

The Birth Narrative of Christ

Luke 2:21-38, the Witnesses to Christ Pile Up

The basic legal principle to the Mosaic Law required that a person's testimony must be confirmed by at least two or three witnesses. During the birth narrative in the Gospel of Luke, the author testified that the baby Jesus was the promised Messiah and was also the Son of God. That awesome claim is backed up in Luke's account by substantial verification by multiple credible eyewitnesses. Luke's witnesses were all righteous people, and he repeated that many times for emphasis. Amazingly, the witnesses were not the powerful political or religious leaders, but God provided a righteous believing remnant that both saw and recognized Jesus as the long awaited Jewish Messiah and the unique Son of God. Zacharias, Elizabeth, Joseph, Mary, and the shepherds all received the good news from angels sent by God to announce the birth of the Christ, the anointed one of God who would save us from our sins. In Luke 2:21-38, God provided two additional witnesses who were dedicated to a life of seeking the Redeemer. Simeon and Anna were both elderly seekers who constantly came to the Temple in Jerusalem seeking "the Comforter and the Redeemer". Both were divinely informed that they would not die until they personally saw the Messiah, so every day they woke up with the eager expectation of meeting God's "anointed One" face to face.

So many of us are dedicated to achieving goals like properly raising children, building a business, and achieving financial security. Those are all good things, but Simeon and Anna had a greater hope, expectation, and goal—to seek the Lord and the Savior He was sending. To live was to seek Jesus, and having found Him, they were ready to pass on in peace.

The Southern Steps

When I periodically take groups to Israel, we always go to the southern steps of the Temple mount in Jerusalem. Many people say, "I want to walk in the exact place where Jesus walked. Today, are there any actual places that we can go to where we know Jesus walked? The answer is that the newly found and uncovered actual steps into the main entrance to the Temple that Jesus often visited have been uncovered and preserved. We can be certain that Jesus walked on these very steps as He approached to enter the Temple.

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English: Southern steps of the Temple Mount, Jerusalem. Deutsch: Treppe an der Südseite des Tempelberges, Jerusalem. (Photo credit: Wikipedia)[/caption]

The Southern Wall of the Temple Mount built by Herod the Great just before the birth of Christ is about 922 feet in length. The enormous retaining wall that Herod built to level Mt. Moriah in order to build the Temple and all the surrounding courtyards and buildings on it, is built of huge blocks of cut stone. The blocks are so well fitted together that a knife blade can't be inserted between the stones. It is so well built that it is the only building from that era that has survived the many earthquakes, invasions, and ravage of time. The southern wall and the steps to the main southern entrance were excavated after 1967 by an archeological team led by Benjamin Mazar. The Temple Mount was entered by walking up the southern steps to ascend to the Temple Mount through a double gate on the west side of the southern wall or through the triple gate on the east side of the southern wall. The steps that lead to the double gate are intact and in good condition while the stairs to the triple gate had to be rebuilt. These gates are generally called "The Huldah Gates". The steps to the double gate are the actual steps that Jesus walked on to enter the Temple. The steps alternate from 12 inches deep to 35 inches deep so that those walking up would have to walk slowly and deliberately. Inside the Huldah Gates, the original staircases survive. Intricately carved patterns are still visible in the arched staircases. These grand staircases led up to the principal entrances to the Temple during the time of Christ.

In Luke 2:21-24, Joseph and Mary obeyed the Mosaic Law by circumcising Jesus when He was eight days old. Then after 40 days, the Law required them to take Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem to present the baby Jesus to the Lord. There were two ceremonies held at the Temple for all first born males. The first was the purification ceremony for the mother by going to the priest and sacrificing an animal (Lev. 12:4-6), then the first born male child was dedicated to the Lord (Ex. 13:2) at the Temple. Mary and Joseph would have carried Jesus up the Southern Steps, up the staircase and emerged on the top of the Temple Mount, and then they were met by a surprise. Two righteous people, Simeon and Anna, were there and immediately recognized the baby Jesus as the long awaited Messiah. Both were advanced in years, lived in Jerusalem, and were associated with the Temple. Both were looking for the "consolation of Israel" and the "redemption of Israel" both of which referred to Jesus. They were like John the Baptist in that they testified to Jesus' true identity. They were a light of revelation to the darkness of a hypocritical nation.

Simeon's Testimony and Prophecy

In introducing Simeon, the author assures us that Simeon is an excellent witness since "he was righteous and devout". In the Bible, righteousness is imputed by God because of a person's faith in God, so Simeon was a believer, and also being devout meant that he was careful to revere God, and honor and obey God. Therefore Simeon was justified before the Lord because of his faith and he was also set apart because of his obedience and works. We also read in v. 25 that he was seeking the Lord constantly by "looking for the consolation". The word for consolation means comforter and encourager. Israel had gone through about 600 years of Gentile occupation and subjugation. First the Babylonians, then the Persians, Greeks, and now the Romans enforced their will on Israel with high taxes and brutal treatment. Those trying times intensified the longing for and expectations of the Messiah to deliver them. They also were looking forward to the expectations of the New Covenant of grace promised by Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:23-28. The New Covenant offered the promise of forgiveness of sin, a new cleansed heart for God, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would see the Messiah who would accomplish this in Simeon's lifetime. When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus into the Temple, this was fulfilled, and Simeon recognized his Savior and Comforter. Simeon had lived in a constant state of joyous excited expectation, which had motivated him to live for the Lord and lead a pure godly life. God had providentially arranged for Simeon to meet the Christ and become a witness to Jesus' identity. Simeon was amazed and uttered a song of praise and a prophecy about Jesus. Theologians call this song of praise the *Nunc Dimittis*, which is Latin for the first two words "Now Lord". Simeon could now die in peace having seen the salvation of the Lord. His next part of the prophecy in v. 31-32 would have confused or even shocked his Jewish audience that this salvation would also go to the Gentiles. They were proud of their status as God's chosen people, and they assumed the Messiah was coming to deliver only them. 600 years of animosity toward their cruel and idolatrous enemies was not easily set aside. They should have recognized this truth through many Old Testament prophecies like Isaiah 42:6 that Messiah would be "a light to the nations". In Luke 2:33-35, Jesus' father and mother were amazed at these wonderful things being said about Him, and Simeon further blessed them with another disturbing prophecy that the child would divide Israel. Jesus was destined to be the judge of all the people's eternal destiny. We think of Jesus as bringing peace between God and man to all those who believe, but it was equally true that all those who rejected Jesus would fall. Just as Jesus would later say, "Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you no, but rather division" (Luke 12:51). Those who reject Jesus would stumble over Him so as to fall, and families would be divided between those who believed and those who rejected Him.

Anna

In God's perfect providential timing, "at that very moment" while Simeon was praising God, Anna came up to Mary and Joseph and she also recognized the baby Jesus as the Redeemer of Israel. The author first establishes Anna's credibility in v. 36-37 by telling us that Anna spent a great amount of time in prayer and fasting serving in the Temple as a prophetess. A prophet was someone that God set apart to use to speak and explain the Word of God, usually concerning what God would do in the future. Anna had been accepted into the Temple service as a respected prophet that dedicated her life to praying for and teaching about the coming Messiah. Therefore she also would have been a great witness of Jesus' identity. All her long years of prayer now erupted in her great praise of God giving thanks for the baby Jesus.

The Witnesses Pile Up

All the Old Testament witnesses like Isaiah who predicted Jesus' virgin birth and role as a sacrifice for sin, Micah who predicted He would be born in Bethlehem of the tribe of Judah and house of David, now emerged as a reality with the New Testament witnesses. The angel Gabriel appeared to John the Baptist's parents, and then to Mary and Joseph. The shepherds, just outside of Bethlehem, had been told by angels of Jesus' birth so that they "made known" all that they saw and heard. After seeing Jesus in person, the shepherds "went back glorifying and praising God for all that they had seen and heard" to everyone that would listen (Luke 2:17-20). The "wise men" from the east came testifying to the newly born "King of Israel". Now in the Temple, two respected righteous and holy people, Simeon and Anna, give witness and prophecy about Jesus.

Living in Expectation of Comfort and Forgiveness

Simeon and Anna don't appear on any nativity scenes or Christmas cards, but they are important witnesses who reflect what the human race needs and is looking for—comfort and redemption (forgiveness). They were both waiting with expectation for the Person who would provide for both of these needs. Things had been going poorly for Israel for 600 years of living in fear, but Simeon had hope in God's promises to send a Comforter. Comfort is a universal human need of all who struggle with loneliness, emptiness, insecurity, and depression, but when Simeon looked at Jesus, he knew Jesus came to eliminate all the fear, loneliness, and depression. Anna was also waiting for God's Anointed One who would redeem and save His people. When Anna saw Jesus, she knew that here at last was the One who would save His people from their sins. Simeon and Anna were eagerly waiting and seeking for God's comfort and forgiveness. What are you seeking? What are you waiting for? Some of us are hurting under difficult circumstances, while others feel guilty and need forgiveness. Jesus is the answer for all of us. To live is to seek the Lord, and eagerly expect the comfort and peace that only Jesus can bring. If we are dedicated to seeking Him, we will be like Simeon who had all his hopes fulfilled in Jesus, and therefore he was ready to go in peace to eternal life with Him.

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