



THE SEASON OF
ADVENT

Announcement of John the Baptist

I. ANNOUNCEMENT OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

When Herod was king of Judea, there was a Jewish priest named Zechariah. He was a member of the priestly order of Abijah, and his wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both very old. Luke 1:5-7

A. Priests carried honor and a high social status in Judaism.

Although priests were allowed to marry outside ancestral lines, it was considered a double honor to be wed to a daughter of Aaron.¹ This in turn begs the question as to whether Mary, Jesus' Mother, was also of the lineage of Aaron since she was related to Elizabeth? One cannot help but wonder if the High Priest in the Heavens (Jesus) was also part of the priestly lineage on the earth.

B. Elizabeth's barrenness stands in stark contrast to the description of her ancestral purity and blameless obedience to the Law. In their minds, this should have ensured their favor in the sight of the Lord, and thus the blessedness of a fruitful womb to have kids. Yet Luke brings them to our attention in a seeming state of disgrace: not only is Elizabeth barren, but they are of old age and beyond the years of childbearing.

One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple, for his order was on duty that week. As was the custom of the priests, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. While the incense was being burned, a great crowd stood outside, praying. While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him. Luke 1:8-12

C. It is in the midst of this tension that the scene shifts to Zacharias in the Temple. He would have made the journey from his residence in the hill country of Judea that lies to the south of Jerusalem. The priests themselves lived not only in Jerusalem but also in other settlements in the land of Israel. When it was "time for the division to go up [to Jerusalem]"², the hundreds of priests left their homes, went up to Jerusalem for a week, and afterwards returned to their homes in Judea or Galilee.

1. The priesthood was separated into twenty-four orders. This was done in such a way that only one given order was on duty at a particular time.³ Each order would have been summoned twice a year to serve for one week. Abijah was eighth in sequence (1 Chronicles 24:7-8; Nehemiah 12:4).⁴

2. Throughout the week, the priests would have stayed busy making sacrifices and doing different tasks of purification, such as someone with a sickness. They would have abided by all the duties written in the Torah.

3. The burning of incense was preceded by a sacrifice. This happened every morning and afternoon. This entire service was called the Tamid and only required a small number of people. Participation in this was decided through the casting of lots.

4. A priest would stand atop the high point of the temple and watch for the first sign of dawn to signal the start of the day's activities in the temple with three blasts from a silver shofar.

5. This day, the lottery to burn incense fell to Zacharias. He would have left the Brazen Altar in the Court of the Priests, ascended the twelve steps to the Holy Place, entered alone, and then made his way to the front of the sacred room where the Golden Altar of Incense sat, glowing with coals taken from the burnt offering outside and which dimly illuminated the cherubim woven into the veil that separated where he stood from the Holy of Holies.

6. Interestingly, in Jewish tradition it was not unheard of for priests to have a vision or hear a voice at the time of the burning of incense. Josephus tells us that while John Hyrcanus was offering incense, he heard a voice that told him his sons had defeated the Syrian king Antiochus.⁵ In addition, the Jerusalem Talmud testifies the high priest Shim'on the Righteous yearly had a vision on the Day of Atonement until his death:

"Shim'on the Righteous served Israel as high priest for forty years. In his last year he said to them: "This year I will die." They said to him: "How do you know this?" He said to them: "Each year [on the Day of Atonement] when I entered the Holy of Holies [to offer incense], an old man dressed in white would enter with me and leave with me. This year, he entered with me but did not leave with me." Jerusalem Talmud, Yoma 42c

7. The scene is described in a way reminiscent of Old Testament encounters such as Daniel 9:21, further linking this unfolding tale with the whole of redemptive history. We may speculate as to how shocking it was for Zacharias to be speaking with the very One who had visited the elderly prophet Daniel so many years before.

As I was praying, Gabriel, whom I had seen in the earlier vision, came swiftly to me at the time of the evening sacrifice. Daniel 9:21

D. The Angel's message:

But the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly." Luke 1:13-17

The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God." Isaiah 40:3

How many countless times had Zacharias groaned with whispers and tears when he and Elizabeth were thirty, and then forty, and then fifty, and assumed that God did not hear? Yet, standing in the Holy Place in the dusk of his life, an angel decrees that most assuredly the prayer of this righteous man had been considered and would now be fulfilled. The child's name would be John, meaning, "God is gracious."

E. The Nazirite Vow: The command of the angel regarding abstinence from wine undoubtedly refers to the Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:2–21). The prohibition against drinking things from the vine is one of the trademarks of the Nazirite as recorded in rabbinic tradition.

According to Numbers 6, a Nazirite must abstain from everything that is obtained from the grapevine: he may not drink wine, wine vinegar or grape juice; he may not eat grapes fresh or dried, or even the seeds or skins of grapes. He also is not allowed to cut his hair or come in contact with a corpse during his entire term.

Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure this will happen? I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years." Then the angel said, "I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was He who sent me to bring you this good news! But now, since you didn't believe what I said, you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born. For my words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time." Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah to come out of the sanctuary, wondering why he was taking so long. When he finally did come out, he couldn't speak to them. Then they realized from his gestures and his silence that he must have seen a vision in the sanctuary. When Zechariah's week of service in the Temple was over, he returned

home. Soon afterward his wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant and went into seclusion for five months. "How kind the Lord is!" she exclaimed. "He has taken away my disgrace of having no children." Luke 1:18-25

F. Undoubtedly news of this would have spread. We know now that the conception of Jesus is soon as well. That's a lot of supernatural activity that is suddenly taking place in the midst of a 400 year span of prophetic silence since the book of Malachi.

G. Luke 2 tells of more unusual activity from Simeon and the prophet Anna:

At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Luke 2:25-26

Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple. She was the daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, and she was very old. Her husband died when they had been married only seven years. Then she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshiping God with fasting and prayer. She came along just as Simeon was talking with Mary and Joseph, and she began praising God. She talked about the child to everyone who had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem. Luke 2:36-38

1 Alfred Edersheim, *The Life & Times of Jesus the Messiah*, p. 95
2 Mishnah, Ta'anit 4:2
3 The rotation of the priestly divisions began in the month of Nissan (mid-March to mid-April). Abijah, the division of Zacharias, would have been summoned at the end of Iyyar (mid-April to mid-May) and again at the end of Marheshvan (mid-October to mid-November).
4 Nazareth was home to the 18th priestly division.
5 Antiq. 13:282

