

# Commentary on the Gospel of Luke

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The Gospel splits up into eight sections of which this is the first. For a full analysis of the whole Gospel see the introduction.

## SECTION 1.

### The Birth and Growth To Maturity Of John And Jesus (Luke 1-2).

This first section of Luke's Gospel can be analysed as below. It will be noted that the analysis, as we would expect, centres on the birth of Jesus. This is what all in the section is preparing for and leading up to, and what then follows puts its stamp on His uniqueness and glory. So central to the whole is Jesus, and this is what the chiasmus brings out.

- a Introduction - wisdom is being offered to Theophilus (lover of God), who represents all God lovers, so that they might 'know' the truth (1.1-4).
- b Zacharias goes up to the Temple and is promised a son, John, who will prepare the way for God's Messiah, and he is made dumb in God's presence (1.5-25).
- c Mary receives the promise that she will bear the Messiah and she responds in obedience (1.26-38).
- d Mary visits Elizabeth who prophesies by the Holy Spirit over Jesus and Mary and rejoices and worships God (1.39-56).
- e Elisabeth's child is born and is circumcised (1.57-60).
- f Zacharias's tongue is loosed and the news of the remarkable events go round the neighbourhood (1.61-66).
- g Zacharias prophesies by the Holy Spirit concerning the coming of the Messiah, and his own son's part in preparing the way for the Messiah. (1.67-80).
- h Jesus is born in Bethlehem among the domestic animals, being laid in a manger (2.1-7).
- g The angels declare the coming of the Messiah and bless God for His goodness in sending the Messiah, and appear to the shepherds in the fields to prepare the way for His coming (2.8-14).
- f The shepherds see Him and filled with wonder give thanks to God and spread the word around the neighbourhood (2.15-20).
- e Jesus is circumcised and presented at the Temple (2.21-24).
- d Simeon, inspired by the Spirit, blesses God and prophesies over Jesus, and rejoices and worships God (2.25-35).
- c Anna the prophetess comes to where Jesus is in the Temple and gives thanks to God and spreads the news (2.36-40).
- b Jesus goes up to the Temple and receives understanding in the things of God in His Father's presence (2.41-51).
- a 'And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man' (2.52).

Note that in 'a' wisdom is offered to all God-lovers that they might grow in it and enjoy God's favour, and in the parallel Jesus grows in wisdom and in favour with God and men. In 'b' Zacharias goes up to the Temple and receives a word from God, and in the parallel Jesus does the same. In 'c' Mary receives the promise of the Messiah, and in the parallel Anna comes to the promised Messiah and spreads news of Him all around. In 'd' Elizabeth prophesies over Jesus and praises and blesses God, and in the parallel Simon prophesies over Jesus and praises and blesses God. In 'e' John is circumcised and in the parallel Jesus is circumcised. All is rooted in the promise to Abraham. In 'f' Zacharias's tongue is loosed and the word goes

round the neighbourhood, and in the parallel the shepherds spread the word around the neighbourhood. In 'g' Zacharias prophesies the coming of the Messiah and in the parallel the angels do the same. And in 'h' the Messiah comes.

#### **Introduction (1.1-4).**

In approaching this introduction we should recognise that it conforms with literary practise in the world of Luke's day.

Josephus in 'Against Appion' opens his writings similarly. In his opening to book 1 he says, "In my history of our Antiquities, most excellent Epaphroditus, I have, I think, made sufficiently clear to any who may peruse that work the extreme antiquity of our Jewish race, the purity of the original stock and the manner in which it established itself in the country which we occupy today. .... Since, however, I observe that a considerable number of persons, .... discredit the statements in my history concerning our antiquity, .... I consider it my duty to devote a brief treatise to all these points, in order at once to convict our detractors of malignity and deliberate falsehood, to correct the ignorance of others, and to instruct all who desire to know the truth concerning the antiquity of our race."

He then commences book 2 in this way:

"In the first volume of this work, my most esteemed Epaphroditus, I demonstrated the antiquity of our race, corroborating my statements by the writings of the Phoenicians, Chaldaeans, and Egyptians. .... I also challenged the statements of Manetho, Chaeremon and some others. I shall now proceed to refute the rest of the authors who have attacked us." It will be seen how similar in general terms this is to Luke's openings, not because either was acquainted with the other, but because it was a standard literary method of the day.

But note that Luke is able to point to eyewitnesses, which Josephus was necessarily unable to do.

1.1-2 'Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to draw up a narrative concerning those matters which have been fulfilled among us, even as they delivered them to us, who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word,'

These first four verses are presented in classical Greek, in contrast with what follows in chapters 1 & 2. We note here that 'many' are said to have put in writing certain facts about Jesus Christ and His life and teaching. Thus Luke had a number of writings from which to draw, and concerning which he could consult Paul and the twelve. These may well have included Mark's manuscript of his own Gospel, or a draft of it, which he may well have lent to Luke as containing the testimony of Peter. But Mark's Gospel could never be sufficient for a historian like Luke. It did not contain sufficient of Jesus' teaching. He clearly then had sources, or a source, for the teaching of Jesus. But we can be sure that he checked their accuracy with the living voices themselves. On top of this he travelled to places like Caesarea and Jerusalem, at one stage remaining in Caesarea for two years, where he would meet a good number of people who had been present at many of the events described. Given that Luke spent so much time with Paul and would certainly have been in contact with Peter, and definitely was with Mark, it would have been incredible if a careful historian like he was had not checked with them the reliability of the material. It is clear that he was not fully satisfied with what had already been produced. He would not therefore just accept what they said. He was a genuine historian and wanted to do the life of Jesus justice.

His words in themselves emphasise the importance of his subject. He speaks of 'the things fulfilled among us'. What Jesus was and what He had done was seen as something 'fulfilled'. It was a fulfilment of the Old Testament Scriptures, and His was a life, seen not as tragically cut short in death, but as a life which had achieved its full potential. It was a fulfilled life. Speaking of Jesus he could hardly have meant anything less. The perfect participle

emphasises that they have been fulfilled and are still being so.

And he then stresses that the information contained in his Gospel comes from 'eyewitnesses and ministers of the word'. While in another this might have indicated that they were simply its original source, Luke's circumstances and travels make quite clear that he would actually have met these eyewitnesses. He could not have failed to do so. And having done so, had that not been what he was signifying here, he would have added a further comment. The fact that he did not do that stresses that these eyewitnesses were ones whom he had talked with himself.

The use of 'the word' here does not go quite as far as John 1.1-18 in personifying the Logos (the Word), but in Luke's writings 'the word' is something powerful and effective that goes forth and changes men's lives, and the prime thing about it is that it concerns Jesus. Indeed one of the main themes of Acts is the going forth of 'the word' (e.g. 4.4, 29; 6.4, 7; etc), and there it means the word about Jesus Christ, the Messiah. And here he closely connects that word with the life of Jesus as witnessed by eyewitnesses. The word is the word concerning Him which goes forth and produces life (Isaiah 55.11). In the parable of the sower it is the word which is sowed so as to result in the establishment of the Kingly Rule of God (8.11). In 11.28 Jesus can say, 'blessed are those who hear the word of God --', compare also 5.1 where the people press to hear 'the word of God'. It is called 'the word of God' because its source was in God. This is why Paul could say that 'the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God'. And it is that word of power that Luke wants to present. Compare 4.32, 36 where it is both Jesus' word of authority in teaching and His word of authority in casting out evil spirits.

'Ministers of the word.' In Acts it is the Apostles and their close associates who are the ministers of the word (Acts 6.4). As this introduction introduces both books Luke may well be intending us to see by this description Apostolic men who had been with Jesus. Papias had said, 'For I did not assume that whatever comes from books is as helpful to me as what comes from a living and lasting voice.' There is really no reason for Luke not to have thought the same, and he had the advantage of meeting at least some of the Apostles face to face.

1.3-4 'It seemed good to me also, having traced the course of all things accurately from the first, to write to you in order, most excellent Theophilus, that you might know the certainty concerning the things in which you were instructed.'

So Luke tells us that, unsatisfied with other writings, he went back to basics. As a genuine historian he 'traced all things accurately from the first', so that Theophilus and his readers may be able to be sure that what he tells them are facts, and might 'know the certainty concerning the things in which they were instructed'. 'From the first' is probably intended to signify that he began at the beginning with the birth of John and what led up to it. For that is where this new activity of God had begun. In view of his accuracy where it can be tested historically we have every reason to accept that he meant this to be taken literally. He was that kind of writer. Thus it is not reasonable to suggest that he meant that he merely accumulated traditional material. That would not have satisfied Luke.

'Most excellent Theophilus.' 'Most excellent' was a title used of Roman procurators. Compare the 'most excellent Felix' (Acts 23.26). But it could also be used as a title of respect, and it may thus be that Theophilus was an influential man who had become, or was on the verge of becoming, a Christian. But however that may be, we must not see this as a personal communication with Theophilus, although a copy might well have been sent to him, and he may well have offered to have it reproduced and sent out. As with Josephus's work the idea was that it be read widely. Indeed Luke may well have chosen his patron because his name 'lover of God' adequately depicted those by whom he wanted his Gospel to be read.

'To write to you in order.' This does not necessarily mean in strict chronological order, although clearly the general outline is chronological. Much of the teaching would not have

been given only once. Much must have been spoken again and again as Jesus went everywhere preaching the word, and some would have been remembered in differing contexts, and other would have been remembered without a context. We must always remember this when we speak of similar sayings in the Gospels having different contexts, as though that meant that one writer must be wrong. For the truth was that some of the sayings had many contexts. And others were well remembered but had no context. Luke would fit these latter in as it suited the message he was conveying. And we must remember that Luke was not writing for twentieth century man who is obsessed with time. He was writing for 1st century man who was more interested in meaning and significance, and portraying a total picture.

The people of Palestine in the first century AD depended a good deal on memory. And as the Sermon on the Mount brings out vividly, Jesus deliberately catered for that by speaking in a memorable way. What He said was spoken in a way helpful for memorising, and the deliberate continual repetition would fix it in the mind.

And all would know who were the ones who had the most reliable memories. It was to them that Luke would go. Whether there was a Q document of sayings or not, we would be doing Luke an injustice to suggest that he relied on that alone when he came across so many who had actually heard Jesus speak a good number of times. We are thus assured that Luke actually heeded the eyewitnesses.

**Zacharias Goes Up to the Temple and Is Promised a Son Who Will Prepare the Way for God's Messiah, and He is Made Dumb in God's Presence (1.5-25).**

From this point on until the end of chapter 2 all is written in Aramaic Greek in vivid contrast to the classical Greek of 1.1-4, and the more general Greek that follows. This may partly reflect Luke's sources, but he later has no difficulty in turning his Aramaic sources into more general Greek. Thus we must see the Aramaic Greek here as deliberately retained and expanded on in order to give atmosphere to the story. It reflects the old from which the new will come.

For four hundred years there had been no prophet in Israel. Heaven had been silent, and the people had been waiting for the fulfilment of the last words of the last of the prophets, who had declared on God's behalf, "Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord come. And he will turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse" (Malachi 4.5-6). And now it is being clearly indicated that those dark days were ended, and God was about to act. Another has come 'in the Spirit and power of Elijah' to fulfil the words of Malachi.

It is indeed interesting that those words were spoken by a man who was called Malachi - 'My messenger'. And now another will arise of whom it is said that he is 'My messenger' (Luke 7.27; compare Matthew 11.10; Mark 1.2). In the purposes of God, after the passage of the silent years, one messenger takes up where another has left off.

1.5-6 'There was in the days of Herod, king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abijah: and he had a wife of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.'

Herod, king of Judaea (this is to be seen as Judaea in its widest sense, the lands of the Jews, including Samaria, Galilee and Peraea - compare Acts 2.9; 10.37), otherwise known as Herod the Great, reigned from c. 37 BC to around 5 to 1 BC. The latter dating depends mainly on whether the coins issued by his sons were 'optimistically' dated or not, and on which eclipse of the moon Josephus was referring to. These are the main bases for dating the time of Herod's death. If the enrolment of Joseph at the time of Jesus' birth was that of the celebration of the 25th year of Augustus' reign, when a decree went out that all men of quality should declare

their loyalty to Caesar, it occurred in 3 BC which would suggest that 1 BC may well be correct for the death of Herod, and would indicate that his death occurred shortly after his slaughtering of the innocent babes in Bethlehem, which took place within the two years after Jesus' birth (Matthew 2.16).

But for Israel those were dark days. They did not relish being under the Roman yoke, nor did they like having an Idumaeen king. He may have commenced the rebuilding of the Temple, but he was only a 'half-Jew' (descended from the Edomites who had been forced to be circumcised under John Hyrcanus), and he had also built pagan temples and other pagan buildings in the land. Furthermore he was a bloodthirsty tyrant, as dangerous to his wife and children as to anyone else. He was, of course, submissive to Rome, for it was from Rome that he gained his authority. He would not have been king otherwise. And that too would put him in disfavour. Thus Luke is stressing that it was in the days of such a king, tyrannical, bloodthirsty, treacherous (in Jewish eyes), and totally worldly, that God revealed His plan to raise up the true 'son of David' promised by the Scriptures. There could have been no greater contrast.

Zacharias was a priest of the course of Abijah. Since the time of David the priesthood had been split into twenty four courses, one of which was the course of Abijah. History had to some extent decimated those courses, but they had been re-established again from what remained. These 'courses' took it in turns to staff the Temple services, each course being on duty for a week twice a year, with all present for the great feasts, and because there were so many priests, lots would be cast to see who should perform what ritual. Because there were so many priests, officially no priest ever had the opportunity to offer the incense more than once in his lifetime. (Those who had done so would be excluded from the lot). Thus what was about to happen to Zacharias was a once in a lifetime sacred moment. Zacharias' wife was also a daughter of Aaron, called Elisabeth. So both were of priestly families. It was considered a blessing to a woman of Israel to be married to a priest, and for a priest to marry a wife of priestly descent was seen as a highly respected and honoured thing, and as revealing his dedication to God. So these two, although unknown and living in 'the hill country of Judaea', were both seen in Israel as being the salt of the earth.

'And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.' This really indicates that they were good living people who sought as best they could to observe God's requirements. It is not saying that they were perfect. But it demonstrates that their desire was always to please the Lord, and that they were careful to obey His word. In the Old Testament the idea was used in this way of Noah (Genesis 6.9).

'Righteous before God.' From a human point of view they could not be faulted in their fulfilment of what He required. 'Ordinances' - 'dikaiomasin' - were something declared to be right.

The name Zacharias (Hebrew Zechariah) means 'YHWH remembers'. It was very appropriate here for what is about to happen demonstrates that God has not forgotten His people. We do not know the meaning of Elisabeth although attempts have been made.

1.7 'And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years.'

But there was one respect in which they were not seen as the salt of the earth. For Elizabeth was barren, and they had grown old together childless. This would have seemed to many a contradiction to what they were, for to be childless would be seen by many as a reproach on her, and a hint of something lacking in her response to God. It would certainly be to her a deep sadness of heart, and she must often have wondered what she had done to deserve this fate. It is almost impossible for us now to conceive quite what a grief of heart it was, or to recognise the stigma that this lack brought on this godly couple. People would look at them

both and shake their heads. The Rabbis would silently condemn them. To them a childless couple were under God's heavy disapproval. But in her 'reproach' little did she know what God had planned for her. She was to bear a son, and he would be the greatest of all the prophets, the preparer of the way for the Messiah, the expected deliverer of Israel.

When we become discouraged in our service for God, or when we seek to pass judgment on what God is doing in the short term, we would do well to remember Elisabeth. She waited long for her vindication, but when it came, what a vindication!

1.8-9 'Now it came about 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 enter into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.'

Zacharias had been 'on duty' in the Temple all week, but on this day he had 'won the lottery' by being selected by lots to offer up the incense in the Temple at the hour of prayer. This offering was made twice a day by priests, and fortunate was the one who was chosen for the purpose of making it. Normally speaking it could only happen to him once in a lifetime, for once he had done it he would be excluded from the drawing of lots. And on this day it was Zacharias' lot to enter into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. His excitement and awe must have been almost too much for him, for he was a godly man who approached his duties with great devotion.

God's care in His selection of place and time should be noticed. The selection was in order that the declaration of the birth of Zacharias' son might take place at the most sacred time in the worship of the Temple, at the offering of the incense, so that it would be known to all that the child was a gift directly from God. He was making it as clear as possible to Israel how important John was to be, and how he came in response to the prayers of all Israel, which were offered at the time of the offering of the incense (Psalm 141.2). Everything about this announcement was sacred, and intended to be observed and remembered.

So there he stood in the outer sanctuary in the semi-gloom, lit only by the lampstand, while his companion priests, having completed their duties, went out through the great doors. He would then wait for the signal from the sacerdotal priest that it was the time for the incense offering. On one side of the sanctuary he could see in the dim light the golden table of showbread, with its twelve loaves of bread neatly arranged, and on the other the seven-branched golden lampstand with its flickering flames providing the only illumination in the sanctuary, while peering ahead he could see the golden altar on which he would make the incense offering, and behind which was the way of entry into the Holiest of All, over which hung the ancient veil. There at that golden altar, as he offered the incense, he knew that he would approach as close to God as any man dared in daily life, and there he would offer the incense on the behalf of the whole of Israel and pray for the salvation of Israel. The whole weight of Israel would be on his shoulders. It was a thrilling moment, the moment of a lifetime.

1.10 'And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the hour of incense.'

Meanwhile at that hour of incense a fairly large crowd of worshippers would gather in the Temple courtyards so that as the incense fumes arose they might all worship God together. Such crowds gathered three times a day at the hours of prayer, two of which occurred at the times of the offering of the incense. So the scene was set. Zacharias alone in the sanctuary, as was required, probably apprehensive because of his sacred task, and all the people waiting expectantly outside ready to burst into worship and to receive the officiating priest's blessing.

1.11 'And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of altar of incense.'

And then suddenly, alone in the semi-darkness, there in that outer sanctuary lit only by the seven-branched lampstand, Zacharias received a terrible shock. For it was obligatory for the

sanctuary to be empty at the time of the offering of the incense, and yet in the dim light he became aware of a figure, standing to the right of the golden altar of incense, the side of privilege. And he was not dressed as a priest. There was an intruder in the sanctuary.

1.12 ‘And Zacharias was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell on him.’

Fear and horror gripped his heart. What was this man doing in the sanctuary? The ‘fear’ and ‘trouble’ might have arisen at the thought that this man was defiling the sanctuary by his presence, or it may have been because something emanated from the man which indicated something of the divine, something that did declare his right to be there. But whichever it was, Zacharias was afraid. All his life he had thought of this moment, and he had taken such care over his preparations, and now it was being marred, indeed might even become disastrous. He would remember others before him who had been smitten down because of sacrilege at the moment of the offering of the incense (Leviticus 10.1-2). Was he now also to face such a death?

1.13 ‘But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias: because your supplication is heard, and your wife Elisabeth will bear you a son, and you will call his name John.” ’

During his offering of the incense Zacharias would have prayed on behalf of all the people, a prayer for the deliverance of Israel. And now the angel, for such it was, knowing his thoughts, spoke gently to him. He told him not to be afraid, for he was not there to cause him harm, but to bring him good news from the presence of God. The good news was that God had heard his prayers, and that His deliverance was about to come to Israel, and not only that but that his wife too was to be involved in it and was to bear a son. And he was to be called Yo-annen, ‘the Lord is gracious’, for through him God was going to act graciously.

The angel replies in poetic and chiasmic form, which we will first give in full:

a “And you will have joy and gladness,  
a And many will rejoice at his birth.  
a For he will be great in the sight of the Lord,  
a And he will drink no wine nor strong drink,  
b And he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.  
c And many of the children of Israel will he turn to the Lord their God.  
b And he will go before his face in the spirit and power of Elijah,  
a To turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,  
a And the disobedient to walk in the wisdom of the righteous,  
a To make ready for the Lord,  
a A people prepared.”

Central to the chiasmus in ‘c’ is that he will turn many of his people to the Lord His God, for that is why he is to be born. Surrounding that central purpose in ‘b’ and parallel is that it will be by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit and power of Elijah. He will be the Mainspring of his activity. And in ‘a’ we have the rejoicing at the coming of the herald and a description of his potential, and in the parallel what he will accomplish through that potential.

1.14-15 “And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and he will drink no wine nor strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.”

And through the birth of this son he will have joy and gladness. But that joy and gladness will not be for him alone. It will be for many. For many will rejoice at his birth. And that will be because of what his son will be. For his son will be great in the eyes of the Lord, and will not need to be fortified by wine and strong drink. For from his mother’s womb he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Thus both for his strength, and for his joy and satisfaction, he will look only to the Holy Spirit of God. He will turn his back on wine and strong drink and rely only on God for his greatness,

which will be a greatness as seen in God's eyes, and from God's point of view. He will not require the pleasures of life, or the wine that the world takes in order to fortify itself. Instead his heart will be taken up with God.

He will be 'filled (pimplemi) with the Holy Spirit' even from before his birth. This phrase has special significance in Luke. 'Filling (pimplemi) with the Holy Spirit' is always in Luke's writings (where it only appears) a filling that produces inspired words. In almost all cases it is a temporary experience. But for John (and later for Paul - Acts 9.17) it will be permanent. So John will be a permanently inspired man, right from his very birth. In other words from the very womb he is called to be a prophet of God. (We must distinguish being filled (pimplemi) with the Holy Spirit, from being filled (pleroo) with the Holy Spirit and being full (pleres) of the Holy Spirit. It is the latter two which are for all Christians and have some permanence).

Drinking wine and strong drink has always been the way in which man fortifies himself for what he has to face. By it man dulls his senses. And it was seen as indicating worldly sophistication as against natural purity, and as the main source of man's happiness. It was the sign of those who dwelt in large houses or cities, or who enjoyed worldly pleasures and aims. Thus John was to abstain from all forms of 'worldliness', and from any need to 'fortify' himself. He would need neither the one nor the other. God would be both his joy and his strength. To the pure soul who lived in the wilderness, away from the world and alone with God, such things would not be available, nor would they be desired. Rather he would become strong in God.

He was not being called on to be a permanent Nazirite, for no mention is made of growing his hair, but all would recognise that this signified that he was called to a special dedication. Priests on duty were also expected to abstain from wine and strong drink (Leviticus 10.9). The idea may be that as the son of a priest he was to see himself as always on duty. However, there is nothing about his ministry that suggests that he saw himself as involved in priestly action. Thus he would be distinct both from Nazirites and priests and would be a mixture of the best in both, and he was being paralleled with those who had been set apart by God in the past (Judges 13.7). To abstain from wine and strong drink was a sign of special separation to holiness (Numbers 6.3, contrast Amos 2.12).

1.16 "And many of the children of Israel will he turn to the Lord their God."

Such will be the inspiration of which he partakes that he will turn many in Israel to the Lord their God (bring them to repentance). For this is why he is being sent. He is coming in order to bring God's people back to Himself (compare Isaiah 49.6), ready for God's great deliverance. This turning of the people of Israel to Himself is a constant theme of the Old Testament, and was especially associated with the last days (e.g. Isaiah 30.15; 31.6; 44.22; Jeremiah 3.14; 24.7; Ezekiel 33.11; Daniel 12.3; Hosea 3.5; 6.1; 12.6; 14.1-2; Joel 2.12-13, 28-32; Zechariah 1.3; Malachi 3.7; 4.6) and was a requirement for the coming of the Redeemer (Isaiah 59.20).

1.17 "And he will go before his face in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to walk in the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared for him."

For Zacharias' promised son John is to be the Elijah who was promised by Malachi 4.5, walking in the spirit and power of Elijah, walking before the face of God, to bring unity and love in Israel, to reconcile fathers and sons, and to make those who are disobeying God and His word, walk in the wise way proclaimed by just men, whether of the present or of the past. Elijah was a prophet very much connected with the Spirit, and his 'spirit' was passed on to Elisha (2 Kings 2.9, 15). Now again it would be passed on to another, to the son of Zacharias. 'The wisdom of the just' might very much have in mind such words as those of the wisdom books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and also include the words of the prophets. And the final purpose in all this will be to produce a people whose hearts are prepared to be ready to



receive the Lord. He will 'make ready a people prepared for Him', as Malachi had declared.

The idea of 'turning the hearts of the fathers to the children' in Malachi seems to mean reconciliation between fathers and sons, in other words the restoration of harmony in Israel (compare the references in Acts to the harmony of God's new people), but it might also include the idea that the ancient fathers, who would be despairing of what their children had now become, would now be reconciled to them because of the change that would take place in their lives. Compare Isaiah 63.16, where the people cried 'Israel (Jacob) does not know us'. But now as a result of the work of John 'Israel' (Jacob) would once more know them. This would then see 'the disobedient to walk in the wisdom of the just' as a reverse parallel, the disobedient being the children and the just the ancient fathers, including the prophets. The children would once more walk as their fathers had walked, as receptive and open to God and all His ways.

It will be noted that at this point there is no definite reference to the Messiah, but that is probably because the description is based on Malachi 4.5 where also there is no reference to the Messiah. The stress therefore is on the fact that John will be the expected Elijah. But as he was to come before 'the great and terrible Day of the Lord' the connection with the Messiah can hardly be doubted. In his later prophecy (1.67-79) the connection of John with the Messiah is made very clear.

1.18 'And Zacharias said to the angel, "By what means will I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years." '

But this was all too much for Zacharias. As he thought back on those long years of childlessness, how could he now expect a son to be born to him, and especially one in whom such wonderful things would be fulfilled? It was beyond belief. So he asked for a sign. And he was given one!

1.19 'And the angel answering said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you these good tidings." '

The answer comes. He can know that a son will be born to him because of the authority and position of the one who speaks. 'I AM Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God.' The 'I am' is emphatic. Could such a one lie? For one who stands in the presence of God could not come with lying promises. What he promises is directly from God. And he had been sent specifically to bring him these good tidings.

Gabriel (Daniel 8.16; 9.21) is one of two angels whose names are given in the Bible. His name means 'man of God'. The other was Michael (Daniel 10.13, 21; 12.1). These two therefore are supreme among angels. (He stands before God). But in Daniel also it was Gabriel, as the angel of mercy, who came as God's messenger. Michael was more the defender of God's people. To 'stand in the presence of God' is to be a close attendant, one in close service, ever ready to do His will.

The Jews believed in seven 'angels of the presence', among whom they named Gabriel and Michael, but while they gave them names no others are mentioned in Scripture, apart possibly from in Revelation 1.4; 4.5. (Raphael is mentioned in the Apocrypha, but the Apocrypha was never accepted by the Jews as Scripture).

'Good tidings.' This was a word intimately connected with the Isaianic promises concerning the Messiah, the Servant, and the Prophet, the Coming One (Isaiah 40.9; 52.7; 60.6; 61.1 compare Luke 2.10).

1.20 "And behold, you will be silent and not able to speak, until the day that these things will come about, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their season."

Because he had not believed Gabriel's words, which Gabriel stressed would be fulfilled, Zacharias was to be struck dumb for some time (ese sioyon). He was to be silent and not able

to speak. In Scripture silence was the prelude to extraordinary events. Compare Revelation 8.1; Lamentations 3.26; Habakkuk 2.20; Zephaniah 1.7; Zechariah 2.13. It was a sign that God was about to work. Thus the very sign indicated the awesomeness of this moment.

The impression given is that he should have believed, for he had as examples of God's ability to give a child in old age the examples of Sara (Genesis 21.1-2) and Hannah (1 Samuel 1.6, 19), and he had been informed of it by an impeccable source. But instead he had doubted, and he could not be allowed to take his doubt out to the people. So God gave him a sign which would also be a sign to the people. God would use his weakness for good, for his dumbness would make an impression that his doubting words might not have, and his releasing from it will be an indication that a new prophet has been commissioned. It was thus not just a punishment. It was a chastening with a purpose. Compare Ezekiel 3.26-27. In Ezekiel's case his dumbness was a sign that God had nothing further to say to the people. And his mouth was opened when his ministry could begin again. Thus if they saw Zacharias' dumbness as indicating that God had at present nothing to say to them it might make the people think more carefully about their position before God in a way that Zacharias' doubting words might not. His dumbness thus indicated the final days of silence before the new prophet was born.

1.21 'And the people were waiting for Zacharias, and they marvelled while he tarried (or 'at his tarrying') in the temple.'

Meanwhile the people outside were waiting and getting restless. Why was the priest being so long? they must have wondered. Something unusual must have happened. They too did not realise the significance of this moment, although they would soon become aware that something remarkable had happened.

1.22 'And when he came out, he could not speak to them, and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he continued making signs to them, and remained dumb.'

And when he did come out they waited expectantly for the priestly blessing (Numbers 6.24-26) which would normally follow the offering of the incense. But it soon became apparent to them that the blessing was not coming. They realised that Zacharias was unable to speak to them, and they gathered that he must have seen a vision in the Temple, for the only way in which he could communicate with them was with signs.

1.23 'And it came to be that when the days of his ministration were fulfilled, he departed to his house.'

His dumbness continued during the remainder of his period of service, and when that was complete he went back to his home in the hill country, still dumb.

1.24-25 'And after these days Elisabeth his wife conceived, and she hid herself five months, saying, "Thus has the Lord done to me in the days on which he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men."'

And sure enough Elisabeth his wife did conceive, and when she did she kept to her private room for five months with joy in her heart at the thought that her reproach had been removed, and no doubt let it be known to some that God had heard their cry and given them a son. He had graciously looked on her and taken away her reproach. The five months of retirement, like Zacharias' enforced silence, would indicate that something especially remarkable was happening about which she wished to retain silence. Indeed the sign of Zacharias' dumbness might have made them feel that God did not want them to spread about what was happening. But with such a remarkable birth foretold she would also want time to meditate and prepare herself. We must not underestimate the sense of awe that must have filled her at the thought of what God had promised concerning her baby. She would clearly feel that such a privilege required special preparation, especially in view of the restriction on John. Perhaps she felt that he must not be tainted by the world while in her womb, for his necessary separation from

the world had been revealed by the injunction laid on him to avoid wine and strong drink (compare 1 Samuel 1.15; Judges 13.4, which she may have taken as a pattern). It was the same sense that would drive John into the wilderness. It may be significant that ‘five’ is the number of the covenant. She was to be seen as revealing her covenant faithfulness.

But there may also have been another parallel explanation which would go along with the previous ones. For some time she had been seen as an old woman past childbearing. And for two or three months she would not be able to say whether what the angel had said was true or not. Probably therefore she felt that she could not face up to the inevitable continual questionings that would assail her if she met with others. And once she did know for certain things might get even worse. Scepticism and comment would be rampant, and she would be an object of continual curiosity. So she probably just did not feel that she could face the public.

Her period of isolation necessarily came to an end after five months because it was ‘in the sixth month’ (verse 26) that Mary visited her and she received her. And Mary would remain for three months. Even in this there was significance. The first to ‘come in contact’ with the newly conceived child in the womb (1.41) outside of his parents was to be the mother of the Messiah, of Whom he was immediately aware and to Whom he would one day bear witness.

So the promise was given of the great preparer of the way, and now his birth had taken place. The next event could only be of the promise of the coming of the Messiah Himself.

#### Mary Receives the Promise that She Will Bear the Messiah and She Responds In Willing Obedience (1.26-38).

These verses represent a unit in themselves, being connected with what precedes by the reference to the sixth month. It is arranged as a chiasmus around the central question as to how this wonderful thing could be when the chosen woman, Mary, had had no sexual relations with a man. This emphasises the fact that the One Who came, came directly from God through Mary. (We should note that the aim of this passage is not specifically to teach ‘the virgin birth’, for that puts too much emphasis on Mary. Mary is kept in the background as far as possible. It is to teach the birth into the world of One Who was the unique Son of God, and not therefore conceived as a result of the seed of a human father).

The name Mary (Mariam, Maria) is the same as Miriam and is a common name, possibly meaning ‘exalted one’.

The passage can be analysed as follows:

- a The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin’s name was Mary, and he came in to her,
- b And he said, “Hail, you who are highly favoured, the Lord is with you.”
- c But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God, and behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bring forth a son, and will call his name JESUS”.
- d  
    “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High,  
    And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David,  
    And he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever,  
    And of his kingdom there will be no end.”
- e And Mary said to the angel, “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?”
- d ‘And the angel answered and said to her,  
    “The Holy Spirit will come on you,  
    And the power of the Most High will overshadow you,

**For which reason also the holy thing which is begotten  
Shall be called the Son of God.”**

- **c “And behold, Elisabeth your kinswoman, she also has conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For no word from God shall be void of power.”**
- **b And Mary said, “Behold, the slavegirl of the Lord. Be it to me according to your word.”**
- **a And the angel departed from her.**

**Note how in ‘a’ the angel comes to her, while in the parallel he departs from her. In ‘b’ he hails her as highly favoured, and in the parallel she responds in humble submission. He has favoured her, she is His slave. In ‘c’ she is assured that she will conceive and bring forth a son, and in the parallel she learns that Elizabeth has conceived and brought forth a son. Note how by means of the parallel the ‘no word from God shall be devoid of power’ speaks as much to Mary’s situation as Elizabeth’s. In ‘d’ we have the angel’s annunciation of Who is to be born, opening with His being ‘called the Son of the Most High’, and in the parallel we are told how it is to be so, closing with the reference to His being ‘called the Son of God’. These two statements surround the central pivot of the chiasmus, which is itself a question, bringing out their importance. And central to it all, with great emphasis placed on it, is the question that would be asked by all. How could this be as she had had no sexual relations with a man? And the answer will be, because of the supernatural activity of God in a way unknown before or since.**

**We should note that the emphasis is not on the virgin birth as such, but on the activity of God through a virgin. However, that birth from a pure virgin is being declared is undoubted. Her purity and untouched state is seen as necessary for what has been promised and what follows. It has to be made clear that God’s divine activity will take place through a pure and untouched source. The ‘otherness’ of Jesus has to be made clear.**

**1.26-27 ‘Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin’s name was Mary.**

**‘The sixth month.’ That is, in the sixth month from the conception of John. After Israel’s long wait, things were moving rapidly. Again Gabriel was involved. He was sent ‘from God’ to a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin who was betrothed to a man named Joseph, who was of the house of David (and would be David’s heir). And the name of the virgin was Mary.**

**Gabriel was sent from God to Nazareth. Every leading Jew would have mocked at the idea. Galilee was despised. No prophet ever came from Galilee (John 7.52). While accepted as part of mainstream Judaism, it was seen as somewhat unorthodox, and a home of rebels. And it was too closely involved with Gentiles. And besides the people did not speak properly. They slurred their gutturals.**

**It was a fertile land, rich in soil and pasturage, with a great variety of trees and widely agricultural. Galileans thought agriculturally. It was also constantly a hotbed of seething rebellion. While under the Roman yoke it was ruled by Herod Antipas, and this differentiated it from Judaea. It saw itself as having more right to independence, and Galileans were seen as natural rebels. Even its Rabbis were seen as lax in their behaviour (by Rabbinical standards). They were known to chat with women in the street, and even to walk alone in the streets at night! And as for Nazareth, it was proverbially a small and insignificant hillside town. ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ (John 1.46).**

**So for Gabriel, the mighty angel who stood in the presence of God, to have come to Nazareth, would have been seen as ridiculous. And yet so it was. For it was in these surroundings that God would choose to bring up the One who was one day to be greater than all the prophets,**

the fulfiller of the promises of Scripture, and especially of Isaiah.

And then he had come to speak to a virgin. The fact is emphasised twice in the verse. For central to this passage is that she had 'never known (had sexual relations with) a man' (verse 14). Whatever some expositors might say, Luke wants us to be in no doubt of this fact.

But she was a 'betrothed' virgin. That means not only that she was 'engaged' but that, while still not yet married, she was legally bound to her future husband. For her to be released would require a 'divorce' (Matthew 1.19). It was fairly well known for a betrothed couple to have sexual relations with each other, and it was not frowned on, although possibly seen as lax. But in this case we are assured that they did not behave in this way. Both sought to live perfectly before God. The normal period of a betrothal was twelve months.

And the man to whom she was betrothed was Joseph, a son of David, seen by the Jews as, in theory at least, in line to be king of Israel. This was why he was called to Bethlehem, his recognised birthplace and the site of the family lands, in order to make his oath of allegiance to Augustus (2.4). This relationship with David is interestingly brought out in that in many years to come his descendants would be brought before Vespasian because of their recognised lineage, when he wanted, after the rebellion in the name of the sons of David, to rid the world of sons of David once and for all, only for them to be sent away in contempt, back to their ploughs, because they were so clearly peasants. But it was important that Joseph was a son of David, for from this would arise the fact that his adopted son was also a son of David, and thus heir to the promises. (Official adoption conferred equal rights to blood birth).

And the woman's name was Mary. We know nothing of her background or her antecedents, although some see the genealogy in Luke 3 as being that of Mary, confirming that she too was of the house of David. The fact that the angel declares that her son will be of the line of David would seem to confirm this.

1.28 'And he came in to her, and said, "Hail, you who are highly favoured, the Lord is with you."'

So to that little backwater of a hillside town in Galilee came the mighty Gabriel, and he came to where she was and said, "Hail, you who are highly favoured, the Lord is with you." 'Hail' is a Greek greeting, possibly translating 'shalom'. Luke's intention is possibly to stress that he has come on behalf of the Greeks as well as the Jews. Or it may be that he wanted the mother of the Messiah to be hailed like an Emperor, as a recognition of the One Whom she was going to bear.

'Highly favoured.' Every woman in Israel longed to be the mother of the coming Messiah. It was seen as the distinction that outclassed all distinctions. And now this woman in this small hillside town in Galilee learned of the great favour that God was bestowing on her. She above all women was being chosen to be the mother of the Messiah. That it was not because she was supremely perfect comes out quite clearly in her subsequent behaviour, for she would later rebuke Jesus for what He saw as right (2.48-49) and would seek to interfere with His ministry and have to be put in her place (Mark 3.21, 31-35; John 2.4). But nevertheless God saw in her a devoutness which meant that he could trust His son with her. She would bring Him up well until He was too big for her to be able to understand.

The word can also be used of physical beauty (Ecclesiasticus 9.8) or moral excellence (Ecclesiasticus 18.17). (It does not refer to something that can be passed on or signify 'full of grace' in that sense).

'The Lord is with you.' This, in contrast to 'hail', was very much an Old Testament idea (compare Ruth 2.4; 2 Chronicles 15.2; Zechariah 8.23), thus confirming that the message was for both Greek and Jew. She was about to face the humiliation of bearing a baby without a known father, but it was very much to be because the Lord was with her in a way in which He

would never be with any other woman. For from her womb would come forth, as truly human as well as truly divine, the Son of God. Through the coming months, and even years, she would need ever to remember that assurance that ‘the Lord was with her’ in it all.

But we must not see in this an over-exaltation of Mary. The concentration in this passage is on Jesus. She is ‘favoured’ because of the huge part that she will play in His coming, even more favoured than the favoured Elisabeth. The favour is all from God. She is but the recipient.

1.29 ‘But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this might be.’

The words of Gabriel ‘greatly troubled’ her. The word is stronger than that used in verse 12. His words clearly signified that something great and wonderful would be expected of her, and possibly her mind flashed back to others who had had angelic visitations, Sara the prospective mother of Isaac who had had to be rebuked because she had not believed (Genesis 18.10-15), and the wife of Manoah (Judges 13.3-5, 9), with all, of both joy and sorrow, that had resulted from her experience. Every woman in Israel knew of these great women of the past and what they had undergone. And she did not feel that she was worthy or able to face up to the demands that might be made on her. After all she was merely a village girl in her mid-teens. Desperately worried she sought in her mind for what the angel might be expecting of her. After all there was little that she could do, except be a good mother.

1.30 ‘And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God, and behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bring forth a son, and will call his name JESUS.”

The angel gently gave her his reassurance. She was not to be afraid. Rather she had found favour with God. God was pleased with her, and wanted to bless her. And the angel then informed her of what was required of her. She had been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah. For she was to conceive in her womb and bring forth a son, and was to call His name Jesus. The very way in which this was said implied a birth from a virgin. Even though she was a young unwed virgin, there was no thought of a husband. She was to conceive in her own womb, and bring forth her own son, because the Holy Spirit of God had come on her.

The words reflect Isaiah 7.14 LXX, ‘behold a virgin will conceive in the womb and bear a son, and will call his name Immanuel’ (idou he parthenos en gastri exei kai texetai uion kai kaleseis to onoma autou Immanouel - LXX). This compares with ‘kai idou sullempse en gastri kai texe uion kai kaleseis to onoma autou Yesoun’ here in Luke. Luke may have had a translation for Isaiah 7.14 which was even closer. That Mary is a virgin (parthenos) has already been declared in verse 27. It may be this similarity that raises the question in Mary’s mind that she asks in verse 34.

‘And will call his name JESUS.’ His name was to be Je-sous, signifying ‘YHWH is salvation’. The naming of Jesus parallels the naming of John, both indicating that they are under His protection and purpose. Compare how the son who is to be born to the virgin in Isaiah 7.14 is also named by the Lord. He was to be named Immanu-el, ‘God is with us (to save)’. And in all of them, through their names, He has revealed something of what they will be.

1.32-33

“He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High,  
And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David,  
And he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever,  
And of his kingdom there will be no end.”

The angel then made clear Who it was Who was to be born.

- He will be ‘great’.
- He will be called the son of the Most High.

- He will receive from the Lord God the throne of His father David.
- He will reign for ever over the house of Jacob.
- Of His kingdom there will be no end.

‘He will be great.’ We can compare here the words concerning John in 1.15. ‘He will be great in the sight of the Lord.’ But this One will be great in His own right because of Who He is. He is the Son of the Most High.

We can compare here Acts 8.9-10. ‘Great’ was a title used by the Jews of God describing Him as ‘the Great One.’ In Psalm 48.1 we read ‘Great is YHWH’ (compare Psalm 76.1). In Psalm 86.10 we read, ‘You are great.’ In Psalm 96.4 ‘YHWH is great (compare 99.2; 145.3; 147.5). In Psalm 135.5 ‘YHWH is great’. The description therefore has divine overtones, especially in parallel with ‘the Son of the Most High’.

‘He will be called the Son of the Most High.’ This is in direct contrast with John who is to be called ‘the prophet of the Most High’ (verse 76). The Son far exceeds the prophet in glory. This is brought home in 20.9-18 where after the prophets came the only Son. So that distinction is here drawn from the beginning. There are no external examples of the Messiah ever being called ‘the son of God’. So this went beyond just being the Messiah. This in itself would be a new conception to Mary, and as the phrase was put in inverted parallel with ‘He will be called holy, the Son of God’, which follows the description of His conception through the Holy Spirit (verse 35), it would lift her thinking, and should ours, to a new level.

In Psalm 82.6 the leading judges of Israel are called elohim (gods), and ‘sons of the Most High’ in that they act in the place of God. But here was to be One Who was to be uniquely His Son. Outside the Psalms the title ‘Most High’ is used of the God of Israel mainly on the lips of foreigners, and its most emphatic use is in Daniel 7 (four times in LXX Hupsistou as here) where ‘the saints of the Most High’ will receive the everlasting kingdom from God by means of a son of man who will come with the clouds of heaven to the throne of God to receive it. That this approaching ‘son of man’ must be the representative of Israel is clear in the passage, and would undoubtedly bring to mind Israel’s king, the son of David. Thus ‘son of the Most High’ may well also have in mind this earthly/heavenly figure who acts on behalf of ‘the saints of the Most High’, thus already connecting Jesus with the Son of Man, and with the saints of the Most High.

A similar connection comes out in Luke. Here Jesus is the Son of the Most High, clearly in context a title revealing His exalted station, but in 6.35 God’s people are urged to reveal themselves as sons of the Most High (those who behave like the Most High and thus demonstrate their relationship with Him) by revealing their unselfish generosity and by loving their enemies, in the same way as ‘He is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish’. The sons of the Most High are those therefore who look to the Son of the Most High and seek to be like Him, just as the saints of the Most High looked to the son of man.

The receiving of the throne of his father David would by itself merely have signified to Mary that He would be restored to the throne that was his birthright. But the indication that His reign would be of an everlasting kingdom which would know no end would demonstrate that there was to it at least some aspect of the supernatural. Here was a more than earthly Messiah. Certainly in Ezekiel 37.25; 2 Samuel 7.13, 16 the coming king was to reign for ever, but that may well have been interpreted as meaning that his house would reign for ever. Here, however, it is made clear to Mary that as in Isaiah 9.7 the child born is to reign everlastingly, for He is to be born through a supernatural birth with a supernatural future in view.

We know that she did not fully understand all this. How could she? Nor would she fully understand Him in the future. But it was being made quite clear that this was more than just an earthly kingship. It was to be an everlasting kingship on the everlasting throne of His father David. Heaven would break through to earth in everlastingness. He was to be the

expected Messiah, but as an everlasting Messiah and more.

Note that His reign on the throne of David over 'the house of Jacob' is to be for ever. This is no earthly kingship, nor is it a limited house of Jacob. Here 'the house of Jacob' is all who are connected with that house through the ages, which includes the 'Israel of God', the church of Jesus Christ. They too are part of the house of Jacob. For all Christians are, in Christ, made one with Israel, that is, with the house of Jacob (Ephesians 2.12-17).

1.34 'And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?"'

There is a sweet innocence about these words. As little teen-age Mary stood there with all these high powered theological ideas being presented to her the only thing that struck her as a problem was how all this could be when she had no husband. We may assume from her question that Gabriel has made it clear that this is to happen immediately (otherwise why such a question from a betrothed woman?).

These words are central to the chiasmus and are therefore intended to be emphasised. This whole passage is therefore built around them. All are intended to weigh them in their minds and consider their significance. The question was that as she had never had sexual relations with a man, how could this possibly be? And the reply was that it would be, not through some named man, but because the Holy Spirit would come on her, and the power of the Most High would overshadow her, with the result that the child Who would be born would be called 'Holy', 'the Son of God. Now by all normal methods of interpretation that signified only one thing. A remarkable birth through the activity of God which would produce a unique human being Who would be like the God Who was called 'Holy' in Isaiah 57.15. He would be of the same nature as God, God's Son. And while Mary would undoubtedly simply have been bewildered and unable to comprehend it at the time, there was only one place in Scripture to which this could be applied. And that is Isaiah 7.14 where because of the failure of the sons of the house of David, the place of their heirs was instead be taken by one not born of the sons of David, but miraculously born through a pure unmarried woman of marriageable age (LXX - 'virgin'), a son who could be called 'the Everlasting God' and would one day rule over God's everlasting kingdom (Isaiah 9.6-7).

1.35 'And the angel answered and said to her,

"The Holy Spirit will come on you,  
And the power of the Most High will overshadow you,  
For which reason also he who is born will be holy,  
He will be called the Son of God."

As we consider this verse we have to pause in hushed reverence, for none of us can even begin fully to appreciate its significance. It is beyond human thought and understanding. It was not a man who would come on her and cast his shadow over her, but the Holy Spirit, the power of the Most High. That is why the One to be born would be the 'Son of the Most High'. And the result would be that conceived within her by that great creative power would be One Who was 'holy' or 'a holy thing', Who would be a man and yet 'called the Son of God'. And why would He be called the Son of God? Because He was begotten of the Holy Spirit, because He was the begotten of God (compare John 1.14, 18; 1 John 5.1). This is the clear implication. So in these combined sets of words of the angel we have a clear indication of the supernatural birth and status of the One Who was coming, as well as the clear indication that He would be the Messiah, and more than the Messiah. In Mark's words He would be 'the Son of God'. In John's words, He would be the eternal 'Word made flesh'.

But we should note that we are simply told of what will happen. No attempt is made to describe Mary's actual experience. This was no crude event susceptible to man's description. It was rather the result of God's creative and active power bringing about conception, probably without Mary at the time even being aware of it. She would probably not even know



the moment when conception took place.

The Holy Spirit was to fill John from his mother's womb, but the One described here comes because the Holy Spirit comes on Mary and works within her in divine power, before He is in the womb, producing One Who is in His manhood 'of the Spirit' even in His conception. For the idea of 'overshadowing', compare the cloud which overshadows both Jesus and His three Apostles in 9.34. It is a way of indicating that God is present and acting.

John and Jesus are in fact seen as contrasted in a number of ways:

- The messenger is called Yo-annan (YHWH is gracious - verse 13), the Son is called Yehous (YHWH is salvation - verse 31).
- The messenger is called 'the prophet of the Most High' (verse 76), the Son is called 'the Son of the Most High' (verse 32).
- The messenger is filled with the Holy Spirit after he is conceived (verse 15), the Son is conceived by the Holy Spirit (verse 35).
- The messenger comes to proclaim the One Who is coming, the Son comes in order to be the Coming One, the everlasting King.
- The messenger would be 'great in the sight of the Lord' (verse 15), the Son would essentially *be* great (verse 32), great in every way.

#### Excursus: The Question of 'The Virgin Birth'.

We do not have time here to enter into a full discussion of this subject and those who are studying the Bible with the help of this commentary for devotional reasons may pass this note over. But for some for whom it may be a problem, because of the way in which the idea has been inflated, we would say a few words.

For eighteen hundred years there was no doubt about the exegesis of this passage except by those who approached it with their minds already made up, and with a determination to excise the idea of birth through a virgin. We must not read back modern scholarship to those attempts. And the only way in which it can now be interpreted in any other way is by excising the 'inconvenient' verses and phrases. But the trouble is that those verses and phrases are really inconvenient, for they are full of characteristic Lucan terminology. It is impossible to believe that an interpolater would make them so Lucan. And as we have seen they are part of a chiasmic construction which forbids us to remove them. So it may well be argued that if they are rejected, it is not for sound scholastic reasons, but because they are inconvenient.

However, one point we must make before we continue is that these verses are speaking of something unique. They are not speaking of a 'virgin birth' in any sense understood elsewhere. They are not really dealing with 'a virgin birth' in any sense in which the term is used elsewhere, but with the supernatural way in which God brought Himself into the world as 'made man' through a virgin. It is never spoken of in Scripture as 'the virgin birth' as though that was somehow a central teaching. That He did it through a virgin was seen as necessary so that He might be called 'holy', for no 'used' channel could produce a 'holy thing'. But this was not to speak of a 'virgin birth' like any of those others so often cited. Those were stories of intercourse between gods in the form of humans, and virgins who were humans (or between gods and goddesses, the latter far from true virgins). They were crude polytheistic stories intended to titillate men and illustrate the activities of the gods. They were not in any way even parallel to this sober account in Luke, and strictly speaking once the event had taken place the women in those stories were no longer virgins. There were also occasional references to the idea of a birth through 'spiritual' activity. But none that parallel the account here which is solidly based on Hebrew ideas.

Here in this account we read of a virgin who remained a virgin throughout. She underwent no sexual relations with either god or man. What she would experience would be the power of God at work upon her and within her. There was nothing sexual about it at all. It was a

miracle of creation and incarnation. It was unique in the history of mankind, apart from the mooted possibility described in Isaiah 7.14. It was a 'virgin birth' only because she was a virgin, and a child was born.

The truth, of course, is that if we study the Scriptures we would expect 'the Son of the Most High' to be born of a virgin. When a beast was a firstling set apart for God it had not to be worked or sheared (Deuteronomy 15.19). When the Ark was carried into Jerusalem it was on 'a new cart' (2 Samuel 6.3 compare 1 Samuel 6.7). When Jesus rode into Jerusalem it was on a colt that had never been ridden (19.30). Thus the birth of the Son of the Most High had to be through a woman Who had never had relations with a man, as in Isaiah 7.14. No Jew would ever have doubted it.

And this had been prepared for by a number of 'miraculous' births of lesser mortals who were chosen by God from the womb. Thus apart from John the Baptist himself we have Isaac (Genesis 17.17; 18.11-14), Samuel (1 Samuel 1.6, 20) and Samson (Judges 13.2-3). But in all those cases a man had been involved. Here no man was involved. Jesus was greater than all.

However, the problem often raised is then as to why this birth was not described as such, or even mentioned, by Mark and John and Paul and Peter? We would not, of course, expect them to speak of a 'virgin birth', which would simply be careless and indicate a crude polytheistic idea to Gentiles unless very closely guarded and protected, but why do they give no hint as to what did happen here?

The answer, of course lies in the fact that they did give such a hint. Every passage that reveals the deity of Jesus demands this unique form of birth. No Jew could have seen it otherwise. Mark assumes it in his description of Jesus as the unique Son of God. John includes it when he speaks of the Word as the only begotten Son. Paul includes it when he speaks of the Son as having come forth from the Father, and as bearing the Name which is above every Name, the name of YHWH (LXX 'LORD'). Peter includes it when he speaks of Jesus as 'the LORD Jesus Christ' (1 Peter 1.3) and refers to the Holy Spirit as 'the Spirit of Christ' (1 Peter 1.11) and to 'our God and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2 Peter 1.2). For not one of these would have conceived of God being made man through any other than a virgin. It would have been incompatible with Scripture. God could not have come into the world through a 'used' or tainted vehicle. Anything connected directly with God had to be unused and untainted. The very fact of having engaged in copulation would have been seen as connecting with sin, not because sex is a sin, but because it is the act of sinful man in producing a sinner. Sexual reproduction was always seen as tainted by sin. That is why sexual relations were seen as producing 'uncleanness', and abstinence from sexual relationships was often seen as a requirement for meeting with God (Exodus 19.15; 1 Samuel 21.5). Sexual relations would have been seen as defiling the channel through which the birth took place. All would have recognised that God could not come into the world through a defiled channel. It did not even need to be said.

And there was certainly good reason why they should not refer to 'the virgin birth' specifically. To do so would have been to put the emphasis in the wrong place, and to ask to have been misunderstood. No one wanted to put the emphasis on Mary when considering His birth, as the idea of the 'virgin birth' would have done. It is only the much later church that emphasised Mary in this way. The emphasis here was on God. Mary was certainly the source of His manhood. But what was important to the early church, who knew that Jesus was a man, was that this true man was also truly God. And both Matthew and Luke can only speak of the subject, which *we* describe as 'a virgin birth', because they do so carefully and in a way that is hedged around against misunderstanding. But *neither speak of 'a virgin birth'* in those words. They rather speak of God's remarkable activity in and through a pure medium, a virgin. To have broached the subject in any other way would have invited the kind of response which they would have seen as blasphemous, and would therefore be seen as best avoided

when it was not necessary. The actual birth story could not have been told without mentioning the fact that Mary was a virgin. But outside that to speak of it was unnecessary, for it was nowhere used as an arguing point in order to prove Who Jesus was, and had it been used in that way it would simply have invited ribald comment. But to all who knew and loved Him it would have been seen as being as obvious as the fact that God had created the world.

**End of Excursus.**

**1.36-37 “And behold, Elisabeth your kinswoman, she also has conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For no word from God shall be void of power.”**

The angel then refers to the birth of Elisabeth’s son. The news was probably no surprise to Mary, and the angel was not simply trying to impart information. He was rather connecting the significance of the two births. He points out that Elisabeth has had a miracle baby in her old age, and was now in her sixth month, just as God had promised through His word spoken through Gabriel himself. That word had proved its power, it had been effective, demonstrating that no word of God was devoid of power. Mary too therefore could be sure that His word spoken to her would be just as effective. His word to her too was not devoid of power.

But we may also see in these words the gentle compassion of God, and of Gabriel. For here was a hint to her of where she could turn in the tumult that would no doubt engulf her. It was a huge task that was being put on such a young girl. But she was reminded here that there was a near relative of hers who was also experiencing a huge change in her life. If she wished she could seek her out.

**1.38 ‘And Mary said, “Behold, the maidservant of the Lord. Be it to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.’**

Mary’s response revealed why God had chosen her. He had shown her favour, she would be His maidservant (there were probably few, if any, slaves in Nazareth). She submitted herself to God’s will, and with no histrionics asked that it happen according to His powerful word through Gabriel. She was at this stage the perfect example of obedience, in line with many a godly woman before her. The way, however, would not be easy. She was being asked to do the impossible. She would be attempting to do what no other woman had ever done. It is therefore not surprising that she should struggle with coping with it and sometimes go wrong, and even feel moved to interfere in what she could not understand. She was but a weak mortal like we are.

**Mary Visits Elisabeth Who Prophesies by the Holy Spirit Over Jesus and Mary and Rejoices and Worships God (1.39-56).**

Elisabeth’s months of retreat were partly interrupted by the arrival of Mary in the sixth month (which at least partly explains why there were only five months of retreat). But this was not something that could cause frustration, for her coming resulted in a sign from God of the relationship that there would be between John and Jesus, and resulted in an outburst of prophecy through the filling (pimplemi) of the Holy Spirit. It contributed to the series of revelations. It is being made clear by this filling with the Holy Spirit, and the parallel activities of the Spirit that were also taking place, that the times of the pouring out of the Spirit promised by the prophets are almost upon them. These are the firstfruits of prophecy, which will lead into the flood.

Again Luke has built this passage on a chiasmic basis, but necessarily the prophecy stands on its own. It can be analysed as follows:

- a And Mary arose in these days and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Judah, and entered into the house of Zacharias and saluted Elisabeth.

- **b** And it came about that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb.
- **c** And Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she lifted up her voice with a loud cry, and said, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”
- **b** For behold, when the voice of your greeting came into my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.
- **a** And blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfilment of the things which have been spoken to her from the Lord.

In ‘a’ Mary arrives and greets Elisabeth, and in the parallel we have her response to Mary’s greeting, which connects back also to verse 38. In ‘b’ the babe leaps in her womb, and in the parallel reference is made to his leaping in the womb. While in ‘c’ central to this passage is again the idea of the birth of Jesus, for Elisabeth declares, ‘Blessed is the fruit of your womb’, and ‘The mother of my Lord has come to me.’ All again centres on Jesus.

**1.39-40** ‘And Mary arose in these days and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Judah, and entered into the house of Zacharias and saluted Elisabeth.’

We are given no specific reason as to why Mary should arise and go to Elisabeth in such haste, but the speed of her reaction suggests that it was because she was in turmoil and saw Elisabeth as someone in whom she could confide. Thus we are left to infer that it was because of this extraordinary experience that she had had, which gained greater meaning from the extraordinary experience that Elisabeth was having. She probably felt that ‘aunt Elisabeth’ was the only one with whom at this time she could fully share it. And she may well have wanted the older woman’s advice. After all, who was there better to go to than an older kinswoman who had also been connected with unusual happenings?

We may assume here that Mary had previously sent a message to Elisabeth to tell her a little of what had happened and that she wanted to come and see her, for Elisabeth is clearly aware of something of her position. That makes the reaction of the baby within her even more significant.

**1.41a** ‘And it came about that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb,’

When Elisabeth heard Mary’s voice, and her greeting, she was aware of an unusual movement within her. It was as though the babe leapt in her womb. He was ‘filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb’ (1.15), and even now discerned the one who was to be God’s instrument in bringing the Son of God into the world. And Elisabeth was at that moment filled with exaltation in the Spirit and herself spoke inspired words.

For this compare Genesis 25.22 where the movement of the babies within was seen as a struggle for supremacy. In this case Elisabeth knew from her husband and his experience that the Messiah was coming, knew something of Mary’s strange experience, and therefore recognised the significance of the movement within her.

**1.41b-42a** ‘And Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she lifted up her voice with a loud cry, and said,’

As a result of a temporary ‘filling (pimplemi) with the Holy Spirit’ Elisabeth became a temporary prophetess. Note the ‘loud cry’ which was evidence of her emotions. She was speaking because she was greatly stirred.

**1.42b-45**

“Blessed are you among women,  
And blessed is the fruit of your womb.  
And whence is this to me,

**That the mother of my Lord should come to me?  
For behold, when the voice of your greeting came into my ears,  
The babe leaped in my womb for joy.  
And blessed is she who believed,**

**For there shall be a fulfilment of the things which have been spoken to her from the Lord.”**

**Note Elisabeth’s emphasis. It is on ‘the Lord’, just as Mary’s response will be. These two women were not exalting each other. Both were exalting the Lord. And both were humbled by what was happening to them.**

**“‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.’ Mary was truly blessed above all women, because she had been chosen to mother God’s Messiah. Women in those days saw their function as being that of a child producer and a good mother. It was what they saw themselves as mainly living for, the supreme purpose of their lives. And to mother the Messiah was to be the greatest privilege of all. Thus Mary was blessed by being given this great privilege. Note, however, that what is meant by such a ‘blessing’ is described. The reason that she is blessed is ‘because there will be a fulfilment of the things which have been spoken to her’. They will ‘come to their true end’. This was not because of anything that she was in herself. Mary is not being exalted here. When a woman called out to Jesus that Mary was especially blessed because she was His mother He rejected the idea and said that rather blessed were those who heard the word of God and kept it (11.27-28). That is, those who hear God’s word and keep it are more blessed than Mary was in bearing Him. What a contrast with the views of some today.**

**Elisabeth then immediately turns to what she knows is more important than the mother, the fruit of her womb. Here is the idea of the fuller, undefined, blessing. Here is the One Who is to be exalted.**

**‘And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?’ Elisabeth’s humility shines out here. Who is she, she asks, that the mother of the Messiah should seek her out? Her period of quiet meditation has well prepared her for this moment. ‘My Lord’ here possibly has in mind Psalm 110.1. There the coming Messiah is ‘my Lord’ (compare 20.41-44). Here then is her recognition that the babe who is to be born of Mary is already her Lord.**

**And the reason why she knows this so spontaneously is because the babe in her own womb had leaped so convincingly within her at the sound of Mary’s voice. It had ‘leaped for joy’. Thus did she know that all would be well, and that Mary would have a child safely Who would be truly blessed. And rather than being jealous, she was humbled by the wonder of it. Note the continual emphasis on ‘joy’ (also in verses 14, 47).**

### **Mary’s Response.**

**Mary’s response was to be full of devotion and gratitude to God, and we are probably to see it as spoken under inspiration from the Spirit (but see below). The silence about that may be because the Holy Spirit was to come on her for a special purpose, the conception of Jesus, so that Luke did not want it to be thought that that was happening already. It echoes the ideas in the song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2.1-11), although not too slavishly, and reflects Old Testament thought continuously (e.g. see parts of Psalm 111.9; 103.17; 89.10; 107.9; 98.3). As we consider it we need to remember that Mary would be steeped in Old Testament thoughts and phraseology.**

**Often would she have sung Old Testament songs, and many Scriptures would be in her memory. She would think in Old Testament language. She may well even have composed some of these words previously as a psalm of praise for her own use. This would then be another explanation as to why it is not said to be the result of the work of the Holy Spirit. (Psalm writing was evidenced at Qumran although with a different emphasis from this). So its contents may not be totally new to her, which would explain why she could remember it so**

well.

There is no thought of self-exaltation in her words. She does not even mention the favour that has been granted to her, unless we see it in 'has given help'. The theological concepts of the angel have gone over her head, to be remembered later. (An inventor of a song to fit the occasion would have made sure that they were included). All her thoughts are on God. It will only be later that what the angel has said to her will gain new meaning. It brings out that she was not a theologian, and did not think in those terms. Her immature teen-age thought would be on the fact that God was now about to deliver her people, and that He was bringing her into it by producing through her the Messiah. The ramifications would come later (a sign of the genuineness of the song). It can be divided up as follows:

- a And Mary said.
- b My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour (46-47).
- c For he has looked on the low estate of his handmaiden, for behold, from henceforth all generations will call me blessed (48).
- d For he who is mighty has done to me great things, and holy is his name (49).
- e And his mercy is unto generations and generations, on those who fear him (50).
- e He has showed strength with his arm, He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their heart (51).
- d He has put down princes from their thrones, and has exalted those of low degree (52).
- c The hungry he has filled with good things; and the rich he has sent empty away (53).
- b He has given help to Israel his servant, that he might remember mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, toward Abraham and his seed for ever (54-55).
- a And Mary stayed with her about three months, and returned to her house (56).

In 'a' Mary speaks, and in the parallel Mary remains for three months. In 'b' Mary rejoices in her Lord and Saviour, and in the parallel describes His saving work. In 'c' she acknowledges God's goodness to her in her low estate and in the parallel God satisfies the needs of those of low estate. In 'd' He acts mightily on her behalf and in the parallel He acts mightily on behalf of His own. And central to it all is the revealing of His mercy to those who fear Him so that in the parallel He has dealt with their enemies, who were too proud to fear Him. This will be especially relevant to John and Jesus who will constantly face up to the proud ones of the earth, who in their pride will be scattered before them.

1.46-50 'And Mary said,'

My soul magnifies the Lord,  
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour.  
For he has looked on the low estate of his handmaiden,  
For behold, from henceforth all generations will call me blessed.  
For he who is mighty has done to me great things,  
And holy is his name.  
And his mercy is unto generations and generations,  
On those who fear him.

Mary's heart is overflowing with joy and gratitude. Here all is joy and gladness. (We learn here nothing of the distraught Joseph, who later, on hearing his future wife's explanation of her pregnancy, goes away, far too wise to be taken in, and determines that as a compassionate man he will not have her called to public account before the elders, but will divorce her privately, only for him to finally be enlightened by God - Matthew 1.19-21. For Luke wants all to be praise). Her soul is opened wide as she praises God continually, 'my whole being magnifies the Lord'.

Meanwhile her spirit is seen as having rejoiced once for all in God Who is her Saviour (compare Psalm 24.5; 25.5; Micah 7.7; Habakkuk 3.18), and Who through her is fulfilling His

saving actions. Like all women Mary was a sinner and needed a Saviour, and she rejoiced because she could look back to when she had responded to Him and recognised in Him her own Saviour. She knew that God was her Saviour. It was something that she would never forget.

Her gratitude is also because God has looked on her in her lowliness and relative poverty (compare Psalm 106.23), and raised her to a position where future generations will declare how blessed she has been (Psalm 2.12; 21.6; 34.8; 128.1), as they see that the promises made to her were indeed fulfilled. They will see her as blessed because of 'the great things' that God has done in and through her in the birth of the Messiah, in the same way as that same mercy is applied to all who fear Him of all generations in the way now about to be described, and especially so through this One Who will be born from her. Mary's blessedness will thus be shared by all.

'Holy is His name.' In His treatment of her He is revealing Himself as distinct, unique and otherworldly because His purposes are so far beyond man's.

In all this there is no idea of the over exaltation of Mary. She is seen as a godly woman who has been highly favoured by God in what is about to happen, but not as one who has in some way become superior to others of mankind. Nevertheless she is a model believer, and, in contrast to Zacharias, takes God at his word, (verses 37-38). She is favoured of God (verse 30), thoughtful (verse 29), obedient (verse 38), believing (verse 45), and worshipful (verse 46).

'And His mercy is unto generations and generations, on those who fear Him.' She recognises in what is happening to her the same graciousness and love as He has revealed from generation to generation, and will continue to reveal into future generations. For all those who fear Him will experience His lovingkindness and mercy.

We gain from her words something of Mary's theology. God is her Lord, her Saviour, He is the Mighty One, His Name (that is, He as He essentially is) is holy, and He is compassionate and merciful. But what she understands of His saving work is very practical. It is just the theology we might expect from a teenager.

Note. There have been attempts to suggest that 'Mary said' should read 'she said', signifying Elisabeth, or 'Elisabeth said'. But the manuscript evidence overwhelmingly supports 'Mary said'. There are only a few Old Latin manuscripts, plus some copies of Irenaeus writings which disagree and cite the verse as 'Elisabeth said'. Thus textwise the text undoubtedly stands firm. The arguments that it fits Elisabeth better are based on laying a certain emphasis on words which are translated to suit, but the song fits adequately into what we would expect Mary's position to be, and 'all generations shall call me blessed' fits only Mary. There are really therefore no grounds for the change except in order to support a preconceived theory. End of note.

1.51-55

He has showed strength with his arm,  
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their heart.  
He has put down princes from their thrones,  
And has exalted those of low degree.  
The hungry he has filled with good things;  
And the rich he has sent empty away.  
He has given help to Israel his servant,  
That he might remember mercy,  
(As he spoke to our fathers),  
Toward Abraham and his seed for ever.

And how has God's mercy been shown to all generations? The answer is, in what He has done for them in the past. He has revealed the mighty strength of His arm (Psalm 136.12), He has

scattered the proud and arrogant in the face of their high thoughts (Isaiah 29.20-21), He has removed princes from their thrones (1 Samuel 15.28). And in contrast He has exalted those of low degree (including herself), He has filled the hungry with good things, while turning away the rich. All verbs are in the aorist. She has read all these things in the Scriptures. God acts on behalf of those who call upon Him from their humble state and position.

Note that Mary is here talking of those who are godly. It is these who are primarily described in her Scriptures as being watched over in this way. She is not to be seen as a philanthropist with a world vision. What she has caught onto is that God is not One Who favours the rich and arrogant. He acts on behalf of those who are 'poor' and humble like she is. And He has given help to 'Israel His servant', which she looks on from the point of view of a teenage village girl.

Note with regard to the hungry and the rich the reversed situation. Ordinarily on earth it is the rich who are filled with good things, and it is the hungry who are turned away. But God turns such things on their heads. For the rich tend also to be the unbelieving and disobedient (Psalm 39.6; 49.6; 52.7; 73.12 etc.), and the poor those who respond to God and do His will. This is certainly the emphasis of the Psalms where the poor are regularly seen as synonymous with the godly (Psalm 9.18; 14.6; 34.6; 69.29; 72.13; 74.19, 21; 86.1; 107.41; 109.31; 140.12).

Her world view is one based on her knowledge of the Scriptures, and her own experience of God's goodness to her. She knows little of the wider political world. But she knows that in the end God brings about what is good, and she knows of many Bible stories which prove it. And she therefore knows that these are the things that Messiah will do. Once He is in control all selfishness and evil will be done away. In the words of Psalm 37.11, the meek will inherit the earth.

We should note also in this her recognition of what type of Messiah is coming, not One Who will exalt the powerful but One Who will go to the meek and lowly. Not One Who will invite the rich to His table, but One Who will go to the poor and the maimed and the blind (Isaiah 29.18-19; 35.5-6; 61.1-2). He will be the Messiah of the people, the One Who does not break the bruised reed or extinguish the dimly burning wick (Isaiah 42.3).

'He has given help to Israel His servant, that He might remember mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, toward Abraham and his seed for ever.' Finally her thought turns from centring on God's gracious and stern activity to His great promises of the past. She remembers how in the past He has helped His servant Israel, and she seeks that He will remember His mercy, promised to 'our fathers', to Abraham and his seed for ever. God had promised blessing to Abraham for his seed. Now God was fulfilling that blessing in the One who was coming, the One Who would be the Help of Israel.

1.56 'And Mary stayed with her about three months, and returned to her house.'

Mary then spent the next three months with Elisabeth before returning home. During this time she would gain much encouragement from the wiser and older woman, and it would enable her to be sure that the promised child was indeed coming in peaceful surroundings. It says much for Elisabeth that Mary knew to whom she could with confidence look in the traumatic events that were taking place in her life.

#### Elisabeth's Child Is Born and Zacharias's Tongue Is Loosed and The News of the Remarkable Events Go Round the Neighbourhood (1.57-65)

The time came round for the birth of Elisabeth's baby and again the family and friends were to be shaken, for first Elisabeth insisted that the baby be called John, then Zacharias insisted on the same, and then finally Zacharias was able to speak again. With the birth and circumcision of John dumbness in Israel was finished and God now had a voice through which to speak. God was gently bringing home what a wonderful event was taking place.



**This passage can be analysed as follows:**

- **a** Now Elisabeth's time was fulfilled that she should be delivered, and she brought forth a son.
- **b** And her neighbours and her kinsfolk heard that the Lord had magnified his mercy towards her, and they rejoiced with her.
- **c** And it came about on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him Zacharias, after the name of the father, and his mother answered and said, "Not so, but he shall be called John." '
- **d** And they said to her, "There is none of your kindred who is called by this name.
- **c** And they made signs to his father, what he would have him called. And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, "His name is John." And they all marvelled.
- **b** And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.
- **a** And fear came on all who dwelt round about them, and all these sayings were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judaea.

In 'a' the time of John's birth approaches, and in the parallel all that was connected with it spreads awe around the area. In 'b' the neighbours and kinsfolk rejoice, and in the parallel Zacharias is at last able to join in the rejoicing. In 'c' Elisabeth insists that he be called John, and in the parallel Zacharias insists that he be called John. Central in 'd' are the words drawing attention to the fact that the particular name 'YHWH is gracious', given to the baby, is stressing that he is separated to God even in his naming. He is not 'of the family', he is 'of God'.

**1.57 'Now Elisabeth's time was fulfilled that she should be delivered, and she brought forth a son.'**

The time for John's birth arrived, and all went smoothly, and he was safely born. In days when firstborn births often did not go smoothly it would be seen as a great moment for rejoicing.

**1.58 'And her neighbours and her kinsfolk heard that the Lord had magnified his mercy towards her, and they rejoiced with her.'**

We need not assume that they had just heard. This is a catch all phrase. They had all heard in one way or another that the one whom they had all thought barren had become pregnant and now they came to rejoice with her at his birth. Such events were never private. All wanted to join in the celebrations.

**1.59 'And it came about on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him Zacharias, after the name of the father, and his mother answered and said, "Not so, but he shall be called John." '**

And on the important eighth day after the birth they all gathered together to celebrate the circumcision of the child. Every son of Israel was circumcised on the eighth day (otherwise he was seen as cut off from among the people). If necessary it could even be done by a woman or on the Sabbath. It may be that on this day he was officially named, although of course the baby would already have had a name applied to him. Previously naming was always done at birth. This is the first evidence for what would much later become the practise (compare also 2.21).

On the other hand it may simply be that due to the unusual circumstances of the father being dumb and the mother in retirement the name had been given to the baby at birth but had not become generally known, so that they just assumed that nothing had been done and decided that he must be called Zacharias on the assumption that that was what the parents would expect to call him, after his father. This was the custom in certain families. 'Not so,' Elisabeth

said (obediently to God's command - verse 13), 'he shall be called John'. Her husband had clearly communicated some of his experience to her in writing and she was determined to stick with the name already given to him.

1.61-62 'And they said to her, "There is none of your kindred who is called by this name. And they made signs to his father, what he would have him called.'

The relatives were both surprised and put out. 'Why', they said, 'there is no one in your family called by that name.' And determined to have their own way, they turned to the father. He was the one with the final choice. Surely he would agree with them. Psychologically we have here an accurate picture. The busybody, but trying to be helpful, male relatives, aware of the problems (the father is dumb, and possibly deaf, the mother not to be regarded too much) attempting to do what they think is right to help the couple out, and in the last resort having to approach the father so as to gain his authority because the wife is being awkward.

So they made signs to him asking what the baby should be called. This may be the first indication we have that Zacharias had also been made deaf (the word used in verse 22 can mean deaf and dumb), or it may simply have been because people who are not disabled often over-exaggerate the disablement of the disabled (just as we might sometimes shout because a person stammers or is disabled). They would think, if he could not speak, surely he could not hear. Being dumb he could not easily correct them. So he may not have been deaf, and their behaviour may later have become a family joke, although discreetly so as not to cause offence.

1.63 'And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, "His name is John." And they all marvelled.'

So Zacharias called for a writing tablet (a wooden tablet covered with wax) and wrote down, 'His name is John.' The result was that they were all amazed, and 'marvelled', probably because the parents were both so adamant about a name not connected with the family. Note his emphasis on the fact that it 'is his name'. The name had already been decided on, and was already being applied. There was to be no argument about it. (It would appear as if he could tell what they were saying).

This would serve to confirm that the baby had been named at birth and that the name had been given prior to the day of circumcision. That would not, of course, prevent it being made official at the time of circumcision.

1.64 'And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.'

And as a result of his obedience Zacharias discovered that he was able to speak again. And his first words on doing so were in order to bless God. He was aware of what a wonderful thing had happened to them.

1.65 'And fear (awe) came on all who dwelt round about them, and all these sayings were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judaea.'

And the consequence of all these things was that the whole countryside round about were filled with awe. Everyone was talking about what had happened. It was a seven day wonder. And the news spread widely throughout the hill country of Judaea.

Zacharias Prophecies by The Holy Spirit Concerning the Coming of the Messiah, and His Own Son's Part in Preparing the Way for the Messiah. (1.58-80).

We are not told when the following prophecy took place. It may have been immediately when his tongue was loosed and he blessed God (verse 64). Or it may have been much later. But meanwhile all the people were asking themselves questions about John and wondering about what he was going to turn out to be. Judaea was a very religious country, where everything was seen in the light of their religion, and thus this question would be asked from a religious

point of view. Their thought was that he was going to be someone special for God.

We may analyse this passage as follows:

- a And all who heard them laid them up in their heart, saying, “What then shall this child be?” And the hand of the Lord was with him (66).
- b And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has visited and wrought redemption for his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us, in the house of his servant David” (67-69).

c As he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets who have been from of old, ‘Salvation from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us’ (70-71).

d To show mercy towards, our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant, the oath which he spoke to Abraham our father, to grant to us that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies, should serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days (70-75).

c Yes and you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the face of the Lord to make ready his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the remission of their sins (76-77).

b Because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the day-spring from on high will visit us, to shine on those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace (78-79).

a And the child grew, and waxed strong in the Spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing to Israel (80).

In ‘a’ we have the question as to what the child John will become, and the promise that the Lord will be with him, and in the parallel we learn what he is becoming, because the Spirit is at work in him. In ‘b’ we have the assurance that God has visited His people, raising up the one by Whose power they will be delivered, and in the parallel the Day-spring from on high has visited them, raised up in order to deliver. In ‘c’ the prophets spoke promising salvation, and in the parallel John is the prophet who will give the knowledge of salvation. And in ‘d’ we have the focus placed on the fulfilment of God’s covenant with Abraham which would result in deliverance and righteous living, (which is the whole point of the incarnation).

1.66-67 And all who heard them laid them up in their heart, saying, “What then shall this child be?” And the hand of the Lord was with him. And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying,’

The news and the rumours spread around concerning all these strange things that had been happening to Zacharias and Elisabeth, and no doubt improved with the telling, with the result that all were wondering exactly what John was going to grow up to be. It was clear to all that God had a special purpose for him. He thus grew up in an area where there was a spirit of expectancy.

‘And the hand of the Lord was with him.’ It was apparent to all who knew him that he had a special relationship with God, and they recognised that God was with him and was blessing him and preparing him for something, although none knew what. This probably especially came out in his response to synagogue teaching. And probably none were surprised when eventually he deserted his home for the wilderness, and began to dress like a prophet in goatskins. This too would be an indication that the hand of the Lord was with him. The wilderness tended to be the place where godly people went when they wanted to get away from the influences and vindictiveness of the world. It was where Elijah had gone. It was where the devout religious communities tended to go. It was the right place for a man of God.

**1.68 ‘Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has visited and wrought redemption for his people,’**

Zacharias’ prophecy begins with a blessing, as regularly among the Jews (Psalm 41.13;72.18;106.48). He sees in what is happening the God of Israel visiting His people and ‘working redemption’ on their behalf. He is coming to them as their Deliverer and Saviour. As always in Scripture this would include both external deliverance and the hearts of the people themselves turning to Him. He would save to the uttermost. For the idea of redemption here compare Psalm 111.9 where He is seen as ‘sending redemption to His people’.

**1.69 ‘And has raised up a horn of salvation for us, in the house of his servant David.’**

And He is doing this by raising up a mighty weapon of deliverance in the house of His servant David. The promised Davidic king was coming as a ‘horn of salvation’ (in Psalm 18.2 ‘the horn of my salvation’ is the Lord Himself delivering him from all his troubles). A ‘horn’ indicated power and strength. It was through their horns that earthly creatures exerted their power (compare Deuteronomy 33.17). And the Davidic king was seen as God’s horn of salvation (compare Numbers 24.8). But note that in verse 77 ‘salvation’ clearly includes the forgiveness of sins. So this is not just political. The coming of David’s son will not only bring deliverance but will also open up a fountain for sin and uncleanness (Zechariah 13.1).

We note there that this confirms that Mary is of Davidic descent, for no one could at this stage know whether Joseph would go through with the marriage (he nearly did not).

**1.70 ‘As he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets who have been from of old,’**

And all this was in accordance with the promises of the prophets made long ago. Prophecy was in the process of fulfilment. The ancient records of the Jews were well known and honoured by most, even among non-Jews. Thus any fulfilment of them could only be truly significant.

**1.71 ‘Salvation from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us,’**

And what was promised by the prophets was deliverance from their enemies, and from the hands of those who hated them. The idea and the words reflect Psalm 106.10. Like all in his day Zacharias saw the coming of the Messiah as very much involving the political freedom that would enable them to serve God fully. He would, of course, bring deliverance and freedom, but it would be in a different way that Zacharias was expecting. Men were still restricted in their thinking and thought very much in earthly terms.

In fact Luke’s Gospel will go on to reveal precisely what kind of deliverance this Messiah will bring. For the enemy from which His followers will be delivered is Satan, and sin, and evil. His kingship will not be of this world.

**1.72-75 ‘To show mercy towards our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant, the oath which he spoke to Abraham our father, to grant to us that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies, should serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.’**

All Israel looked to the promises that God had made to Abraham. He had promised, no, sworn, in His holy covenant with Abraham (holy because God-initiated) that Abraham’s seed would be ‘blessed’. And this could only mean their being brought into a position of peace and safety, with all enemies thrust aside, and they themselves being righteous, so that they could serve God fully, without fear, and in holiness (separation to God) and righteousness (walking in accordance with His revealed requirements) all their days (compare verse 77 which describes how this could be possible). This was the Jewish dream among those who were piously looking for God to act. Deliverance without, and transformation within. For them at least there was no thought of deliverance without a change of heart (as the angel had already explained when describing what John would do - verses 15-17). Again God would fulfil His

promises through Jesus, but in His teaching the emphasis would turn to the heavenly Kingdom. This world would be a period of tribulation leading up to the final deliverance (John 16.33; Acts 14.22).

So he prays that God will remember His holy covenant and bring them to a position where they can live in peace and safety, and live righteously before Him (compare Psalm 106.45; Leviticus 26.42, 45; Jeremiah 14.21; Ezekiel 16.60).

Note how Zacharias has justified the fact that God selected him. His great concern is that Israel once more become godly, and walk in the fear (reverential awe) of the Lord.

1.76a 'Yes, and you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High.'

The attention now turns to John. He is to be a prophet. Yes, he will be called 'the prophet of the Most High'. He will be great indeed, in his part in the purposes of God. Yet his greatness pales before that of 'the Son of the Most High' (verse 32).

We must recognise here that prophecy had long ceased in Israel and the next prophet expected by Judaism was to be a restored Elijah who would introduce the last days (Malachi 4.5). Thus this is a declaration that the last days are upon them. As Jesus would make clear, John was the Elijah which was to come (Matthew 11.14) for he came in the spirit and power of Elijah (verse 17).

The sudden change in subject reflects Psalms like Psalm 19 & 22.

1.76b 'For you will go before the face of the Lord to make ready his ways.'

Thus he is called to be the preparer of the way, going 'before the face of the Lord'. 'Before the face of the Lord' can indicate something as happening in front of God's eyes (Genesis 19.13; 1 Samuel 26.20). It can also indicate God positively ready to act and turning His face towards something (Psalm 34.16) or the place to which men come in repentance (Lamentations 2.19). Here either of the first two are possible, for John will certainly be continually in God's sight and he will also certainly be acting in preparation for God to reveal His face. But the emphasis is all on making ready. As we have already seen, he was not the final solution. This would be important for Luke's readers to note, and especially any who were disciples of John the Baptist (Acts 19.1-6).

1.77 'To give knowledge of salvation to his people in the remission of their sins,'

God's purpose for John was for him to be a revealer of the way of salvation that men might become aware of their sins and find forgiveness from them. That is why his baptism will be called 'a baptism of repentance (change of mind and heart) for the forgiveness of sins' (3.3). He is to make ready the way of the Lord by turning men's hearts to God in repentance and faith (compare verses 16-17) so that they will come within God's offered sphere of salvation.

For the giving of the knowledge of salvation see Psalm 98.2. The giving of knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of sins reflects Exodus 34.7; Numbers 14.18; Isaiah 43.25; 44.22. It was the prayer for Israel of the scion of the Davidic house (1 Kings 8.36, 50).

1.78-79 'Because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the day-spring from on high will visit us, to shine on those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

And this will be because of God's tenderness and compassion in bringing into the world a new dawning, the One Who is like the dawning of a new day, the One Who is the rising Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4.2), who will come to 'visit' the world in redemption (verse 68), and shine on those who sit in darkness.

'Day spring.' The Greek is 'anatoles' which means 'rising, that which rises'. It is used in the Old Testament to translate 'the branch' in Jeremiah 23.5; Zechariah 3.8; 6.12, thus having

Messianic connections. It also commonly refers to the rising of the sun or moon. Thus here 'the rising' may be an abbreviation for the equivalent of the rising of sun or moon. This would tie in with the rising of 'the sun of righteousness' in Malachi 4.2. He is thus pictured as coming like a rising sun of righteousness, shining on the darkness in which His people sit (compare John 3.19-21).

We can also compare here the idea in Isaiah 60.1 where Israel is compared to a light which is to 'arise and shine', and this as a result of the glory of the Lord which rises (anatello) on them. This would make 'the rising' here the rising of the glory of the Lord which shines on His people who sit in darkness calling on them also to arise and shine.

Alternately we may consider Isaiah 60.19 in LXX reads:

- a 'And you will no more have the sun for a light by day,
- b Nor will the rising (anatole) of the moon lighten your night,
- b But the Lord will be your everlasting light,
- a And God your glory.'

This may be seen by inverted parallelism as signifying that the Lord Who is their everlasting light parallels the 'rising' of the moon to lighten the night and was therefore 'the rising from on high' (with the sun paralleling 'God your glory'). In all these examples the 'rising' is the rising of the Lord on His people in order to bring them light in the darkness.

For He is to be like a light shining on those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. For this last compare Isaiah 9.2, 'the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who dwell in the land of the shadow of death, on them has the light shined', which was also spoken in the context of the coming everlasting King (Isaiah 9.6). See also Isaiah 42.6-7; 49.6; 60.1. For sitting in darkness see Psalm 107.10. Jesus elsewhere also likens Himself to a light shining on those in darkness (John 3.19-21; 8.12)

'To guide our feet into the way of peace.' Compare Isaiah 59.8. The 'way of peace' there is the way of righteousness, of godliness, of avoidance of violence, of the kind of behaviour that finally leads to peace for all men (2.14). This peace was to be the result of the coming of the everlasting King, the prince of peace, in order to guide our feet (Isaiah 9.6-7) and is the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5.22).

1.80 'And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing to Israel.'

So John began to develop and grow, and became strong in the Spirit (he was full of the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (verse 15). And he went into the wildernesses (the plural is typical of LXX) there to prepare for the day when he would be revealed to Israel as the prophet and preparer of the way. Even if we translate 'spirit' with a small 's', signifying that his own spirit was made strong, verse 15 makes quite clear the source of his strength, as indeed it was intended to do. Compare here 2.52; Judges 13.24 and 1 Samuel 2.26.

Some have suggested that John was connected with the Qumran community, but it must be recognised that if so his emphasis was totally different from theirs. Perhaps he tried them and was disillusioned by them. They certainly would not have agreed with his view of himself as the herald preparing the way for the Coming One, nor with his preaching of righteousness instead of asceticism, nor with his going among the people (they kept themselves separate in order to avoid defilement), nor with his baptism as a symbol of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. It is probable therefore that he lived as a solitary, although that is not to deny that he may have had contact with them. They would appreciate his asceticism and separation from society. But his teaching was not like theirs.