

Lectionary Commentary



Epiphany, Year B

Little Way Chapel

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Little Way Lectionary

Candlemas (The Feast of the Presentation of the Lord), Year B

Malachi 3:1-4, Hebrews 2:14-18, Luke 2:22-40

Introduction

This week, we focus on Candlemas, or the Feast of the Presentation, which is typically relocated from its official feast day on February 2 to this Sunday. This commentary features:

- A brief overview of the history of Candlemas (also known as the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord or the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin), with a particular emphasis on its place in the history of the English church.
- The second section treats the Gospel reading, a lengthy extract from Luke 2 describing how Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple and there met two aged prophets, Simeon and Anna. My discussion divides into four sections of uneven length: Mary's offering; Simeon's consolation; Anna's praise; and Jesus' growth. I argue that Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple, not to "redeem" him from the Lord's claim on his life as a firstborn son, but rather to "present" him to the Lord in acknowledgement of that claim, and of the vocation which would ultimately take Jesus to the cross. I also trace the Isaianic background of Simeon's and Anna's expectations, and explore the implications for our understanding of Christ's person and natures of Luke's claim that he "grew in wisdom."
- My exposition of the reading from Malachi 3 focuses initially on its relation to Luke 2, but also how this passage informs Paul's understanding of post-mortem purgation in 1 Cor. 3.
- Finally, my discussion of Hebrews 2 is largely an infomercial for the work of my teacher David Moffitt, who is arguably the greatest living interpreter of Hebrews. In particular, I summarize some of his arguments for the importance of Jesus' resurrection and ascension for the Epistle's account of how he frees us from the fear of death and makes atonement for sins.

Candlemas: An Overview

The Feast of the Presentation of Jesus (aka the Purification of the Virgin or Candlemas) has been celebrated since the earliest centuries of the church, eventually settling on February 2nd once the date of Christmas was fixed as December 25th. As I detail in the next section, the occasion for the feast is the purification of the Virgin Mary following Leviticus 12's prescriptions for new mothers, and her "presentation" of the infant Jesus in the Temple. When a woman named Egeria visited Jerusalem on pilgrimage from Gaul in the 380s, she described its celebration as follows: "The fortieth day after Epiphany is undoubtedly celebrated here with the very highest honor, for on that day there is a procession, in which all take part in the Anastasis, and all things are done in their order with the greatest joy, just as at Easter" (*The Pilgrimage of Egeria*, III.4, p. 56).

No later than the early Middle Ages, the practice of blessing candles (hence, Candle Mass or Candlemas) had become a key element in the celebration of this feast, influenced in part by Simeon's description of Jesus as "a light for the revelation to the nations" (Lk. 2:38). Of particular interest to Anglicans is the witness of Aelfric of Eynsham (ca. 900 AD), an English monk whose Anglo-Saxon *Catholic Homilies* are perhaps the earliest sermon-cycle in any European vernacular. In his sermon for this feast, which he calls "the Purification of St. Mary," Aelfric concludes with a bit of combined liturgical history and processional instruction: "Let each know that it is set down in the churchly customs, that we on this day bear our lights to church, and let them there be blessed: and that we should go afterwards with the light among God's houses, and sing the hymn that is thereto appointed. Though some men cannot sing, they can, nevertheless, bear the light in their hands; for on this day was Christ, the true Light, borne to the temple, who redeemed us from darkness and brings us to the Eternal Light."

In her recent book, *Winters in the World: A Journey through the Anglo-Saxon Year*, the historian Eleanor Parker offers a lovely meditation on the place of Candlemas in the turning of the year, particularly in northern climes: "The Christmas season came to an end on 2 February, with Candlemas. Candlemas is...a transitional festival, which looks back to Christmas and forwards to Easter...Candlemas is a festival which has at its heart a meeting between childhood and old age [e.g., of the baby Jesus with the aged Simeon and Anna], birth and death, and winter and spring...2 February coincided with a significant point in the solar year: midway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox, it's a time when the days are getting longer, daylight is growing stronger, and in northern Europe, the earliest spring flowers are starting to appear. It was a natural time for a festival of light, and that was what Candlemas became" (86-87).

Annotated Translation

22 And when the days of their purification were fulfilled according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord” [cf. Exod. 13:2]) 24 and to give a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons” [Lev. 12:8]. 25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and reverent, awaiting the consolation of Israel, and a holy spirit was upon him. 26 And he had been advised by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Anointed. 27 And he came in the Spirit into the holy place; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, that they might do for him according to the custom of the law, 28 he himself received the child in his arms and blessed God and said,

29 “Master, you now are letting your slave depart in peace,
according to your word;
30 for my eyes have seen your salvation
31 which you have prepared before the face of all peoples,
32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and glory to your people Israel.”

33 And his father and his mother were marveling at what was said about him; 34 and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother,

“Behold, this one is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel,
and for a sign to be contradicted
35 (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also),
that thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

36 And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher; she was much advanced in days, having lived with her husband seven years from her virginity, 37 and as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the holy place, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. 38 And coming up at that very hour she gave thanks to God, and spoke of him to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.

39 And when they had completed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their city, Nazareth. 40 And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon him.

Translation Notes

v. 22: “their purification”-- does Luke think that Joseph (and/or Jesus) also had to be purified alongside Mary? Some early versions of Luke have the more intelligible, “her purification,” but that also might have been introduced to correct the confusing “their.”

v. 25-26: I switch in these verses between “a holy spirit” and “the Holy Spirit” because Luke (apparently) does so -- the expression’s first occurrence in v. 25 lacks the Greek article (“the”), while second has it. Luke’s usage isn’t obviously significant to me, however, so I understand the impulse to paper over the differences in translation.

v. 27: “τὸ ἱερόν,” “the holy place,” probably meaning the Temple courtyard (cf. also v. 37), as opposed to the sanctuary (ναός), where Zechariah is found serving in Lk. 1:9 (cf. Brown, 1977: 439).

v. 29: “Master (δεσπότης)” rather than “Lord (κύριος).” In *The Birth of the Messiah*, Raymond Brown (1977: 439) notes that this term, unusual as a divine epithet, is also used of God in the prayer of the Jerusalem congregation in Acts 4:24, which might indicate a common source for both traditions in that community.

v. 34: Simeon’s prophecy that Jesus would be a “sign to be contradicted (σημεῖον ἀντιλεγόμενον)” is confirmed at the end of Luke’s sequel in Acts, where the Jews in Rome tell Paul that his “sect is everywhere contradicted (ἀντιλέγεται)” (28:22).

v. 36: “of the tribe of Asher”-- Anna is the only character in the NT described as coming from one of the “lost” northern tribes of Israel, which were scattered among the nations by the Assyrians following their destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Other Jews whose tribes are identified come from the expected Southern survivors, namely Judah (Jesus), Benjamin (Paul, Phil. 3:5), and Levi (Barnabas, cf. Acts 4:36). How did this lone Asherite come to be hanging around the Temple? Luke might mention it simply as a curiosity, but, as Brown notes (1977: 440), the name “Asher” is etymologically related to a Hebrew word meaning “happy” or “blessed,” a fact which is made explicit in a verse celebrating Asher’s birth: “And Leah said, ‘Happy am I (’רִשָׁא)! For the women will call me happy’; so she called his name Asher (רִשָׁא)” (Gen. 30:13). Note as well the resonances of this verse with Mary’s Magnificat (cf. Lk. 1:48). In that light, perhaps the choice -- either Luke’s as author of the text or the LORD’s as ordainer of the events! -- of “Asher” had symbolic value: Hannah of the blessed tribe is blessed by the sight of the savior.

v. 37: Luke’s Greek could also mean that Anna had been a widow for eighty-four years, which would make her well over 100 in total.

Reflections on Luke 2

The Gospel reading divides relatively cleanly into four sections, which we'll treat in turn: Mary's offering (Lk. 2:22-24); Simeon's Consolation (Lk. 2:25-35); Anna's Praise (Lk. 2:36-38); and Jesus' Growth (Lk. 2:39-40).

Mary's Offering (v. 22-24)

Forty days after Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph take him to Jerusalem (presumably from nearby Bethlehem). Luke gives two reasons for their making this visit. The second of them is the easiest to understand: Mary comes to the Temple to make offerings for her "purification" following the requirements of Leviticus 12:

"And when the days of her purifying are fulfilled, for a son, or for a daughter, she shall bring a lamb of the first year for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon, or a turtledove, for a sin offering, unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, unto the priest: Who shall offer it before the LORD, and make an atonement for her; and she shall be cleansed from the issue of her blood. This is the law for her that hath born a male or a female. And if she be not able to bring a lamb, then she shall bring two turtledoves, or two young pigeons; the one for the burnt offering, and the other for a sin offering: and the priest shall make an atonement for her, and she shall be clean" (Lev. 12:6-8).

This is not to say, of course, that Leviticus 12 is perfectly pellucid; in particular, the requirement that the mother not only bring a burnt offering (הֲלֵל) but also a sin offering (חַטָּאת) is puzzling. Why would giving birth be something not merely to be cleansed from (as were all acts or life stages involving the emission of bodily fluids), but also to repent of and be forgiven for? The Babylonian Talmud (ca. 500-600 AD) testifies to the theological problem here by offering a particularly far-fetched interpretation of the sin-offering requirement:

"The students of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai asked him: For what reason does the Torah say that a woman after childbirth brings an offering? He said to them: At the time that a woman crouches to give birth, her pain is so great that she impulsively takes an oath that she will not engage in intercourse with her husband ever again, so that she will never again experience this pain. Therefore, the Torah says that she must bring an offering for violating her oath and continuing to engage in intercourse with her husband" (*Babylonian Talmud, Niddah 31b*).

On this view, the sin offering is demanded because (all?) women laboring to deliver their babies falsely swear that they will never again sleep with their husbands, and so need to atone for their lie. This is pretty clearly not the original rationale for the requirement, but the fact that no more plausible explanation is given by Rabbi Shimon suggests that it was a source of confusion for Jewish exegetes in his time.

But I digress: whatever the Law's rationale, Mary recognized it as applying to her, and so came to Jerusalem to make the offering which would satisfy it. Note that Mary offer the two birds which Leviticus proposes as a concession to those who can't afford a lamb, suggesting that she and Joseph were relatively poor.

Things are less clear, however, where the other stated motive for their visit is concerned: Mary and Joseph also come "to present [Jesus] to the Lord, as it is written in the Law of the Lord, 'Every male who opens the womb'" -- i.e., every first-born boy -- "will be called holy" (Lk. 2:22-23, cf. Exod. 13:2). Later, we are told that "the parent brought the child in to do according to the custom of the Law concerning him" (Lk. 2:27).

The background to this part of the story is that, in the Torah, firstborn sons, like the firstborn offspring of Israel's animals, are set apart for the LORD, and so must be "redeemed" through a payment of five shekels to the priests (Exod. 13:12-13). In the immediate context, this is described as a reminder of the way in which God spared the Israelite firstborn from the slaughter of the firstborn in Egypt (cf. Exod. 13:14-15). However, as the Jewish biblical scholar Jon Levenson has argued in his brilliant book, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity*, these practices also likely reflect a ritual sublimation of earlier rites of child sacrifice, both as practiced by non-Israelite Canaanites (cf. Lev. 18:3, 20:3; Deut. 12:30-31, 18:10) and perhaps also by the Israelites themselves.

Some parts of the Old Testament arguably preserve memories of this type of sacrifice within Israel. Exodus 22, for instance, is at least ambiguous about the obligations imposed on Israel regarding their firstborn sons: "The first-born of your sons you shall give to me. You shall do likewise with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall be with its dam; on the eighth day you shall give it to me" (Exod. 22:29b-30). Notice that no "redemption" of the son is explicitly in view here, as it is in Exodus 13. So too, the prophet Micah privileges the pursuit of "justice" and "kindness" over sacrifice, whether of "calves," "rams," or "my firstborn son" (Mic. 6:6-8), with no indication that offering the son is in principle any less acceptable to God than offering domestic animals. And in Numbers 31, in the division of the spoils following Israel's conquest of Midian, the LORD receives a "tribute" from each category of booty: 675 sheep, 72 cattle, and 61 donkeys (Numb. 31:37-39), all of them presumably destined for sacrifice, but also, ominously, a "tribute" of 32 virgin girls from among the human captives (Numb. 31:40). Levenson suggests that these passages, among others, might reflect a stage of Israel's religious life when at least some regarded human sacrifice to the LORD as not merely permitted but perhaps even required in certain circumstances (1993: 3-18).

With the command to "redeem" the firstborn son, then, the Torah at once affirms the "holiness" of these children as belonging to the LORD, and rejects the principle that they would be offered to him via blood sacrifice. Their lives are ransomed from God with the payment of the five shekels, as well as with the "offering" of the Levites to dedicated service to God on behalf of the rest of Israel (Numb. 8:15-16). We might assume, then, that Luke envisions that Mary and Joseph intended to pay their five shekels to redeem Jesus at the same time as Mary made her purification offerings.

This is in fact far from clear in our reading, however. For one thing, Luke does not say that they went to the Temple to “redeem (λύτρωσαι)” Jesus as specified in Exodus 13:12 (in fact, he doesn’t reference this passage at all), nor does he narrate them as making the requisite payment. Rather, he says that they came “to present [him] to the Lord (παραστήσαι τῷ κυρίῳ)” (Lk. 2:22). The point of this passage is arguably not that Mary redeemed Jesus from the Lord’s claim to his life; rather, its point is that she did *not* redeem him, but instead offered him wholly to the Lord, in anticipation of his eventual, sacrificial death. Simeon’s warning to Mary that a sword would pierce her soul (cf. Lk. 2:35) was given in recognition of the price she would pay for this selfless gift of what was dearest to her in the world.

As William Glass argues in a [brilliant essay](#) about the role of Mary’s faithful obedience in God’s plan of salvation, “The conception and birth of Samuel, which motivates Hannah’s hymn of deliverance” - a passage noisily echoed in Mary’s Magnificat (cf. Lk. 1:46-56, 2 Sam. 2:1-10) -- “is followed by her presentation of the boy at the Shiloh sanctuary. As far as we know, after she brings her son to Eli, she never again lays eyes on the child God gave her. This act of Hannah is the right interpretation of Mary’s presentation of her Son at the Temple...In bringing [Jesus] to the Temple, as Hannah had, [Mary] offers him there to the Lord as a living sacrifice [cf. Rom. 12:1]. She does not redeem him there because she renounces any claim at all to his life.” (And notice that there is a “Hannah” (translated into Greek as AVVQ in LXX 1 Samuel 1) in the Temple when Mary arrives!)

When read in light of Luke’s Gospel as a whole, however, the presentation not only figures Christ as the firstborn son, set apart as holy to the Lord, but also takes on the additional sense of a fulfillment of the promise (and warning) in Malachi 3:1b, “the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.” After all, Jesus himself would later describe John the Baptist as the messenger promised in the first half of this verse: “This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee’” (Lk. 7:27, cf. Mal. 3:1a).

And Jesus’ remarks merely make explicit what was implicit in Gabriel’s promise to Zechariah that John “will go before [the Lord] in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children” (Lk. 1:17), here echoing to Malachi 4: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD, and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (4:5-6). John the Baptist comes first as the Lord’s messenger, and Jesus follows after, his presentation marking an unexpected fulfillment of the promise of Lord’s sudden arrival at his Temple.

Simeon’s Consolation (v. 25-35)

If the focus in the initial verses of our passage is on the requirements of the Torah, Simeon’s entrance shifts our gaze toward the Prophets, serving as he does as a kind of personification of Old Testament prophecy, or rather, of Israel’s expectant meditation upon God’s long-deferred promises (cf. Brown, 1977: 452). Voicing hopes nourished across a lifetime (Simeon’s old age has traditionally been inferred from his announcement that God has now set him free to die, v. 29), Simeon’s words are drawn from a number of passages in from the later chapters of Isaiah (esp. ch. 40-ff.).

“My eyes have seen your salvation” (Lk. 2:30), Simeon says, echoing Isaiah’s “All flesh shall see the salvation (τὸ σωτήριον τοῦ θεοῦ)” (Isa. 40:5). Notice that this passage is directly quoted in Luke 3:4-6, in reference to John’s ministry. I also suspect that this line is meant to invoke a pun on Jesus’ name in Hebrew (Yehoshua, *יְהוֹשֻׁעַ*), which is of course strikingly similar to the Hebrew for “salvation (*יְשׁוּעָה*).” This idea is especially compelling if you think -- as I do -- that much of Luke, including the Infancy Narrative, consists of translations from Hebrew and Aramaic sources. This is not the place to explore this in-depth -- perhaps we’ll come back to it in a later installment -- but if you’d like to explore this idea more deeply, two great places to start are Charles Torrey’s *Our Translated Gospels* (1936), and James Edwards’s *The Hebrew Gospel and the Development of the Synoptic Tradition* (2009).

Simeon’s “before the face of all peoples (κατὰ πρόσωπον πάντων τῶν λαῶν)” might evoke Isaiah’s “the Lord will reveal his holy arm before all peoples (ἐνώπιον πάντων τῶν ἐθνῶν)” (Isa. 52:10, LXX). And his “light for revelation to the Gentiles (φῶς εἰς ἀποκάλυψιν ἐθνῶν)” echoes Isaiah’s promise that the Lord’s Servant would be given “for a light for the Gentiles (εἰς φῶς ἐθνῶν)” (Isa. 42:6, LXX), while his “glory of your people, Israel” likely evokes Isaiah 46: “I bring near my deliverance, it is not far off, and my salvation will not tarry; I will put salvation in Zion for Israel, my glory (*תִּי אֶבְרִיךָ לְאֵלֵינוּ*)” (46:13). (In this case, Luke’s allusion seems to better correspond to the Hebrew Massoretic Text than to the LXX, which has “to Israel for glory (τῷ Ἰσραηλ εἰς δόξασμα).”)

As Richard Hays notes, “Most interesting of all, however, is Luke’s statement that Simeon was awaiting ‘the consolation (παράκλησις) of Israel [Lk. 2:27].’ The theme of *consolation* is the keynote sounded at the beginning of Isaiah’s prophecy of return and restoration: ‘Comfort, comfort my people (LXX: παρακαλεῖτε παρακαλεῖτε τὸν λαόν μου), says God’ (Isa. 40:1). In other words, to say that Simeon was awaiting ‘the παράκλησις of Israel’ can mean only one thing: he was remembering Isaiah 40 and awaiting the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy that Israel’s time of punishment and exile would come to an end” (*Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, 217).

Anna’s Praise

As we’ve already noted, Anna is a mysterious figure, not least for her membership in the tribe of Asher, but equally for her great age; for her long dedication to chaste widowhood in a society in which widows were expected to remarry if at all possible, out of economic necessity as much as social propriety; and for her devotion to the hope of a coming “redemption of Jerusalem (λύτρωσις Ἱερουσαλήμ)” (Lk. 2:38). As with Simeon, Anna’s expectations are firmly grounded in Isaiah, in this case in Isaiah 52:9: “the LORD has comforted (ἠπαρηγόρησεν) his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem (ἠλυτρώθη Ἱερουσαλήμ)” (Isa. 52:9). (Here again, the allusion is more directly to the Hebrew version of this prophecy than to its Old Greek translation.)

We find an important model for Anna’s dedication to chaste widowhood in the Book of Judith (cf. Brown, 1977: 468), which survives only in a Greek version (translation?), and which is regarded by Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox as Scripture, but as “deuterocanonical” by most Protestants. After Judith’s husband dies, she “remained as a widow for three years and four months at home, where she set up a tent for herself on the roof of her house. She put sackcloth around her waist and dressed in

widow's clothing. She fasted all the days of her widowhood except the day before the Sabbath and the Sabbath itself, the day before the new moon and the day of the new moon, and the festivals and days of rejoicing of the house of Israel" (Jdt. 8:4-8). Perhaps Anna's devout widowhood was inspired directly by Judith.

Anna's form of life also clearly anticipates important aspects of the life of the earliest church. As Brown notes, "Anna who never leaves the Temple courts and who worships God day and night in fasting and in prayer is the forerunner of the Jerusalem Christian church which devotes itself to prayer and day by day attends the Temple (Acts 2:42, 46)" (1977: 453). So too, Anna's widowhood anticipates the prominent social role played by widows in the New Testament church, not least because of the social provision that was made for them (cf. Acts 6:1, 1 Tim. 5:4-9).

Jesus' Growth

This superficially banal conclusion -- they went back to Nazareth, and Jesus grew up like the healthy, intelligent boy he was -- underscores a critical point which would be the subject of great controversy for decades and indeed centuries after Luke wrote. In view of early Christian convictions about the divinity of Christ, what is most shocking about this passage is that Jesus actually grew and developed, cognitively as well as physically, like any other human. Outside of Luke, Jesus' embrace of human limitation is apparent in his profession of ignorance in Mark 13:32, and in the Epistle to the Hebrews' comments that Jesus was "made like his brethren in every respect" (2:17), and "learned obedience through what he suffered" (5:8).

To see just how differently some early Christians thought about this issue, you need only consult *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, the first surviving reference to which comes from Irenaeus of Lyons' (ca. 175 AD), who quotes it and describes it as one of the "apocryphal and spurious writings" which his "Gnostic" opponents employ (*Against Heresies*, 1.20.1). This document purports to describe a number of incidents from the life of Jesus between the ages of five and twelve (which are skipped over by all the canonical Gospels). It describes the child Jesus as performing a series of miracles (including bringing clay sparrows to life) as well as maiming or killing several other children and their parents after they insult or annoy him (chs. 2-4).

For our purposes, the most revealing section of this short text is an incident in which a man named "Zacchaeus" tries to teach the five-year-old Jesus the (Greek) alphabet. Far from needing the lesson, Jesus hectors him in response: "Thou who art ignorant of the nature of the Alpha, how canst thou teach others the Beta? Thou hypocrite! First, if thou knowest, teach the A, and then we shall believe thee about the B...Hear, O teacher, the order of the first letter, and notice here how it has lines, and a middle stroke crossing those which thou seest common; (lines) brought together; the highest part supporting them, and again bringing them under one head; with three points of intersection; of the same kind; principal and subordinate; of equal length. Thou hast the lines of the A" (ch. 6). In this text, far from needing to "grow in wisdom," Jesus is intellectually perfected even as a small child.

The question of Jesus' human development has remained a perennial problem in the history of Christian thought. In the fourth century, a priest named Apollinaris drew the ire of many when he argued that Jesus had no human intellect, since the "Word" assumed only "flesh" (cf. Jn. 1:14). Apollinaris was motivated not least by the superficially reasonable concern that a human intellect would serve no purpose for Jesus: after all, isn't God the Son already omniscient in his divine intellect? Wouldn't his employing a human mind as well be a bit like carrying a candle around in broad daylight? The best single response to Apollinaris was the profoundly Lukan insight offered by St. Gregory of Nazianzus in his "Epistle to Cledonius": "Whatever is not assumed is not healed." That is, anything in the human experience that Jesus has not taken into union with his deity has not been healed by that union; if our minds are sin-sick as well as our flesh, then we had better hope that Jesus had a human mind as well as a human body.

Annotated Translation

Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like the soap of those who tread the washing; 3 he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the LORD. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

v. 1a: “my messenger (מַלְאָכִי),” or, transliterated, “Malachi.” This, of course, is also the name of the book’s eponymous prophet (Mal. 1:1). This might also be translated as “my angel”, מַלְאָכִי being the usual Hebrew word for “angel” as well as “messenger.” Cf. closely similar expression in Exod. 23:20: “I am sending an angel before you, to guard you on your way.” (The LXX is even closer to Mal. 3: “I am sending my angel (τὸν ἄγγελόν μου) before you...”

v. 1b: “will suddenly come to his Temple”-- does this imply that God is not in the reconstructed second Temple? At the consecration of Solomon’s Temple, the sanctuary had been visibly filled with “the glory of the Lord” (1 Kgs. 8:10-11). Later, Ezekiel had a vision of the departure of “the glory of the Lord,” along with the mobile chariot-throne, from the first Temple ahead of its destruction (Ezek. 10:15-18, 11:22-25). And when the second Temple was reconsecrated, there was apparently no comparable visible manifestation of the divine glory; on the contrary, many of those old enough to remember the first Temple wept at its diminishment (Ezra 3:11-13). Does Malachi presuppose this broad narrative of a “continuing exile” of Israel’s God from the Land and people?

v. 2: “of those who tread the washing” is my cumbersome attempt to improve on the RSV’s opaque “fuller’s.” The “soap (בְּרִית)” in question is described as pertaining to “מִסְבָּחִים”, from the root, “סָבַח,” meaning, “to stamp, to tread.” The image is of people washing clothes by stomping on them in a basin of soapy water -- in the analogy, the unfortunate Levites are the clothes being ground and squeezed in the purificatory process.

The Refiner's Fire in 1 Cor. 3

I wouldn't expect you to preach on this at the Feast of the Presentation, but as a point of interest for you to tuck away for another occasion, I thought I would explore the influence of Malachi 3-4 on 1 Corinthians 3. (For more on this topic, see my book, *The Accountable Animal: Justice, Justification, and Judgment*, chapter 5). In this chapter, Paul describes the various fates which await each person's "works" on the day of the Lord. The presenting issue in this section of the letter is the division of the Corinthian church into rival factions, perhaps attached to the various teachers (Paul, Apollos, Cephas) who had shaped them (1 Cor. 1:10-11, 3:4, perhaps 16:12). Paul responds to this factionalism by describing the division of labor within the church's mission: he planted the Corinthian church as a garden, and Apollos watered it (1 Cor. 3:6). Or, alternatively, he laid a foundation for the church in his preaching of "nothing...except Jesus Christ, and him crucified," and then another built upon it (1 Cor. 3:10-11, 1 Cor. 2:2) – but how?

When Paul comes to the building-analogy, the stakes of laboring on God's behalf come into focus, for it is possible that the teacher will build well or badly, either with "gold, silver, and precious stones," or with "wood, grass, and reeds" (1 Cor. 3:12). Paul notes that the shoddy builder might find his works consumed by the fire of judgment which will pass over all on "the day" (1 Cor. 3:13). He envisions two possibilities for such workers: either they will receive a "wage" for their good works (1 Cor. 3:8, 14), or "suffer loss" when their deeds become "manifest," even if they are "saved, but as if through fire" (3:15).

This passage offers a clear biblical hint regarding the need for post-mortem purgation, focusing as it does on the purification of the believer from imperfect works by the revelatory fire of his encounter with Christ. The final judgment, Paul warns, will not be experienced identically even by those who will be saved from (or rather, by) it. The judgment carried out over each man's works (cf. 2 Cor. 5:10, Rom. 2:6, etc.) will not be a mere external assessment, but a fire which probes and tests those works, consuming all that is unfitting for God's presence. Some will come through that fire greatly resembling the person who entered it; others will come out utterly – and, if the image tells us anything, agonizingly – transformed.

As David Fryer-Griggs has shown, this passage as a whole is plainly adapted from the vision in Malachi of God's return to his Temple for purifying judgment:

The Lord whom you seek will come suddenly to his temple...And he will purify the sons of Levi and pour them out like gold and like silver...Behold, the day of the Lord comes, burning like a kiln, and it will ignite them, and all those who do lawless things will be reeds (καλάμη)" (Mal. 3:1, 3, 19, LXX). (In the LXX Malachi 4 is just folded into the end of ch. 3).

As Paul interprets this passage in light of Christ, the church itself is the Temple which is built upon the foundation of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 3:11, 16; 6:19; cf. also Eph. 2:20-21, 1 Pet. 2:5). The day of the Lord sweeps over it like fire, consuming its lawless "reeds (καλάμη)," but purifying the good, as with gold and silver (1 Cor. 3:12).

Now this sheds a great deal of light on the fire of 1 Corinthians 3:15. After all, in Malachi 4 (LXX), the fire is clearly not an obstacle to salvation (much less an agent of damnation!), but its instrument. And this, as Fryer-Griggs documents copiously, is typical of the Old Testament and of Second Temple Jewish literature as a whole (cf. Zech. 13:9, Ps. 65:10-12; 2 Macc. 2:29; 4 Macc. 7:12; 1 Pet. 1:7; Philo, *De Abrahamo* 1) (“Neither Prooftext Nor Proverb,” 520). Also typical, at least in the NT, is the use of *sōzō* + *dia* + genitive to indicate the means by which salvation is effected: in Roman 5:9, we are “saved through him,” namely Christ, while in Ephesians 2:8, we are “saved through faith” (cf. also Tit. 3:5, Acts 15:11).

You might object, however, that this purgatorial reading of 1 Corinthians 3:15 muddles Paul’s metaphor: after all, in this verse, the fire tests the building, not the builder. Isn’t Paul merely describing the reward or punishment meted out to ministers of the Gospel based on the success or failure of the communities they form? Why generalize this passage to describe the purifying judgment of the baptized? The objection captures an important limitation of Paul’s architectural metaphor, for in 1 Corinthians 3, the builder is part of the building he helps to construct. (Paul surely does not intend to exclude himself from the “Temple” of the church described in 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19, or Ephesians 2:19-22.)

Paul himself muddles the metaphor in his adaptation of Malachi 3: whereas in Malachi, God comes to his Temple to purify “the sons of Levi as silver,” and to consume “the arrogant” like “reeds,” in 1 Corinthians 3, Paul identifies those materials as the (human) building blocks of a new, spiritual Temple. For this Temple, church leaders such as Paul and Apollos bear special responsibility, since they serve as architects in its framing. The special judgment for which 1 Corinthians 3 singles out the work of an apostle is not in tension with the universal purification of the church, but rather presupposes it. The two are one event, viewed in different aspects.

Hebrews 2:14-18

Annotated Translation

14 Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong enslavement. 16 For he surely did not take on the angels, but he took on the seed of Abraham. 17 Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. 18 For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.

One general comment: I won't here expatiate on the occasion, dating, and authorship of Hebrews, but will instead merely encourage you to read William Glass's brilliant treatment of these issues in his "Apollos and the Pauline Influence on Hebrews: A Proposal of Origin and Occasion," in our jointly authored, *Least of the Apostles: Paul and His Legacies in Earliest Christianity* (Wipf & Stock, 2022).

v. 14: Why is it that Jesus' death breaks the power the Devil exercises over us through our fear of death? It seems to me that the author here presupposes the importance of Jesus' *resurrection*, which demonstrates the ultimate impotence of death, and so frees us from the terror it would otherwise inflict. On the importance of the resurrection to "indestructible life" (cf. Heb. 7:16) for the theology of Hebrews, see esp. David Moffitt's *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in Hebrews* and *Rethinking the Atonement*. In *Rethinking the Atonement*, Moffitt argues that Heb. 2:14 alludes to the Passover: Jesus is the new Moses who, by covering God's people with saving blood, forestalls the power of "the destroyer" (cf. Exod. 12:23, and Moffitt, *Rethinking the Atonement*, 19-23).

v. 16: The ESV's "help" or the RSV's "be concerned with" are possible, albeit rare, meanings of "ἐπιλαμβάνομαι," but in this case, either confuses the sense of the passage (cf. Heb. 2:9-18), which is concerned to show that the Son had to assume passible flesh and suffer in order to defeat death and the Devil (2:14). The Son became a human being rather than an angel because only human beings are subject to death (2:16). The KJV's rendering of 2:16 ("For verily he took not on him the nature of angels") better draws out this point, and moreover, stands closely in line with classic translations such as the Latin Vulgate ("Therefore, he never assumed (*adprehendit*) the angels") and the Syriac Peshitta ("Therefore he never took possession of (*mashlat*) the angels").

v. 17: "to make expiation (τὸ ἰλάσκεσθαι)" -- The idea that Jesus somehow expiates or atones for human sins is woven through many strands of the NT, but is especially central to the Epistle to the Hebrews, where Christ is repeatedly described as the true high priest who ministers on our behalf in the true, heavenly Temple, in a service for which earthly sacrifices -- paradigmatically, for Hebrews,

the Day of Atonement (cf. Lev. 16:10-19) -- are but anticipations and analogies (cf. esp. Heb. 8). How are we to relate this priestly service to Christ's death on the cross? Here again, Moffitt's work is revelatory. I won't pretend to be unbiased, as I'm a former student of Moffitt's, but for my money, there's simply no one doing more interesting or important work on Hebrews today than he. (*Tolle, lege!*)

In his essay, "Blood, Life, and Atonement: Reassessing the Hebrews' Christological Appropriation of Yom Kippur," (also in *Rethinking the Atonement*), Moffitt argues that the epistle's repeated analogy between Christ's priestly self-offering and the Yom Kippur sacrifice implies that Christ's act of "expiation" for sin does *not* occur on the cross, but rather in heaven, after the resurrection and ascension. He points out, first, that "atonement (ἁγιάζω, ἐξιλάσεται)" takes place, not when the sacrificial victim is slaughtered, but rather when its blood is applied to the interior of the holy of the holies (Lev. 16:16-19). As Leviticus 17:11 emphasizes, "the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life" (cf. Moffitt, "Blood, Life, & Atonement," 95).

There are thus two distinct moments in the sacrificial process: the slaughter of the victim outside the Tabernacle/Temple, and the atoning application of its blood within it. So too, for Hebrews, while Jesus "suffered outside the gate" (13:12), he can only offer his own "indestructible life" (7:16) in the heavenly Temple once he has risen and ascended; this is why the author of the Epistle insists that Christ's priestly ministry is effective only in heaven (Heb. 8:1-4), in the everlasting Temple into which he has brought, "not the blood of bulls and calves, but his own blood" (Heb. 9:12).

Discussion Questions

1. How does the symbolism of the feast of Candlemas fit (or not!) with the changing of the seasons where you live? How might these lines of continuity or discontinuity help us to think about the relationship between nature and grace or reason and revelation?
2. Why do Mary and Joseph “present” Jesus in the Temple? How does this act fit with the rest of Jesus’ ministry?
3. What did Simeon mean when he told Mary that “a sword will pass through your soul”? Have you ever suffered because of your love for Christ? If so, how might Mary’s experience illuminate yours?
4. How did Simeon and Anna ready themselves to recognize Jesus when he appeared? How we might we follow their example in our own lives?
5. What are some ways in which you find yourselves “enslaved by the fear of death” in your daily life (cf. Heb. 2:17)? How does the Epistle to the Hebrews suggest we find freedom from this fear?