pregnancy at any time, much less in older years.

III. ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS

A. Gabriel's Greeting to Mary (Luke 1:26-33). Though Elizabeth did not know it, during this time, the same angel is sent to earth again to a Galilean insignificant village, to a maiden not yet married and living in her own home, but betrothed to a man named Joseph of the house of David (Matthew 1:5-6 and Isaiah 11:1-5). "The Virgin's name was Mary"—Miriam in Hebrew and common then. Luke has twice used the word virgin here.

Gabriel's words in saluting Mary and telling his news include the most impressive salutation in the Bible, and are echoes of many Old Testament texts which all devout Hebrews knew.

The Greek "charis" used here, "highly gifted or favored, adorned" means that Mary is "par excellence" in God's eyes. She is "most favored," the permanent object of God's predilection. So she was full of His gifts—there was no shadow of sin that could mar her in His eyes.

Twice the angel mentions that she is blessed among women, as does Elizabeth later. Such terms were never heard before in Scripture.

This beautiful and unusual greeting is the source of the insight, aided by the Holy Spirit, of the belief that Mary's soul was preserved from original sin, by reason of her Son's dignity and merits. We call this grace the Immaculate Conception. Mary, as Eve was in the beginning, was created without sin. But like Eve, she had free will. We must realize that being created without sin did not mean she could not sin. The *sensus fidei* and the Magisterium, led by the Christians of the first and second centuries, especially the doctors of the Church, who discussed and finally accepted this insight, have always believed that

Mary's perfect cooperation with God and her Son, led her to preserve sinlessness.

B. Mary and the Angel (Luke 1:34-38). Mary's beautiful and humble response to this unusual greeting arose from her profound and simple awareness of herself in comparison to the God of majesty whom she, of all humans, must have known intimately. It is said of saints that the more they understand God, the less they think of themselves; they see their nothingness and dependence and marvel at His love for them. Something of this must have arisen in Mary in the presence of the angel from God, with this praise; a presence that in itself was awe-inspiring. Yet it was more than awe and fear, for Mary was troubled at his words, puzzled at the meaning of such praise. This lack of expectation of any praise was the cause, it is thought, of God's favor, for He is attracted by humility and truth, so rare among His creatures, infected by pride.

Gently the angel calmed her fear and again, as to Elizabeth, announces the conception of a son, and His name—Jesus (the salvation of God); then he goes on to announce the Messiah, the expected Son of David, the ruler of Jacob's house forever; Jacob—Abraham's grandson and father of the patriarchs of the twelve tribes. He added that Mary's son would even be called "Son of the most High!" It is amazing that Mary was not completely overwhelmed at such Scriptural messages about her son. But she remembered that God has already asked a gift from her, and she calmly asked a question that causes many another question.

"How can this be done since I do not know man?" For an engaged girl to ask this shows that she had a concern about which she prudently needed an answer—a difficulty out of the ordinary. Her Semitic statement, "I do not know man" would be unreal otherwise. She did not expect, apparently, to be a mother. This question suggested to first and second century Christians that Mary was so aware of God, her love was so

special, that she had an exclusive love for Him. This kind of love was described in the Old Testament in such texts as Deuteronomy 6:5, Hosea 2:16-18; 21-22, and in the Psalms and Prophets. It found its culmination in Mary, the first Christian, and the first of a long line of Christians who felt called to virginity in response to such an interior grace. It has been preserved in traditional religious life, and also, in modern lay people who make privately one or other of the vows.

This early Christian belief is preserved in the Apostles Creed, (“born of the Virgin Mary”), in the Nicene Creed (Council of Nicea-Constantinople, 381 A.D.), and in the liturgy and feasts of the Church from earliest times. The Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass, quite ancient, says “We honor Mary, the ever-virgin mother of Jesus Christ our Lord and God.”

IV. WOMAN OF FAITH

A. When the angel told her of God’s spirit overshadowing her, we have another strong Old Testament image, for Luke’s word is the same as that used for the Presence of God that hovered over the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 40:34-38). And Mary was more the Ark of the Covenant than the original one! Did Mary interpret the words “Son of the Most High” and “Son of God,” both used by the angel, as we do? Did she clearly realize the little boy to come was, as we say, the second Person of God? Probably not that clearly. She was a woman of faith as we are, and as these mysteries were revealed to her, she, like the Church does, pondered them, sought to place them in the context of other revelations, and thus grew in understanding.

As a help to Mary’s faith, and to her more complete knowledge of God’s great promises unfolding rapidly around her, the angel tells her that Elizabeth, her older relative, is six months with child, for “nothing is impossible with God” (Luke 1:37).

And the words of Mary came without any further hesitation: “I am the handmaid (double—female slave, one completely at the service of a master) of the LORD!” And her next words ushered in the moment that changed the way the world counted time—New Testament history began. Mary believed the angel and said, “Let it be done to me as you say.” God waited for a free response of a girl of fourteen and created the small cell of a little being with a human nature in time, and a divine nature from eternity.

Mary’s humble obedience to a change in her plans was in total contrast to the disobedience of the mother of our race. Mary became the second Eve, as Jesus was the second Adam, both repairing what was spoiled by the first.

B. The Visitation. Mary thinks of Elizabeth and hastily goes to be of assistance. She may rightfully also have wanted someone to share with, to seek advice. She received a surprise that overjoyed her.

At Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth cried out with a loud voice and was “filled with the Holy Spirit.” This is the first time Luke uses this phrase in his writings. And Elizabeth utters the first beatitude in the Gospel: “Blessed is she who believed that the Lord’s words to her would be fulfilled.” She also uses the same greeting that the angel did: “Blessed are you among women.” In this greeting, Elizabeth also effaces herself before Mary as John her son later does before Jesus, and as David did before the Ark of the Covenant (2 Samuel 6:9). John, at the same time, already in the womb of his mother, is sanctified by Jesus and leaps with joy at the sound of Mary’s voice. Here Luke is noting that through Mary, Jesus brought joy to the world.

Elizabeth also calls Mary the mother of my Lord,” causing some question about whether Elizabeth meant mother of God? This also is where Mary’s great faith and her role as a woman of faith, is shown. The Gospel says several times that Mary “did not understand”—“pondered.”

She, too, had to question at times before the revelation was clear to her. She is our mother in the faith, too. This aspect of Mary is given much emphasis in modern times to counteract some excessive piety of the past which made Mary a frail, weak-looking, Hollywood-made-up-in-her beauty woman, who knew everything and had no reason for faith. How then, could she be mother of the believing Church?

C. The “Magnificat”—“My Soul Glorifies the Lord.” In the reply to Elizabeth, Luke begins Mary’s sublime words of praise and joy at the “greatness of the Lord” and her joy in Him who regarded her “lowliness.” We get a glimpse here of Mary’s spirituality, her soul, which Luke had learned about from her or from one of his sources. This sublime and biblical hymn of praise, full of Old Testament allusions, is almost exactly found in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, as exclaimed by Hannah, the mother of Samuel. Mary may have known it by heart practically, or Luke must have incorporated it in his canticle, a poetic song, as fitting Mary better than any other description. This song reveals “the beautiful soul of the Jewish maiden who first uttered this Gospel of salvation in the poetry of her native tongue” (Carroll Stuhlmeuller, C.P.). Latin American parishes and communities, sing Mary’s song remembering the old themes she knew from the prophets. Her song is also recited or sung in every daily Vespers in the Divine Office of the Church.

In one of Juliana of Norwich’s revelations she says, “God showed me the wisdom and truth of Mary’s soul. In this, I understood the reverent contemplation with which she beheld her God, who is her Creator, marveling with great reverence that He was willing to be born of her who was a simple creature created by Him. And this wisdom and truth, this knowledge of her Creator’s greatness and of her own created

littleness made her say very meekly to Gabriel: “Behold me here; God’s handmaiden” (JULIAN, WOMAN OF OUR DAY, p. 14, Chapter 4, p. 182).

D. Birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:57-80). Luke mentions, to close his scene, that Mary remained about three months with Elizabeth. Many believe that this includes the birth and the circumcision of John, in which Zechariah was healed of his inability to speak when he wrote the child’s name. “And throughout the hill country,” says Luke, “these happenings began to be recounted to the last detail.” And Luke must have found them out there.

At last, it was time for Zechariah to be “filled with the Holy Spirit” (of prophecy), and he too, has a very Biblically oriented song of praise. This one, like Mary’s, is said every day, and has been for centuries, by all who say the Divine Office, now called the “Hours of the Day,” every day. The Sisters gather in chapel for Vespers each day. The “Magnificat” of Mary, which is said or sung, is in its closing. Vespers belongs to the whole people of the Church and many say this daily, too.

With Mary gone home to Nazareth, Luke concludes Chapter 1 with John’s growing up and maturing in spirit, and his call to the desert where he will be preaching when we next hear of him.

* * * * *

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 4
Luke 2:1-21

Day 1 Read the Notes and the references in them to other Bible passages.

Day 2 Choose a passage from the notes and a reference in the Bible. Share with the group, and tell why it struck you especially.

Day 3 Read Luke 2:1-7.

a. What type of birth experiences or situations did God plan for Jesus, (since it was the Godhead in Jesus that planned His own birth as man)?

b. What do you learn about the situations of Joseph and Mary? Their virtues?

Day 4 Read Luke 2:8-20.

a. What striking difference is there in the events told in Luke 2:1-7 and 2:8-14?

b. What do we learn from these first events in Jesus' life for our lives; for instance in regard to poverty and affluence?

