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The Birth of the Messiah and the Song of the Angels

THE STORY OF JESUS' BIRTH IN THE GOSPELS RESONATES with Jewish beliefs concerning God's plan of salvation and the promised coming of the messianic deliverer. The birth of the Messiah is by no means an ordinary affair. The event is marked by prophecy and angelic visitations. The song of the angels as told in Luke 2:14 expresses the inward yearnings of the Jewish people concerning the Messiah. These words of praise and adoration which define the messianic task have a rich Jewish background.

The threefold structure of the angelic song in the King James Version of the Bible is well known and often quoted during the Christmas season: 1. "Glory to God in the highest" 2. "on earth peace" 3. "goodwill toward men." Most modern translations, however, have a variant twofold version of the angelic song: 1. "Glory to God in the highest" 2. "Peace on earth toward men of goodwill." The first version emphasizes the universal meaning of the coming of the Messiah. Goodwill is for all people. The second version indicates that his coming is reserved for people who are worthy, that is, "men of goodwill." The difference between these two versions of the song is more significant than is often realized. David Flusser has argued strongly for the first version, that is, the three-part pronouncement of the angels.¹ Below we shall examine the Jewish background to the birth of the Messiah in the Gospels and the meaning of the song of the angels in order to understand the nature of the messianic task.

The texts of the Gospels are grounded in the rich diversity of Jewish messianic thought which characterized the late Second Temple period.² When studying the Gospels, one must seek to become aware of Jesus' distinctive message about his task.

Grounding this task in the expectations and traditions of first-century Judaism also includes certain distinct and innovative features. The song of the angels, "Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, goodwill toward men" or as other translations have rendered it, "Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth toward men of goodwill," has become a point of scholarly disagreement.³ As we examine the meaning of the birth of the Messiah in the context of ancient Jewish thought, the better reading of the threefold blessing for the angelic song will become clear. First the background of the story of the birth of the Messiah must be viewed within its historical and cultural context.

Important biblical figures chosen by God to carry out special tasks in salvation history often have unusual circumstances surrounding their births. The profile of such personalities in the Bible usually includes an account of the individual's miraculous birth. Frequently a miracle baby is considered to be destined for greatness in God's higher purposes. Salvation and redemption are made possible because God sets apart an individual even from the womb to be anointed for the divine task.

For instance, the Old Testament contains a number of miracle births. Abraham and Sarah miraculously give birth to Isaac.⁴ The Scripture teaches, "The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him" (Gen 21:1-2). Isaac had a unique task to fulfill in the divine plan. In addition to Isaac's birth, the births of Samson, who saved the people from the Philistines, and Samuel, who served as an anointed prophet, were also described as miraculous events (Judg 13:3, 24; 1 Sam 1:2, 20). Many rabbis felt that even Moses was a miracle baby.⁵ Isaac, Samson, Samuel, and certainly Moses all played special roles in the divine plan.

According to the rabbis, prophecy and divine intervention accompanied the birth of Moses. Like the child Jesus, whose unique mission prophecies foretold,⁶ Moses was the subject of a prophecy spoken by his sister Miriam. Before Moses was born, Miriam predicted the destiny of her baby brother. Moses became a model for the messianic idea. The Talmud tells about Miriam, who prophesied, saying, "In the future my mother will give birth to a son who will save Israel." At the time when

Moses was born, the whole house was filled with light. Her father stood up and kissed her on the head. He said to her, "My daughter, your prophecy has been fulfilled."⁷

Miriam prophesied about the task before Moses. God would use her infant brother to save Israel. The struggles of the family to protect the child from the Egyptian Pharaoh, who desired to kill all the Hebrew children, served the higher purpose of redeeming the people of Israel from slavery.

The stories of Jesus' birth are preceded in Luke's Gospel by the account of John the Baptist's family and his miraculous birth. John the Baptist also had a role to play. Perhaps Luke employed a source about the life and ministry of John for the record of these events.⁸ In any case, the episodes in the Gospel of Luke indicate the manner in which God used the longings of an ordinary family like Elizabeth and Zechariah, the mother and father of John the Baptist, to fulfill the divine strategy. They wanted a baby. When they prayed, God supernaturally intervened, and John the Baptist was born. His mission was to prepare the way for Jesus. Amazingly, the personal anguish of a barren family hoping for the birth of a child gave way to the higher purpose in God's divine plan to prepare for the coming of Jesus.

The shepherds who were watching their flocks by night were common Jewish laborers. One cannot be certain of their status in society but it seems that shepherds were not highly esteemed.⁹ Some suggest they were tending some of the sacrificial animals for the temple, but this is not implied in any way by the text. Unlike the account of Matthew where great wise men from the East are told of the coming king, the humble shepherds experienced the manifestation of angels who sang a blessing that described the purpose of Jesus' birth.¹⁰ In light of the descriptions of supernatural happenings associated with important figures in Jewish history, the angels' appearance and their hymn of praise are very much a part of the fabric of Hebrew thought for the messianic idea. The anticipation that the birth of the Messiah would be heralded by the angels of the divine presence was by no means foreign to popular thinking in the first century.

The difference between the two-part version of their song, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace toward men of goodwill," and the threefold blessing, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill toward men," is of

tremendous importance for the understanding of Jesus' messianic task. In Greek the difference between the two translations is actually only one letter. The word for "goodwill" in Greek, *eudokia*, in the nominative case supports the threefold translation. The merciful goodwill of God is designated for all people. When the one Greek letter, sigma (ς pronounced like the *s* sound in English), is added to the end of the word, *eudokia*, it is put in the genitive case and would be translated, "toward men of goodwill." The translation as a genitive, *eudokias*, accounts for the two-part version of the song. Reliable Greek manuscripts of Luke preserve both versions of the text, that is, with the sigma (in the genitive case) and without it (in the nominative case).¹¹ With the sigma, the text describes the nature of the people by the genitive case. Peace is promised only to people of goodwill, or as the Revised Standard Version translates, "among men with whom he [God] is pleased!" The word *eudokia* "goodwill" in Greek is a translation of the Hebrew term *ratzon* (e.g., in LXX 1 Chron 16:10; Ps 5:12).

The Dead Sea Scrolls use this term, *ratzon*, quite frequently. David Flusser has studied the word in the Dead Sea Scrolls and observed that it became a technical term for the sectarian theology of predestination in the community.¹² The elect are predestined to receive God's goodwill. Only they receive his benevolent favor. This specialized meaning of *ratzon* "goodwill," as Flusser has observed, departs from the sense of the word which occurs in the Hebrew Scriptures, where divine favor is more universal. At least traditional Jewish interpretations do not restrict the meaning of the word *ratzon* "goodwill" as does the Dead Sea community. Bruce Metzger comments in regard to the two-part text, "Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls it was sometimes argued that 'men of [God's] good pleasure' is an unusual, if not impossible, expression in Hebrew."¹³ With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, however, the expression has been found in the Hebrew of the sect. Since both readings are possible in Hebrew and both texts have strong support in the textual tradition, the task of determining which one of these variants is the better reading is indeed difficult.

Here, the context in the Gospel of Luke and the background from Jewish liturgy provide strong support for the threefold text of Luke 2:14:

1. "Glory to God in the highest"
2. "On earth peace"
3. "Goodwill toward men."

The angel who appears to the humble shepherds says to them, "Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people" (v. 10). The phrase "which shall be to all people" does not limit the message of peace to a select group.¹⁴ In Flusser's study of the theology of the Dead Sea sect, he has pointed out that this sectarian community understood God's goodwill (*ratzon*) as restricted to the members of their elect group. God's peace and goodwill could not be offered to anyone else. Everyone outside their limited number was predestined for eternal punishment. The concept of free will was not accepted by this group. They believed that an individual is not able to make the decision whether or not to follow the path of God. In their view, a person already possessed a spirit, either good or evil, which predetermined the individual's relationship to God. Therefore, they used the expression "men of goodwill" as a technical term for members of their own religious order.¹⁵ The wider Hebrew meaning of the term as found frequently in the Bible was ignored by the Dead Sea community. It is easy to understand how later Christian scribes may have been drawn to the genitive form of *eudokia* because it expressed their understanding of a limited salvation for those predestined for God's goodness. The threefold text for the birth of the Messiah, which proclaims God's goodwill to all people, however, most certainly is supported from the context in Luke 2:10. The glad tidings are for all people. Clearly the three-part version of the blessing in Luke 2:14 is the preferred translation. The King James Version renders a fine translation of the threefold text.

In the larger Jewish background of the text, Flusser has noticed also the strong similarities the threefold text of Luke shares with traditional liturgical blessings. For example, there is the description of the praise of the angels in Isaiah 6:3, when they cry out, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is filled with his glory." The Lord is called holy three times. The three-part structure of blessings as well as the rule of threes in storytelling is a well-known characteristic of folktales and a familiar literary device.¹⁶ In the praise of the angels who surround the heavenly throne, the word "holy" is used three

times in Isaiah. The Aramaic Targum of this passage provides insight into the ancient Jewish understanding of the text of Isaiah. Moreover, it forms a remarkable parallel to Luke 2:14.¹⁷ Again a three-part structure emerges from the song of the angels. The Targum of Isaiah says,

1. "Holy in the highest heaven, the house of his Presence"
2. "Holy upon the earth, the work of his might"
3. "Holy for endless ages is the Lord of hosts:
the whole earth is full of the brightness of his glory."

The song of the angels to the shepherds concerning the birth of the Messiah reflects the three-part litany of the angels in Isaiah's vision in Jewish tradition. The first blessing contains the strongest words of praise for God who is portrayed as the all-powerful king enthroned on high. "Glory to God in the highest" from Luke is parallel to "Holy in the highest heaven, the house of his Presence," from the Targum of Isaiah. The second blessing in Luke, "On earth peace" is echoed in the next blessing in Isaiah, "Holy upon earth the work of his might." The most important of the phrases in Luke, "goodwill toward men," finds parallel in the third part of the angels' song in the Targum of Isaiah, "the whole earth is full of the brightness of his glory."

The message of the angels for the birth of the Messiah is universal. The all-powerful God of heaven seeks to establish peace on earth and express his merciful will for all people. His divine favor is provided for all humanity. To understand fully the good tidings of the angels, one must recall the Hebrew meaning of peace. It is wholeness and completeness. Jesus is said to be the *Prince of Peace*. The word "prince" could refer to an official in government. During Jesus' day, governmental officials were in charge of war. Jesus, however, is not the minister of war. He is the Prince of Peace who brings wholeness and salvation for all the people. The goodwill of God is not restricted to those few who are predestined, but for all who receive God's divine favor. According to Jeremias, "goodwill" (Heb. *ratzon*), appears 56 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. In at least 37 instances, it refers to God's good pleasure.¹⁸ It is his higher purpose for those he created. The word "goodwill" denotes God's blessing and his divine favor. In Deuteronomy 33:24 "satisfied with goodwill" is paralleled by "full with the blessing of the LORD." Goodwill is a blessing of the Lord.

The word “goodwill” possessed deep meaning for the Jewish people in the first century. Not only is the term used in Old Testament passages like Deuteronomy 33:24, but in the Jewish literature around the time of Jesus it signifies God’s desire to express his merciful benevolence to humanity. In the Psalms of Solomon, “goodwill” describes God’s goodness: “To us and to our children, O Lord our Savior, be your goodwill [*eudokia*] forever; we shall not be moved forever.”¹⁹ Divine favor is expressed when God’s good pleasure is accomplished. His will is done. Thus in the Lord’s Prayer Jesus instructs his disciples to pray, “Thy will be done.” This word for will is the same term, *ratzon*, in Hebrew. It denotes God’s higher purpose and his good pleasure. It expresses what God truly desires. He wants people to experience his peace and salvation. The birth of the Messiah means that peace, divine wholeness, is made known to people. God’s merciful will is revealed for all of humanity in the coming of Jesus. His coming was for “all people” as indicated in Luke 2:10. The “goodwill” in the song of the angels refers to God’s divine favor which is being revealed in the birth of Jesus the Messiah. The mission of Jesus resonated with the song of the angels, “Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

NOTES

1. David Flusser, “Sanktus und Gloria,” in *Abraham unser Vater: Festschrift für Otto Michel zum 60. Geburtstag* (ed. O. Betz, M. Hengel, and P. Schmidt; Leiden: Brill, 1963) 129–52; reprinted now in D. Flusser, *Entdeckungen im Neuen Testament* 1.226–44. The approach of Flusser is favored by Jean Daniélou, *The Infancy Narratives* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) 63.

2. See the important study, R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1977; revised, 1993) 425–27.

3. While David Flusser (see note 1) has argued convincingly for the three-part song of the angels, the more accepted position today is by far the two-part version of the song. This position has appeared in numerous studies. See for example, E. Vogt, “‘Peace among Men of God’s Good Pleasure’ Luke 2,14,” in *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (ed. K. Stendahl; New York: Harper, 1957) 114–17; J. A. Fitzmyer, “‘Peace upon Earth among Men of His Good Will’ (Luke 2:14),” *Theological Studies* 19 (1958) 225–27; and also Randy Buth, “The Sons of His Will,” *Jerusalem Perspective* (November/December 1989) 6–7. Fitzmyer’s treatment presents the evidence for this view clearly. See also his fine

commentary, J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke* (AB 28; New York: Doubleday, 1981) 1.410–12. None of these studies, however, deals with the compelling evidence cited by Flusser for accepting the three-part song of the angels in Luke 2:14. In the present short chapter, only portions of Flusser's arguments will be presented.

4. Gen 18:10; 21:1–3; on Ishmael see also Gen 16:11.

5. See the discussion of David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (1956; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994) 5–9. See the excellent and intriguing study by Allan Kensky, "Moses and Jesus: The Birth of a Savior," *Judaism* 42 (1993) 43–49.

6. See Luke 2:25–38.

7. B. *Megillah* 14a and see parallel traditions b. *Sotah* 13a; Mechilta de Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai on Exodus 15:20 (Epstein and Melamed, p. 100); Exodus Rabbah 1:22; Numbers Rabbah 13:19; Midrash Mishle 14.

8. It would not be surprising if a source similar to the Gospel stories about Jesus was written about the life of John the Baptist and circulated among his followers. The stories about John the Baptist's birth could have been a part of such a text. In the prologue to Luke's Gospel, Luke explains that he used sources available to him that could throw light upon Jesus' life. Though a Baptist source has not survived the centuries, such a literary work may have circulated widely during the period.

9. As Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1.408, correctly notes, "News of the birth of the Messiah is first made known, not to religious or secular rulers of the land, but to lowly inhabitants of the area, busy with other matters." The good news is not given to the high and mighty power brokers of that day but to the common folk.

10. Joseph Frankovic has suggested that the universal message of the angelic hymn is supported by the fact that the angels appear to humble shepherds who were regarded as a dubious lot (private communication). Were shepherds widely esteemed as "men of goodwill"? The wise men would be more suitable for such a descriptive term, but not shepherds.

11. For a consideration of the textual evidence see Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975) 133; and Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1.411. Both Metzger and Fitzmyer see stronger textual support for the two-part text. But the correctors of Sinaiticus and Vaticanus as well as L, Θ, and patristic evidence should not be dismissed lightly. It is easier to explain how scribes would change the nominative form into the genitive for their theological purposes than to imagine that the sigma of the genitive case was deleted to make the text more universal in outlook. For further evidence see *The New Testament in Greek. The Gospel according to St. Luke* (ed. American and British Committees of the International Greek New Testament Project; Oxford: Clarendon, 1984) 1.39–40.

12. See Flusser, "Sanktus und Gloria," 130 and 149.

13. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 133. It is clear that both texts are possible in Hebrew. However, the sectarian thought of the religious order stands behind the construction of the phrase in the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The more direct Hebrew reconstruction, *ratzon le-bene adam*, as would be in the threefold text of the song of the angels, is far better.

14. In the least, the phrase from Luke 2:10, “to all the people” (Greek *panti to lao* or in Hebrew *lakol haam*), refers to all the people of Israel, which is more universal than the restrictive “men of goodwill.” The words of the angel of the Lord in Luke 2:10, “I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people,” portray an event in salvation history for the entire nation.

15. The term, “men of goodwill” *meanshe ratzon* (literally “from men of goodwill”), appears only once in an unpublished Dead Sea Scroll fragment 4Q418 (PAM 41.908; see S. Reed, M. Lundberg, E. Tov, and Stephan J. Pfann, *The Dead Sea Scrolls on Microfiche* [Leiden: Brill, 1993], and also R. Eisenman and J. Robinson, *A Facsimile Edition of the Dead Sea Scrolls* [Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1991], vol. 1, plate 506). The terms “sons of thy goodwill” *bene ratzonchah* (1QH 4.32f., 11.9) and “the chosen of goodwill” *bachire ratzon* (1QH 8.6), published some time ago from the Thanksgiving Scroll, have led a number of scholars to think that the phrase “men of goodwill” is idiomatic Hebrew. These word constructions, however, reflect the high sectarian and exclusive theology of the Dead Sea Scrolls. On one occasion, David Flusser wrote to me, “In my opinion, such a phrase as ‘men of goodwill’ cannot be said in Hebrew” (private communication). That such a phrase appears in the Dead Sea Scrolls does not mean necessarily that it is fine idiomatic Hebrew. As Bruce Metzger observed, “Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls it was sometimes argued that ‘men of God’s good pleasure’ is an unusual, if not impossible, expression in Hebrew” (Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 133). The evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls must be weighed and evaluated in light of all considerations. I tend to agree with Flusser that the phrase “men of goodwill” is exceedingly difficult if not altogether impossible in Hebrew. The scrolls reflect the theological outlook of the sect, and this particular Hebrew construction is somewhat strained. They see men of goodwill as the sons of light in their community who are predestined to receive salvation. In ancient Jewish teachings, however, it was more acceptable to speak about God’s goodwill.

16. The three-part nature of storytelling as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, for instance, where one sees (1) Priest (2) Levite and (3) Samaritan does not prove the point—but it does strengthen the other evidence in favor of “goodwill toward men” in Luke 2:14 (cf. Exod 20:4). On the parables, see also H. McArthur and R. Johnston, *They Also Taught in Parables* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 132–34.

17. See especially Flusser, "Sanktus und Gloria," 151.
18. See J. Jeremias, "Anthropoi eudokias (Lc 2, 14)," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 28 (1929) 13–20. See especially p. 16.
19. Psalms of Solomon 8:39. See R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977) 2.642. Most authorities agree that the Psalms of Solomon were originally composed in Hebrew and translated into Greek. See R. Wright, "Psalms of Solomon," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (ed. J. Charlesworth; New York: Doubleday, 1985) 2.640.