1Research: Birth of John the Baptist

Luke 1:5-8, 11, 13, 18, 19, 24, 25, 57, 58

5¶ There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judæa, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife *was* of the daughters of Aaron, and her name *was* Elisabeth.

“*There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea*— This is he who is commonly known by the name of *Herod the Great,*a cruel, ambitious man, who, without any title, obtained the crown of Judea from the Roman senate, to whom he was recommended by Mark Antony. Under his government the Jews were very uneasy, because he was a foreigner. Nevertheless, the Roman generals in those parts having given him possession of the throne, by his own prudence and address he maintained himself in it for the space of forty years. His reign, though celebrated on many accounts, was remarkable for nothing so much as that, toward the conclusion of it, the Messiah and his forerunner were born” (Benson Commntary).

“The Announcement of the Birth of the Fore-runner- John the Baptist.

*“of Herod, the king*] Towards the close of the reign of Herod the Great. The true sceptre had departed from Judah. Herod was a mere Idumaean usurper imposed on the nation by the Romans.

“*of Judea*] Besides Judaea, Samaria, and Galilee, his kingdom included the most important regions of Peraea

“The Jews highly valued the distinction of priestly birth. The notion that Zacharias was a High Priest and that his vision occurred on the great Day of Atonement is refuted by the single word  “his *lot* was,” [Luke 1:9](http://biblehub.com/luke/1-9.htm).” (Cambridge Bible).

“course of Abia—or Abijah; the eighth of the twenty-four orders of courses into which David divided the priests (see 1Ch 24:1, 4, 10). Of these courses only four returned after the captivity (Ezr 2:34-39), which were again subdivided into twenty-four—retaining the ancient name and order of each. They took the whole temple service for a week each.

“his wife was of the daughters of Aaron—The priests might marry into any tribe, but "it was most commendable of all to marry one of the priests' line" (Jamieson-Fausset-Brown).

“**His wife was of the daughters of Aaron.**—The priests were free to marry outside the limits of their own caste under certain limitations as to the character of their wives ([Leviticus 21:7](http://biblehub.com/leviticus/21-7.htm)), and the fact of a priestly descent on both sides was therefore worth noticing.

**“Her name was Elisabeth.**—The name in its Hebrew form of Elisheba had belonged to the wife of Aaron, who was of the tribe of Judah ([Exodus 6:23](http://biblehub.com/exodus/6-23.htm)), and was naturally an honored name among the daughters of the priestly line” (Ellicott’s Commentary).

Luke 1:6, 7

6And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

“Both righteous - Both "just" or holy. This means here more than external conformity to the law. It is an honorable testimonial of their "piety" toward God.

“Walking in ... - Keeping the commandments. To walk in the way that God commands is "to obey."

“Ordinances - Rites and customs which God had ordained or appointed. These words refer to all the duties of religion which were made known to them.

“Blameless - That is, no fault or deficiency could be found in them. They were strict, exact, punctual. Yet this, if it had been mere "external" observance, might have been no proof of piety. Paul, before his conversion, also kept the law "externally" blameless, [Philippians 3:6](http://biblehub.com/philippians/3-6.htm). But in the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth it was real love to God and sincere regard for his law” (Barnes’ Notes).

7And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were *now* well stricken in years.

“ *And they had no child*— The providence of God so ordering it, that the birth of John the Baptist might be the more remarkable, and might excite the greater attention; *because that Elisabeth was barren*— Even when in the flower of her age. *And they both were now well stricken in years —*Here, then, was a double obstacle in the way of their having children, both the natural barrenness of Elisabeth, and the old age of them both; and, consequently, a double proof of the supernatural agency of God in the birth of John, evidently showing him to be a person miraculously sent by God. It is worthy of observation here, that many eminent persons under the patriarchal and Mosaic dispensations, were born of mothers that had been long barren, as Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Samson, Samuel, and here John the Baptist.” (Benson Commentar).

“Well stricken in years - Old or advanced in life, so as to render the prospect of having children hopeless” (Barnes’ Notes).

11And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

“It had now been about 400 years since the time of "Malachi," and since there had been any divine revelation. During that time, the nation was looking for the Messiah, but still with nothing more than the ancient prophecies to direct them. Now that he was about to appear, God sent his messenger to announce his coming, to encourage the hearts of his people, and to prepare them to receive him.

“On the right side ... - The altar of incense stood close by the veil which divided the holy place from the most holy. On the north stood the table of showbread; on the south, the golden candlestick. As Zechariah entered, therefore, with his face to the west, the angel would stand on the north, or near the table of showbread.” (Barnes’ Notes).

13But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.

“*But the angel said, Fear not,* — Thus encouraging him with great gentleness of aspect and voice. *For thy prayer is heard*— I do not come unto thee with a message of terror, but am sent to assure thee, *thy prayer is heard, and thy wife shall bear thee a son*— “No doubt this good man had often prayed for children; but as he seemed now to have given up all expectations of that kind, it is reasonable to conclude, that these words chiefly relate to his prayers for the deliverance of Israel by the Messiah, whose appearance was then expected by pious persons conversant in the sacred writings.” (Benson Commentary).

“Thy prayer is heard - That is, thy prayer for offspring. This, among the Jews, was an object of intense desire. No prospect was more gloomy to them than that of dying childless, so that their "name should perish." Special pains, therefore, had been taken in the law to keep up the names of families by requiring a man to marry his brother's wife, [Deuteronomy 25:5](http://biblehub.com/deuteronomy/25-5.htm).” (Barnes’ Notes).

18And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.

“Whereby shall I know this? - The thing was improbable, and he desired "evidence" that it would take place. The testimony of an "angel," and in such a place, should have been proof enough; but people are slow to believe the testimony of heavenly messengers. As a consequence of not believing, he was struck mute” (Barnes’ Notes).

19And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings.

“**I am Gabriel.** —No names of angels appear in the Old Testament till after the Babylonian Exile. Then we have Gabriel (= “the strong one—or the hero—of God”), in [Daniel 8:16](http://biblehub.com/daniel/8-16.htm); Michael (“who is like unto God?”), in [Daniel 10:21](http://biblehub.com/daniel/10-21.htm); [Daniel 12:1](http://biblehub.com/daniel/12-1.htm); Raphael ( “the healer of God”—i.e., the divine healer), as one of the seven holy angels which present the prayers of the saints. As having appeared in the prophecies which, more than any others, were the germ of the Messianic expectations which the people cherished, there was a fitness in the mission now given to Gabriel to prepare the way for the Messiah’s coming.

**“That stand in the presence of God.** —The imagery was drawn from the customs of an Eastern Court, in which those stood who were the most honored ministers of the king, while others fell prostrate in silent homage.” (Ellicott’s Commentary).

“*that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee*] He was thus one of the “Angels of the Presence” ([Isaiah 63:9](http://biblehub.com/isaiah/63-9.htm); cf. [Matthew 18:10](http://biblehub.com/matthew/18-10.htm)),  
  
“One of the Seven  
  
Who in God’s presence, nearest to His throne,  
  
Stand ready at command, and are His eyes” (Cambridge Bible).

24And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying,

“Hid herself - Did not go forth into public, and concealed her condition. This might have been done that she might spend her time more entirely in giving praise to God for his mercies, and that she might have the fullest proof of the accomplishment of the promise before she appeared in public or spoke of the mercies of God” (Barnes’ Notes).

“hid five months—till the event was put beyond doubt and became apparent” (Jamieson-Faussett -Brown).

25Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on *me,* to take away my reproach among men.

“**To take away my reproach among men.**—The words express in almost their strongest form the Jewish feeling as to maternity. To have no children was more than a misfortune. It seemed to imply some secret sin which God was punishing with barrenness” (Ellicott’s Commentary).

“To take away my reproach - Among the Jews, a family of children was counted a signal blessing, an evidence of the favor of God, [Psalm 113:9](http://biblehub.com/psalms/113-9.htm); [Psalm 128:3](http://biblehub.com/psalms/128-3.htm); [Isaiah 4:1](http://biblehub.com/isaiah/4-1.htm); [Isaiah 44:3-4](http://biblehub.com/isaiah/44-3.htm); [Leviticus 26:9](http://biblehub.com/leviticus/26-9.htm). To be "barren," therefore, or to be destitute of children, was considered a "reproach" or a "disgrace," [1 Samuel 1:6](http://biblehub.com/1_samuel/1-6.htm)” (Barnes’ Notes).

57Now Elisabeth’s full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son.

“*Now Elisabeth's full time came* . . . The nine months, which is the full time of a woman's going with child, were now complete; for in the sixth month of Elisabeth's pregnancy, or when she had been gone six months with child, the angel acquainted Mary with it, and she had stayed about three months with her; but now had left her, to shun the company which would be at the delivery of her; though some think, she stayed till that time was over, which is not so probable; and so her reckoning being out, and the time come, that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son, according to the angel's prediction both to Zacharias and Mary, [Luke 1:13](http://biblehub.com/luke/1-13.htm)” (Gill online, <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/luke/1-57.htm>).

58And her neighbours and her cousins heard how the Lord had shewed great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her.

“In these verses, we have an account of the birth of John the Baptist, and the great joy among all the relations of the family. He shall be called Johanan, or Gracious, because he shall bring in the gospel of Christ, wherein God's grace shines most bright. Zacharias recovered his speech. Unbelief closed his mouth, and believing opened it again: he believes, therefore he speaks” (Matthew Henry online, http://biblehub.com/commentaries/luke/1-57.htm).