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Anna: Prophetess and Teacher

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Anna, the aged prophetess – she is mentioned in the Bible only once, in Luke, for a duration of two verses, and then is never spoken of again. Blink and you’ve missed her. What could possibly be the purpose for such a seemingly insignificant character? It is obvious that the author of Luke-Acts has a special focus on women that does not exist in the other Gospels. But Anna exists for a purpose beyond simply magnifying the author’s attention to women. Luke uses Anna, within his thematic focus on the lowly members of society (which included women), in order to educate women who were joining the Christian movement about Jesus’ universal, egalitarian ministry. Luke 2:36-38 offers its readers a close look into the author’s view of women, the Christian church at the time, and the importance of women’s education for the emerging Christian church.

Interpreting the Text in Context

A detailed reading of the Gospel of Luke can tell the reader much more than it would initially seem. Prior to discussing Anna, the reader learns that Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus have traveled to the temple for the baby’s ritual circumcision. While at the temple, Simeon (a pious Jewish man) recognizes Jesus as the Christ child and prophesies about him. Immediately afterwards, the author writes about Anna. The Gospel reads:

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eight-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.¹

It should be noted that Anna, a woman, recognizes Jesus as the redeemer of Jerusalem and then continues to pass on the Good news to others.² However, Anna is never quoted. Even though she is called a prophetess, she is not quoted as having given a canticle. Some scholars have interpreted this to mean that

¹Lk. 2:36-38 (New Revised Standard Version).

² Vasiliki Limberis, “Anna 2,” in *Women in Scripture*, ed. Carol Meyers (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 51.

her purpose is to spread the news of Jesus, whom Simeon has already proclaimed to be the Christ.³ Both Simeon and Anna recognize the baby Jesus for who he is, the son of God, and foresee what he will do for the salvation of Jerusalem. In this sense, both are prophets, which in itself is a gift given to only a select few. For women specifically, prophecy is a blessing given solely to widows and virgins.⁴ Anna's status as a widow is significant in itself - this is typical Lucan in that the author of Luke-Acts paid especially close attention to widows, because they were marginalized in society. It is significant that Luke gives Anna's biographical information, "the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher," rather than giving that of her father or husband, because it empowers Anna's femininity by presenting her with her own standing.⁵ This is typical of Luke-Acts, seeing as widows are referenced more frequently than in the other Gospels and often in situations that presuppose their low status in society. In Luke, the story, and therefore its subsequent interpretation, are shaped in order to fit the author's broad themes (specifically the attention to women) by including such details.

There is no question that Luke's Gospel pays particularly close attention to the outcast and lowly members of society. At the close of the first century, when Luke-Acts was written, it was common for women to fall into this category. The author's attention to women is visible when one considers the number of passages concerning women. Luke contains 42 passages, 23 of which are unique to this particular Gospel.⁶ Using Streeter's Source hypothesis, scholars have concluded that the 23 unique passages come from a special "L" source. This has been suggested to be a women's source that likely includes stories that "provide insight into women's experience of the Jesus movement."⁷ Some have suggested that Luke's focus on women stresses a radical new set of rules and positions for women, for which Luke-Acts lays the groundwork. These new rules and new statuses are often accredited to the early

³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke: introduction, translation, and notes*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 423.

⁴ Vasiliki Limberis, "Anna 2," in *Women in Scripture*, ed. Carol Meyers (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 50.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶ *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992), 274-277.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 276.

church's need to educate women. Specifically, Luke's inclusion of Anna as a prophet provides women in the early church a role model, whom they can strive to emulate.⁸ By doing this, the gospel offers a link from the Old Testament prophetesses to women in the New Testament holding positions of power within the Church.

Thematic Attention to Women

One of the major themes evident in Luke-Acts is the attention to outsiders and their need for inclusion. As H. Louis Baugher explains in his commentary on the Gospel, Anna's presence in Luke chapter two expands this theme. "Christ received a witness at his birth, not only from prophets and shepherds, but also from aged and holy men and women. Every age, and both sexes, and the marvels of events, confirm our faith. A virgin brings forth, the barren becomes a mother, the dumb speaks... Simeon prophesied; she who was wedded prophesied; she who was a virgin prophesied; and now a widow [Anna] prophesies, that all states of life and sexes might be there."⁹ Between Simeon and Anna the author of Luke guarantees that all walks of life are represented. Various strata of society stand side-by-side in Luke creating a sense of egalitarianism. Part of this is due to the Lucan criticism of social expectations (particularly those that said that women were to be subordinate) that existed at the time. The author prepares readers for the radical changes in social norms that Jesus' ministry would bring. They are changes that promise to "raise up" the poor and make them "part of the restored people." Promises that give hope to people who may be cast out by human standards; "among them are... those who by virtue of their gender were denied full participation of the people."¹⁰ More often than not, those who accepted the prophetic annunciation of Jesus as Christ were in fact, those who were considered average and even

⁸ Constance F. Parvey, "The Theology & Leadership of Women in the New Testament," in *Religion and Sexism*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), 139-146.

⁹ H. Louis Baugher, *Annotations on the Gospel According to St. Luke*, The Lutheran Commentary (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1896), 56.

¹⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Luke-Acts, Book of*, vol. 4 of The Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 417-418.

marginal in the eyes of society. Fred B. Craddock maintains that, “for Luke, God works in and through the normal avenues of life in the believing community.”¹¹ Craddock believes that Anna and Simeon are the quintessential examples of those who accepted the prophetic annunciation. They were “devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the temple, longing, and hoping for the fulfillment of God’s promises.”¹² Luke’s inclusion of a widow magnifies his use of relatable characters who can be imitated and used as teaching tools in the early Christian church.

Anna as a Teaching Tool

By focusing on her circumstances as a member of society’s marginalized class, Luke creates a character who is similar to those that the Church is trying to educate. Luke’s detailed description of Anna’s position as a “pious widow” follows the pattern which makes women models of “faith and piety” for female converts to the developing Christian church.¹³ It was crucial for the Church to educate women to become “prayerful, quiet, grateful women, [and] supportive of male leadership.”¹⁴ By doing so, the Church was able to control women’s participation. This was crucial since control was the overall goal of education.¹⁵ In educating women by example, the Church was able to create a specific prototype of desirable behavior that would in turn be emulated by the converts. These prototypes were created by biblical authors to serve as teaching tools. Anna is an example of such a prototype. Luke was able to shape his stories so that they fit his desire to instruct women in the early church on how to act. Through the creation of an archetype of behavior, the early Christian church was able to ensure that followers

¹¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 26.

¹² *Ibid.*, 40.

¹³ Vasiliki Limberis, “Anna 2,” in *Women in Scripture*, ed. Carol Meyers (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 51.

¹⁴ *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992), 275.

¹⁵ Constance F. Parvey, “The Theology & Leadership of Women in the New Testament,” in *Religion and Sexism*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), 139-146.

would be respectable people.¹⁶ Luke, specifically, creates a female counter-story that he pairs with a male story in order to expressly present women a character with whom they can relate.

As previously mentioned, the Gospel of Luke utilizes pairs of stories in order to make the text more readily understandable for all readers. This pairing contains both a male and a female counterpart. It is not uncommon in Luke's Gospel for male/female pairings to exist. There are three in the birth accounts alone: Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, and Simeon and Anna.¹⁷ Mary Rose D'Angelo contends that two types of pairings exist. The first is an "architectural" pairing, in which two similar stories are told but with different contextual settings. The second contains two stories which are identical in purpose. One of these features a male character, which tends to be a traditional story, while the other features a female character and is often specifically Lucan in origin and focuses on themes prevalent in Luke-Acts.¹⁸ The paired stories of Simeon and Anna fall into the latter category. In both, aged prophets recognize Jesus as the great Christ child, sent to save Jerusalem. Many view this pairing as a demonstration of gender equality that comes through faith in Christ. This view of equality would seem to be at odds with the notion that through education women are controlled. However, gender equality develops when women are portrayed in the same roles as men. As a result, women are given positive role models who are receive "God's grace and gracious endowments," like the gift of prophecy, in the same way that men are receiving such blessings.¹⁹

There is no question that Anna is a minor character in the grand scheme of the Gospel of Luke, after all she is only mentioned for two verses. By drawing upon the theme of women, used heavily in the Gospel, the author creates a quintessential example of how living righteously according to God's laws is rewarded. The author gives hope and promise to those who were otherwise cast aside by society. But why

¹⁶ Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions Among Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 129.

¹⁷ Leander E. Keck, ed., *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9, *The Gospel of Luke* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 23.

¹⁸ Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Women in Luke-Acts: A Redactional View," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109, no. 3 (fall 1990): 443-444.

¹⁹ Ben Witherington, "Women in the New Testament," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 959.

introduce a new character for only two verses? Because using Anna, as an example of how women should behave, allows the author of Luke to give women a respectable status, equal to that of men, to which they can aspire.

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36 And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher; she was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years from her virginity, 37 and as a widow till she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. His name may be a play on words, since Anna was among the first to recognise the face of God when she saw the infant Jesus. The main themes of Anna's story. Anna, a holy and wise woman, saw things that were not yet apparent to others: she "saw" the destiny of the small child Jesus when she held him in her arms. Like many stories in the New Testament, this is not about the woman Anna but about Jesus. Its purpose was to show who Jesus is. Anna, the aged prophetess and widow, is present at the Second Temple at the very hour Mary and Joseph redeem Jesus, their firstborn son, and offer a sacrifice for Mary's ritual purification after childbirth (Luke 2:36-38; cf. Exod. In an otherwise fine article, A. A. MacRae lists those individuals who are either designated as prophets or prophetesses in the New Testament. Besides Jesus and John the Baptist, he lists Zechariah (Luke 1:67); Agabus (Acts 11:28, 21:10); Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, and Manaen (Acts 13:1); Judas and Silas (Acts 15:32); and Women Prophets & Teachers - The wisdom of Solomon is literally proverbial. When writing advice to his son, Solomon figuratively pictured wisdom as a woman. Anna approached the parents of Jesus amid the bustle of the temple courts and later spoke about the baby Jesus to whomever would listen. In contrast, Miriam's prophetic song of Ex 15:20-21 was public and spectacular, but it was "all the women" that she led, not men. Jezebel was a prophetess, not a teacher. Second, a church that would tolerate anyone, man or woman, who advocated sexual immorality (as Jezebel did) would probably have few qualms about violating God's order concerning appropriate ministry avenues for men and women (such as women not serving as teachers).