

# The “Presentation” of the Infant Jesus in Luke 2:22–24

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## Abstract

The “presentation” of the infant Jesus in the temple is a well-known image. But what is happening in Luke 2:22–24? The article explains that in contemporary literature such a presentation is not known. It does not belong to the purification of the mother, nor is it part of the ceremonies of circumcision or of the redemption of the firstborn son. A semantic analysis of *paristanai*, used in Luke 2:22, gives new theological insight in the meaning of the passage. Luke does not confuse different ceremonies, but shows how Jesus is placed in the service of the Lord, at the same time fulfilling the words he is quoting from Exodus 13.

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## Introduction

A few weeks after Jesus is circumcised, his parents take him to the temple. Luke describes this event and quotes two Old Testament texts to explain what happens there. His first quotation refers to the custom of redemption of a firstborn son (Luke 2:23; Exod 13). The second relates to the sacrifice that Mary must bring for her purification after the birth of her child (Luke 2:24; Lev 12:8). At first sight, it seems that Luke conflates these two matters into one event.

For exegetes, this immediately raises questions. Is Luke really describing the ceremony of Jesus's redemption as firstborn child here? If so, why is there no mention of the five silver shekels that were required to be paid? And why would Jesus have to be brought to the temple? According to the Torah, there really was no need for that. In addition, does Jesus indeed assume a role here in Mary's purification? It seems as if Luke presumes that Jesus, too, was ceremonially unclean.

In almost all Greek manuscripts, we read that "the days of *their* purification" had come; Luke seems to indicate that this purification does not just concern Mary. However, nowhere does the Torah point to a requirement that the newborn child also needed such purification.

And finally: Why would it be necessary that Jesus, for one or both of these rituals, be presented before the Lord in the temple? Not a single Jewish source is known that refers to such a presentation of children in the temple.

Does the evangelist not combine or confuse practices from different ceremonies here, conflating them into one single event? Many exegetes point to the fact that on the one hand Luke displays a good general knowledge of Jewish life, as evidenced by his specific reference to Old Testament texts, while on the other hand he does not seem to be well informed about the details of the specific rituals that were associated with these practices. The conclusion is usually drawn that Luke, notwithstanding his historical research, did not possess sufficient knowledge of Jewish law and its implementation in the temple, and the assumption is that Luke himself was not a Jew, or that he—Jew or not—was not very familiar with the details of the temple service, having grown up far from Jerusalem in the diaspora.<sup>1</sup>

In this article I will examine the question whether this conclusion—that Luke lacked exact knowledge of the Law—is justified.<sup>2</sup> In particular, I will

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<sup>1</sup> As does, for example, Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (London: Chapman, 1978), 448–49. He describes Luke as having "a strange combination of a general knowledge of Judaism with an accurate knowledge of details—an indication that the author scarcely grew up in Judaism or in Palestine." In a more recent article, Matthew Thiessen provides an overview of various perspectives, in which it is clear that Brown's view still counts as the *communis opinio*: "According to the scholarly consensus, Luke's belief that both Mary and Joseph (and/or Jesus, a possibility that Brown does not mention) need to undergo purification conflicts with Levitical law, which requires only the purification of the new mother (Lev 12:1–8)" (Matthew Thiessen, "Luke 2:22, Leviticus 12 and Parturient Impurity," *Novum Testamentum* 54 [2012]: 17). Thiessen then quotes Joseph B. Tyson, who describes this consensus as follows: "Here Luke probably misunderstood passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as Jewish practices, since he conflated two different religious duties and failed to mention the practice of redeeming the first-born son" (Joseph B. Tyson, *Marcion and Luke-Acts: A Defining Struggle* [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006], 99).

<sup>2</sup> This article was first written in Dutch and dedicated to professor Dr. Teus Hofman in G. C. den Hertog, M. C. Mulder, and T. van Spanje, *Acta: Bundel ter gelegenheid van het afscheid*

focus on the combination of the rituals of Mary's purification and of the infant Jesus's redemption, examining these practices with reference to the Scripture texts Luke quotes. I will point out that one clear reference to the Old Testament seems to be consistently overlooked in scholarly literature, the one that may be found in the verb *paristanai* (παριστάναι, usually translated as "to present").

When the use of this word, in its own context, is properly weighed in the exegesis of the pericope, several of the questions that are raised will be answered, and the scene in the temple takes on a profound theological significance.

## I. Circumcision

Before we look at the infant Jesus's coming to the temple, it is appropriate to pay attention to the preceding verse, the one that refers to his circumcision (Luke 2:21). This verse and the passage that follows are closely connected, in regard to both form and content.<sup>3</sup> Luke highlights that both circumcision and purification—together with their attendant rituals—had to be carried out at specific times, as stipulated in the Law of Moses. Mary and Joseph adhere to these regulations; they wait until the set time has elapsed, and then carry out the relevant requirements of the Torah.

Leviticus 12:31 prescribes that an infant boy had to be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. As a rule, that was (and still is) an occasion for a small celebration.<sup>4</sup> This was also the moment when the infant child received his name. Until the boy had received the sign of his inclusion in the covenant, he remained nameless. The boy drew his identity from what his circumcision confirmed: that YHWH wanted to be his God. The name he was given was connected with that declaration. This is also what happens to Jesus. He receives the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb: Jesus, the LORD saves (Luke 1:31).

Jesus is treated as any other Jewish male child. He receives the sign of God's covenant, as prescribed in the Law. And it is not until this moment that he is given his name, a name that has greater significance for him than

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van Prof. dr. T. M. Hofman als hoogleraar aan de Theologische Universiteit Apeldoorn (Heerenveen: Groen, 2015), 146–57. I most heartily thank Aart Plug, who was willing to translate it in order for it to reach a broader audience. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 2:21 and 22 begin identically: *Καὶ ὅτε ἐπλήσθησαν αἱ ἡμέραι*, "and when the days were completed"; next to this formal congruence, there is also one of substance: both verses show that what happened to Jesus was in accordance with what the Law prescribes.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Luke 1:59.

for any other child. His name is the program of his life. Here the manner in which he is to fulfill this program becomes visible. He fulfills it by standing fully next to his people: not above, but under the Law.<sup>5</sup>

He has come to fulfill the promise God gave to Abraham and his offspring, so that all nations might be blessed in him. Both covenant and circumcision are signs of that promise. The One who is to bring this blessing takes up his place fully within the covenant; hence, he also receives the sign of this covenant. Jesus's circumcision and the giving of his name visibly demonstrate what his incarnation is really about. Following his birth, this takes Jesus one step further than merely his assumption of humanity: Jesus assumes the humanity of *one who stands under the Law*, in complete solidarity, and in complete subjection to the consequences of transgressions against the Law, transgressions from which those who live under the Law can never deliver themselves. In this way, the manner in which he is to fulfill the program of his life becomes visible: he is united with, next to, and in his people as one of them.<sup>6</sup>

## II. Purification

The beginning of verse 22 echoes the first words of the preceding verse. The repeated use of the verb *plērousthai* (πληροῦσθαι, to be completed) heightens the suspense. Besides pointing to Mary and Joseph's waiting for the right prescribed moment, the use of this verb also echoes something of the deeper significance of what is about to happen. At critical moments in his account, Luke uses the verb to complete or fulfill, to show that the gospel is bound up in God's firm purpose and promises. We already heard this word from the mouth of the angel, who rebuked the priest Zechariah for not believing his words, which would be fulfilled in their time.<sup>7</sup> We often come across this verb as a signal word throughout Luke's work.<sup>8</sup>

After the child's circumcision, Mary had to wait another thirty-three days before her purification. Leviticus 12:2–4 prescribes this period of waiting

<sup>5</sup> In this connection, frequent references are made to Gal 4:4. For example, Jakob van Bruggen writes, "It is as if Luke 2 elaborates Galatians 4:4: 'God sent his Son, born of a woman (Luke 2:1–20), *born under law* (Luke 2:21–39), to redeem those under law'" (*Lucas: Het evangelie als voorgeschiedenis*, CNT 3 [Kampen: Kok, 1993], 85).

<sup>6</sup> This is also highlighted in Christ's first public act, when he leaves Nazareth and is baptized by John (Mark 1:9). He is baptized together with "all the people" (Luke 3:21). Thus it was fitting for him to "fulfill all righteousness" (Matt 3:15).

<sup>7</sup> Luke 1:10.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Luke 4:21; 9:31; 24:44; Acts 1:18; 3:18; 13:27 and συμπληροῦν in Luke 9:51 and Acts 2:1.

after the birth of a male child. Contact with blood and with the secret source of life causes cultic impurity. Through the rituals of purification all of life is permeated with an awareness of distance from holy God, a distance that can only be bridged by way of a sacrifice—the way appointed and given by God himself. On the fortieth day a sacrifice is to be brought: a sheep as a burnt offering and a pigeon or turtle-dove as a sin offering, to make atonement (Lev 12:6–7). Whoever is unable to pay for a sheep, may bring a second pigeon instead (Lev 12:8); clearly, that was the case with Mary (Luke 2:24).

There is nothing at all in the regulations in Leviticus to indicate that the child, too, had to be purified. Still, Luke writes that “the time came for *their* purification according to the Law of Moses.”<sup>9</sup>

There are exegetes who relate this plural not to Mary and Jesus, but to Mary and Joseph. After all, it is they who together bring the child to Jerusalem (v. 22). Joseph too—so goes the argument—had a part in bringing the sacrifice and can be considered as participating in Mary’s uncleanness.<sup>10</sup>

It is questionable whether this is what Luke means, and if he does, then it is clear that he deviates from what is prescribed in Leviticus. Most exegetes therefore regard this as a contrived solution. The first editions of the *Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament* followed this line of thinking, first proposed by Heinrich A. W. Meyer, but in a subsequent edition Bernhard Weiss dismisses it as “a mere contrivance.”<sup>11</sup> In Weiss’s view, it is more realistic to admit that here we have to do with an error the Gentile Christian author made about the ritual of purification.<sup>12</sup> John Nolland,

<sup>9</sup> The great majority of manuscripts has *Καὶ ὅτε ἐπλήσθησαν αἱ ἡμέραι τοῦ καθαρισμοῦ αὐτῶν*, i.e., with the plural *αὐτῶν*. Only the Codex Bezae has the masculine singular *αὐτοῦ*, while a very few non-Greek manuscripts have the feminine singular. It seems obvious that here we encounter a later assimilation of the text to Lev 12:4. The use of the female singular, e.g., in the KJV (and the Dutch Statenvertaling): “when the days of her purification ... were accomplished,” is not based on the textual evidence. Thiessen (“Luke 2:22,” 18–19) discusses the range of variants.

<sup>10</sup> This is the way in which especially the first editions of *Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament* regarded the plural. Heinrich A. W. Meyer, in the third edition (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1855), described it as a “synecdochic expression.”

<sup>11</sup> From the seventh edition onward, doubt is expressed concerning Meyer’s view, and the ninth edition (Bernhard Weiss, *Die Evangelien Markus und Lukas*, 1908) says: “The hypothesis of a synecdoche, insofar as Joseph contributed to the presentation of the one who was bound with him ... or had to worry about fulfilling the legal duty ... is simply an excuse.”

<sup>12</sup> Weiss, *Markus und Lukas*, speaks of “a mistake of the Gentile-Christian author about the purification offering.” Over against that, Darrell L. Bock defends the reliability of the Lukan account, and attempts to show from the Mishnah that a husband could become ceremonially unclean by assisting with the birth, in which case Joseph also would have had to undergo purification after forty days (*Luke*, The NIV Application Commentary [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 92). However, the references quoted from m. Niddah 1:3–5; 2:5; and 5:1 do not demonstrate that. From an entirely different perspective, Fred Strickert writes that Joseph was as much involved with the sacrifice as Mary was: “One can only conclude that Luke saw a role

however, is not prepared to call this a misunderstanding. He takes the view that here Luke “speaks loosely of the purification as a family matter.”<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, then, this statement is about Joseph and Mary, while on the other hand this solution leaves open the possibility that Luke certainly did understand that there was no need to bring a sacrifice for Joseph. It must be said, though, that this solution is still awkward and speculative.<sup>14</sup>

Many other exegetes, then, choose rather to link the plural to Mary and Jesus. A small number suggest that this is related to Greek ways of thinking, in which both mother and child were regarded as unclean.<sup>15</sup> However, the clear reference to the temple and to what is taking place there does not point to a Hellenistic background. Most exegetes presume that here Luke conflates various reasons for bringing a sacrifice.

Usually, three different ceremonies are thought to have been brought together: Mary’s purification, the infant Jesus’s redemption, and the presentation of the child in the temple. Hence, when Luke refers to “their purification,” he could mean that in these ceremonies in which the infant Jesus has a part, the child, too, in a certain sense undergoes purification. This purification might consist of the payment of a price for redemption, or in a ceremony that was part of his presentation in the temple.<sup>16</sup>

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for Joseph in the purification. The new reality, brought about by the presence of the child Jesus, required a totally new approach to the law” (Fred Strickert, “The Presentation of Jesus: The Gospel of Inclusion,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 22 [1995]: 36). Basing his argument on the plural in Luke, Strickert defends an entirely new approach to the Law, in this case linked to a specific gender theology. However, he reads more into the text than is exegetically defensible.

<sup>13</sup> John Nolland, *Luke 1–9:50*, WBC 15a (Dallas: Word, 1989), 117.

<sup>14</sup> A quite different approach can be found in the Roman Catholic tradition, which sometimes gives a Mariological interpretation to the plural. In this view, “their purification” refers neither to Mary and Joseph, nor to Mary and the Child, but only to Mary, in whom the whole church is represented; that is why purification for Mary was necessary, according to the Pontificia Academia Mariana Internationalis in *Maria in Sacra Scriptura: Acta Congressus Mariologici-Mariani in Republica Dominicana anno 1965 celebrati* (Rome: Pontificia Academia Mariana Internationalis, 1967), 294–95: “Luke’s text is first of all testifying that Jesus is the Messiah. But indissolubly with this scope he combines the proclamation of Mary as offering and suffering with him, in the name of Mankind (as their head, representing the church and all men). Thus Mary, the mother of our Savior, is acting here as Mother of Mankind and as Mother of the Church.”

<sup>15</sup> Michael Wolter: “Possibly the Greek conception is in the background, according to which mother and child become unclean through the birth” (*Das Lukasevangelium*, HNT 5 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008], 135). Nolland, too, mentions the possibility that Luke’s language is “an accommodation to a Hellenistic manner of speaking” (*Luke 1–9:50*, 117).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, I. Howard Marshall: “It is most likely that Luke has run together the cleansing of the mother and the offering of the child into one act” (*Commentary on Luke*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 116), and François Bovon: “The expression [‘their purification’] is only to connect [Mary’s] ‘purification’ and [Jesus’s] ‘presentation’” (*A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine M. Thomas, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress,

There is, however, a problem: the prescriptions for redemption do not include the bringing of a purification sacrifice. Exegetes who become more specific on this point therefore prefer to point to the presentation of the child in the temple.<sup>17</sup> In order to determine whether this "presentation" in the temple may in a sense be regarded as a purification, we first need to have a clearer view of what exactly is meant by it.

### III. *Presentation in the Temple?*

Luke links Mary and Joseph's journey to Jerusalem to present the infant Jesus to the Lord with a free rendering of some verses from Exodus 13. There we read that all males<sup>18</sup> that open the womb<sup>19</sup> belong to the Lord<sup>20</sup> and are therefore to be set apart to him.<sup>21</sup> For an animal, this setting apart usually means that it is to be killed, or that another animal is to be sacrificed in its place.<sup>22</sup> Firstborn children, however, had to be "redeemed."<sup>23</sup> We read in Numbers 18 what exactly this redemption of a human firstborn consisted of. Moreover, in this chapter a distinction is made between clean and unclean animals. All firstborn males are to be set apart to the Lord. This means that, in the case of a clean animal, it was to be sacrificed to him. Unclean animals

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2002], 99). Van Bruggen follows a similar line in interpreting the reference to Lev 12:6: "Mother and child are closely connected, the child gets involved in the uncleanness of his mother" (*Lucas*, 88–89). While Van Bruggen correctly points out the special involvement of Jesus in Mary's impurity, he does not offer a satisfactory explanation why Jesus should therefore have been taken to the temple "according to the Law." Bock raises the possibility that "Luke is alluding in verse 22 to all the sacrifices involved in the three ceremonies and that those offerings, some hers and others theirs, are combined" (*Luke*, 92). Similarly, James T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 75: Luke "fuses two rituals."

<sup>17</sup> "Under καθαρισμός αὐτῶν [their purification] the narrator apparently understands in imprecise and broad terms the entire path to the temple. Above all the 'presentation' of the first born, which is given as the main reason for the trip to Jerusalem (v. 22b)" (Heinz Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, HThKNT 3.1 [Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1984], 121). Hans Klein writes in a comparable manner about Joseph and Mary's journey to Jerusalem: "They connect the purification of the mother at the birth of the first child (Lev 12) ... with a presentation of Jesus" (*Das Lukasevangelium*, KEK [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006], 145).

<sup>18</sup> πᾶν ἄρσεν in Luke 2:23, cf. Exodus 13:12, 15, in LXX: πᾶν ... τὰ ἀρσενικά.

<sup>19</sup> διανοίγον μήτραν in Luke 2:23, cf. Exod 13:2: πᾶν πρωτότοκον πρωτογενές διανοίγον πᾶσαν μήτραν (cf. Exod 13:12 and 15).

<sup>20</sup> τῷ κυρίῳ κληθήσεται in Luke 2:23, cf. in Exod 13:2: ἐμοί ἐστιν.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. ἀγιάσον μοι in Exodus 13:2 and ἀγιάσεις τῷ κυρίῳ in Exod 13:12, interpreted in Exod 12:15 as λυτρώσομαι.

<sup>22</sup> The firstborn of all livestock (in principle, of clean animals) shall be the LORD's (Exod 13:12), while every donkey's foal shall be killed or redeemed by a clean animal (Exod 13:13).

<sup>23</sup> Exod 13:15. How that is to be done is not recorded. Exod 34:19–20 repeats this prescription word for word, with the addition that one could not appear before the face of God empty handed.



were to be redeemed by paying a certain sum of money. Firstborn male children also, rather than being sacrificed, were to be redeemed by paying five shekels “according to the shekel of the sanctuary.”<sup>24</sup>

Exegetes attempt to find a link between this redemption and the presentation in the temple of the child. Some suggest a specific ceremony, known to everyone at the time, in which the child was dedicated to the Lord.<sup>25</sup> Sometimes this is thought to be combined with a ceremonial redemption. Raymond Brown even identifies the presentation in the temple and this redemption as one and the same thing.<sup>26</sup> In this view, Luke here describes a presentation in the temple, as was customary for the dedication of all firstborn.<sup>27</sup> Whichever way this combination is interpreted, such a presentation or offering is often regarded as a separate cultic ritual, even though views may differ as to whether Luke was correct in linking this act to the sacrifice of purification.

It is especially in religious art that this motif has found broad acceptance. Since medieval times, the presentation in the temple has been a favorite theme, sometimes characterized as “the presentation of the firstborn in the temple.”<sup>28</sup> Many exegetes will have a mental picture of this occasion, often inspired by the visual representation of a well-known artist. Such a mental picture unavoidably evokes the idea of a separate, concretely visualized ceremony that took place in the temple.

<sup>24</sup> Num 18:16; up to the present day, that is a substantial amount.

<sup>25</sup> Van Bruggen: “The presentation of the child to the Lord would have been consisting in its dedication to the priest” (*Lucas*, 88). Seakle Greijdanus: “The same ceremony has been applied to many Israelite boys” (*Het evangelie naar Lucas*, KV [Kampen: Kok, 1941], 71). See also Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 118, who identifies next to the sacrifice a separate act of presentation “to consecrate Him to the service of God.”

<sup>26</sup> Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 447: “There was the consecration or presentation of the child to the Lord.” A little further on, he uses the words “presentation” and “redemption” to denote one and the same ceremony: clearly, he regards the redemption ritual and the presentation in the temple as the same thing.

<sup>27</sup> “This consecration [of the firstborn by means of their redemption] was called ‘presentation’ and meant that the child was dedicated to the Lord and handed over for the service of the temple” (Fritz Rienecker, *Das Evangelium des Lukas*, WS [Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1959], 65). Jos Keulers, *De evangeliën volgens Marcus en Lucas*, BNT 2 (Roermond: Romen & Zonen, 1951), explains that the firstborn were presented in the temple one month after birth, as a sign of their dedication. However, he notes that there was no requirement that they be brought to the temple for this.

<sup>28</sup> Heidi J. Hornik and Mikael C. Parsons, “Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s Presentation in the Temple: A ‘Visual Exegesis’ of Luke 2:22–38,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 28 (2001): 31–46; their connection of the history of the exegesis of this passage with its portrayal in Christian art is interesting. From the fifth century onward, the Western church celebrated the feast of Mary’s purification. Later, this met with theological objections, since a pure virgin ought not to have needed any purification. These objections were refuted in the twelfth century, by Thomas Aquinas among others, who indicated that this was an example of the virgin’s humility, as well as of Christ’s assent to the law.



However, the question may be asked whether such a practice actually existed at that time, a specific act that could be described as a "presentation to the Lord": a dedication before the priest connected either to the purification ritual for the mother, or to the redemption ritual for the child. The answer to such a question is quite clear: as far as we know, it was not the case. "Extraneous sources know of no such practice."<sup>29</sup> Schürmann sets out the facts clearly in his commentary, at the end of a paragraph entitled "Jesus's presentation in the temple," where he writes: "That a first born male child would be 'presented' before the Lord was not prescribed, and is not attested in any source."<sup>30</sup> A practice that could be described as a presentation in the temple was completely unknown within the Jewish world of that time.<sup>31</sup>

Hence, only two known motifs to which Luke can point remain: Mary's purification in the temple and the redemption of the firstborn. The remarkable thing is that these two events are connected: on the one hand the child had no role in the purification, whereas on the other the ritual of redemption, to which the quotation from Exodus 13 indirectly refers, did not have to take place in the temple.

#### IV. *Redemption*

Herman Strack and Paul Billerbeck's exhaustive *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* indicates that while the redemption of first-born usually did not take place in the temple, it was possible. The only

<sup>29</sup> Jacob Mann, "Rabbinic Studies in the Synoptic Gospels," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 1 (1924): 329: "Apparently, Luke refers here to a general custom in the time of the second Temple to present there the first-born sons. For Luke does not suggest that the case of Jesus was exceptional. Extraneous sources, however, know of no such practice."

<sup>30</sup> Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, 1:121–22. The only exegete who believes he can point to such a practice is Nolland, who refers to Neh 10:35–36 (*Luke* 1–9:50, 117). There, the people of Israel commit themselves in a profession of renewed obedience, closely linked to the reconstruction of the new temple, to bring their firstborn sons to "the house of our God." Within the situation of the newly rebuilt Jerusalem it is quite understandable that the people stated their intention to bring the price of redemption, which was to be paid to a priest, to the temple. However, there is no mention here of an attendant "presentation ceremony" either.

<sup>31</sup> Brown, together with others, proposes another motif that may have played a role here: "the real model for the presentation motif is the story of Samuel" (*The Birth of the Messiah*, 450). It is indeed true that Luke 1 and 2 contain a number of allusions to the story of Hannah and Samuel. However, Luke's choice of words in describing the visit to the temple bears no resemblance to 1 Samuel 1:28: *καὶ ἔδωκεν αὐτὸν τῷ κυρίῳ πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας ἃς ζῇ αὐτός χρησιν τῷ κυρίῳ*. This text deals with "giving him to the Lord," "in the service of the Lord," and the specific terminology that Luke uses is not present here. It would be an overstatement if, as Brown does, Luke's lack of clarity comes about because of the conflict between the "redemption" motif and that of giving him to the service of the Lord, as was the case with Samuel. Nolland rightly notes that the "allusion remains secondary" (*Luke* 1–9:50, 117).

prooftext to show this, however, is Luke 2:22–23.<sup>32</sup> It seems, then, that we are dealing here with a quite unique situation.

To gain a good sense of this uniqueness, we ought first to clearly understand the manner in which a firstborn son was to be redeemed. This ceremony still exists in Jewish practice.<sup>33</sup> One month after the birth of the child a priest pays a visit to the family.<sup>34</sup> He points to Exodus 13, which describes the background to the law of the firstborn, then he asks the father whether he wants to give his son to the priest or to redeem his baby for the required amount. The background of Exodus 13 is very meaningful. The people of Israel are no better than the Egyptians, who resisted God's command to let his people go. This, in essence, explains the practice of redeeming the firstborn: God could with equal right have destroyed all of Israel's firstborn, when his angel went through the land on the night of the Passover. His people need constantly to be reminded that God himself, out of pure grace, has provided an alternative. On the night of that first Passover, it was a slaughtered lamb, the blood of which had to be smeared onto the doorposts. The sacrificial animal was brought to God in place of the life of the firstborn son, who as firstborn represented, in a sense, all of their offspring. Since that first Passover night in Egypt, the reality has remained the same. Even after God accepted this sacrifice, the firstborn remained set apart as holy to the Lord. That is what Exodus 13 emphasizes, following on from the account of the exodus in the preceding chapter.

This is what is brought into remembrance with the ceremony of redemption. That such redemption is possible still relates to the alternative that God himself has provided. Numbers 3:11–13 explains that it is the ministry of the Levites that makes it possible for the firstborn to be redeemed. God has taken them into service in the place of Israel's firstborn, those who were rightfully his. It is only because the tribe of Levi has been set apart to stand in the service of the Lord that the redemption of the firstborn from the other tribes is possible. Because the Levites have been given to God every firstborn son in Israel, the beginning of every family's future, can stay alive.

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<sup>32</sup> "The ransom money could be paid in the whole country to any priest. That it could happen in the temple as well together with the bringing of the child and occasionally of the purification offering of the mother appears from Luke 2:22–23" (Hermann Leberecht Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* [Munich: Beck, 1983], 2:120).

<sup>33</sup> For the manner in which this ceremony has developed within present-day Jewish life, see for example Dan Cohn-Sherbock, *Judaism: History, Belief and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 534.

<sup>34</sup> This period of one month is mentioned in Num 18:16.

This is the context of the words to which Luke refers: all firstborn males shall be set apart as holy to the Lord.

## V. *Brought to Stand before the Lord*

Exegetes might find it remarkable that Luke does not mention the act of redemption itself and that he only quotes words that form the backdrop for this event. However, this begins to make sense when we examine the context of the words Luke uses to indicate the "presentation of the child to the Lord": *paristanai tō Kuriō* (παριστάναι τῷ Κυρίῳ, literally "to be brought to stand before the Lord"). Is Jesus really being redeemed here, or is something else going on? As has already been pointed out, the problem is that *paristanai* does not occur in relation to any specific ritual act that took place in the temple, nor is it connected anywhere at all to the ritual of redemption.

On the other hand, it turns out that this verb is frequently used in connection with the Levitical service. In Deuteronomy 10:8 we read that the tribe of Levi was set apart to "stand before the Lord" (*paristanai enanti Kuriou*). This verse explains that to "stand before the Lord" means: to stand before him to serve him. In Deuteronomy 18:5 and 7 we read that the sons of Levi are said to stand before the Lord, using the same standard expression *paristanai tō Kuriō* and *enanti Kuriou*, respectively. In various other places, it becomes apparent that the verb is a technical term for the priestly ministry.<sup>35</sup> In addition, it occurs with a related meaning in connection with the service of other office-bearers. Especially in the case of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, we regularly encounter *paristanai* in the standard expression "to stand before his face" when they indicate that they are acting in the service of the Lord.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Deut 17:12: the priest stands before the LORD, which means that he is in God's service, τοῦ ἱερέως τοῦ παρεστηκότος (derived from παριστάναι) λειτουργεῖν ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ). Judg 20:28: the priest Phinehas stands (παρεστηκώς) before the ark of the covenant. Jer 35:19 (LXX 42:19): the promise to the Rechabites that there will always be a son of Rachab to stand before the face of God (παρεστηκώς κατὰ πρόσωπόν μου). Zech 4:14: the two anointed who stand before the Lord (παρεστήσιν τῷ κυρίῳ). Cf. apocryphal Judith 4:14: temple servants who all stand before the Lord (οἱ παρεστηκότες ἐνώπιον κυρίου ἱερεῖς) and Judith 11:13: the priests who stand in Jerusalem before the face of the Lord (τοῖς παρεστηκόσιν ... ἀπέναντι τοῦ προσώπου τοῦ θεοῦ). Hence Paul uses this term in his application of priestly service to the life of believers (Rom 12:1), where he describes priestly service as standing before God: παριστάναι τῷ θεῷ, compare παριστάναι in Rom 6:13, 16, 19, and presumably with the same meaning in Col 1:22, 28 and 2 Tim 2:15.

<sup>36</sup> 1 Kgs 17:1: ὁ θεὸς Ἰσραὴλ, ᾧ παρέστην ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ, ditto in 1 Kgs 18:15, 2 Kgs 3:14 and 5:16.

Luke uses this verb once earlier in his Gospel, before he uses it to indicate Jesus's first appearance in the temple. It comes from the mouth of the angel Gabriel, just as it did from Elijah and Elisha, to indicate his direct service before God: "I stand in the presence of God."<sup>37</sup>

The expression usually translated as "to be presented to the Lord" literally says, "to be brought to stand before the Lord," which thus means to stand in his service. It can be used this way in numerous contexts, but especially to describe the Levitical and priestly service in the temple.

When this background of *paristanai* is taken into account, we discover in Luke 2:22 something that is quite different from a customary ritual. It was normal only for the Levites to be "brought to stand before the Lord" in the place of the firstborn of the people. It is because the Levites stand before the Lord to serve him, that the rest of the people of Israel are kept alive through the redemption of their firstborn.

And now comes Jesus. He is no Levite. And still, says Luke, his parents take him to the temple to "bring him to stand before the Lord." In this way he confirms the truth of the most original meaning of the words of Exodus 13: he will be set apart for the Lord. He does not need to be redeemed for that. He does not need the tribe of Levi for that, either. It is just the other way around.

Luke makes a unique connection between Jesus's *paristanai*, his being placed in the service of the Lord, and the fulfillment of the words of Exodus 13.<sup>38</sup> He traces Jesus's ministry not through Levitical descent, but directly back to Exodus 13:2. Since Jesus from infancy has been placed in the Lord's service, the words of Exodus 13 become fully true in him. And because he is fully consecrated to the Lord, he is able to fulfill this *paristanai* as God originally intended it. In his ministry he has not only come, as the Levites

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<sup>37</sup> Luke 1:19: ὁ παρεστηκώς ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ. Compare the use of *paristanai* for the service of God in heaven in Dan 7:10; Zech 4:10; 6:5; 4 Maccabees 17:18 and for the service of the angels in Matt 26:53.

<sup>38</sup> There are more exegetes who have emphasized that Jesus here is consecrated to God in a unique manner, and in this way has been placed in the service of God. However, the connection with the fulfillment of the Levitical ministry through the words *paristanai* τῷ θεῷ is, regrettably, then not made. Van Bruggen correctly links the setting apart of the firstborn with being "placed before the Lord" in a special service to God (*Lucas*, 87). However, he intentionally leaves open the question whether Jesus needed to undergo redemption or not. Van Bruggen suggests that if Jesus had descended from the tribe of Levi, as Luke seems to indicate, there would have been no need for such redemption. At the same time, he points out that this has no bearing on what Luke is saying, since the evangelist's point was the specific act of consecration, by a priest, of the child. If, as I have concluded above, Luke is indicating that Jesus has fulfilled the Levitical ministry through his own *paristanai* τῷ θεῷ, then the reason why he did not need to be redeemed is quite different. In fact, then, he is consecrated as a Levite in the absence of a Levitical genealogy; a Levite after the order of Exodus 13.

did, to stand in the place of all the firstborn, who otherwise would have had to die. He takes this substitutionary work of the Levites a step further. He also comes to stand in the place of the Levites themselves.<sup>39</sup> That is why he was not redeemed, because in him the deepest meaning of the words of Exodus 13 becomes true. In him they take on a substitutionary character, just as the Levites had a place as substitutes for all the firstborn. In this manner he is set apart to stand before the Lord in the place of the whole people.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

In this short passage dealing with Jesus's infancy we encounter two aspects of his work that had evidently already begun when he was an infant. He comes to stand next to his people, under the Law. This becomes clear in his circumcision and also in the manner in which he is connected, in the same breath, with the impurity of his mother. For him, too, the door to the temple can only be opened after a sacrifice of cleansing is brought. But for him this uncleanness is not something that is beyond his power to remove. This becomes evident from the second thing that Luke writes about him. He is set before his people to stand before the face of God for them, to fulfill in their place their service to God. This second scene is not some sweet "presentation" in the temple: it is Luke's portrayal of the confirmation of

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<sup>39</sup> Théodore Köhler highlights this substitutionary aspect of the role of the Levites: "In particular, he purifies the sons of Levi who took the place of the firstborn, thus he purifies, redeems his entire people" ("Pour le présenter au temple," in Ferdinando Bergamelli, Mario Cimosà, *Virgo fidelis: Miscellanea di Studi Mariani in onore di Don Domenico Bertetto* [Roma: C.L.V.-Edizioni liturgiche, 1988], 519). Köhler, however, links this role not to the verb *παριστάναι* but to the significance of the feast of Jesus's presentation in the temple (in the Eastern church, the feast of *Hypapante*), which he regards, among other things, as a fulfillment of Mal 3:1.

<sup>40</sup> Luke's comment in 2:27 that Jesus's parents brought him to the temple to "do for him according to the custom of the law" appears to be at odds with this interpretation, which highlights the unique character of what took place in the temple. Is Luke here alluding to a specific practice, a "presentation" in the temple that was done with other firstborn boys as well? The word that is translated here as "custom," *τὸ εἰθισμένον*, does not appear anywhere else in the NT. Here, Luke does not write *κατὰ τὸ ἔθος*, as he does, for example in Luke 1:19. The verb *ἐθίζειν*—from which *τὸ εἰθισμένον* is derived—occurs several times in the LXX, as does the noun *τὸ ἐθισμός*. This is often used as a translation of the Hebrew *חֻשׁוֹן*. In addition to the meaning of "custom," this word may also convey aspects of "ordinance" or "jurisprudence." In 2 Maccabees 4:11 *ἐθισμούς* even indicates completely new ordinances. It seems likely that the prevailing translation of Luke 2:27 is colored by the belief that it referred to a commonly understood practice. We could with equal justification translate the sentence *καὶ ἐν τῷ εἰσαγαγεῖν τοὺς γονεῖς τὸ παιδίον Ἰησοῦν τοῦ ποιῆσαι αὐτοὺς κατὰ τὸ εἰθισμένον τοῦ νόμου περὶ αὐτοῦ* in a manner which emphasizes its unique character: "when the parents brought the child Jesus, to do for him according to what had been laid down (or decreed) concerning him in the Law."

his priestly service so soon after his birth. In Jerusalem, in the temple, he is confirmed in his office as substitute. It is because of his being set apart to stand before God that there is a future for Israel and for the nations.