

Reading Between The Lines In Luke

Much can be gained by reading the books of the Christian Bible with an approach more commonly used in reading literature.

Considering themes that have been emphasised to give particular ideas special importance, and noticing the way that characters are developed.

A literary approach helps us to be more aware of the individuality of each of the gospels, and helps us notice what the writer notices.

As one example, consider how Luke uses one particular motif, the fact that Mary was blessed by becoming the mother of Jesus Christ.

Luke uses this to further his favourite themes, the historical veracity of Jesus Christ, a favourable view of women and the universality of the gospel message.

Luke 1:28 [New King James] *“And having come in, the angel said to her, ‘Rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!’”*

Spoken by an angel.

Luke 1:42 [New King James] *“Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!’”*

Spoken by Elizabeth, a more specific version of the blessing given by the angel Gabriel, and it shows that the angel’s prophecy is indeed coming to pass.

Luke 1:45 [New King James] *“Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfilment of those things which were told her from the Lord.”*

All these things that Gabriel prophesied, Elizabeth was inspired to say will come to pass.

In the first chapter of Luke’s gospel, the blessing of Jesus Christ’s impending birth for Mary is repeated three times.

But this theme is not forgotten.

Luke 11:27 [New King James] *“And it happened, as He spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!’”*

This was during Jesus Christ’s ministry, from a women in the crowd, many of whom had been blessed with healings by the baby that Mary was carrying when the blessing was expressed by both Gabriel and Elizabeth.

This repetition is an intensified form is a common literary device throughout the Christian Bible.

So what is the impression given so far by this motif of Mary’s blessedness?

First – women are placed in a favourable light by the coming of Jesus Christ. Mary is the centre of attention, playing a most obvious and integral role, but Elizabeth and the woman in the crowd also merit praise for their recognition of Mary’s blessedness.

Second – the historical veracity of Jesus Christ’s birth has been attested.

It was prophesied by the angel Gabriel before Mary conceived, affirmed by the Holy Spirit inspired Elizabeth, and acknowledged by the woman in the crowd who had seen some of the miracles that Jesus Christ had performed.

Luke 11:28 [New King James] *“But He said, ‘More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’”*

Jesus uses this statement from the woman in the crowd to make a spiritual point.

Jesus Christ turned the theme on its head.

He affirms that Mary was blessed, but that the true blessing is available to all humans.

Anyone who believes and obeys God can be blessed.

Going back to **Luke 1:45**, we see that Elizabeth’s statement foreshadowed the concept.

Mary’s blessedness is primarily because she believes and obeys, [Luke 1:26-38].

So Luke uses the idea of this blessing to further his emphasis on the universality of the gospel message.

All can be blessed who believe and obey.

However, Luke includes another literary allusion to this motif at the crisis point of the gospel accounts as Jesus Christ is being led to His crucifixion.

Luke 23:27-29 [New King James] *“And a great multitude of the people followed Him, and women who also mourned and lamented Him. But Jesus, turning to them, said, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For indeed the days are coming in which they will say, “Blessed are the barren, wombs that never bore, and breasts which never nursed!”””*

This is an instance of high drama in the narrative.

The account began with joyful news that Mary is to have a son, the Messiah, and that she is indeed blessed.

However, at this terrible moment, the mother is to stand by and watch her son brutally murdered.

Far from a blessing when Mary is enduring the curse that was the natural result of human sin.

Notice also how Luke again uses this passage to make certain points.

He uses a parallel structure, which tends to emphasise whatever comes last.

People followed Jesus Christ and women mourned and lamented.

Luke gives emphasis to the fact that women were among the dedicated followers of Jesus Christ at this time of His deepest agony.

Having already proclaimed that all who believe and obey can partake of Mary’s blessedness, Luke’s gospel reminds believers that they must also partake of suffering, they may also weep for themselves and for their children.

They will suffer tribulation, persecution and loss.

Jesus Christ warned the women of events that would occur in AD70 with the destruction of Jerusalem.

There would be personal tragedy for mothers in that coming destruction.

As we look at Luke's use of the highly emotive theme of the blessing or curse of being a mother to certain children, we also see an emphasis on Jesus Christ as a figure whose birth, life and death are historically attested and are a part of the sweep of human history.

This is one way of looking at the Christian Bible from a more literary point of view that adds to our understanding of and appreciation for the message.

When we look closely at the Christian Bible, themes are echoed again and again, in the space of a few verses, or even spanning the gulf between the Old Testament and the New.

When we read and learn from the Christian Bible in this way, we can appreciate more deeply the rich tapestry of meaning.

Enough to satisfy us for a lifetime!