*Announcement to Zacharias “Getting Acquainted with your Bible” Berneice Shotwell*

Events of marked significance surrounded the birth and early years of Jesus, from the angel’s first announcement to Zacharias to the safe return of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus to Nazareth from Egypt.

The Gospel narrative opens in the Temple in Jerusalem with an angel’s announcement to Zacharias of the coming of a son to his wife Elisabeth. According to Old Testament prophecy, the Messiah was to be preceded by his forerunner: “Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me:

and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts” (Mal. 3:1).

Zacharias was a priest of the order of Abia (Abijah, eighth of the twenty-four courses, see p. 55); Elisabeth was of the ancient priestly line of Aaron, and up to this time she had been barren. This devout couple, well advanced in years, lived in the hill country of Judaea. “They were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.” In their hearts was a deep reverence, a purity wherein the spirit of God and the presence of angels could abound.

As Zacharias was executing his priestly office within the Holy Place of the Temple—and on this day, it had been determined by lot that he should perform the sacred ritual of sprinkling incense on the Golden Altar, a special privilege that fell to a priest only once during his lifetime—an angel appeared at the right side of the altar. Zacharias was troubled at his appearing, but the angel said, “Fear not . . . for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.” (This promised child was later known as John the Baptist.)

The promises continued one by one as Zacharias listened: “Thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost [New Testament term for the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God], even from his mother’s womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias [AV New Testament form of the name Elijah], to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

“Whereby shall I know this?” asked Zacharias. The angel answered, “I am Gabriel [Dan. 8:15,16; 9:21], that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings.” Doubting Gabriel’s words, Zacharias asked for a sign. This he was given—he was told that because of his unbelief he would be struck dumb until the day these things should occur; and when he came out of the Temple he was unable to speak, to the astonishment of those in the courtyard.

As soon as his Temple duties had been accomplished, Zacharias returned to his own house in Judaea. “And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying, Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men”.

Barrenness

A marriage without children was a bitter sorrow to

both husband and wife and was accounted a reproach

from God. The wife not only grieved because she had

no children but also feared for her position as a wife.

She was subject to the ridicule and scorn of the other

women of the household and the neighborhood. Both

Sarai (wife of Abram) and Hannah (wife of Elkanah)

suffered this humiliation (Gen. 16:4; 21:9; I Sam.

1:7). The disgrace felt by a barren wife sometimes

caused her to give a handmaid to her husband as a

secondary wife that she might, through her, lay claim

to children and so retain her husband’s favor. Sarai,

when she saw she was barren, gave Abram her

Egyptian slave Hagar (Gen. 16:1–3) and Rachel

sought a child of Jacob through her handmaid Bilhah

(Gen. 30:1,3). The children of polygamy or concubinage

were regarded as legitimate and were welcome

members of the household.

Meanwhile Elisabeth gave birth to her son, and in accordance with Mosaic Law on the eighth day after his birth the child was circumcised, the rite admitting him into the privileges and duties of the covenant of Abraham. On this day, so important to every Jewish household, Elisabeth’s cousins and neighbors came to rejoice with her and to celebrate the naming of the child. When they would have given the boy his father’s name Elisabeth objected, “Not so; but he shall be called John.” Zacharias, deprived of the power of speech for many months, asked for a waxed tablet and wrote, in accord with the angel’s word, “His name is John.” His tongue was immediately freed. No longer in doubt, he praised God and prophesied the future dignity and mission of the child as the forerunner of Israel’s Messiah.

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David. . . .

“And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways;

“To give knowledge of salvation. . . . To give light to them that sit in darkness . . . to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

In consonance with the angel’s prophecy the child was brought up by his parents as a Nazarite. *Nazarite* means “separated” and refers to one who consecrated himself to the service of God by abstinence from the wine of the grape and every other kind of intoxicating drink, by permitting no razor to touch the hair of his head, and by avoiding ceremonial defilement with relation to food and to the dead (Num. 6:1–21). A man (or a woman) might take the Nazarite vow voluntarily as often as he wished, being free to set its length of observance. But John, like Samson and Samuel, was consecrated by his parents before birth, and so remained a Nazarite all his life. These words from Luke are all that are recorded of John’s early years: “the hand of the Lord was with him,” and “the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel.”