

(Lk. 19:10), especially those who are despised and lowly-regarded, like publicans and Gentiles.

We who recognise the wonder of God's grace, as outlined in the promises and the prophets, need never despair about any natural disadvantage that might attach to us. Such limitations mean nothing

to Almighty God. Luke's use of the words 'salvation' and 'saviour' demonstrates that, regardless of natural circumstances, all may become heirs of salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, whom God sent to be "the Saviour of the world" (Jno. 4:42).

The women of Luke's Gospel

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It is immediately obvious, just from a brief look at Luke's Gospel, that women have an important place in this book. More than in any of the other Gospels, women and their part in the momentous events surrounding the birth, life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus are focused on by Luke, writing under inspiration. The characters most prominent in the first two chapters are two women, Elisabeth and Mary—yet one of them, Elisabeth, does not appear at all in any of the other three Gospels. And even Mary has much more written about her in Luke than anywhere else. This prominence given to women continues through Luke's Gospel, with a number of women appearing in the narrative who are not mentioned elsewhere.

THE PROMINENCE of women in Luke's Gospel can best be shown by listing them. [Table 1](#) lists all those who are mentioned in Luke but not in any of the other Gospels. Other women, who are also mentioned elsewhere, include:

- Mary mother of Jesus
- Jairus' daughter
- The woman with an issue of blood
- Martha and Mary of Bethany
- The Queen of the South
- The woman in the parable who had seven husbands
- The widow who threw her last mites into the temple treasury
- The maid of the high priest at Jesus' trial.

In all, quite a remarkable list!

Another interesting feature of the Gospel is that it presents a number of linked pairs or groups of similar types of events or parables, and a high proportion of these are male/female pairings. These are shown in [Table 2](#). Not all are unique to Luke's Gospel.

What are we to make of these? One clear lesson is that the gospel message is available for all. In

Christ "there is neither male nor female"; all can have equal access to the salvation from sin and death depicted in the miracles Jesus performed. All, too, have equal access to the Father through prayer. Jewish men and women were looking for the consolation of Israel at the birth of Christ, but Gentile men and women also can hear the gospel preached and can repent and come to the greater than Solomon. Luke's Gospel appears to have been written mainly for Gentile readers, and this aspect would have great relevance for his readers.

There must, however, be more to Luke's inclusion of so many women in his Gospel. Why does he devote so much space to Elisabeth and Mary in the first two chapters, for instance? We turn now to consider some of the women who make up the Gospel narrative, and in the process we hope to find some answers and bring out some of the underlying themes of the Gospel.

Childless women

Think for a while, to begin with, of Elisabeth and Mary. We see in them both similarities and contrasts. Both were godly women, and they must have been among those who, like Simeon and Anna, were "waiting for the consolation of Israel", and "look[ing] for redemption in Jerusalem" (Lk. 2:25,38). At a time when many women in Israel would have hoped to be the one chosen to bear their Messiah, one can imagine that it would be a great grief to the elderly Elisabeth that she was barren. The years went by, and all hope of having a "godly seed" would grow dim.

Mary, in contrast, was a very young woman, as yet unmarried, too soon even to consider having a child. Yet surely, as she matured from childhood into young adulthood, her heart would have

Table 1. Women who appear in the Gospels only in Luke

Elisabeth (ch. 1)

Anna (2:36-38)

The widow of Zarephath (4:25,26)

The widow of Nain (7:11-17)

The woman who was a sinner (7:36-50)

The ministering women, who include Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna (8:2,3)

The woman in the crowd who blesses Mary's womb (11:27,28)

The woman bowed down with infirmity (13:10-17)

The parable of the woman who loses a coin (15:8-10)

Lot's wife (17:32)

The parable of the widow who continually pleaded with the unjust judge (18:1-8)

The daughters of Jerusalem (23:28)

Table 2. Linked events, parables and teachings

	Male/ female?	Unique to Luke?
Simeon and Anna (2:25-38).	✓	✓
Widow of Zarephath and Naaman (4:25-27).	✓	✓
Healing of the man with a demon and Simon's mother-in-law (4:31-39). Note "rebuked" in both instances. This is followed by a multitude of healings.	✓	
Jairus and the woman with the issue of blood (8:40-56). Note "falling" in verses 41 and 47. This is part of a larger sequence of linked events starting in 8:22 and going through to 9:6.	✓	
The queen of the South and the men of Nineveh (11:31,32).	✓	
Healing on the sabbath: the woman bowed down (13:10-17); the man with dropsy (14:1-6).	✓	✓
Parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin (15:3-10).	✓	✓
Parables of the Prodigal Son and the Unjust Steward (15:11-32; 16:1-9). Compare the accusations in 15:13,30 and 16:1; perhaps this should make us reconsider our interpretation of the Parable of the Unjust Steward.		✓
Parables of prayer: the Unjust Judge and the Pharisee and Publican (18:1-14).	✓	✓
Rich young ruler (18:18-23), blind beggar (vv. 35-43) and Zacchaeus (19:1-10). Note "follow" (18:22,43); "distribute to the poor" (18:22; 19:8); wanting to see (18:41; 19:3); "when they saw it" (18:43; 19:7). Again part of a longer sequence.		Only Zacchaeus

thrilled to the possibility of being the mother of Israel's future king. After all, she was of David's house, and Joseph, her husband to be, was descended from the royal line of kings.

As yet, however, her womb was closed, and in this she resembled Elisabeth, though for a very different reason. Two women, one old, one young, both childless at the start of the Gospel.

Anna

Then as we look at other women in Luke, we begin to see the theme repeated. Here are a number of women who are apparently childless. Anna, we are told, lived with a husband for seven years before being widowed. She seems to have spent the rest of her years (either eighty-four years of widowhood, or up to the age of eighty-four) serving God in the temple. Whether or not she had children we do not know, but she is presented in the narrative as childless, devoting her life to God. The fact that we are given numbers of years for her could be significant. She is the only one for whom we know the age or the number of years of marriage and widowhood. 84 is 7×12 , two highly significant numbers. The fact that her widowhood lasted far longer than her marriage is carefully brought to our attention.

This wonderful woman was in the temple when Joseph and Mary brought the child Jesus in to be presented to the Lord. We are told that she "served God with fastings and prayers night and day" (2:37). It would seem that her prayers were directed towards the coming of the Messiah, for she was eager to speak of the Lord Jesus to all who "looked for redemption in Jerusalem". Her name, Anna, is the equivalent of the Old Testament Hannah (another barren woman), meaning 'grace', and similar to the name John, a Greek form of the Hebrew for 'the grace of God', or 'Yah is gracious'. It is interesting that her age is measured in sevens, because this links her with Elisabeth. We often think of the name Elisabeth meaning 'oath of God', from the Hebrew *El* (God) and *sheba* (oath). But *sheba* can also mean 'seven', as can be seen in Genesis 21:28-31, where Abraham presents Abimelech king of Gerar with seven ewe lambs as a token of the oath which they swore together at Beer-sheba, the 'well of the oath' or the 'well of seven'.

It is well known that Zacharias refers to the names of his wife and son, Elisabeth and John, (as well as his own) in his prophecy in Luke 1, where he speaks of "the *mercy* [*grace*] promised to our fathers . . . the *oath* which He swore to our

father Abraham" (vv. 72,73). It could therefore be important that we are told of Anna's age. The narrative is placing emphasis on God's grace to be brought in the work of His Son who has been born, in fulfilment of His promise to Abraham.

The widow of Nain

Another widow presented to us in Luke's Gospel is the widow of Nain (7:11-17). She is not childless—or is she? She has a son, an only son; but he is dead. Hers is not a barren womb, but the effect is the same. There is no heir, no "godly seed", until the one comes who can bring life from the dead.

Martha and Mary

Then think of Martha and Mary (10:38-42). Martha has a house, but there is no mention of a husband or children. Were they too young yet to be married? Or is it that any husband and children are ignored by the Gospel writer? We do not know for certain, but once more two faithful, godly women appear in the text as childless.

We learn much more of these two women from John's Gospel. Luke tells us that Jesus entered "a village", where Martha had a house. It is John who tells us that the village was Bethany, and that they also had a brother, Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead (Jno. 11). We know, too, from John of the incident when Mary anointed Jesus' feet with costly ointment, showing her understanding that Jesus must die (12:1-8). The similar incident of anointing in Luke 7:36-50 is set in a different context, and we are not told who the woman was, only that she was a sinner. There are those who think this woman was also Mary of Bethany, or even Mary Magdalene, but I feel it is unfair on the two Marys to make such assumptions when we are not specifically told so.

Luke omits all John's details about Martha and Mary. Instead he concentrates on a little cameo telling how Mary sat listening at Jesus' feet while Martha "was cumbered about much serving". This little incident clearly has lessons for all of us about getting priorities right in our lives, but I think that there is more to it than this. We are informed that Martha "received [Jesus] into her house". This phrase seems to link back to the beginning of the chapter, where the Lord sends out seventy of his disciples "before his face into every city and place, whither he himself would come" (10:1). He gives them instructions to remain in a house and city where "they receive you", and "eat such things as are set before you" (vv. 5-8), but to

shake the dust off their feet where "they receive you not" (vv. 10,11). Perhaps this would indicate that Martha and Mary had already been visited by two of Jesus' disciples, before they were followed by the Lord himself. And he probably did not just come for a meal. He would have stayed a number of days while he taught and healed in the village. At the end of his instructions to his disciples Jesus also said, "He that heareth you heareth me . . ." (v. 16). So Martha and Mary at the end of the chapter give an example of those who "received" Jesus and his disciples (Martha, v. 38) and who "heard" (Mary, v. 39).

But there is even more than this. The seventy were commanded, "salute no man by the way" (v. 4), and this phrase has Old Testament echoes of 2 Kings 4, where we meet yet another godly but childless woman. In verses 8-10 we read how Elisha was received into the house of a "great woman" of Shunem, not just once, but many times as he travelled that way. She had no child, and her husband was old, so in return for her kindness Elisha promised her a son. Here again is a miraculous birth to a godly woman, following the pattern of so many in the Old Testament. But some years later the child fell dangerously ill and died. Elisha sent Gehazi his servant before him (*cf.* "before his face", Lk. 10:1) to heal the child, and commanded him, "if thou meet any man, salute him not; and if any salute thee, answer him not again" (v. 29). At the pleading of the woman, Elisha followed after his servant, and finally brought about the miracle of resurrection.

In sending out the seventy to "heal the sick . . . and say . . . The kingdom of God is come nigh unto you" (Lk. 10:9), and in commanding them to "salute no man by the way" (v. 4), the Lord Jesus surely had this Old Testament incident in mind, so is it not reasonable to see in Martha, who received Jesus into her house, a pattern of the childless Shunammite woman? And, like the woman of Shunem, Martha too received her "dead raised to life again" (Heb. 11:35), though in her case her brother rather than her son.

The birth of the Son of God and his forerunner

All this brings into sharp relief the remarkable events of the first two chapters of Luke, when two children are conceived miraculously from the closed wombs of Elisabeth and Mary. Our eyes are being directed to the birth of the 'seed' promised in Genesis 3:15, that 'seed of the woman' who would at last destroy the power of the serpent.

From the barrenness of Israel (represented by Elisabeth, the old woman), after a gap of 400 or so years since Malachi, the last prophet of Israel, a new prophet burst onto the scene to herald the coming Messiah. And from the virgin's womb was born the Son of God, to bring grace and salvation, and the hope of life by resurrection from the dead.

The women at the crucifixion and the resurrection

We have drawn a number of threads out of the Gospel of Luke concerning the women he writes about, and all these threads come together when we consider the death and resurrection of our Lord. If it is inevitable that women were involved in the birth of Christ and the events surrounding it, then it is appropriate that they were there also at his death, and were the first to see his rebirth from the womb of the grave as the first-born of a new family of sons and daughters of God.

There were the women who stood afar off and beheld his crucifixion, and who followed Joseph and Nicodemus to see what they did with his body. Luke does not identify these women at this point, except to tell us that they had followed Jesus from Galilee (23:49,55). It was they who came on the first day of the week bringing spices to anoint the body, only to find the tomb empty. Not until after they had learned of the resurrection from two angels are we told that the group included Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary the mother of James (24:10). Thrilled with the news, they ran to tell the apostles and other disciples, only to find their tidings disbelieved. We meet these women earlier in Luke. Mary Magdalene and Joanna, among others, were healed by the Lord, and then faithfully followed him thereafter, looking after his needs throughout his ministry (8:2,3). That faithfulness was rewarded with joy on the resurrection morn.

Then there were the unnamed women who were among the crowd following Jesus to the cross, to whom the Lord turned and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children. For, behold, the days are coming, in the which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck" (23:27-29).

Jerusalem

This leads us on finally to consider the one 'woman' in Luke who is twice spoken of as

having 'children', and that is Jerusalem. One of these occasions comes only in Luke's Gospel; the other occurs also in Matthew, but in a different context.

In Luke 13:34,35 Jesus laments,

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy *children* together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate: and verily I say unto you, Ye shall not see me, until the time come when ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord".

Here Jerusalem stands for Israel, God's 'wife', who should have been bearing faithful sons and daughters for Him. But her rejection of God's true Son meant that she was soon to be left desolate, like a divorced wife, and therefore barren. The other mention of her, in Luke 23:27-29 quoted above, reinforces the message. At that time her troubles would be so great that barrenness would be considered a blessing.

During this time of desolation, other, mainly Gentile, sons and daughters would be born to God; and this causes us to think that there is another underlying theme seen in the women of Luke's Gospel: that of natural and spiritual Israel. Certainly it is there in the incidents of the woman with the issue of blood and Jairus' daughter (8:41-56). The older woman had had an issue of blood for twelve years (is there a connection of the number twelve with Anna, above?), during which time she would have been unable to be a wife who could bear children, as well as being ritually unclean, cast off from temple worship. She represents Israel now, cast off from God. But all the time that she was ill a new young woman was growing up. Jairus' daughter was just twelve years old when she died. She represents the new family of sons and daughters in Christ. And it is significant that the time of her resurrection is

entwined with the healing and receiving back into fellowship of the other woman. As Paul wrote: "if the casting away of them [natural Israel] be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?" (Rom. 11:15).

And if we can see this theme in these two women, is it possible that it is there also in Elisabeth and Mary? The older woman, Elisabeth (representing natural Israel), remains barren for many long years; the younger woman, Mary (spiritual Israel), bears the Son of God. Even Martha and Mary fit the pattern in some respects. Martha, "cumbered about much serving", resembles Israel after the flesh, vainly seeking righteousness through works of the Law; whereas Mary "heard his word", and thereby chose "that good part", the righteousness which is of faith, that brings everlasting life.

Conclusion

Many of the other women in Luke's Gospel can also be fitted in, but there is no space to deal with them all here. The theme of the women of Luke's Gospel is the grand theme of the whole of the Scriptures: that through the seed born of a woman, after many years of 'barrenness' for Israel and the world, eventually would come the conquering of sin and death, and the possibility of miraculous rebirth from the barren womb of the grave to glorious immortality in the Kingdom of God. This is the mercy and grace promised to the fathers; this is the subject of the oath sworn to Abraham.

And if there is significance in the use of the number seven in connection with Anna, it may be that it is intended to turn our minds to the seventh day of rest at the end of the Creation week, that day which foreshadows the Kingdom of God, when His work of forming a New Creation of resurrected sons and daughters will at last be finished, and "redemption in Jerusalem" will be complete.

And now, lest it should be thought that a consideration of the life and times of Anna contains only interest and exhortation for the aged women, let us hasten to say that what Anna was when she was old, was only the result of what she had been throughout her long pilgrimage. She had spent her life filling her vessel with the oil of the Word and this sustained her through her widowhood . . . The Temple in Jerusalem would often be the centre of . . . troubles and Anna's faith and patience were sorely tried; but when old age came upon her, she was strong to encourage and exhort others.

Ruby Whiteside, "Anna", *Women of the Bible*, p. 183, The Christadelphian, 1996