



# The Births Foretold: John the Baptist & The Coming Messiah

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Every year at Christmas, the birth of Jesus Christ is celebrated in churches with youth or children performances around the nativity scene, the magi, and the shepherds. What is less often considered are the events that precede Christ's birth.

Luke 1:26-38 records the annunciation of Jesus Christ, in which the birth of Jesus is foretold.

Before that, we will first look at Luke 1:5-25 which records the foretelling of John the Baptist's birth, the forerunner to Jesus Christ.

## The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold

The book of Luke is unique in that it is the only account we have of the historical events leading up to the births of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ.

Whereas Matthew, Mark, and John focus on John the Baptist's ministry in relation to

the beginning of Christ's public work, Luke provides a historical account of how John the Baptist and Jesus came into the world.

## **John the Baptist's Priestly Background**

John the Baptist comes from a priestly background. His father, Zechariah was a priest of the division of Abijah, the eighth division established under David (1 Chronicles 24:1-31). Elizabeth, the wife of Zechariah and the mother of John the Baptist, is described as one of the daughters of Aaron, placing her within the Aaronic priestly lineage. Aaron was the brother of Moses and the first high priest of Israel, appointed along with his sons to serve as priests (Exodus 28:1).

John the Baptist wasn't a priest himself but was appointed to prepare the way for Christ, who is later revealed in Hebrews as the great high priest (Hebrews 4:14-16).

## **Zechariah's Priestly Service in the Temple**

At this point in the narrative, Zechariah is serving in the temple as part of the priestly division of Abijah. The priesthood was organised so that each division would serve in rotation, with specific duties assigned by lot to ensure fairness in the distribution of sacred responsibilities.

During this period of service, Zechariah is chosen by lot to enter the Holy Place and burn incense before the Lord (Luke 1:8-9). This was a central priestly duty performed twice daily, morning and evening, symbolising the prayers of Israel rising before God. While the incense was being offered inside the sanctuary, a multitude of worshippers would remain outside the temple courts, praying during the hour of incense (Luke 1:10).

It is within this structured moment of temple worship that the angelic announcement occurs. Zechariah enters alone into the Holy Place to perform the incense offering, while the people pray outside, and there, beside the altar of incense, the angel Gabriel appears with the message concerning the birth of John.

## **Elizabeth and Zechariah: A Type of Abraham and**

## Sarah

The circumstances of Elizabeth and Zechariah closely parallel those of Abraham and Sarah.

- Sarah was advanced in years and barren, yet God promised that she would bear a son (Genesis 18:11–12). Elizabeth was also advanced in years and had been childless, making John’s birth a result of divine intervention (Luke 1:7).
- God announced through angelic messengers that Sarah would bear a son, Isaac, through whom His covenant purposes would continue (Genesis 18:10). Gabriel similarly announces to Zechariah that Elizabeth will bear a son, John, who will prepare the way for the Messiah (Luke 1:13).
- Sarah responded to the promise with laughter, questioning how it could take place given her age (Genesis 18:12). Zechariah likewise responds with doubt, asking, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years” (Luke 1:18).

## John the Baptist in the Pattern of Elijah

Verse 17 presents John as continuing the mission promised in Malachi, mirroring the work associated with Elijah.

- Malachi 3:1 declares, “Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me,” establishing the promise of one who would go before the Lord to prepare His way. John’s role is defined as one who will “turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God” (Luke 1:16), preparing the people to receive the Messiah. Luke 1:17 reflects this directly, stating that John “shall go before him... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord,” identifying him as that promised messenger.
- Malachi 4:5 declares, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord.” Luke 1:17 echoes this language, stating that John “will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah,” identifying him with the prophetic role described in Malachi.
- Malachi 4:6 speaks of turning “the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.” Luke 1:17 parallels this by describing

John's mission as turning hearts and leading the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, highlighting his role in calling Israel to repentance before the Messiah's arrival.

John is not Elijah himself, but comes "in the spirit and power of Elias" (Luke 1:17), carrying out a similar prophetic ministry in preparing Israel for the Lord.

Some questioned whether John himself was Elijah, but he clearly denied this. When asked directly, "Art thou Elias?" he said, "I am not" (John 1:21). This confirms that while John came in the spirit and power of Elijah, he was not Elijah himself.

## **John the Baptist: Consecrated from Birth in the Nazarite Pattern**

Luke 1:15 notes that John is to abstain from wine and strong drink from birth, echoing consecration patterns seen in figures such as Samson and reflecting Nazarite-like separation. This directly mirrors the legal language of the Nazarite vow found in Numbers 6:1-21.

This specific phrasing infers a life of "separation", where an individual was set apart for divine service. By applying this requirement from birth, the text links John to the rare, lifelong consecration seen in figures like Samson (Judges 13:4-5).

This total abstinence served as a physical sign of his internal reality: that he was to be "filled with the Holy Spirit" rather than worldly spirits, providing him with the unique prophetic authority required to prepare the way for the Messiah.

Zechariah then emerges from the temple and when the people notice that he is unable to speak, they recognise that he has seen a vision. (Luke 1:21-22).

This silence served as a sign that God's word would surely come to pass, showing the certainty of His promises.

Elizabeth then conceives and withdraws from public view, understanding her pregnancy as the Lord's act in removing her reproach among the people (Luke 1:24-25).

With John now promised and conceived, Luke then turns to the annunciation of Jesus Christ.

## **The Birth of Jesus Christ Foretold**

God sends the angel Gabriel to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, to the home of Mary. Nazareth was a small city in Galilee, believed to have had around 300 inhabitants at the time of Christ.

These events occur “in the days of Herod the king” (Luke 1:5; Matthew 2:1), grounding the narrative in historical reality.

Nazareth was also distant from Jerusalem and outside Judea’s religious centre, and it was not regarded as significant.

When Philip tells Nathanael that they have found the Messiah, Nathanael replies, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:45–46).

The Messiah is being identified with a place that carried no reputation.

## **The Virgin Mary**

The Bible does not say much about the background of Mary. When the angel Gabriel is sent to her, she is described as a virgin betrothed to Joseph. The Greek word translated “virgin” in this passage is *parthenos*. This term, together with the Hebrew word ‘*almâ* in Isaiah 7:14, a passage cited as prophecy of the virgin birth, has prompted discussion because of its association with both virginity and a young woman.

Later in the account, when Mary is told that she will conceive and bear a son, she asks how this will be possible, given that she is a virgin. Her question clarifies how Luke presents her, as one who has known no man and shows that her virginity fulfills that prophecy in Isaiah 7:14.

Being betrothed to Joseph, a status that preceded marriage yet was as binding as marriage itself, would have made Mary’s pregnancy not only unexpected but problematic.

Matthew’s Gospel later records Joseph’s intention to divorce her quietly, highlighting the seriousness of the situation, however, after an angelic visitation, he is reassured of the divine nature of Mary’s birth and takes Mary as his wife.

## **The Angel's Greeting to Mary, the Favoured One**

A visitation from an angel would have been unexpected, and Mary is described as being troubled by the greeting (Luke 1:29). Gabriel reassures her and says that she has found favour, *charis*, which means grace.

Mary's favour with God is not presented as being connected to her background. She is a Jewish girl from an insignificant place, far from Jerusalem, and betrothed to a tradesman. Elizabeth, by contrast, is married to a priest and is herself from the Aaronic priestly line, which by human standards would appear more significant.

The contrast highlights that God chose a humble setting for the incarnation, showing that His favour is not tied to status.

## **Jesus, Son of the Most High**

Gabriel continues by telling Mary that she will conceive and bear a son, and that His name will be Jesus. In Luke 1:32-33, Gabriel declares that this child will be called the Son of the Most High and will reign over the house of Jacob forever.

From the time of Melchizedek, king of Salem, in Genesis 14:18-20, Yahweh is referred to as the Most High. Luke's wording aligns this title with Jesus, presenting a claim about His identity that goes beyond that of a merely human ruler. The declaration that Jesus will reign over the house of Jacob forever draws on Old Testament expectations of a coming king.

Isaiah 9:6-7 speaks of a ruler from David's line whose reign would be lasting and righteous. During the exile, when the Davidic monarchy had failed and the nation was in ruin, Jeremiah 23:5-6 renews that hope by promising a future king, a righteous Branch, who would restore and rule God's people.

Luke also states that God will give Jesus "the throne of his father David" and that "of his kingdom there will be no end." This language places the announcement within Israel's historical and covenantal framework, presenting Jesus as the continuation and fulfilment of the Davidic kingship.

## **Mary's Response to Gabriel**

Mary, like Zechariah earlier in Luke 1 and Sarah in Genesis, responds by asking how this can be, given her circumstances.

Gabriel answers in Luke 1:35, explaining that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and that the power of the Most High will overshadow her, and therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.

Gabriel then points to Elizabeth's pregnancy as evidence of God's power, concluding with the statement, "For nothing is impossible with God." Mary responds by submitting herself to God's word, saying, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word."

## **Mary's Visit to Elizabeth**

After this, Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country to visit Elizabeth, her kinswoman. When she entered the house and greeted her, the babe in Elizabeth's womb leaped, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost. (Luke 1:39-41)

Elizabeth exclaimed, "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:42-43)

Even before birth, John and Elizabeth recognize the Messiah. Elizabeth's words affirm God's hand in Mary's calling and echo the divine recognition given to her son.

Some commentators note the connection to Luke 1:15, where John was filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb.

## **The Magnificat (Mary's Song)**

Mary responds with a song of praise, recognising that what is happening is part of God's covenant plan for Israel.

In Luke 1:46-48, she magnifies the Lord, rejoices in God her Saviour, and acknowledges that God has looked upon her low estate, marking her as blessed among generations.

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Verses 49–53 describe God’s mighty works and mercy: His power over the proud, the exaltation of the lowly, the provision for the hungry, and the sending away of the rich empty.

Mary’s words anticipate the coming Messiah’s righteous rule according to God’s promises to Israel.

In verses 54–55, she connects these events to God’s covenant faithfulness, remembering His mercy toward Israel and the promises made to Abraham and his seed.

Mary’s song points forward to the fulfillment of God’s promises in the coming Messiah, showing that from the very beginning, God’s covenant faithfulness to Israel was being revealed, while also opening the way for the salvation of all who would believe.