

## **A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 2:22-40**

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This is a story about two elderly righteous persons whose amazing experience at the time of Jesus' presentation in the temple confirmed Jesus' identity as Messiah. Simeon is a holy man, a layman, not a priest. His looking for the consolation of Israel means that he was hoping for the restoration of Israel's pride and freedom as a reward for all that the nation had suffered since the exile, now over 600 years.

Simeon's holiness is emphasized three times: the Holy Spirit rested on him, had revealed the fulfillment of his hopes to see the Messiah, and led him up to the Temple at that moment. All of the descriptions emphasize that he was a person uniquely sensitive to God's Spirit. The temple was an absolutely magnificent place and one needs to imagine and portray the temple and its atmosphere in the way that you tell the story.

Simeon's immediate identification of the child and taking him in his arms is a confirmation of Jesus' identity as the Messiah. Simeon's poem of praise is spoken in utter exaltation and joy. An appropriate gesture is to first cradle and then hold up the child. Simeon's poem celebrates the fulfillment of one who has waited an entire lifetime for this event so his prayer can appropriately be prayed in that spirit

The description of the child has two dimensions. The first is that he is coming as a light of revelation to the Gentiles. His life will enlighten Israel's enemies, the Gentiles, and reveal the true God to them. Second, it is for the glory of the people of Israel. Because of the impact of his life, the people and tradition of Israel will be glorified throughout all time.

This is all to be told in a spirit of amazement and wonder. It is the same tone as the appearance of the angels to the shepherds. In fact, the entire story from the beginning of the Gospel of Luke until now has this basic spirit and tone.

Simeon's blessing of Mary is a realistic and sober assessment of the conflict that will be generated by her child's life and work: "This child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel and is a sign that will be opposed." The prophecy is that the child's destiny is to change the future. The phrase, the fall and rising of many, names the same theme as Jesus' frequent ending in his speeches, "Many who are first will be last, and the last first." He will also generate opposition. But the first passion prophecy is for Mary, not the baby Jesus. That is, a sword will pierce her soul in addition to the sword that will pierce him. This prophecy of suffering is the climax of the promise that this child as Messiah will reveal what is in the hearts of many. It is also the first intimation that this story will test the responses of the listeners and will result in the fall and rising of many listeners.

Anna is described as an extraordinary woman. She lives a kind of monastic life and is in many ways an anticipation of the women who became members of monastic communities in the fourth and fifth centuries. She has lived as a celibate woman for approximately sixty years. All of that time she has been devoted to prayer and fasting. She has literally lived her life in the temple. Thus, as a woman who is uniquely aware of the signs of the presence of God, she sees the child and speaks about the child to everyone who is looking for the deliverance of Jerusalem. These stories are signs of blessing that confirm Jesus' identity as Messiah and communicate a spirit of great, great joy.

The hopes that are being fulfilled in this story are specifically Jewish hopes for political and religious freedom. The "consolation of Israel" and the "redemption of Jerusalem" refer to the hopes of the people of Israel for a new life after centuries of domination and humiliation by various Gentile nations.

The only danger in telling these stories is to make them factual in tone and emotionally flat. This is one of the most graphic instances of the inaccuracy and inadequacy of the traditional mode of reading the Scriptures in a tone of objectivity and emotional detachment. If there is one thing that Simeon and Anna are *not*, it is emotionally detached.