

Two Significant Births

LUKE 1:5–2:52

After a preface written somewhat in the style of Greek secular histories, Luke adopts a narrative approach reminiscent of the Greek Old Testament, or Septuagint (LXX), and plunges his readers into the world of first-century Palestinian Judaism. God's actions to fulfil his purpose for humanity are set in the broader course of human history, but their significance is revealed in supernatural ways that excite amazement, wonder and praise. This section transitions from the story of Israel to the story of Jesus and provides, in Raymond Brown's words, 'a true introduction to some of the main themes of the Gospel proper'.¹ It begins and ends in the Jerusalem Temple (1:5–25; 2:41–50), as does Luke's Gospel (24:53).

1. *God's intentions revealed and acknowledged (Luke 1:5–56)*

Luke establishes a close link between John the Baptist and Jesus in the plan of God, echoing biblical scenes where angelic revelations disclose in advance the significance of the birth of a key figure in the history of God's people (e.g., Genesis 18:1–15; Judges 13; 1 Samuel 1–2). This similarity suggests to Tannehill that 'John and Jesus are part of a single divine purpose, which is developing according to the same biblical pattern'.² Despite these parallels, however, distinctive differences between John and Jesus are revealed by angelic disclosures and biblical allusions, and by the way each one is described in relation to God's Spirit.³ The announcement of John's conception (1:5–23) comes first, followed by Elizabeth's pregnancy and praise of God (1:24–5). The announcement of Jesus's conception comes

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (London: Chapman, 1977; New York: Image/Doubleday, 1979), 242. Brown compares the way Acts 1–2 transitions from the story of Jesus to the story of the Church.

² Tannehill, *Narrative Unity* 1, 16. See also Green, *Luke*, 50–51.

³ See Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, 40–41; Fitzmyer, *Luke I–IX*, 313–14.

next (1:26–38), followed by Mary’s visit to Elizabeth and her praise of God (1:39–56). Isaak identifies these as the first of a series of ‘women’s stories’ in this Gospel, providing ‘female readers with female characters as role models in a world of mainly patriarchal characters’.⁴

The announcement of John’s conception (1:5–25)

The birth of John the Baptist foretold

5In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. **6**Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. **7**But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

8Once when Zechariah’s division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, **9**he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. **10**And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

11Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. **12**When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. **13**But the angel said to him: ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife

Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. **14**He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, **15**for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. **16**He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. **17**And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.’

18Zechariah asked the angel, ‘How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.’

19The angel said to him, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. **20**And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.’

21Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering

⁴ Isaak, ‘Luke’, 1232. Mary’s role is amplified in 2:1–52, where Anna the prophetess is also introduced. Women feature at several other key points in the narrative (7:36–8:3; 8:40–56; 10:38–42; 13:10–17; 15:8–10; 18:1–8; 21:1–4; 23:55–24:12).

why he stayed so long in the temple. **22**When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realised he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

23When his time of service was

completed, he returned home. **24**After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. **25**‘The Lord has done this for me,’ she said. ‘In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.’

5. John the Baptist’s parents lived in the tumultuous era of Herod the Great (73–4 BC), who was appointed ‘king of Judea’ by the Roman Senate in 40 BC and ruled from 37 to 4 BC. Herod’s domain encompassed Galilee, Judea, Samaria, Western Idumea and portions of Perea and Coele–Syria. Edwards describes him as an Idumean by birth but a Jew by religion, ‘endowed with strength, stamina, and shrewdness, with a gift for taking strategic risks and landing on his feet, a passionate builder, artistically sensitive and sensuous, but barbarically cruel to his enemies, real or imagined’.⁵ Most importantly, he enlarged and magnificently refurbished the Temple that had been built in Jerusalem after the Babylonian Exile. Zechariah is introduced as belonging to ‘the priestly division of Abijah’ and ministering in that temple.⁶ His wife Elizabeth was also from a priestly family (‘a descendant of Aaron’).

6–7. The righteousness of Zechariah and Elizabeth ‘in the sight of God’ was expressed in their daily lifestyle (‘observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly’).⁷ Brown observes, ‘Combining priestly origins and blameless observance of the Law, Zechariah and Elizabeth were for Luke the representatives of the best in the religion of Israel; and as a remnant which received the “good news” (1:19), they personified the continuity in salvation history.’⁸ Despite their godliness, however, they had no child, ‘because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old’. This recalls the situation of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis

⁵ Edwards, *Luke*, 32. See also H. Bond, ‘Herodian Dynasty’, *DJG*, 379–82. Judea here means ‘the land of the Jews’ (see 4:44; 6:17; 7:17; 23:5). Elsewhere, it refers more specifically to the southern area of Palestine.

⁶ The word rendered ‘priestly division’ (*ephēmeria*) is used in 1 Chronicles 23:6; 28:13 LXX with reference to the twenty-four divisions of priests who would do daily service in the Temple for one week, twice in each year, and at the annual festivals. The division of Abijah was the eighth (1 Chronicles 24:10). See C. Fletcher-Louis, ‘Priests and Priesthood’, *DJG*, 696–702.

⁷ See my note on ‘the righteous’ in verse 17.

⁸ Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 268.

18:11), and also Samson's mother (Judges 13:2) and Samuel's mother (1 Samuel 1:1–8) who were childless and unable to give birth. The birth of John is thus presented as an extraordinary gift of God 'in continuity with the births of famous figures in the salvific history of Israel'.⁹

8–10. It was 'when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as a priest before God, [that] he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense'. In association with the daily burnt offerings, incense was offered morning and evening on the altar that stood in the Holy Place before the curtain leading to the Most Holy Place (Exodus 30:1–8). Given the large number of priests available, Nolland considers that 'the privilege of offering incense before the Lord would normally be expected only once or twice in a lifetime'.¹⁰ So it was a special occasion for Zechariah in more ways than one. The statement, 'when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside', prepares for the moment when Zechariah comes out of the Temple and the people realise that he has seen a vision (verses 21–2).

11–13. The extraordinary appearance of a divine messenger in the outer sanctuary of the Temple is simply announced: 'Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.' Angelic visitations are actually rare in Scripture, providing special, immediate indications of God's presence and care for his people.¹¹ The manner in which this 'messenger of the Lord' (called Gabriel in verse 19) announced imminent events is reminiscent of Daniel 8–10. Angels appear three times in Luke's birth narratives (1:11–19, 26–38; 2:9–14), not as bearers of new revelation, but proclaiming the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies and applying them to either John or Jesus.

Like many recipients of an angelic visitation in the Bible, 'when Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear' (compare Exodus 3:1–6; Judges 6:22–23; Daniel 8:15–17). But the angel insisted that there was nothing for Zechariah to fear, because 'your prayer has been heard'. Since prayer has not been mentioned so far, the following clause, 'your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son', might indicate that he had been praying for this. More likely, Zechariah was praying with others for

⁹ Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 269. Luke 1–2 hints at further specific parallels with the story of Abraham (Green, *Luke*, 53–8).

¹⁰ Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, 27. See also Edwards, *Luke*, 34–5.

¹¹ See C. Fletcher-Louis, 'Angels', *DJG*, 11–17; Green, *Luke*, 72; and my Introduction, pages 23–4.