

About the Story

Anna, A Prophet (Luke 2:36-38)

Setting of the Story

The original audience of Luke's Gospel would have heard this short story in the context of a longer one about Jesus' birth. It follows the episode about Simeon, an old man who recognized the significance of the infant Jesus and praised God for bringing salvation to the people. After he predicts the opposition that Jesus will face, and his mother Mary's pain because of it, the story of Anna is told. Both the story of Simeon and of Anna take place in the temple, where Mary and Joseph went soon after Jesus' birth "to present him to the Lord."

Anna, a Prophet

The first two parts of this story describe its main character, Anna. Anna is first of all described as being a prophet. This is very unusual since she was a woman. Only one other woman in biblical history had been described as a prophet—Deborah—and she had lived over a thousand years before in the days before Israel had kings (see her story in Judges 4). Prophets were people who listened to God and who spoke for God, so they were very important persons in the history of Israel.

Anna, an Old Woman

Anna is an old woman, at least 84 years old. Her "great age" makes her distinctive in biblical tradition. There are very few biblical stories about old women. Sarah, the wife of Abraham, whose story is told in the book of Genesis, is one other. This is the only place where Anna is mentioned and it isn't a very long story, but she was clearly an important figure. Unlike many women in biblical stories she is given a name. Not only that, we are even told about her family and tribe: she is the daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher.

Anna, a Widow

Another thing we learn about Anna in this short story is that she is a widow. She only lived with her husband for seven years after they were married. There is no mention of any children. In ancient Israel, widows were usually regarded as among the most vulnerable and unimportant people, especially if they did not have any sons to care for them.

Widows were usually very poor, as are all the other widows mentioned in the Bible; see for example, the widow who gave two pennies to the temple treasury, Luke 21:1-4. Widows were poor because women had no legal rights and were therefore totally dependent on men for their economic welfare. So a woman without a man was usually destitute. Perhaps this is why Anna came to live in the temple, though there is no mention of other women, or men, doing that. She was clearly special.

Anna, a Pious Woman

Part two of the story continues the description of Anna with one sentence, one breath unit: “She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day.” These words should be emphasized when you tell the story. They let the audience know that Anna was to be trusted as a true prophet, close to God, because she lived in the temple and constantly engaged in two important spiritual practices: fasting and prayer. Her words could be believed. And what words did she speak? We find out in the last part of the story.

A Message of Hope

The people of Israel looked to the prophets for guidance and good news. They remembered the prophets of old who had connected them to God and helped them know God was still there and still loved them, and that they were still God’s people. They hadn’t had a prophet for over 300 years and they kept hoping for one to come. So they would be happy and excited when they heard this story.

The last prophets had given the people of Israel hope after their holy city, Jerusalem, had been destroyed by the Babylonians. When Anna “began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” the first audiences would have known that meant good news because that’s how their prophets of old had spoken after Jerusalem was conquered and sacked by the Babylonians.

Luke’s audience were living in the years soon after the Romans had sacked Jerusalem, so the promise of a child, in connection with the redemption of Jerusalem, was a powerful promise. If a prophet as reliable as Anna said it, it must be true.