Luke 1:1-25

The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold

Luke was probably a Gentile convert to Judaism, living in the Hellenistic city of Antioch in Ancient Syria where he met the Apostle Paul and became a Christian believer. He is called a physician, and from the quality of his Greek language, he is one of the most highly educated of the authors of the New Testament.

His gospel is directed toward a community made up of both Jewish and Gentile Christians. Its message is the universality of Jesus' mission. As God says to the Messiah, "I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth." (**Isaiah 49:6**)

Luke 1:1-4 - "Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, That thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed."

Since Luke was not an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry he states in his preface here that he had diligently gathered the details of Jesus' life.

"perfect understanding" - he had sought out eyewitnesses who had firsthand knowledge

"from the first" = *anōthen* - from the conception of John the Baptist. Others take this to mean "from above" i.e. perfect because given to him by God

"in order" - Luke wants to relate these thing in as close to chronological order as possible.

"Theophilus" - "Lover of God." This may stand for anyone who is a believer and is reading this gospel. Some think this is a particular believer, possibly a government official.

John the Baptist

Luke 1:5 - "There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth."

The "course of Abia" or Abijah was one of the divisions of the priesthood indicating when they would serve in the Temple. Moses had set eight courses. David increased these to 24 courses of priests as well as 24 courses of Levites.

Maimonides - "They went up to Jerusalem to the service of the course every week; and from sabbath to sabbath they changed; one course went out, and another came in, till they finished, and returned again."

After the exile in Babylon, only four courses of priests returned to Judea. The course of Abijah did not return from captivity, but its order and name were retained.

In Herod's Temple the 24 courses were restored.

There were also 24 courses of “men of the station.” An Israelite was supposed to stand in the Temple when his sacrifice was offered. But many of the offerings were made on behalf of all Israel. It was impossible for everyone to gather in the Temple courtyard. So there were 24 courses of common Israelites chosen from godly men called "men of the station."

The fact that Zacharias, the father of John the Baotist, was of the course of Abijah is key to determining when John was born, and therefore when Jesus was born. (More on that later).

As a priest, Zacharias was of the tribe of Levi and a descendent of Aaron, as was his wife, Elisabeth. ("Elisabeth" was also the name of the wife of Aaron)

Luke 1:6 - "And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless."

Unlike the Pharisees who portrayed themselves a pious, these two were actually righteous. But their righteousness came from their faith not in works of the law. They looked for the Messiah.

- Romans 3:28 - "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

"blameless" - By faith they were justified by the righteousness of Christ, as were all the Old Testament saints.

Luke 1:7 - "And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years."

Childlessness was considered a tragedy and a "reproach." See Abraham and Sarah (**Genesis 16**); the parents of Samson - Manoah, and his wile, Elkanah (**Judges 13**); and Hannah (**1 Samuel 1 & 2**).

The word for "aged" has the same *gematria* as the number 60, so 60 years of age marked the beginning of old age.

Luke 1:8-9 - "And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God

in the order of his course, According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord."

There were said to be as many as 20,000 priests in the time of Jesus. The lot to serve might fall to a priest only once in his life. To serve in the Holy Place would have been a tremendous honor.

According to rabbinical sources, a priest's area of service in the Temple was by choice originally. Someone would volunteer to sweep and clean the altar, someone else would volunteer to replace the wicks in the Lamp Stand, etc.

"At first, whoever would, might sweep the altar, or cleanse it----it happened that two alike ran, and came up to the ascent of the altar, and one thrust down the other, and he fell, and his leg was broken; and when the sanhedrim saw that they came into danger, they ordered that they should not cleanse the altar, but by lot." - Mishna Yoma, c. 2. sect. 1, 2.

So all the jobs and service were selected by casting lots.

Luke 1:10 - "And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense."

Because of the crowd, this was probably a sabbath. On weekdays mainly only the priests, Levites and the "stationary men" attended.

Incense was burned at the time of the morning and evening sacrifice (**Exodus 30:7-8**).

The Ritual

The morning sacrifice began when the incense priest walked toward the temple, through the outer courts, he struck a gong-like instrument known as the *Magrephah.* At this sound, the Levites assembled and got ready to lead the gathered people in songs of worship to God. The other two priests chosen by lot that morning walked up to the temple on each side of the priest chosen to offer the incense. All three entered the holy place together. One priest set burning coals on the golden altar; the other priest arranged the incense, so it was ready to go. Then those two priests left the temple, and the incense priest was left all alone in the holy place.

The incense priest burned the incense and then prayed in the holy place, in the very presence of God, for the entire nation, as the people prayed silently in the courtyard.

Prayer is compared to incense in the Psalms:

- Psalm 141:2 - "Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice."

... so people gathered to pray at the time of the burning of incense in the Temple.

This scene is reflected in the Book of Revelation:

- Revelation 8:3-4 - "Then another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, along with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, rose up before God from the hand of the angel.…"

But the people had to stay a certain distance away.

In the time they burn the incense in the temple every day, "they separate all the people" from the temple, and from between the porch and the altar; there is not a man there, till he comes out that burns the incense. - Maimonides Hilch. Tamidin, c. 3. sect. 3. 9

Luke 1:11 - "And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense."

This was Gabriel (**Luke 1:19**) who about 500 years before had appeared to Daniel "about the time of the evening oblation," with a prophecy of the coming of Messiah (**Daniel 9:21**).

The Jews knew of several reports of supernatural appearances within the Holy Place.

According to Josephus, the high priest Hyrcanus received an oracle, or answer from God, as he was offering incense. And Simeon the Just , high priest in around the early third century B.C., had this experience:

"Simeon the just ministered unto Israel in the high priesthood forty years; and in the last year, he said to them, I shall die this year: they said to him, from whence dost thou know it? He replied to them, every year that I have entered into the holy of holies, there was, , "one old man" clothed in white, and veiled in white, that went in with me, and came out with me; and this year he went in with me, but did not come out with me." - Jerusalem Talmud, Yoma 42c

Luke 1:12-13 - "And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John."

Sometimes prayers are answered immediately, sometimes as in this case an answer comes after many years. Sometimes the answer is no. Sometimes the prayer is fulfilled in an unexpected way. But here, Zacherias and his wife had probably stopped praying for a child, being well past childbearing age. But God had heard their prayer. It was to be answered at the appointed time and in sync with God's timing of the coming of Messiah.

The name "John" would be "Jochanan" in Hebrew, which means "gracious." Appropriate, since he would be the forerunner of Jesus' kingdom of grace.

Was John the Baptist Under a Nazarite Vow?

Luke 1:14-17 - "And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall 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 a people prepared for the Lord."

The phrase to "drink neither wine nor strong drink" seems similar to the Nazarite vow (**Numbers 6:1-13**), although John is not specifically called a Nazarite. You could take a Nazarite vow for a period of time or be dedicated a Nazarite from birth, like Samson and Samuel. The vow involved abstaining from grapes and wine, shaving neither hair nor beard, and strictly avoiding contact with a corpse.

Keeping the hair long and uncut represented acknowledging your sins.

- Psalm 40:12 - "For innumerable evils have compassed me about: mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of mine head: therefore my heart faileth me."

Thus the hair was called the Nazirite's "crown." With different vowel points, "*Nazir*" becomes "*Nezer*," which means "crown" in Hebrew.

Abstaining from wine, which "gladdens the heart" (**Psalm 104:15**), represented sorrow for one's sins. All this encouraged humility.

Mark describes John:

- Mark 1:6 - "And John was clothed with camel's hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey;"

Mark description is probably purposely a quote from **2 Kings 1:8** concerning Elijah -"He was an hairy man, and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins." ("hairy man" could imply either long hair or a hairy garment).

John the Baptist is identified in the New Testament as the messenger who would go before the Messiah, spoken of by Isaiah.

- Isaiah 40:3-4 - "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain"

The prophet Malachi identifies this person as Elijah:

- Malachi 4:5-6 - "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse."

But in what way can John be identified with Elijah? Should we take it literally?

Jesus confirms that John is Elijah:

- Mark 9:11-13 - "And they asked him [Jesus], 'Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?' And he said to them, 'Elijah does come first to restore all things... But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased.'"

But at one point John denies being Elijah:

- John 1:19-21 - "And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No."

John later affirms his role as the forerunner prophesied in Malachi:

- John 3:28 - "Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him."

So John came, as Luke says, in the "spirit and power" of Elijah, but not as a "back from the dead" second coming of the prophet. John was his own person who, filled with the Holy Spirit, stepped into the role and mission he shared with the Old Testament prophet.

Jesus was not the kind of political Messiah the Jews expected, and John did not exactly fit their expectations of his forerunner.

Although John was not the "reincarnation" of Elijah, both prophets were similar in zeal and ascetic lifestyle.

Both John and Elijah confronted evil kings to their face and were persecuted. Both preached to a discouraged people who were weak in faith, calling many to repentance. And both lived an austere lifestyle under what seems like a Nazarite-like vow that set them apart.

John the Baptist "went before" Jesus by literally being born six months before, and then beginning his ministry probably six months before he baptized Jesus as He began His.

The way he "made straight in the wilderness a highway for our God" was in pointing out the pride of the inward high places and the crookedness and perverseness of our nature that would block the kingdom of God, and then calling for repentance.

The Jewish belief was that Elijah the Tishbite himself would appear in person. Even today, Jews hope for the coming of Elijah. His spirit is the unseen guest at every Passover table, where a place is set for him.

According to Jewish expectation, Elijah would appear suddenly "three days before the Messiah" - Yalkut, vol. 2

When the archangel Michael blows the trumpet, Elijah will appear with the Messiah, whom he will present to the Jews.

"Elijah would stand on the mountains of Israel, lamenting the desolateness of the land, his voice being heard from one end of the world to the other, after which he would proclaim: 'Peace' cometh to the world; 'peace' cometh to the world! Similarly on the second day he would proclaim, 'Good' cometh to the world; 'good' cometh to the world! Lastly, on the third day, he would, in the same manner as the two previous days, make proclamation: 'salvation cometh to the world;' 'salvation) cometh to the world,'"
- The Life and Tomes of Jesus the Messiah

Elijah's main purpose would be to call Israel to repentance.

Rabbi Jehudah said: If Israel will not repent they will not be redeemed. Israel only repents because of distress, and because of oppression, and owing to exile, and because they have no sustenance. Israel does not repent quite sincerely until Elijah comes, as it is said, "Behold, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the great and terrible day of the Lord come. And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers" - Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 43

He would also settle disputes over interpretations.

"Elijah comes to defile and to cleanse (i.e. to pronounce what things are clean or unclean), and to remove afar off, and to bring near (i.e. to determine what family genealogies are legitimate or illegitimate). R. Simeon says, "to compose differences"; and the wise men say, neither to remove, nor to bring near, but "to make peace" in the world; as it is said, "behold, I send unto you Elijah the prophet", etc. "and he shall turn the heart of the fathers", etc."
- Mishnah Eduyot 8:7

The word "to" should be translated "with" - meaning he will turn the hearts of the Fathers with the children, i.e back to faith in God and, in John the Baotist's case, to faith in Jesus. "And the disobedient to the wisdom of the just" - both Jew and Gentile.

"The wisdom of the just" refers to the "Messiah of the just" according to the Targum on **Jeremiah 12:5**.

- Jeremiah 23:5 - "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch (*tsemach tzaddik*), and he shall reign as king..."

The Hebrew phrase *tsemach tzaddik* ("righteous branch") is translated into Aramaic in the Targum as "the Messiah of the just" (or "the Messiah of the righteous." Jesus who is the only just or righteous one, and is the wisdom of God.

John's mission would be to bring Israel to repentance to be worthy of "the Messiah of the righteous."

Zacharias' Moment of Unbelief

Luke 1:18-19 - "And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years. And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings."

Zacharias would have immediately recognized the name Gabriel, from **Daniel 8:16** where he appears to Daniel. Gabriel's name is associated with the prophecy of the coming Messiah which he delivered to Daniel.

So Zacharias' hesitancy and question: "Whereby shall I know this?" was unacceptable to the angel. If you can't believe an angelic being sent from God ,who beheld the face of the Almighty as he ministered to Him, who can you believe?

Gabriel, according to the Jews, is one of the four angels that surround the throne of God: their names are Michael, Uriel, Raphael, and Gabriel - Bernidbar Rabba, sect. 2. fol. 179.

The name Gabriel was understood by *gematria* or Jewish numerology to be the same as "merciful," because he brought news or the prophecy of the Messiah.

This powerful being was sent specifically to take a message from God to Zacharias, and yet the priest questioned the reality of it.

<u>Zacharias looked at the circumstances instead of at the power of God.</u>

So Gabriel decides to place a chastisement on Zacharias to hopefully teach him a lesson.

Luke 1:20 - "And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season."

Apparently he was struck both deaf and dumb, since later we read that his friends were "making signs" to communicate to him (**Luke 1:62**).

Luke 1:21 - "And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he tarried so long in the temple."

Normally, according to the Mishna, the priest burning the incense "made a short prayer in the outward house, (in the temple,) and he did not continue long in his prayer, "that he might not affright" the Israelites" i.e. thinking that he was dead; for many high priests that were unfit for, or made alteration in the service, died in the holy of holies, according to Maimonides.

Luke 1:22 - "And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless."

Normally the priest would bless the people with the priestly blessing from Numbers before dismissing them:

- Numbers 6:24-26 - "May the LORD bless you and keep you; may the LORD cause His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; may the LORD lift up His countenance toward you and give you peace."

Luke 1:23 - "And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house."

Levites would be disqualified from duties because of inability to speak or hear, since one of their duties was singing. But Zacharias could still perform his tasks, although without the ability to issue the blessing.

Luke 1:24-25 - "And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying, 'Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.'"

She "hid herself" possibly not wanting to say anything about this unusual pregnancy until it was clear she was really "with child."

All this is happening while Zacharias is still unable to speak or hear. However, he would have been able to explain to her in writing what the angel had told him.