

A Narrative Study of Luke 2:1–40

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Provide a study of *a* biblical text which gives specific attention to a particular methodology. Locate your work within your chosen hermeneutical framework.

Introduction

For this study I have chosen Luke 2:1–40. I have several reasons for choosing this passage. First, I plan to preach on this during Advent, and this is a great opportunity to study a passage in greater depth than I usually would. Second, I am currently writing a retelling of the story of the shepherds. The shepherds have always intrigued me, and a different hermeneutical approach may help me to shed some light on these mysterious figures.

My interest in the shepherds may give something of a clue as to my particular hermeneutic: I have a concern for the apparently powerless that affects my interpretation of the text. This is somewhat broader than some other hermeneutic approaches. To my mind the

passage in view asks deliberately general questions about powerless people that may be missed by more specific approaches. Feminist theologians would be interested in the situation of the childless prophet Anna, yet wouldn't be terribly concerned by the social status of the shepherds in the field. The shepherds, in turn, may be of interest to the Marxist theologian, who might have no interest in sexual politics surrounding the pregnant virgin. As my analysis will show, the difference between powerful and powerless is important to Luke,¹ but not as important as the difference between favoured by God and not favoured.

Scope

Ideally I would like to study the first two chapters of Luke. However, space doesn't permit a proper treatment of this whole section so I will limit my analysis to the first 40 verses of the second chapter. Of course, I have left many lines of investigation untouched, and I have listed some of the more interesting possibilities in an appendix beginning on page 21 at the end of this study.

This study will employ a narrative approach, and as such I will not be focusing on historical-critical methodologies. Given Luke's stated purpose of "writ[ing] an orderly account" (1:3) I expect that plot will be central to the organisation of Luke's narrative (Levett-

¹Out of deference to tradition, popular usage and brevity I will assume the author/editor of the third gospel was a man named Luke.

Olson 2006). However, Luke's manipulation of the narrator's point of view is also instructive, and I will discuss how it informs us of his theological programme.

Point of View

Before I commence the study it would be wise to unpack the concept of 'Point of View.' Point of view has to do with the location from which a listener experiences a story. This is easily demonstrated in movie making. In a movie the point of view at any one time is closely related to what the camera is doing. The director may use a variety of different camera techniques to get the story across. She can follow a character for some time, or move between various scenes in quick succession (Adele Berlin, cited in Yamasaki 2006, p. 90). The physical process of writing a story is quite different, but the author has analogous techniques to call upon when telling his story. Point of view is more than a strictly visual idea. According to Boris Uspensky there are five different dimensions or 'planes' in which point of view is located (Yamasaki 2006, pp. 91–93). The author can shape her story by moving the audience through any combination of these. Briefly described, these five planes are:

- The *temporal* plane, which is concerned with the position of the audience to the events of the story with respect to time. Written narratives normally place the audience at a point in

the future, and the story is related in the past tense. However, subtle changes in tense can dramatically alter the story.

The author can also affect the audience's temporal experience by changing the pace of the story. For example, he could gloss over hundreds of years of history and then slow the pace down to relate an action by action account of some event, and then slow it down even further by spending some time to describe a scene in detail.

- The *spatial* plane is where the audience relates to the physical space of the story. Locating the audience within this plane is very similar to how a movie director would manipulate the point of view by choosing the position of the camera in relation to the scene in question. Is the audience far away? Are they close up? Does the story jump from scene to scene in quick succession?
- The *psychological* plane refers to the space within the characters' minds. This gives the audience insight into the motivations of the characters in the story, and often presents information not available to anyone in the story but the character in question.
- The *phraseological* and *ideological* planes are a little more difficult to understand. The author affects point of view in these planes by temporarily taking on some of the attributes of a particular character, whether they be ways of speaking or naming

things, or attitudes and psychological ways of relating to the environment. I have found little evidence of Luke manipulating the point of view within either of these planes in the passage in view.

Analysis

Verses 1-7²

Up until this point in the narrative the audience has been spatially close to the action. Now the audience is moved back as Luke describes the registration — all the subjects of Rome are in view. However, he quickly ‘zooms in’ on Joseph, then to his fiancé Mary and the birth of Jesus.

Luke does a rather interesting thing in the temporal plane. Time passes very quickly in these few verses, but it is padded out somewhat by the insertion of information outside of the flow of time and apparently not relevant to the narrative. For example, verse two locates the registration during the time of Quirinius, a notice which seems a little extraneous. Joseph takes two verses to travel to Bethlehem with his pregnant fiancé, who subsequently takes another one and a half verses to give birth then clothe and house her child.

The birth of Jesus itself is almost incidental to the story. This is

²I have included the full text of Luke 2:1-40 as an appendix beginning on page 18.

strange, considering the obvious importance of the event in subsequent parts of the narrative. The broad sweep of these seven verses in time and space would imply that they serve to introduce the next few stories. The birth of Jesus has been recorded with a bare minimum of context, which is all we need to know.

The few details we have of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus are instructive. The chapter begins with a fiat from the Emperor himself, and the governor of Syria is also mentioned. The powerful are exercising their power, regardless of the imposition it puts on Joseph and his pregnant fiancé. No clue is given at what stage in the pregnancy Joseph and Mary made their journey, although the time line in Chapter One would suggest that she was in her second trimester at the earliest, and possibly much later.

Mary is left quite powerless in this affair. She has found herself pregnant, and one must wonder how convincing her story is, especially to Joseph, who presumably knows the child isn't his. But unlike Matthew Luke doesn't expedite the marriage. In fact, verse five suggests they aren't even married yet. Even if they are, it is only by the benevolence of Joseph that Mary has any social standing at all. Yet once Mary moves into the spotlight we see her only thinking of the child she has borne. The unmarried mother, at the mercy of the Emperor and living solely by the grace of her fiancé, uses what little influence she has to wrap her baby and find lodgings in the sparest accommodation a strange town can provide.

Verses 8–14

Now the focus moves out to a field ‘in that region.’ A group of shepherds are peacefully minding their own business when an angel of the Lord stands before them. The angel isn’t identified by name, which is a curious departure from Luke’s practice in the other angel stories in the first two chapters of his gospel. In 1:19 the angel appearing to Zechariah identifies himself as Gabriel, who is also sent to Mary in 1:26. In both cases Luke specifically identifies Gabriel, but generally refers to him as ‘the angel’ or ‘an angel,’ as he does with the angel in the field. Could this angel in the field also be Gabriel?

Luke gives us an insight to the psychological state of the shepherds — the angel’s appearance leaves them ‘terrified.’ The angel commands them ‘Do not be afraid’ but Luke has no more to say about their state of mind. The angel continues, and explains that he has ‘good news of great joy for all the people.’ Luke is careful to describe the news which is about to follow: the news is for all the people. This isn’t just for the powerful, and it isn’t just for the poor and powerless either. This news is for everyone.

It is somewhat strange that such important news was delivered to shepherds. As a group shepherds were not the obvious ones to take important news to if you wanted it spread ‘to all the people.’ By the nature of their occupation shepherds didn’t come across that many

people, and when they did they were doubtlessly treated with a measure of suspicion and distrust. Yet the angel sees fit to give them the news ahead of all others. Once again the socially undesirable are accorded a high honour.

The angel delivers his message: ‘to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’ The shepherds have been given slightly different information to Mary, who was told that her child would be great, be called the Son of the Most High, and that he would be given the never ending throne of David over Jacob (1:32, 33). Mary knows this child will be great, but this is the first time he has been positively identified as the Messiah.

The angel explains the sign by which the shepherds will know this message to be true. Then suddenly — Luke quickly moves the audience to the next part of the story — the angel is accompanied by a ‘multitude of the heavenly host’ praising God. This is military language: the shepherds have been visited by a battalion of God’s army. The audience becomes witness to the most powerful force in the universe delivering a message from God himself to outcasts living in the fields.

Luke’s description of the heavenly host evokes memories of the ancient history of Israel. Not only was God frequently called the ‘Lord of Hosts’ but the heavenly host was seen in the vision of Micaiah in 1 Kings 22:19 || 2 Chronicles 18:18. There are numerous references in the Old Testament to the pagan worship of the ‘host of heaven’ (e.g.

2 Kings 17:16, and others). Such references are sometimes understood to refer to the stars (for example the NIV translates the term in this verse as ‘the starry hosts’). This association is only made stronger by Luke’s note that the angels appear to the shepherds in the night, a tradition built on by generations of carol writers.

There is another tradition that adds to the intertextual play here. In 2 Kings 6:24–7:8 we find the story of how the entire Aramean army wages war against Israel. After their plans are thwarted by the prophet Elisha the Arameans decide to attack Dothan, where Elisha is known to be. Elisha’s attendant is somewhat perturbed by this, but God opens his eyes and he sees a great army waiting in the hills — an otherwise invisible army sent by God. After divine intervention the Arameans return home. Some time later they return and lay siege to Samaria, but this time God doesn’t intervene. Eventually though, he steps in, causing the Arameans to flee after they hear what they assume to be the sound of the combined Egyptian and Hittite armies. It is very easy to make a connection between the army surrounding the Arameans at Dothan and the noise they hear at Samaria. Is this invisible but noisy army, responsible for the flight of the Arameans the Host of Heaven?

Whether or not this connection is warranted, we are still left with the idea that the battalion before the shepherds are veterans of their art. Yet the host which destroys powerful armies brings news of joy to mere shepherds. Their blessing in *v.* 14 explains the difference:

peace will exist among those whom God favours. There is no mention of power, wealth or influence. God's favour rests upon those whom he favours.

Verses 15–20

Luke pauses the story while the angels speak their praises. Eventually — we have no idea how much time passes — the angels return to heaven and Luke quickly speeds the story back up. The shepherds, deciding that 'this thing that has taken place' is worthy of their attention, make haste to Bethlehem and find Jesus and his family. Finding the sign to be true the shepherds begin to spread the news. There had been no order to do this, but there is no order to keep the birth of the Messiah and the appearance of the angels a secret, either. After all, this news was for all the people! The people are amazed (one wonders what they are amazed at — the news the Messiah had been born, the story of the angels in the fields, or the apparently sober state of the shepherds) at the tale. There is no indication, however, whether or not the people believed the news. The shepherds eventually return to the fields, praising God for all they had seen and heard.

There is another slight pause in the narrative. Luke briefly moves the audience from the frenetic story telling of the shepherds to give us an insight into Mary's mind — she 'treasured these words and pondered them in her heart.' It seems odd that Luke puts this

notice here instead of a verse later, where it wouldn't interrupt the flow of the story. Doing it this way implies that Mary's musings are specifically on the message about her newborn son, not the shepherds. She — and the audience with her — must have many questions about the child in the manger and what the future holds for him.

Verses 21–35

Luke fast forwards eight days to the time of Jesus' circumcision. We can only presume the family is still in Bethlehem, as there is no mention of their return to Nazareth until *v.* 39. He is named according to the instructions of the angel in 1:31. We then jump forward to the time of purification, which involves a trip to Jerusalem. Again we don't know whether or not the family had returned to Nazareth. Given the proximity of Bethlehem to Jerusalem it would make sense to stay in Judea until all their business there was finished. Most of the information in *vv.* 21–24 is incidental to the broader narrative, setting up the events which follow; however, it serves to locate Jesus within the extant cultural milieu. It also goes some way to demonstrate that Joseph was a righteous man and that he was willing to follow the requirements of the Law. Finally, the details of the sacrifice in *v.* 24 also suggest that Joseph's family were quite poor (cf. Leviticus 12:8).

The focus now moves to a man of Jerusalem by the name of Simeon,

noted for his righteousness and devotion. We know nothing of the situation of Simeon. There is no clue as to his economic status, his position in the community or even his age, although it might be inferred from vv. 26 & 29 that he was nearing the end of his life. All we know is that he had been promised that he 'would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.' Luke records no particular reason why Simeon should have received this promise from God; the only possibility Luke affords is his righteousness.

Following the guidance of the Holy Spirit Simeon goes to the Temple where Jesus' family had come for the sacrifice. The order of events seems a little mixed up here: v. 27 suggests that the encounter with Simeon happened *before* the sacrifice was offered. For once Luke has arranged the narrative to allow for better story telling.

Simeon takes the baby, and like Mary and Zechariah before him speaks a blessing (cf. 1:46–55, 68–79). This blessing is largely based on Isaiah 49:5–6, which speaks of one formed in the womb to be God's servant, and through whom salvation will reach 'to the ends of the earth.' Thus Luke identifies Jesus with the Servant of Isaiah.

Achtemeier, Green & Thompson (2001, pp. 159–160) point out that there is a connection between each of the three 'songs'³ in Luke 1–2. Each 'song' is a response to evidence of God's fulfilling of a promise. Achtemeier et al. summarise this in tabular form, which I have adapted and reproduced in Table 1.

³In each case these songs are, in fact, spoken.

Character	Promise	Evidence of Fulfillment	Response
Zechariah	His wife would bear a son	John is born	Speech of Zechariah
Mary	She would conceive a son	Unborn John bears witness to Jesus in the womb; Elizabeth blesses Mary.	Speech of Mary
Simeon	He would see the Messiah	He encounters Jesus in the Temple	Speech of Simeon

Table 1: God's Promises in Luke 1–2.

The narrative is fairly free flowing for most of these two chapters, but these three extended speeches break the flow quite significantly. The first two come just before a change of scene, but this doesn't happen in the case of Simeon. Nevertheless, this is quite an important feature of these two chapters, although it isn't immediately clear why Luke has organised his work this way. Achtemeier et al. (2001, p. 159) suggest that the purpose is to 'stop the progression of events momentarily so the Spirit-inspired interpretations of these momentous events might be heard clearly.' I have no doubt that this is true as far as it goes, but I suspect there is more to these speeches than simple interpretation of the events at hand.

Mary and Zechariah both speak of God's promises of mercy and salvation to the descendants of Abraham (1:54–55; 72–73), and Simeon begins by acknowledging the fulfillment of the promise made to him. In Simeon's case, the promise was that he would see 'the Lord's Messiah' (2:26) and Simeon refers to it in his speech as the 'salvation prepared in the presence of all peoples.' In each case the

fulfillment of the promise of God's salvation is in view, and the response is an outpouring of praise.

If we skip to the very end of Luke's gospel we read

Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you — that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

(Luke 24:44–53, NRSV)

Jesus is addressing the disciples before his return to heaven. He reminds them of the fulfillment of everything written about him in the scriptures, explaining that it means that 'repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations.' Once again God's promise of salvation has been fulfilled, except this time it includes all nations. It is good news for all the people. So how do the disciples respond? They go to the temple and, like Mary, Zechariah and Simeon, bless God.

The repetition of this pattern in the first two chapters points to the end of the Gospel. Between now and then Israel is going to have to learn about Jesus the hard way — there will be no more angelic visits, no recognition of Jesus by the unborn, no more promises from the Holy Spirit to reveal the Messiah. The journey there will be difficult, as Simeon seems to suggest in his comment to Mary (vv. 34–35.) However, God will keep his promise — indeed, this child in the Temple is proof that he already has.

Verses 36–40

Simeon has finished his business with the young family, and the focus immediately moves to another figure in the temple. Presumably Joseph and Mary go to offer their sacrifices, but Anna, an eighty-four year old prophet, recognises the baby. Like the shepherds (and unlike Simeon, who is now content to die) she busily begins to spread word of who has arrived in the temple.

The comparison with the shepherds goes a little further. As a childless widow she occupies a low place in Jewish society. There is also a question about her ethnicity. She is of the tribe of Asher, which was supposed to have been destroyed centuries earlier with the rest of the Northern Kingdom. Whilst she is a descendant of Jacob, and thus fully entitled to the benefits of her race and religion, there may have been some element of distrust towards her. Yet she is a prophet who spends all her time in the temple. She has been

chosen by God for a task, and as in the case of the shepherds social status isn't an issue. God's favour rests upon those whom he favours.

Once Anna's story is told Luke returns to the family of Jesus. The point of view now recedes in both space and time. Having finished their business in Jerusalem they return to Galilee. The focus moves in slightly to the town of Nazareth, but the narrative glosses over twelve years as Jesus grows and becomes strong.

Conclusion

Luke surveys a wide range of characters in the second chapter of his gospel. The way he has structured his narrative points to a few attributes those characters have that fit them for the important role they play.

Powerful characters like Caesar and Quirinius are mentioned, but they do nothing other than use their influence to disrupt life and inadvertently set the scene. The other characters of power (the angels) exist solely to do the work God has for them, which they do. Their power comes from their obedience.

Simeon is distinguished solely by his righteousness. We don't know why God chose the rest of the people that he did. Most of them don't seem to be the best choices available. The only thing these people had in common was that God chose to use them for their particular

task and no one else. The grace and sovereignty of God is the prime mover here, regardless of the whim of Caesar. God is free to choose whomever he wants, and Luke makes it quite clear that he doesn't care for class, social status, occupation, race, gender, or anything else of the kind.

A study of Luke's manipulation of the point of view highlights a few points of interest. Whilst he moves in the temporal and spatial planes to move the story along he gives us a brief look into the psychological space of some of the characters. Throughout the story the witnesses to the various scenes are 'amazed' at what they see and hear. Mary alone, however, 'treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart' (v. 19). Yet she's not the only one — Luke invites the audience into the mind of Mary, regardless of our position in life to ponder these things with her.

A Luke 2:1–40

New Revised Standard Version

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

²¹After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;

³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your
people Israel.'

³³And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed — and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

B Directions for further research

Whilst I have endeavoured to analyse this passage quite thoroughly my research has opened up other possible avenues of investigation that time and space constraints prevent me exploring.

- I am aware that it is possible to translate the name 'Gabriel' as 'Warrior of God.' If this nuance is warranted it would further influence the understanding of the Heavenly Host, and it could also explain why the shepherds were so terrified. It would be useful to survey other contemporary literature for references to Gabriel. For example, Gabriel appeared to the prophet Daniel on two occasions (Daniel 8:16; 9:21).
- By restricting myself to these forty verses I have not been able to explore some of the narrative strands Luke weaves through his opening chapters. For example, (Achtemeier et al. 2001, p. 160) suggest that there are strong parallels between the stories of John and Jesus in the first two chapters. Luke devotes a lot of space to John, and it would be fruitful to discuss how this affects the broader narrative.
- The last few verses of Luke serve as a transition to the rest of the gospel, and the way Luke moves between the two sections gives us some insight into where the gospel is going to go. It also helps summarise the introductory section.

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