

December 31, Christmas 1B (Luke 2:22-40)

Luke insists that Jesus is a child of Israel.

by [Greg Carey](#) in the [December 6, 2017](#) issue

Seminarians must roll their eyes at how often I ask them to fill in the blank: “Jesus was a . . .”

“Jew.”

“And Peter was a . . .”

“Jew.” And Mary, and Paul. This simple point—that the New Testament’s key figures all lived and died as Jews—is now taken for granted in theological education. The various movements we now identify with earliest Christianity all thrived within the orbit of ancient Judaism. Participants read Jewish scriptures, argued over the details of daily living as Jews, and worshiped the one they believed to be the Messiah of Israel.

Fifty years ago, these assumptions could not be taken for granted. Christian scholars emphasized how Jesus differed from his Jewish environment and debated Paul’s criticisms of his own religion. They sought explanations for the “parting of the ways.” Reclaiming the Jewish identity of Jesus is one of the great changes in biblical scholarship over the past few decades.

We encounter Luke 2:22-40 during the Christmas season but after the story of Jesus’ birth. No angels or shepherds here. Certainly no Magi or malevolent Herod—Luke’s infancy account shares little with Matthew’s, apart from the names of Jesus’ parents. Luke’s theological perspective is distinctive as well. Jesus’ birth brings salvation to all people, a salvation profoundly grounded in the hopes of Israel. Our trouble happens precisely here: How does Israel’s good news relate to good news for the gentiles?

Luke’s introduction insists upon Jesus as a child of Israel. The narrative begins with his relatives Zechariah and Elizabeth, who “blamelessly” observe “all the

commandments and regulations of the Lord” (1:6). Elizabeth’s pregnancy recalls Sarah’s: both previously childless, they conceived when they were “getting on in years” (1:7). When Gabriel informs Mary of her impending pregnancy, he promises that Jesus will sit on David’s throne and rule over Jacob’s house—that is, over Israel (1:32–33). Mary and Zechariah both break into song, Mary celebrating God’s help to Israel (1:54) and Zechariah Israel’s redemption from its enemies (1:68–74).

So it comes as no surprise that Jesus’ parents would circumcise their infant son and later present him in the temple “according to the law of Moses.” Preachers have long noted the modest sacrifice Joseph and Mary bring: if one cannot afford a sheep, a pair of turtledoves or pigeons will do (Lev. 5:11, 12:8). Jesus’ parents are too poor to offer a sheep. Luke shows no sentimentality toward Jesus’ poverty, however, having suggested already that through Jesus God will fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty (1:53). Whatever we may find in our Christmas carols, Jesus’ poverty is not to be romanticized. Mary and Joseph appear together at the temple as faithful Israelites.

Interpreters have long noted Luke’s tendency to pair a story about a man with another about a woman, often giving the man more detailed treatment. Consider the centurion and the widow (7:1–14), or the parables of the shepherd who loses a sheep and the woman who loses a coin (15:3–10). (Mary, of course, gets extensive treatment in Luke.)

Enter Simeon and Anna. Luke suggests both are far along in years. Anna is 84, widowed after a marriage of only seven years. Ancient life expectancies being what they were, perhaps she feels only slightly cheated. But she has been on her own a very long time. Luke doesn’t give Simeon’s age, but he has been waiting for Israel’s consolation, informed by the Holy Spirit that he will see the Messiah before he dies. “Now you are dismissing your servant in peace,” he says in his prayer, indicating the imminence of his death. Anna does not receive a speaking part. But the two are united in their old age, their piety, and their hope. Simeon awaits Israel’s comfort, while Anna looks for Jerusalem’s redemption.

Luke will return to this hope. Walking to Emmaus, two disciples encounter Jesus. They’ve received the testimony of his empty tomb and the angels’ words, but they do not recognize him. In one of the Bible’s greatest examples of irony, they all but scold Jesus for his apparent ignorance of his own ministry and death. Misguided as they are, the two disciples share the hope of Simeon and Anna. Only we readers

understand how it will be accomplished.

But Simeon adds a dimension to this hope, one crucial for Luke and his readers. This infant, the Messiah who will comfort Israel, will also bless the whole world. “Glory for your people Israel” indeed, but “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” as well. Israel’s salvation is the world’s salvation.

The Jewish-gentile question is a contentious issue among students of Luke and Acts. In Luke we find Jesus lamenting over Jerusalem: “your house is left to you” (19:35) and “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace” (19:42). The major speeches in Acts include lines such as “you crucified and killed [Jesus]” (2:23); “Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected” (3:13); and “now you have become his betrayers and murderers” (7:52). And many of Paul’s troubles come at the hands of his fellow Jews. Luke grounds the gospel in Israel but laments that it thrives primarily among gentiles.

We need our reminder from Simeon and Anna. Healthy Christian theology celebrates Jesus as the Messiah sent by the God of Israel. It remembers that Jesus’ parents raised him as an observant Jew, which according to Luke he remained all his life. And it honors God, who is not fickle toward Israel or to any of God’s people but who longs to heal the world through Israel’s own son. God’s faithfulness extends to us as well.