

Dear Friends,

Jesus is forty days old. Mary and Joseph have brought him to the temple. An old man called Simeon is there at the same time. He takes the child in his arms and shares God given words about what Jesus will do. Simeon knows that this child has given him peace. He also believes that this peace is not for him alone. He says that Jesus is "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory of your people Israel".

The Israelites used the word "Gentiles" for those who were not of their number. What did Simeon mean when he said that Jesus would be a light to these Gentiles? Some say that he only meant that the Gentiles would get to see the light from the outside as observers. They would not actually enter the light and experience it for themselves. Others say that he believed that the Gentiles as well as the Israelites would come to the light and so experience God's peace and salvation.

My hunch is that Luke, the writer of the story, sees Simeon as believing that with God all are welcome. In his gospel he goes on to tell of Jesus bringing healing to Gentiles as well as Jews. Luke follows up his gospel with a second book, The Acts of the Apostles. That is all about how the first Christians take the good news of Jesus to the ends of the earth. Surely Simeon has a vision of this wide embrace in which God is ready to hold all people. Simeon does not see the Gentiles as onlookers, watching enviously from a distance. He sees them being given the light and coming to God. What Jesus will do will not just be for the few, not even just for the many, it will be for all. The glory for Israel is not that this is for them alone but that it comes from amongst them and is for everyone.

Mary and Joseph hear what Simeon says about their son and they are amazed. They were also amazed on the night when Jesus was born. Then they were surprised by the shepherds who told them what the angel had said about Jesus. Mary and Joseph are open to strangers. They listen to them and learn from them even about their own child.

Simeon turns his attention to Mary and Joseph. He blesses them. He then tells them more about what Jesus will do. He says "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel". What does he mean by this? Are there two groups of people? Will Jesus make one group fall and another rise? That's possible. Mary has already sung of God as one who turns things upside down and inside out. She said "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty". Jesus will grow up to tell a story about two men, a rich man who has good things in this life followed by agony in the life to come, and a poor man who experiences evil while alive and comfort beyond death. He will also put this teaching into words, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted", and "There are those now last who will be first, and those now first who will be last".

So yes, Simeon may well see Jesus as making some fall and some rise. But does he also see Jesus as sometimes making people fall in order to bring them to a place from which they may fully rise? Is the deep longing of Jesus for no one to fall for ever but for all to ultimately rise?

God bless you,

Tony