



# The Investigator's Gospel

## An Eyewitness Journey Through Luke

### Session 2 – Chapter 1 – It All Begins with a Baby

#### **John the Baptist – The Bridge Between the New and the Old**

We are going to take a close look at the ministry and significance of John the Baptist in Chapter 3. What is significant for this lesson is the emphasis Luke places upon the birth of John – details which none of the other Gospels have. For Luke, and for the early Church, John had a far greater significance than we place upon him today. He serves as the “bridge” between the Old Testament and the New. Luke even changes his writing style to reflect this; from “formal presentation Greek”, in which the first four verses are written, to “Septuagint” Greek. The Septuagint was the Greek-language translation of the Old Testament, made about 150 years before Jesus. Luke will change language style again in Chapter 2, which marks the birth of Jesus.

#### **A Setting in Time – Luke 1:5-7**

*Luke 1:5 - In 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.*

Luke begins by placing the event in the historical timeframe – the time of Herod, King of Judea (by which Luke also includes Galilee – the name “Israel” had not been used for the entire country since the Jewish Civil War split the land into Israel in the North and Judea in the South in the 800s BC). Herod gained power by first being appointed Governor of Galilee by the Romans, and then, through friendships with Roman elites such as Marc Antony and Caesar Augustus, was eventually appointed King of Galilee and Judea. Not fully Jewish, Herod was held in suspicion by many Jews, but brutal suppression of dissent as well as the creation employment through massive building projects (and taxation!) enabled him to retain power. His death in 4 BC helps us place the births of both John and Jesus to this time – approx. 6 BC.

The Temple in Jerusalem was the central shrine of Jewish religious life. Synagogues (the name means “gathering place”) were local community halls, used for Scripture reading and teaching, as well as other aspects of community life. Only at the Temple in Jerusalem were sacrifices made, and the primary holiday festivals formally observed.

As the national religious shrine, the Temple required many priests to serve its many functions. Priests were born into the role, as descendants of Moses’ brother Aaron. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth are from this line. Zechariah is identified as being of the priestly division “Abijah.” There were 24 divisions, with responsibilities shared on a rotating basis. He and Elizabeth are described as “righteous” and “blameless.” As well as childless and “very old.” To be childless was particularly difficult in that culture, as children were regarded as a blessing, and childlessness as a withholding of blessing.

## **The Angelic Visit – Luke 1:8-22**

Zechariah's turn came for the honour of burning incense in the Holy Place (interior, rather than courtyard) of the Temple (but not the Holy of Holies, where the Ark was kept). Lots were drawn for this great honour, which might only come once in the priest's lifetime. The incense symbolised the prayers of the people, rising up to God.

Zechariah is "*startled and gripped with fear*" by the sudden appearance of an angel, when tells him (as Angels tell everyone they meet!) to "*fear not.*" The angel says that their prayers for a child have been heard – a boy, who they are to call "John" (Hebrew name Johanan, meaning "Yahweh has shown favour"). Like Samson and the prophet Samuel before him, John has a special purpose, and like them, is to refrain from "strong drink," as he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth.

John's special purpose is twofold: to bring the people of Israel back into proper relationship with God, and to prepare the way for the Messiah. As such, he will be like the prophet Elijah, forerunner of the Messiah. Even today, pious Jews will leave an empty chair at Passover, in case Elijah should come, and usher in the age of the Messiah (as foretold in Malachi 4:5-6 - "*See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.*").

When Zechariah questions the likelihood of fathering a child, the angel reveals himself to be Gabriel, who "*stands in the presence of God.*" Gabriel appears in the Old Testament in the Book of Daniel, where he is described as "*having the appearance of a man,*" but also "*coming in swift flight,*" which accounts for the idea of him having wings (Daniel 8:16, 9:21). Only in Luke is he mentioned again by name, and as an angel. Gabriel strikes Zechariah mute for his unbelief.

Nevertheless, upon returning home, Zechariah and Elizabeth conceive. Elizabeth goes into seclusion for five months – perhaps in sympathy with Zechariah's muteness. "*The Lord has done this for me,*" she says. "*He has shown his favour (Johanan!).*"

## **The Second Angel Visit (The Annunciation) – Luke 1:26-38**

The scene shifts from Jerusalem to Nazareth. Luke again is specific regarding time, location, and cast of characters: "*In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.*"

Nazareth was a surprising choice – located in the hills of Galilee, in northern Israel, Nazareth had been settled only in the previous century, during a campaign to "re-Judaize" the Galilee, initiated by the Jewish Hasmonean rulers of the area (approx. 160-60 BC). During the previous Greek rule (initiated by Alexander the Great), the area had been settled by Gentiles. Even in the days of Jesus, the eastern Galilee was Gentile (such as the area known as the Decapolis).

Nazareth was a small community, comprised of around 40 families, all from Davidic (royal) tribal roots. It is possible that they named the town “Nazareth” reflecting the Hebrew root “Nezer,” which means “branch.” This would refer to the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 11:1 – *“Out of the stump of David’s family will grow a shoot - yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root. And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on him...”* If this were the case, the people of Nazareth had hopeful expectation that the Messiah would come from among them.

Nazareth was isolated by its hilltop location, but not by proximity – the capital of the region, Sepphoris, was a 45 minute walk, and was a major source of employment, particularly in the building trades. It is quite possible that Joseph, and later Jesus, worked there as builders.

Note that the text does not identify Mary as “from” Nazareth. There is very strong early Church tradition, that Mary was from Jerusalem, and resident in Nazareth only for the purposes of her engagement to Joseph. This engagement was far more formal than today. A legal marriage contract would be drawn up (which could only be broken by “divorce”), the girl would be called her fiancé’s “wife,” and infidelity would be treated as adultery. Mary could be visiting Nazareth for a period of time to meet the family, who would have been tribal relatives.

She is referred to as a virgin (Greek – “Parthenos”) which could mean “young unmarried girl” as well as the more technical “virgin – as in one who has not had intercourse.” That the text means the latter is made clear by Mary’s incredulous response that she is to bear a child: *“How can this be, since I am a virgin?”*

Gabriel greets Mary with the words, *“Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”* Mary is understandably startled: *“Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.”* Gabriel tells her she need not be afraid, as she has *“found favour with God”* – similar language to that used by Elizabeth earlier, connecting the two events. And then the news: *“You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”*

This statement reflects a central Old Testament prophecy by Isaiah, over 700 years before (7:14): *“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”* In Isaiah’s case, the prophecy meant the imminent defeat of Israel’s enemies; but a greater fulfillment was found in Jesus.

Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Yeshua—a shortened form of Yehoshua, which in the Old Testament is translated, “Joshua,” a not uncommon name at the time, made famous by Moses’ successor, and the book of the Bible which bears his name. It means, literally, “God Saves.” Gabriel also says that he will be called “The Son of the Most High.” “Most High – “El Elyon” in Hebrew – is a common title for God, used about 40 times in the Old Testament.

*“The throne of his father David.”* Joseph is identified as a descendant of King David – Luke links Mary with that tribal line as well – and David is referred to as “father,” which is a common Hebrew way saying “ancestor” (as in the phrase “Father Abraham”). God had promised David (2 Samuel 7:16), *“Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.”* Since that promise, even after the civil war which split the Kingdom, the destruction of the Northern Kingdom, and the Babylonian, then Greek, then Roman occupation of the South, faithful Jews still clung to this promise, that the throne of David would be restored, that God’s anointed (Messiah) would re-establish the Kingdom. Gabriel tells Mary that Jesus is the one who will do this.

But how? When Mary points out that she is a virgin, and therefore unable to bear a child, Gabriel explains the mystery (*Luke 1:35: The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.”*). The verb “come upon” is used similarly in Isaiah 32:15 (*“Until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, And the wilderness becomes a fruitful field”*), where it refers to the Spirit’s coming upon the land to make it fertile. Luke uses the same verb in Acts 1:8 of the Spirit’s coming upon the believers at Pentecost (*“You shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit comes upon you”*). The verb “overshadow” appears in Exodus 40:35 with reference to the light of God’s glory “overshadowing” the tabernacle in a cloud, and a similar reference to God’s overshadowing presence appears in the transfiguration account (Luke 9:34 – *“While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them”*). From all of this, it can be clearly seen that the work of the Holy Spirit, unlike legends of pagan gods impregnating earthly women, is not in any way sexual, either in language or intent. Instead, the miraculous nature of the birth will be a sign of Jesus’ divinity.

## **The Visit to Elizabeth**

Gabriel told Mary, *“Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month.”* It is to Elizabeth she “hurries.” She remains with Elizabeth “for about three months” until the birth of John, “and then returned home (Luke 1:56).” Remember, however, that strong Church tradition places Mary’s home in Jerusalem (close to the Pool of Bethesda). It is unlikely that the now pregnant Mary can be seen among Joseph’s family in Nazareth; a deadly scandal would ensue (Matthew’s Gospel investigates this further). But if Mary’s home is Jerusalem, she would be shielded from Nazarene eyes, in the safety of her parent’s home, who (we hope!) had been assured by Zechariah and Elizabeth that something miraculous is underway. So, when Joseph travels to Bethlehem for the census, and picks up the highly pregnant Mary en-route, she only as 7 miles or so to travel.

(For an explanation of the songs of Mary and Zechariah, see the Sermon of September 22).