

Circumcision (03-01-10)

“this thing which is come to pass” (Gospel)

My working assumption is that Luke was with Paul on his last visit to Jerusalem and had time to do research. He as a Gentile was unlikely to be able to create deeply Hebraic texts such as the “Magnificat”, so I think he found them. But if so, then he could seek and perhaps find facts about the Nativity. This is the reasonable inference from the statement that Mary “kept all these things and pondered them in her heart”. Further evidence for this will be if what he writes is not a simple use of the Old Testament. That said, it is foolish to say that all apparent fulfilments of prophecy must be fraudulent!

Here are a few features of Luke's account which do *not* seem to derive from the Old Testament: the census, the inn, the manger, the shepherds – in other words, rather a lot, all of them mundane and not obviously serving a theological purpose. You can test this by using a concordance to see in what contexts these words exist, or in some cases don't exist, in the Old Testament. Luke, then, at least to some extent was reporting what had happened, and I think did so because he cared to “earth” the story within mundane facts – very much like some near-contemporary pagan writers of biographies.

It is as well to add that much that we take for granted has no place in the Gospels. No “little donkey”. No “ox and ass and camel”. No “bleak midwinter”, even. These are all later imaginings and inventions, perhaps harmless, but certainly not essential to faith. Similarly the much earlier inventions concerning the midwives who attended on Mary.

The first truth then that Luke wants to convey to us is that this was a very human event, immersed in the very ordinary complications of human life. But the way it is ordinary is as a Jewish event. Jesus is named – as a second Joshua, the one who achieves the promises (Joshua, not Moses, brought the Israelites into the land of promise). He is circumcised on the eighth day, and so fully belongs with the Jewish people in dignity as a male. (Here at any rate his masculinity matters!) But I am sure Luke had heard Paul many times on the irrelevance of circumcision for Gentile converts, so he gives very little space to the event. Contrast the space given to Mary making the ritual offering for her purification (of which our “Churching of Women” used to be a pale echo).

But of course the ordinary is in a context of the extraordinary. Both Matthew and Luke are aware of partial Old Testament parallels to this birth (Isaac, Sampson, Samuel) which have miraculous aspects but are still human. Both are also aware of prophecies which had never been fulfilled and so might be, particularly Isaiah 7.14 as it stood in the Greek “behold a virgin shall conceive” (the familiar Authorised Version mistranslates the Hebrew). It is here and elsewhere in the New Testament a puzzle to what extent authors assume the Greek of the Old Testament. Matthew's habit is to bring all the parallels he assumes out into the open, so we can easily see how he thinks. Luke does not do this, but you might guess (following the librettist of Haydn's Creation) from the shepherds' vision of angels that here is a new creation just as the sons of God and morning stars rejoiced in the first creation (Job 38.7). Incidentally, shepherds were assumed not to keep the law well, so here is a delicate touch that even at his birth Jesus is a saviour for sinners.

As you can see, in order to appreciate how Luke understands the birth we have to look both backwards and forwards. Backwards, to Gabriel's use of the title Son of God. Forward, to the baptism “thou art my beloved Son” and then to the genealogy, which begins “the son (as was supposed) of Joseph and ends “of Adam, of God”. Neatly, neither the beginning nor the end are ordinary descent!

Luke did not know and would not have understood the developed faith of the church as we find it in the Athanasian creed “our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; God, of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds: and Man, of the substance of his Mother, born in the world.” But he as much as any other Gospel writer started us on the path to that faith.

The readings for the Circumcision are Romans 4.8-14 and Luke 2.15-21.