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Alastair Roberts

A feast of wine on the mountain of the Lord. The annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 25. O LORD, you are my God, I will exalt you, I will praise your name, for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. For you have made this city a heap, the fortified city a ruin.

The foreigner's palace is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt. Therefore strong peoples will glorify you, cities of ruthless nations will fear you. For you have been a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm, and a shade from the heat.

For the breath of the ruthless is like a storm against a wall, like heat in a dry place. You subdue the noise of the foreigners, as heat by the shade of a cloud, so the song of the ruthless is put down. On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the

veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth. For the Lord has spoken, it will be said on that day, behold this is our God, we have waited for him, that he might save us, this is the Lord, we have waited for him, let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain, and Moab shall be trampled down in his place, as straw is trampled down in a dunghill. And he will spread out his hands in the midst of it, as a swimmer spreads his hands out to swim. But the Lord will lay low his pompous pride together with the skill of his hands, and the high fortifications of his walls he will bring down, lay low, and cast to the ground, to the dust.

Isaiah chapters 24-27 are an extended proclamation of the Lord's judgement upon the whole earth, punctuated by praise that responds to it. While we can imagine some of these chapters being occasioned by the judgements upon the whole earth brought about through the Assyrians at the end of the 8th and beginning of the 7th centuries BC, it is general and non-specific in character, and one might just as well relate it to the later judgement upon the earth that came about through the Babylonians a century later. The figures in this section seem to stand for broader realities.

The two opposed cities of the section are perhaps best understood as relating to the city of man and the city of God, rather than simply to particular cities like Babylon or Jerusalem. Even when specific places are referenced, like Moab in this chapter, we should probably see them as more exemplary or representative of the nations more generally. Most importantly, within the more immediate horizons of the Lord's acts of judgement and redemption in history, the reader is invited to see a far greater final horizon prefigured, the time when the judgement and salvation of the Lord will be complete, death itself will be defeated, all enemies will be pacified, and the reign of the Lord spread throughout the world, his people triumphant and free, and worshippers from all nations gathered to the holy mountain.

Chapter 25 is a chapter that speaks of cosmic restoration and renewal after the devastation and decreation described in chapter 24. Punctuating the pronouncements of the Lord's judgement and salvation in these chapters are responsive declarations of praise, verses 1 to 5 of chapter 25 being an example of this. Chapter 12 provided a similar song of praise, responding to the material relating to the earlier crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite war.

The language here is steeped in that of the Psalms and the scriptures more generally. The opening lines of the song might recall the words of Moses' song after the deliverance at the Red Sea in Exodus chapter 15 verse 2. Just as that song responded to the great deliverance and judgement at the Red Sea, so this song declares the Lord's greatness in the light of the judgement of the earth that he will bring about, much as the feast on the

mountain that follows it might recall the covenant meal at Sinai in Exodus chapter 24. The singer expresses his devotion to the Lord and his commitment to exalt the Lord's name, the God who has acted powerfully for his deliverance.

He gives reasons for his praise, the mighty deeds of the Lord in accordance with his sure purposes of old. The Lord has declared his purposes and his judgements in advance and he has brought them to pass. The Lord rules over the affairs of men and all of the events of history.

He is never taken by surprise, he is never wrong-footed. His plans are not only certain but also plans in which his faithfulness to his covenant and his people are displayed. A further reason for exalting the Lord is the fact that his judgements against his foes are decisive.

And as the Lord displays his hand among the Gentiles, people of foreign nations fear and glorify his name, a common theme in the book of Isaiah. As the Lord's judgements go out to the nations, the Lord's salvation is also extended to them. The Lord is a God who is near to the poor, the needy, and all those in distress.

He is a refuge for those who are oppressed. He is like a fortress and a stronghold for them, one to whom they can flee for safety, but also a shade and a shelter against hostile elements. The furious blast of the cruel violence and oppression of the wicked against the weak and the vulnerable is quelled by the protection of the Lord, who is like the relief of the shade of a cloud on a burning hot day, or like a wall that shields people from the anger of a storm.

The previous chapter had described the failure of the vine harvest, the stilling of feasts, the cutting off of the wine, and the banishing of gladness from the people. Now however, a bountiful banquet of wine is prepared for all of the nations. The mountain here, like the cities, isn't identified, although it is presumably the cosmic mountain to which all of the nations is assembled, to be identified with the mountain of Zion that is lifted up over all of the other mountains, described in places like chapter 2 verses 1-4.

It is a celebration of the Lord's kingship, albeit not a coronation as some have claimed. The feast is not exclusive to Israel, but is one to which all of the peoples are invited. After the dark storm clouds of cruel oppression, war, and mourning have been removed, that mountain will be a place for the breaking forth of joy and gladness.

Nothing less than the removal and swallowing up of death is in view. All hurts will be harmed, every tear wiped away, mourning, sorrow, and pain will be removed, and the disgrace of the Lord's oppressed people will be taken away. Once again, the certainty of this is founded upon the certainty of the Lord's word.

In the deliverance of Judah from the Assyrian crisis, and then later on in their return to

the land after the fall of Babylon to the Medes and Persians, the mourning veil that would be associated with times of pestilence, famine, and war is removed as the nation does not suffer from the same untimely deaths. In such deliverances from mourning, the people of the Lord would have an anticipation of a greater deliverance yet to come, not merely a deliverance from times of war and disaster, but a more complete deliverance from death in all of its forms. In such a deliverance, the confidence of faithful people in the Lord would be vindicated.

They had trusted and hoped in him, and he had delivered them, and now they will rejoice in his salvation. The final three verses of the chapter describe a contrast between the mountain of the Lord, upon which the hand of the Lord rests in blessing and protection, and the near neighbor Moab, presumably symbolizing unfaithful nations, who will be brought low and humiliated. Moab will be akin to straw trampled down in dung.

Verse 11 describes Moab as akin to someone swimming to try to escape a cesspool, yet his efforts to escape will fail. His pride will be utterly humiliated. All of this is seen in the failure of Moab's cities and defenses, their fortifications brought down and crumbled to dust.

A question to consider. How can we relate the image of the defeat of death in this chapter with images of resurrection within the New Testament? In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah of the division of Abijah, and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. Now while he was serving as priest before God, when his division was on duty according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.

And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.

And Zechariah said to the angel, How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years. And the angel answered him, I am Gabriel, I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.

And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute.

And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. In the opening of Luke chapter 1, Luke introduces himself as the latest in a line of several who had written a narrative of the events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Luke was someone with access to eyewitnesses and apostolic heralds of the Gospel message.

He had been following everything closely for some time. He was in a great position to write a detailed and orderly account for someone like Theophilus. In order need not refer to strict chronological order.

There is chronological reordering of material in the Gospels for thematic and other purposes. This is something we find elsewhere throughout the Scriptures. But what we see here is a similar expression to something that we encounter also in Acts chapter 11 verse 4. When Peter relates the events of his bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles in chapter 10, his words are introduced as follows, but Peter began and explained it to them in order.

The point, it seems to me, is that there is a well-structured, persuasive narrative, achieving its purpose of informing and persuading people, most immediately Theophilus, in the truth of their faith. Luke begins with parallel annunciations. There is the first one to Zechariah concerning John the Baptist and the second to Mary concerning Jesus.

The angel Gabriel appears to both of them. Both of them respond with fear. Both of them are reassured by Gabriel, told not to be afraid, and are told that they will have a son.

John will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. The Holy Spirit will come upon Mary. The future missions of both John and Jesus are foretold.

Both Zechariah and Mary respond with seemingly similar questions. How shall I know this? For I am an old man and my wife has advanced in years. And how will this be, since I am a virgin? There are a number of similar accounts of annunciations in the Old Testament.

Genesis chapter 16 verses 11 to 12, given to Hagar. And the angel of the Lord said to her, Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael,

because the Lord has listened to your affliction.

He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen. Genesis chapter 17 verses 15 to 21. And God said to Abraham, As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.

I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations, kings of peoples shall come from her. Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child? And Abraham said to God, O that Ishmael might live before you.

God said, No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you.

Behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.

And then in Judges 13 verses 2 to 5. There was a certain man of Zorah of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah, and his wife was barren and had no children. And the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, Behold, you are barren and have not born children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean.

For behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazarite to guard from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines. The presence of two annunciations in direct succession indicates that the destinies of Jesus and John the Baptist are entwined in a single divine purpose.

There are further parallels and connections between the two that emerge as we proceed through the narrative of Luke. The presence of these two annunciations at the very beginning of Luke's Gospel also foregrounds the theme of birth. The prominence of the theme of birth can also be seen at the beginning of books such as Exodus and 1 Samuel.

The story of the Exodus is the story of the deliverance from Egypt, the story of 1 Samuel the story of the establishment of the kingdom. A similar new work of God is to be anticipated here. The theme of new birth is not just about an individual having a child, it's about something new happening in history, the birth of a new order.

Like Exodus and 1 Samuel, the beginning of the story of Luke focuses upon believing and courageous women and birth. In Exodus it's the Hebrew midwives, Jochebed and Miriam

and Pharaoh's daughter. In 1 Samuel it's Hannah.

And here it's Mary, Elizabeth and Anna. The focus upon women at the very beginning of a great new work of God in history is noteworthy. It follows a consistent pattern in the Old Testament.

The men that surround them are either wicked, Pharaoh and his men, Hophni and Phinehas in 1 Samuel, or lacking in spiritual perception, Eli and Zechariah. Eli later goes blind while Zechariah is struck dumb. Or they stay largely in the background, Amram in Exodus, Elkanah in 1 Samuel and in Luke, Joseph.

Many of the women are barren, widows or unmarried. The barren woman having her womb opened is a very important theme in scripture, particularly in the book of Genesis. The story of Luke begins with believing women and a doubting man at news of birth.

It ends with believing women and initially doubting men at news of resurrection. And this is one of the ways we can already start to see a symmetry developing between the birth of Christ at the beginning and his resurrection at the end, which is a new birth. The focus upon women also goes together with a focus upon the gestation periods of God's salvation.

God's salvation doesn't begin in the glare of public life, but in the quiet prayers of an aging couple and in the hiddenness of a young woman's womb. Thirty or more years will pass before this salvation comes to fruition. But it has already begun.

It's begun in the secret place, in these contexts where people don't necessarily know what's taking place. But something is going to occur and it will have impact many years down the line. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are faithful people.

They're both Levites and are described as being righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. Now such a statement makes many Protestants nervous, but it shouldn't. The framework of perfect and spotless law obedience is one that we often impose upon the text, but we often do so quite inappropriately.

Flawed and fallen human beings like Zechariah and Elizabeth certainly were, can be described in such a manner. The law always graciously provided ways for people to be in faithful and blameless relationship with God, even as sinful human beings. Zechariah shares his name with Zechariah the prophet, whose ministry centred around the rebuilding of the temple.

His connection with Zechariah might also make us think of the Old Testament story and where it left off. It also hints at a new temple building project after the defiling of an old temple and a period of exile. The muteness of the priest Zechariah could be related to the general silence of God in the period between the two testaments.

God reopens the mouth of the dumb prophet and a new era of his redemption will come about. He might be a picture of the nation as a whole as well. Zechariah initially responds with doubt, but his mouth has later opened in praise.

Many of these particular connections are weak and I wouldn't put that much strength upon them, but they're worth considering. Elishabeth was the wife of Aaron and the matriarch of the priestly line in Exodus 6.22. Baron Elizabeth, who shares her name, is a symbol of a priestly line in crisis, much as it was in the time of Eli, as Eli's two sons died on the same day and his priestly house was left in tatters. The later opening of the womb of Elishabeth promises the establishment of a new faithful priesthood from the ashes.

Again, not a very strong connection, but worth considering perhaps. We've already met the angel Gabriel on two previous occasions, both in the book of Daniel in chapter 8 verse 16 and chapter 9 verse 21 of the book of Daniel, where he is involved in the affairs of nations and the destinies of empires. His presence here hints at something that is stirring that will have ramifications far beyond the borders of Israel.

The setting of the scene here is important. Zechariah is in the temple at the hour of incense. His service here would be related to the duties outlined in Exodus chapter 30 verses 7 to 8. And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it.

Every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall burn it. And when Aaron sets up the lamps at twilight he shall burn it. A regular incense offering before the Lord throughout your generations.

And a connection between incense and prayer can be seen in places like Psalm 141 verse 2. Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice. Interestingly, we have already seen a prayer associated with the evening sacrifice in scripture. In Daniel chapter 9 verses 20 to 23, He made me understand, speaking with me and saying, O Daniel, I have now come out to give you insight and understanding.

At the beginning of your pleas for mercy a word went out, and I have come to tell it to you, for you are greatly loved. Therefore consider the word and understand the vision. This is followed by the prophecy concerning the 70 weeks in which the work of Christ is foretold.

And so the coming of Gabriel again at the time of the evening sacrifice may not be an accident. It may be designed in part to draw our mind back to this event. Zachariah was from the priestly division of Babija.

Each of the 24 subdivisions of the priests would serve on a rotating two week basis. Zachariah would serve with the incense and then he was supposed to come out and bless the praying people outside. The setting in the temple recalls the story of 1 Samuel

chapter 1, which also begins with a barren woman praying for a son in the temple and another priest, Eli, who lacks perception.

The temple is prominent at the beginning of Luke, also appearing in chapter 2 with the presentation of Jesus in the temple, where we also encounter a woman called Anna, reminding us of Hannah, who constantly prays there. The temple isn't just dismissed by Luke as something belonging to the old order and unimportant. A lot of events in the book of Luke and in the book of Acts present the temple in a more positive light.

It's a place where people go to interact with God, to pray. It's a place where faithful people are to be encountered. And it's also a place, in this particular occasion, where God meets and reveals himself to his people.

At the end of the Gospel, it also returns to the themes of its beginning, with the disciples constantly praying in the temple after Jesus has ascended to heaven. We could perhaps see this as mirroring the praying multitude at the beginning of the Gospel. The theme of prayer is very prominent throughout the book of Luke, another thing to notice here.

Jesus' action at the end, however, also recalls the beginning, as he blesses the disciples and then ascends to the heavenly temple. There is maybe a symmetry to be seen between the beginning and the end. The book of Acts also follows the pattern of Luke in many ways.

The temple, prayer and the Holy Spirit are also very prominent at its beginning, as is the failure to perceive. Here it's Zachariah's failure to perceive. In the book of Acts, it's the people thinking that maybe they're drunk, which again reminds us of the story of Eli, who thinks that maybe Hannah is drunk when she's praying.

The focus upon the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the Gospel is also noteworthy, and again is paralleled with the focus upon the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the book of Acts. At the beginning of the book of Luke, we see that association in the way that John the Baptist is to be filled with the Holy Spirit from his womb, then in the way that the Spirit comes upon Mary, then in the way that Elizabeth and Zachariah are filled with the Spirit, then in the way that Simeon is led in the Spirit into the temple, and then the way that Christ is filled with the Holy Spirit and then led in the Spirit into the wilderness. The Spirit is very, very prominent at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, and then later on in the book of Acts, of course, with the events of Pentecost, it's no less prominent.

God has heard the prayers of Zachariah and Elizabeth, but these prayers are not just prayers that relate to them as individuals and their desire for a son. As in 1 Samuel, the prayer of individuals for a child is the prayer for deliverance for the entire nation. The significance of John's name is not so straightforward.

Johanan was one of the high priests after the Restoration in Nehemiah 12, verses 22-23.

Perhaps somewhat more interesting, Johanan was also a leader of the army who led a remnant of Judah out of the land to Egypt after the assassination of Gedoliah against the word of the prophet Jeremiah. We see this in 2 Kings, chapter 25, verses 22-26, and Jeremiah chapter 42, verse 1 to 43, verse 7. How would this relate to John? First, the names of his parents suggest that John the Baptist is connected with the formation of a new priesthood, perhaps.

Second, faithful John actually does something rather similar in character to the unfaithful Johanan. He leads a remnant out of an occupied land into the wilderness where he prepares the way for Jesus, Joshua, the new ruler who will lead them back in. However, by far the more prominent meaning, I think, is the straightforward etymological one.

God is gracious, that's the meaning of his name, and it's a theme in the story. God has shown his favour to Zachariah and Elizabeth. He has shown mercy to them in giving them a son, and this is a sign of his grace towards his people more generally.

So while those other associations may be there, I suspect they're very much in the background if they are there at all. John the Baptist is to be a Nazarite from birth. We have the law of the Nazarite in Numbers chapter 6, and this is similar to Samson in Judges chapter 13, and Samuel in 1 Samuel 1, verse 11.

He comes in the spirit and the power of Elijah, and as we go through the Gospel he'll be described in ways that recall Elijah too. His mission is associated with Elijah explicitly at other points. And the last verses of the prophet Malachi are alluded to here.

Malachi chapter 4, verses 5 to 6. So what do we see here putting the pieces together? With a cluster of Old Testament allusions, John the Baptist is being characterised for us. He's like Samuel, the one who's a Nazarite from birth, the one who's given in response to prayers and that's declared in the Temple. He's someone who will prepare the way for and anoint the king, the Davidic king.

He's like Elijah, a desert prophet who will herald the great day of the Lord, preparing the way for the Lord to come to his people. He's a sign of the restoration of a faithful priesthood, born to Elishaba, a woman who shares the name of the Aaronic matriarch. He is picking up the threads that were left off in the prophecies of Zechariah and Malachi.

The silence of Zechariah until his birth might also make us think of the silence of the prophets in the intervening period between the Testaments. John the Baptist is going to continue the ministry of the prophets and in preparing the way for Christ he will bring that ministry to its climax. Zechariah's question in response to Gabriel is similar to that of Abraham.

Genesis chapter 17 verse 17, Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to

himself, Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child? And then in chapter 15 verse 8 of Genesis, But he said, O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it? Whereas in that case it doesn't seem to be a question of unbelief, in Zechariah's case it does seem to be one of unbelief. His question is not, as Mary's will be, a question of how this thing will come to be, it's a question of will it come to be. It all seems a bit too incredible.

And so Zechariah is struck dumb until he will be most prepared to bear the praise for what God has done. A question to consider. The appearance to Zechariah isn't just an appearance to a private individual, it's rather an appearance to a priest in the course of the administration of his duties, while a crowd is waiting outside in prayer, waiting for him to come outside to bless them.

What significance might we see in the fact that God delivers this revelation, this annunciation, in such a context?