

Chapter One

(1:1-80)

THE GOSPEL OF THE SON OF MAN

IDEAS TO INVESTIGATE:

1. If others had already been compiling narratives of the life of Jesus, why did Luke feel it necessary for him to do so too (1:1-4)?
2. Why did God need to precede the birth of the Messiah with a "fore-runner" (1:17)?
3. Why was Mary upset with the announcement from the angel about Jesus' birth (1:29)?
4. Should Mary be venerated in some special way because she was the mother of our Lord (1:42)?
5. Why was it so important to name the "forerunner" John (1:60)?
6. Who are the "enemies" the Messiah's people are to be saved from (1:71)?
7. Isn't it rather strange to let the child John grow up all by himself in "the wilderness" (1:80)?

SECTION 1

The Precise Record (1:1-4)

1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, ²just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, ³it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.

1:1-4 The Author: The author of this historical record of the life of Jesus was Luke (also the author of Acts of the Apostles) "the beloved physician" (Col. 4:14) and traveling companion of the apostle Paul. He was a Greek by race and the only Gentile writer in the New Testament. He was probably one of Paul's converts and tradition says his home was in Syria in the city of Antioch. Being a physician, he would be thoroughly trained and highly motivated toward skillful scientific research. Most doctors of that day were respected, well-paid practitioners. Historical records

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indicate physicians of that era were more skilled than we sometimes think. Amputations, surgery on the skull, surgery for "stones" (gall and kidney), suturing of blood vessels and tracheotomies were performed. Surgical instruments were so well designed that it has hardly been possible to improve on some of them even at the present day. There were probes, cauterizers, scalpels, needles for suturing, clamps, forceps, elevators for lifting up depressed portions of the skull (much like those used today), catheters, scissors, throat spatulas and other complicated instruments for dilating passages in the body and internal examinations.

Paul picked up Luke at Troas on his second missionary journey (Acts 16:10; note, "we") and then left Luke at Philippi (about 51 A.D.). Six years later Luke was in Paul's missionary troupe again sailing back to Troas (about 58 A.D.) (note "we" used again in Acts 20:1-6). Luke probably accompanied Paul from then on through the third missionary journey, the return to Jerusalem, two years imprisonment at Caesarea (58-60 A.D.), and finally, the trip to Rome and Paul's imprisonment there (60-63 A.D.).

Luke's travels with the apostle Paul, especially the two or three years spent in Palestine, gave him ample opportunity to complete his detailed research and interrogation of "eyewitnesses" and write his gospel record. Most scholars date the writing of Luke's gospel about 58-60 A.D., coincidental with Paul's incarceration at Caesarea. External evidence abundantly testifies to the early existence and use of Luke's gospel. Justin Martyr (100-165 A.D.), a student of Polycarp (who was in turn, a student of the apostle John), quotes from Luke's gospel; Hegesippus (110-180) quotes from it; Tatian's *Diatessaron* (120 A.D.) quotes it; The Muratorian Fragment (170 A.D.) cites it as Luke's gospel; the Syriac manuscripts (some of the oldest mss. of the N.T.) (100-200 A.D.) contain the gospel according to Luke.

Although Luke was not an apostle (like Matthew and John), he was a co-laborer and long-time companion of the apostle Paul. Paul had the power to lay his hands on his co-laborers and impart to them special, miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 1:6). We believe Paul must have imparted to Luke the miraculous gift of the Holy Spirit to guide him in producing an inerrant record of the life of Jesus (and Acts of the Apostles). In other words, we believe Luke's gospel is "inspired" by the Holy Spirit as surely as Matthew's or John's. His gospel has been received as canonical by the church from the end of the first century until now.

Luke's gospel has often been characterized as "the gospel with the Gentile world in mind." Beginning in 1:68, Luke emphasizes the *redemptive* work of Jesus. Thiessen, in his *Introduction to The New Testament*, points out the following peculiarities of Luke's account:

1. This is the Gospel of the perfect humanity of Christ. Our Lord is seen as having the development, feelings, sympathies and powers of a man. Luke gives us the fullest account of the birth, childhood, growth, domestic and social life of Jesus.
2. Luke makes much of Prayer. Christ is represented as praying 15 times in the four Gospels, 11 of which are found in Luke's Gospel, 3 in Matthew's, and 4 in both Mark and John. Luke has a good deal of teaching on prayer not found in the other Gospels, 11:5-13; 18:1-8; 21:36; cf. 18:11-13.
3. The Third Gospel also makes much of Praise and Thanksgiving. It begins and ends with worship in the temple (1:9; 24:52). He alone gives us the words of the great hymns which have since been set to music; The Ave Maria (1:28); the Magnificat (1:46-56); the Benedictus (1:68-79); the Gloria in Excelsis (2:14); and the Nunc Dimitis (2:29-32).
4. Women and children are prominent in this Gospel; Elizabeth and Mary; Anna; the widow of Nain; woman bound by Satan; women who ministered to Jesus; sinner woman; widow appealing to unrighteous judge; Martha and Mary; infants (18:15); Jairus' daughter, etc.
5. The Gospel of Luke is the most literary and beautiful of the gospels. Its introduction is classic and its vocabulary is that of an educated man.
6. He uses many medical terms and shows special interest in sickness and in the sick. He shows the compassion of Jesus.
7. Luke records 20 miracles of Christ, of which 6 are peculiar to him, and 23 parables, of which 18 are peculiar to him.
8. He traces Christ's genealogy back to Adam, showing Christ's kinship with all of mankind in His work of redemption.

SECTION 2

1:1-4 The Authentication: The tenses of the Greek verbs in Luke's "prologue" indicate he wrote his introduction *after* he had completed the body of the account itself. William Barclay says, "Luke's introduction is unique . . . It is the best bit of Greek in the New Testament." The physician-historian uses the classic form of introduction which the great Greek historians all used. He wants to assure those who read his account of the life of Jesus that it is the product of the most careful and accurate research. An example of Luke's diligence for historical accuracy is that he dates it by reference to no fewer

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than six contemporary political personages: "Now in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar (1); Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea (2); Herod being tetrarch of Galilee (3); and his brother Philip being tetrarch of Ituraea and of the regions of Trachonitis (4); and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene (5); Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests (6); the word of God came to John (the Baptist)." (Luke 3:1-2)

The Greek word *anataxasthai* (Lk. 1:1) is translated *compile* and was really a military term referring to the lining up of soldiers in orderly rank and file. There were thousands of people who had seen and heard the miracles and sermons of Jesus. The Greek word referring to these things is *peplerophoremēnon* and is in the perfect tense, meaning, "things having been accomplished with a continuing result." Jesus was God Incarnate. He had died as a final and complete atonement for man's sins. He had conquered death and the grave and promised eternal life to all who believed and obeyed Him. The good news was sweeping through the Roman empire like wildfire. Churches were being formed and were wanting desperately an orderly, detailed account of Christ's life in permanent written form. Evidently, there were many Christians attempting to gather the oral and written fragments of the Jesus-story into one complete, orderly account. None of these suited Luke's purpose, so he set about to write his own account.

It is not that these earlier attempts were inaccurate or spurious for they were from "eyewitnesses." The Greek word for *eyewitnesses* here is *autoptai* from which we get the English word *autopsy*. It is a Greek medical term. Physicians perform an *autopsy* so they may see with their own eyes conditions which may have caused death. The word means literally, "seeing for oneself." Luke's sources for his gospel account were *eyewitnesses*. As a scientist-physician and historian, he would never be satisfied with hearsay material. The student should be impressed with the fact that the gospel accounts (and especially Luke's) are pure *history*. They make no attempts to interpret meanings—they are records of what Jesus said and did, purely and simply, and modern-day news reporters would do well to follow their example. The Gospel writers had confidence that honest, clear-thinking men and women who read their historical accounts of Jesus could form their own conclusions about who Jesus is and what they should do about their conclusions. (See John 20:30-31)

It is inconceivable that a man of Luke's training could be satisfied with only fragmentary and disconnected portions of the life of Jesus. He would be challenged to make a scientific investigation of every bit of true historical information he could gather. A.T. Robertson reminds us that Luke was the first "critic" of the life of Christ whose criticism has been preserved for posterity. With his training and sources it is

unlikely that he would be fooled. He had nothing to gain by misrepresenting the facts. He got his facts first hand from eyewitnesses. Shouldn't honest-minded people today give more credence to Luke than modern-day critics, almost 2000 years away from the events, who are trying to impugn their accuracy?

Luke evidently does not mean to say that each one of his sources had been with Jesus during every event of His life. No doubt Luke received his account of the birth narratives from Mary, mother of Jesus. He tells much about Mary's part in the history of Christ that others leave out. During his stay in Palestine for two years it is altogether possible that he talked with a number of the first apostles of Christ. Paul told of 500 brethren, most of whom were alive when he wrote I Corinthians, who were eyewitnesses. Luke probably interviewed a number of these people. He definitely met James and "all the elders" at Jerusalem with Paul (Acts 21:18). Nowhere does Luke claim to have written everything Jesus said and did, but his account is the most complete and orderly account of all four gospel accounts.

Graphically, Luke describes the work he put into his gospel record. The Greek word *parekoloutheoti* is translated *having followed* and means, literally, *to follow alongside* a thing which one has in mind, or *to trace* a thing carefully. Galen, famous Greek physician, used this word for the tracing-out of medical symptoms. Luke applies the exact science of his medical training to the careful investigation of events surrounding Jesus' life. He traced every account for accuracy and order. The word *closely* in the English text is *akribos* in Greek and means *minutely*. Nor was he satisfied until he had traced all things to their source. The Greek word is *anohen* and means, *source* or *beginning*. The translation, "for some time past," in RSV is not a good translation. Luke's method of scientific-historical research is in no way inferior to any method used today.

Luke is not only an expert researcher, he is also an expert communicator. He is not satisfied just to trace every bit of material on the life of Jesus which comes his way to its source with minute accuracy, he must also put it in logical order. The Greek word is *kathexes*. G. Campbell Morgan says the word is that of the artist. Luke gathered his material, established its accuracy and then gave it artistic order so that his friend, Theophilus, would get the whole "picture" of Jesus. Hobbes notes, Luke's "historical genius expresses itself in the words *inquiry, accuracy, and order.*"

Theophilus is a Greek name meaning, "one who loves God." Luke addresses him as "most excellent" or "your excellency." He uses the same Greek word *kratiste* which is used twice in Acts to address important government officials (cf. Acts 23:26; 24:3). Many ancient writers were supported by "patrons" or men of wealth who wished to benefit by the research done by these experts. Luke also mentions Theophilus in

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his introduction to Acts. Theophilus was probably an important government official of considerable wealth, a convert to Christianity, who wished to know as many details about Jesus' life as possible and have them written down in orderly, permanent form so that he could establish himself and others more firmly in the faith. Theophilus had been taught the good news about Christ. In fact, the Greek word translated informed is *katechetes* and is the word from which we get *catechism* in English. The Greek word *asphaleian* is translated *truth* (*certainty* in KJV). It means "without tottering or falling." Plummer comments that "Theophilus shall know that the faith which he has embraced has an impregnable historical foundation."

Through the work of modern archaeologists and historians like Sir William Ramsay, Luke's Gospel (and Acts) has been thoroughly authenticated as to its historical accuracy. Herschel H. Hobbs summarizes it beautifully:

The fires of criticism have burned about the whole of the Bible. Yet it has stood the test. And central in this test has been the Gospel of Luke. It is really no wonder that this Gospel stands triumphant in the field of battle. It has stood the stern test of scientific analysis where science is qualified to speak. And where it cannot speak with authority this Gospel itself can. For before this scientist-historian allowed any single item to be honored with a place in his account, he first subjected it to the most critical analysis in every detail. This man of science who possessed a keen appreciation for history surrendered his personality and powers to the Holy Spirit. The result is not only the world's most beautiful story, but one which gives to us the full knowledge of "the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed."

And for this dual reason we are indebted to Luke beyond measure, a debt which the faithful can never repay.

from *An Exposition of The Gospel of Luke*, by H.H. Hobbs, pg. 23, pub. Baker

STUDY STIMULATORS:

1. Some have led us to believe that physicians of 2000 years ago were little more than ignorant, superstitious witchdoctors—what about Luke?
2. Does the academic and social position of Luke and the political status of Theophilus tell you anything about the cutting-edge of the Gospel as it penetrated all strata of first century society? Can you

name other people of position and erudition converted by the Gospel?

3. Since Jesus never promised Luke the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, nor does Luke claim it in his own statements, do you have any difficulty accepting Luke's Gospel as an authentic part of the Bible?
4. Did you know that some modern religious leaders claim most of what is recorded of Jesus in the gospel accounts is mythological—that is, made-up stories like fairy-tales? How does that compare with Luke's claim to historical accuracy?
5. Since Jesus was crucified about 34 A.D. and Luke was interviewing eyewitnesses in Palestine about 58-60 A.D., what famous persons might have been alive then for Luke to interview about Jesus' life?
6. Why do you think the Holy Spirit guided the gospel writers to refrain from making interpretations of the meaning of the events they recorded? Does this give any indication about right and wrong in the "psychology" of the proclamation of the Gospel? In other words, should we try to push people into responding by manipulative methods, or simply proclaim the gospel story with conviction and compassion and leave men as free as possible to make their own choice?
7. Is it important to you that Luke has emphasized his goal of minute and orderly accuracy?
8. Are you convinced that Luke's historical account can stand the test of modern scientific and historical investigation?
9. Do you think an honest-minded unbeliever could be converted by studying Luke's gospel? Or would it take something else?

SECTION 3

Preparing for the Redeemer (1:5-25)

5 In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. ⁷But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

8 Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹according to the custom of the priesthood, it fell to him by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹And there appeared to him an angel of

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the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.

¹³But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

¹⁴And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth;

¹⁵for he will be great before the Lord, and he shall drink no wine nor strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

¹⁶And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

¹⁸And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." ¹⁹And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of God; and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news.

²⁰And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things come to pass, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." ²¹And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they wondered at his delay in the temple.

²²And when he came out, he could not speak to them, and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple; and he made signs to them and remained dumb. ²³And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴ After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she hid herself, saying, ²⁵"Thus the Lord has done to me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men."

1:5-12 Persons: God chose the days of Herod (the Great) to send the Redeemer of mankind to the world. Herod was made "king of the Jews" by the Roman emperor. He was not a Jew but an Idumean (Edomite) a descendant of Esau. Ethnically he was what we would think of today as an Arabian. The Roman conquest of Palestine was repugnant to most Jews to begin with. But their bitterness was even more agitated when the Romans appointed an Arab to rule over them. Herod was an able administrator, promoter of extravagant public building projects (which required exorbitant taxation), and a crafty politician. He was also cruel, sadistic and suspicious. He had ten wives and many children. He nearly succeeded in obliterating the Jewish royal family (Hasmoneans) through assassinations and executions. He ordered the execution of the wife

he loved most, Mariamne (a Hasmonean princess). Then he had her two sons slain along with five sons of his by various other wives. He heard rumors they were trying to wrest his throne from him. The Roman emperor Augustus (Octavian) said, "It is better to be Herod's pig than his son." He was joking that Herod would have more scruples against violating Jewish tradition than murdering his relatives! When Herod was about to die, he ordered that all the most important men of the kingdom be executed to insure that there would be mourning during his funeral. He was the Herod who ordered the slaughter of the babies of Bethlehem (Mt. 2:16-23). He reigned from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C.

Herod was the personification of the condition of the world when God began to make preparations for His Redeemer to be sent. Herod's world was cruel, materialistic, hateful, exploitative, cynical and filled with despair. The Jewish people suffered much at the hands of their rulers. When Herod and the Romans were not oppressing them, their own religious leaders were. The religious life of the Jews (an integral part of their social and political life) had lost its vitality and helpfulness. The Pharisees had made their traditions a burden almost impossible to bear; the Sadducees were using religion to amass personal fortunes.

The prophets of the Old Testament had spoken concerning an age of glorious righteousness and abundant spirituality for the Jewish people. But the last prophet had spoken 400 years earlier and Jehovah had not said anything to His people since then. The days of Herod were most unlikely days for God to begin preparations for the Redeemer! Modern man with his "Madison Avenue" techniques would not have planned it so. But God's ways are higher than men's. It is all the more significant that in such a condition and time God chose to act in history for the accomplishment of His eternal redemptive purpose. God was ready to demonstrate His sovereignty. The "time" (Gal. 4:4) had come! And despite a people and a religion saturated with materialism, cynicism and despair, there was still a faithful remnant, a few godly, obedient, believing people Jehovah could use to be the instruments of His will.

An aged priest and his wife were chosen by Jehovah to become parents of a son who would later be called the greatest of all those born of woman (Mt. 11:11), and he would be the Way-Preparer for the Messiah. Zechariah means, "Jehovah remembers," and Elizabeth means, "the oath of God." God had solemnly promised to send the Redeemer, and He remembered His oath. Zechariah was a priest and his wife, Elizabeth, was a daughter of a priest.

There were twenty-four "courses" (shifts) of priests, that of Abijah was the eighth "shift." There were some twenty thousand priests altogether taking turns at officiating at the temple in Jerusalem. This would mean there were about 900 priests in each shift. Each shift served

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for a week twice a year burning incense, sacrificing, caring for the showbread and scores of other duties. Not all the priests lived in Jerusalem. Some lived in villages and cities scattered throughout Judea and came to Jerusalem only when they were "on duty." The various duties were rotated among the shifts and on Sabbaths the whole shift served. During the three great feasts, Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, all 24 shifts served.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had taken the law of the Lord seriously all their lives. They loved it and obeyed it. Undoubtedly they had been reared in godly homes. The Greek word for *blameless* is *amemptoi* and literally means, "unblamed ones." It is the same word the apostle Paul used of himself in Phil. 3:6. There is another word translated *unblemished* and that is *amomos*, used in Eph. 5:27. Of course, these two were not sinless. Any man who says he is without sin (Romans 3:23; I John 1:10) contradicts the Word of God. But this good man and his wife believed the sweet singer of Israel (Psa. 119) and delighted to walk in the law of the Lord. Yet in spite of their superlative spiritual qualifications, how will God be able to use them as His instruments for the birth of the Way-Preparer? Elizabeth was barren and they were both beyond the normal age for child-bearing. The Greek word for barren is *steira* from which the English word *sterile* comes. Elizabeth's sterility cannot thwart the Lord God Almighty. God has two willing, obedient people and He can carry out His will through them. He is sovereign Lord of all that is. The Bible is a historical record of Jehovah's countless supernatural interventions in His creation to carry on redemption's work. The whole Jewish nation came into being when God gave Abraham and the barren Sarah a child.

It was Zechariah's turn to burn incense. The inside of the Temple-building was exactly like the inside of the Tabernacle. The Holy Place contained the Table of Showbread, the Menora (candelabra), and the Altar of Incense. Outside the Temple-building was the Altar of Burnt Offering and the Laver. Inside the Holy of Holies was where the Ark of the Covenant was supposed to be. Only the High Priest could enter there and only once a year on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Incense was burned on this altar (which stood just in front of the veil which separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies) every morning and every evening so that it was literally, perpetual (cf. Ex. 30:8). It was customary for the Jews to stop whatever they were doing each day at these times of burning the incense in the temple and pray. Many made a special trip to the Temple courts to pray at those hours. It was one of the greatest experiences in the life of an ordinary priest of the Jews to be chosen to burn the incense. But this day was going to be much greater than Zechariah expected.

Suddenly there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar. Zechariah's reaction was trouble and fear (*phobos*, in Greek). What would you do if an angel appeared to you? Daniel fainted (Dan. 10:8-9). God used angels many times in ages past to assist Him in His redemptive work. Sometimes they appeared as men (Gen. 18). God is able to make His angels wind and fire (Heb. 1:7), and sends them forth as "ministering spirits to serve for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation (Heb. 1:14). Angels do not necessarily have to take human form to do God's service. Some, entertaining strangers, have entertained angels unawares (cf. Heb. 13:2). Perhaps God still sends angels occasionally to protect or serve His saints. The book of Revelation seems to indicate angels were active in the service of God to bring about the downfall of the Roman empire (the "great harlot, Babylon"). Luke, cautious, discriminating and diligent scientist-historian was convinced of the reality of angels. There is no valid reason for us to dispute Luke's research. Thus the scene is set for God's first announcement concerning the Redeemer since the days of Malachi the prophet, 400 years ago.

1:13-17 Pronouncement: Zechariah may have feared the angel was to signal some judgment from God. But the angel had news that would bring great joy to Zechariah and his wife—their prayers for a child were to be answered with a Yes! Their child would be no ordinary child. His whole life was to be totally dedicated to God's service. First, they were to give the child a name already selected in heaven. *John* means "gift of God," or "God's grace." This child was the gift of God's grace to more people than Zechariah and Elizabeth. He would cause "many" to "rejoice at his birth." The ministry of John the Baptist was cause for great excitement in the Jewish nation (cf. Mt. 3:5; Mk. 1:5; Lk. 3:15; Jn. 1:19-28). He was fearless in his attacks upon ungodliness in places both high and low. He preached with authority and eloquence. He lived a life of righteous austerity quite unlike the indulgent, self-serving living common among the religious leaders of that day. But more important, he heralded the coming of the Messiah! He was "filled with the Holy Spirit," from the day of his birth. It is interesting that John the Baptist, so far as the inspired record goes, worked no miracles. He healed no one's illnesses, he spoke in no foreign language (tongues), he raised no one from the dead, and worked no miracles upon nature, yet he was "filled" with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit "filled" John to give him divine guidance in identifying and testifying to the work of the Messiah (cf. Jn. 1:6; 1:29-42). God distributed His miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His will (cf. Heb. 2; I Cor. 12:4-6). And John the Baptist proves conclusively that being filled with the Spirit does not necessitate speaking in tongues!

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This child to be born of these aged, godly people would begin the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecies (cf. Mal. 3:1-5; 4:5). Malachi predicted both the Messiah (Messenger of the Covenant) and the Way-Preparer (Elijah). The prophecies of Malachi (and Isaiah 40:1-8) should be read in connection with this lesson. John's mission was much broader than merely reuniting families. He would aim at reuniting the whole nation of Israel with the doctrines and practices of its godly forefathers (Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets). The prophecy of Luke 1:17 must be understood in this sense. Godet says, "It will be John's mission . . . to reconstitute the moral unity of the people by restoring the broken relation between the patriarchs and their degenerate descendants." G. Campbell Morgan states it, "In other words, he will come to restore primal ideals . . . to turn these renegade people back to the patriarchs . . . and to the things for which they stood." The "heart" of Abraham, "friend" of God (Rom. 4:1-25; Jas. 2:21-26), the "heart" of Moses, in fact, the "heart" of all the faithful (Heb. 11:1-40) is what John would try to put within the children of Israel. The Greek word *epistrepσαι* is translated *turn* and is sometimes translated *converted*. It means literally, "to turn toward, to turn oneself around, to return." Another interesting word in the Greek text is *kateskeuασμενον*, translated *prepared*. It is a perfect tense verb meaning, *already having been prepared*. In other words, John is to prepare a people who have already been prepared to some extent. Their entire history was that of preparation for one great event—the producing of the world's Savior. The birth of one "in the spirit and power of Elijah" signals that event is imminent! An aged priest and his barren wife from a little village of the hills of Judea are announced as the instruments of Jehovah to give birth to "Elijah"!

1:18-25 Phenomenon: Zechariah cannot believe all this. A son, perhaps, but the "Elijah" predicted by Malachi—that is too much! Hobbs notes, "And it has ever been thus when men look at God through their problems rather than to view their problems through the power of God." If we have seed-like faith (living, germinating faith) no obstacle is too overpowering to keep us from doing the will of God. It is not quantity but quality of faith that Jesus seeks (Mt. 17:20; 21:20-22). After all, the power is not in us or even in our faith, but in the object of our faith, Almighty God.

G. Campbell Morgan does not believe the angel intended to punish Zechariah in making him deaf and dumb for a season, but merely gave him the "sign" he asked for. Gabriel is one of two angels named in the Bible (cf. Lk. 1:26; Dan. 8:16; 9:21), the other is Michael (Jude 9; Rev. 12:7; Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1). There appears to be some rebuke in the words, ". . . because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time," so we believe Zechariah was being chastened, at least, while also being given proof that this messenger is declaring the word

of God and what he says will indeed come to pass! The affliction of Zechariah was also a "sign" to the worshipping crowd that he had "seen a vision." Zechariah had been in the temple longer than usual. The Talmud says that even the high priest did not tarry long in the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. The people customarily waited in the outer court for the priest burning incense to come out and dismiss them with a blessing. Zechariah apparently signaled the blessing with his hands only or indicated that the blessing would not be said that day. Zechariah continued ministering in the temple until his "shift" was over unable to hear or speak, then he and Elizabeth returned to their village in the hills of Judea.

Shortly after their trip home, Elizabeth conceived. Zechariah probably found some way to communicate to Elizabeth what had happened to him in the temple. While the conception took place by natural means and was quite different than Mary's conception by the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth's was still supernatural in the contravening of her sterility. Elizabeth "hid" herself from the public (known to Mary, of course) until time for the birth of her son. Some think her reticence was due to embarrassment over pregnancy at her advanced age. Others think she wanted solitude due to the sanctity of the entire experience. Still others think she was afraid to let it be known until she was sure she could "prove" it. We don't really know why she hid herself.

Morgan summarizes, "Human failure everywhere, but the Divine victory is clearly seen . . . in the midst of human failure, God needed, and He found, loyal souls as His vantage ground . . . all members of an elect remnant, living in the remembrance and truth of the past. There God found vantage ground, set down His foot, and marched on toward the great event; the coming into human life in the Person of His Son, and all that followed thereupon."

STUDY STIMULATORS:

1. Is it important to know the historical background of cultural, political and social events and persons surrounding the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus? What were they?
2. Do you think it was coincidence or providence that Zechariah was chosen to burn incense during his "course" at the temple?
3. Why didn't God choose a younger priest whose wife was not sterile to give birth to the Way-Preparer for the Messiah?
4. Did Zechariah really see an angel? How can we be sure?
5. What is so unique about John the Baptist's being filled with the Holy Spirit?

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6. How is John to "turn the hearts of the fathers to the children"? Did he do it? How many and what kind of people gave attention to John's preaching?
7. Did Zechariah believe the angel? How did the angel help him believe? How much faith does one need to overcome and be powerful?
8. What do you think Luke's purpose was in tracing the gospel all the way back to this experience of Zechariah and Elizabeth?

SECTION 4

Predictions of the Redeemer (1:26-56)

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" ²⁹But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?"

³⁵And the angel said to her,

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High overshadow you;

therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.

³⁶And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷For with God nothing will be impossible." ³⁸And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

³⁹In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, ⁴⁰and she entered the house of Zechariah, and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³And why is

this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?
⁴⁴For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

⁴⁶And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.

For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.

⁵⁰And his mercy is on those who fear him
 from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud
 in the imagination of their hearts,

⁵²he has put down the mighty from their thrones,
 and exalted those of low degree;

⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and the rich he has sent empty away.

⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵as he spoke to our fathers,

to Abraham and to his posterity for ever."

⁵⁶And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her home.

1:26-38 Mother: In the days of Herod the land of the Jews was divided into about six regions (Judea, Samaria, Galilee, Idumea, Decapolis and Perea) each with their own cultural, racial and religious distinctives. The word Galilee means, "circuit of the Gentiles." It was more Gentile in character and culture than Judea, and as a result Galilean Jews were considered "less holy" by their Judean countrymen. The village of Nazareth was in the hill country of Galilee, sheltered in a little valley all its own, about 20 miles from the plain of Esdralon. Although an important Roman road ran near the ancient village making it a widely known place, its people had established a rather poor reputation. Nathaniel questioned, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" as if its reputation were proverbial (cf. Jn. 1:46). Again, viewed from the human perspective, this would be a most unlikely place to find a woman God might use to bear His precious, sinless Son into the world.

But the Lord knew there was a godly young woman, a virgin, betrothed to a godly man, upon whom He could depend for his momentous, spectacular mission. Hebrew betrothals were much more serious than

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modern engagements. A betrothed woman suspected of unfaithfulness could be divorced and even put to death (cf. Mt. 1:18-20); she could not be divorced without a "bill" of divorcement; if her fiance died she was counted as a widow; and a child born during the betrothal was held to be legitimate. In Matthew 1:19, Joseph is called Mary's "husband" while still in the betrothal stage of their relationship (that is, before he "knew" her as a wife). But, in the light of the binding requirements of betrothal it is not unusual for Joseph to be called her husband before the consummation of the marriage. Most Jewish girls were betrothed when very young. Few of them spent much time at formal education. One rabbi wrote in the Talmud that "teaching a girl was the same as starting her upon the road to moral depravation." However the Talmud also says, "Every man is required to teach his daughter the Torah." Mary knew the Scriptures; for her Magnificat (Lk. 1:46-55) contains at least 30 words or phrases echoed from the Old Testament.

Mary was a virgin. Her marriage had not been consummated with sexual intercourse. Therefore, she was "greatly troubled" when the angel announced she would conceive and bear a child. It was beyond her comprehension as to how this could take place (1:34). There was nothing supernatural in the fact that Mary could give birth. Medical history has noted a few cases of conception in women where the virginal-hymen was intact after intercourse with a man; However, history has never recorded the conception of a woman without the implantation of male sperm within her womb. The miracle is technically not a "virgin birth" but *conception without the implantation of male sperm* in her womb. Mary was a virgin; she was betrothed and old enough to give birth. But she had "not known a man." The Greek word *ginosko* is used often for mental knowledge, but in this verse (34) means sexual intercourse (as in Gen. 4:1, etc.).

The fact that Luke was highly trained in medicine and research and that his accuracy in recording history is unimpeachable lends importance to this account beyond measure. Everything in Luke's training would lead him to be highly skeptical of such a claim. To record it for the world of his day to read would subject him to criticism by his colleagues, ridicule by the general public, mockery by the pagan myth-religions which were built on bizarre tales of parthenogenesis by their gods, and the animosity of the Jewish world of his day. But Luke traced all things accurately and was so convinced of its truth he boldly and beautifully recorded it.

Luke is not recording parthenogenesis. Parthenogenesis involves "the development of eggs from virgin females without fertilization by spermatozoa . . . it occurs chiefly in certain insects, crustaceans, and worms." History has never recorded such a thing of the human race. But Luke

records the angel's statement that the conception of Jesus would take place through the direct action of the Holy Spirit of God in the womb of Mary. Science cannot legitimately speak for or against the Biblical teaching of the virgin conception. The conception of Christ in Mary's womb was a biological miracle. A modern scientist may say that *he* has never observed a virgin conception but just because he has never observed one does not mean one did not occur. Harold Fowler writes in, *The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. I*, pg. 46, College Press, "The question of the virgin birth, then, remains, will we accept the testimony of the eye-witnesses and the universal acknowledgment of the early Church as recorded in the documents of the Church, or, rejecting this, will we adhere to a mistaken view of natural law, a view which decides *a priori* that all miraculous events are impossible?"

Some theologians today say it is not important to our Christian faith that we believe in the virgin conception. But the fundamental integrity of both Matthew and Luke as historians is impugned if we do not. How can we believe anything else they recorded if we do not believe the accuracy and historicity of this event? The honesty of God is brought into question if we do not believe it, for He directed His prophet Isaiah to predict the event (Isa. 7:14). The virgin conception is, "the keystone which supports the arch of logical connection between the incarnation of God and the Messiah's necessary identification with humanity . . ." (Fowler, *ibid*, pg. 45).

And so the godly young maiden from Nazareth, Mary, continued to "cast about" (*dielogizeto*, in Gr.) for answers to these astounding things she was being told by the angel. This child to be conceived in her womb by the miraculous power of God's Spirit was to be called Jesus, or *Yeshua* (Joshua) in Hebrew, which means, *Jehovah-is-salvation*.

While Mary was still trying to figure out how she could conceive without "knowing" a husband, the angel gave Mary further proof that it would come to pass. The angel told Mary of the conception of her barren cousin, Elizabeth. If God could accomplish this, why could He not cause Mary to conceive without "knowing" a man. Mary did not need the proof. She immediately surrendered to the will of the Lord as announced by the angel. The word for handmaid is *doule*. It is the same word the apostle Paul uses to call himself a *bond slave* of Jesus Christ. Mary willingly acknowledged herself as a female slave of Jehovah, surrendering to what she undoubtedly knew would cause consternation in her fiance Joseph, jeopardize her social status in Nazareth should any neighbors find out, and endanger her very life should she be accused of infidelity to Joseph.

Although Mary was only a mortal and not to be elevated above another, and surely not to be given the title "Queen of Heaven," yet the

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glory of all motherhood was her lot. Among all women she was afforded the greatest privilege—to give birth to the Savior of the world. The beautiful song *Ave Maria* was written under the inspiration of these verses. The first two parts of the hymn are purely biblical and date from earliest times. The third portion was added around the fifteenth century and is not at all biblical. Surely Mary was highly favored because of her faith and godliness. Her submission to the revealed will of God is a great example and challenge to all who would be used of God in His work of redeeming the world.

1:39-56 Magnificat: Two women, chosen by God to be instruments of His in the divine redemption of mankind, burst forth in rapturous praise and thanksgiving to Him. Within a few short hours of the visit of the angel, Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth lived in the hill country of Judea (probably south of Jerusalem) so Mary's trip took at least four days. What a spectacular thing was going to happen to Mary! The miracle of the conception was nothing compared to the identity of the Child to be conceived! He would be the Messiah; the Savior and the Son of David whom the Jewish people had longed for for centuries. Nearly every act of their religious and civil life was in typical anticipation of this Messiah. Great and famous women of the nation had lived and died hoping they would give birth to *the* Son of David. God chose a Galilean peasant girl, the fiancee of a lowly carpenter, to be that mother. In addition, Mary's cousin Elizabeth was going to be blessed with a baby after all these years of praying for one. Mary could not stay in Nazareth! She had to go visit her cousin and share with her in the good news that had come to both of them. It is nothing short of amazing that Mary could restrain herself from telling everyone she knew. Perhaps the circumstances we mentioned earlier caused her to be cautious. Perhaps Mary already had a mother's intuition of the jeopardy she might place her future Child in should she make too much publicity of the angel's announcement. Whatever the case, Mary had to tell someone so she went "with haste" to Elizabeth's home.

Two more miracles occurred when Mary arrived at her cousin's house. Elizabeth's baby "leaped" in her womb. Hobbs says, "The intended forerunner responded to the prenatal presence of Him whom he should proclaim." At that moment, Elizabeth was "filled with the Holy Spirit" and began to pronounce a blessing upon Mary and Mary's child. The Holy Spirit did not leave the identity of Mary's Child up to Elizabeth's human knowledge. Elizabeth could not have known who this Child was. Deity taking human flesh, being born as a baby and conceived by a virgin is completely outside human experience and therefore, outside human comprehension. The Holy Spirit *revealed* to Elizabeth the identity of Mary's Child—He is her Lord! Elizabeth also proclaims the blessing

that Mary is to have because she believed and surrendered herself to become the handmaiden of God. While Elizabeth praises Mary, she does so because Mary is going to give birth to Christ, the Savior and Lord, not because there was any inherent divinity in Mary. Certainly Elizabeth was not worshipping Mary—nor should anyone else. The Bible expressly forbids man to worship anyone except God (Ex. 34:14; 20:4-5; Dt. 6:13-14; Isa. 45:20; Rev. 22:8-9). Mary cannot be a “mediatrix” between God and man for there is only One Mediator (I Tim. 2:5).

The word *magnificat* is Latin for “doth magnify.” The Greek word Luke used is *megalunei* which means “to amplify, exalt, extol and enlarge.” Mary was moved deeply, emotionally and spiritually to praise the Lord with words of Scripture she had learned and stored in her heart. Her prayer of thanksgiving is very similar to that of Hannah (I Sam. 2:1-10). We think Mary was guided by the Holy Spirit in the selection (perhaps some from Psalms) and utterance of the words of this great psalm of praise. She makes some statements concerning herself and her Child that she could not make with human knowledge alone. Mary first rejoices in her own experience (v. 46-49). She prophesies that all generations will henceforth call her blessed. Then she rejoices in the blessings that are coming to the world as a result of her experience (v. 50-55). She predicts that her Child will fulfill all the redemptive events of the long history of God’s dealings with men. Mary is not simply reviewing God’s actions in the past, but she is announcing that the Child to be borne of her comes to consummate all those promises God made to Abraham and his “posterity” (*spermati* in Greek which means *seed*). Mary is using what is called “predictive present” tense in her statement. The Lord “baring His arm” is a messianic figure of speech (see Isa. 40:10; 51:4-5; 52:7-10; 53:1). The Messiah is coming to give mercy to those who fear Him, defeat to those who arrogantly rebel against Him, exalt those of low degree, fill the hungry with good things, send the self-satisfied away empty, and fulfill His promise to the children of Abraham, forever. These phrases are echoes of the prophets of Israel. They remind us that most of what the Old Testament prophets predicted of the glorious messianic age in agricultural, physical terminology, was intended to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ and His spiritual kingdom.

Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months. She arrived for her visit in the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. Did Mary remain until after the birth of John the Baptist? Plummer reminds us that “cousins” in Luke 1:58 could include Mary. Luke does record Mary’s return to Nazareth immediately before he records John’s birth, but he may have simply been completing one story before beginning another. It is strange to think, in view of the long and difficult journey she made

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to get to Elizabeth's and the significance of the child to be born to Elizabeth, that she would leave when the baby was just about to be born.

At any rate, Mary returned to her home in Nazareth. It was probably at this point Joseph learned of her condition (see Mt. 1:18-25). Luke's account tells us nothing about Mary for six more months. Matthew infers that Joseph, after the message to him from the angel, protected her from the shame and social confrontations that might have come her way if he had not kept her secret.

STUDY STIMULATORS:

1. What would the fact that Jesus was born of a young woman of Nazareth do to His reputation? Does it make any difference to you where His mother was from?
2. Why would Joseph's first reaction to Mary's pregnancy be to "divorce" her? What would your reaction have been if you had known only what Joseph knew?
3. Can we really believe Luke that a virgin could conceive without the implantation of male sperm in her womb?
4. Wouldn't it be more accurate to explain it by the phenomenon of parthenogenesis?
5. What differences are there between Luke's account of Mary's virgin-conception and both ancient and modern occult stories of supernatural conceptions?
6. Are those who pray to Mary as a "mediatrix" right or wrong?
7. Why did Mary make the long, dangerous, difficult trip from Nazareth to the hill country of Judea to visit Elizabeth?
8. What purpose is served by the preservation of Elizabeth's and Mary's "songs of praise"? What good do they do for your Christian life? What would you think of Mary and Elizabeth if these songs weren't recorded?

SECTION 5

Paean of Redemption (1:57-80)

57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to be delivered, and she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸And her neighbors and kinsfolk heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they would have named him Zechariah after his father, ⁶⁰but his mother said,

"Not so; he shall be called John." ⁶¹And they said to her, "None of your kindred is called by this name." ⁶²And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he would have him called. ⁶³And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, "His name is John." And they all marveled. ⁶⁴And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. ⁶⁵And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea; ⁶⁶and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" For the hand of the Lord was with him.

⁶⁷ And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying,

⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people,

⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David,

⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies,
and from the hand of all who hate us;

⁷² to perform the mercy promised to our fathers,
and to remember his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath which he swore to our father Abraham, ⁷⁴ to grant us
that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,

⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life.

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,

⁷⁸ through the tender mercy of our God, when the day shall dawn
upon us from on high

⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel.

1:57-66 Birth of the Forerunner: Not much excitement ever came to break the monotony of daily routine in the little town where Zechariah and Elizabeth lived. But when Elizabeth gave birth to a baby boy the whole town was excited. Neighbors and relatives came to help them celebrate. At last Elizabeth and Zechariah knew the fulfillment of parenthood. Now they would have someone upon whom they might shower parental love.

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On the eighth day after his birth, friends and kinfolk came to the child's circumcision. Circumcision of male children (Gen. 17:12; Lev. 12:3; Ex. 4:25) and keeping the Sabbath were the two most distinguishing practices that set the Hebrew people off from all the other people of the earth. They were the two most important signs of covenant relationship to Jehovah. Originally the father performed the circumcision (*peritemein* in Greek, meaning literally, "a cutting round."). In exceptional cases any adult could perform the rite, even a woman (Ex. 4:25). The child was named at the time of the circumcision ceremony. It made the Hebrew male-child an official member of the covenant and ideally guaranteed him (and his wife and family) his portion of the material blessings Jehovah promised the nation. Old Testament prophets often reminded the Israelites that the outward rite, to have any real efficacy with God, must be accompanied by a "circumcision of the heart" (meaning faith in God and obedience to His commandments; see Dt. 30:6; Lev. 26:41; Ezek. 44:7; Jer. 9:25-26).

Some of the kinfolk were just about to officially declare the baby's name Zechariah in honor of its godly father, but the Lord had already told the parents the name was to be *Yokhanan* (Hebrew) or *Ioannes* (Greek) or *John* (English). The name has been a favorite of all languages (Jean, Fr.; Juan, Sp.; Ivan, Russian; Giovanni, It.). It means "God has given; God is gracious." Elizabeth stopped the well-meaning kinfolk and insisted the baby must be named John. Not taking her word for it, they made signs to the mute father who confirmed his wife's instructions by writing on a tablet (probably of wax or clay), "His name is *Yokhanan*." There was no doubt in the father's mind that he had better follow God's instructions about this child, for it was now evident to him that the direct hand of the Almighty was involved in every aspect of the baby's birth (cf. Lk. 1:18ff). So Zechariah's written instruction proved that he now believed God could do the impossible. Immediately Zechariah's speech was restored and he began blessing God. The mysterious, miraculous happenings struck awe into the hearts of the kinfolk and neighbors gathered. Is God so rigid that when He tells a father and mother exactly what name to give their child, He expects implicit obedience? Indeed, He is! Man may not always understand God's explicit commands (and God probably does not want man to understand), but God expects man to trust Him enough to obey to the letter. Man certainly has enough recorded evidence that God's rigid commands are all for man's good. Of course, God has not told all parents what to name their children, but He has told all parents how to *rear* their children!

The miracles surrounding the birth of John were talked about through all the hill country of Judea. Those who witnessed the miracles agreed,

“. . . the hand of the Lord was with him.” No doubt there were many who remembered these testimonies when John began preaching 30 years later and repeated them to the younger generation so that great multitudes (Mt. 3:5) went out into the uninhabited Jordan river valley to hear him. After all, there had not been a *bona fide* prophet of God among the Hebrew people for over 400 years.

1:67-80 Benediction of the Father: A benediction is a solemn blessing and dedication to God. This is what Zechariah, inspired by the Holy Spirit, pronounced upon his son, John. This beautiful benediction furnishes one of the most significant keys in the New Testament to understand that much of the messianic language of the Old Testament is “times-coloring.” In other words, Zechariah shows that when an Old Testament prophet predicted the Israelites would be “saved from their enemies” in the distant future, the prophet was probably referring to the days of the Messiah (whose forerunner was Zechariah’s son).

The Lord “visiting” His people to redeem them is messianic language (cf. Isa. 29:6; Zeph. 2:7; Psa. 8:4-6; Heb. 2:6; Acts 15:14). The “horn of salvation” is messianic (cf. Psa. 132:17; 148:14; Ezek. 29:21); horn is symbolic of power, so the Lamb is pictured with seven horns in Revelation 5:6. Of course, “the house of David” is messianic (cf. Amos 9:11; Acts 15:15-18; etc.). It is interesting to tabulate the figurative phrases which according to Zechariah are to be fulfilled in a spiritual way in the Messiah and His kingdom:

- a. “visited and redeemed his people . . .”
- b. “raised up a horn of salvation for us . . .”
- c. “we should be saved from our enemies, . . . and the hand of all who hate us . . .”
- d. “perform the mercy promised to our fathers . . .”
- e. “remember his holy covenant . . . which he swore to our father Abraham . . .”
- f. “being delivered from . . . our enemies . . . we might serve him without fear and righteousness . . .”

Now note especially that Zechariah’s son is to be the “prophet of the Most High” in order to prepare the way of the Lord (Messiah) who will come and accomplish all the above. Whereas the above promises in the Old Testament appear to be future physical blessings, Zechariah makes it plain they will actually be spiritual blessings such as, (a) knowledge of salvation; (b) forgiveness of sins; (c) mercy of God; (d) light; (e) peace. Peter made it plain that the blessings to come through the Messiah predicted by the O.T. prophets found fulfillment in “turning every one of you from your wickedness” (Acts 3:17-26), and not in physical battles,

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enemies, warfare, crops, lands and temples. Alfred Plummer notes that as the Magnificat of Mary (Lk. 1:46-55) was modelled on the psalms, so the Benedictus of Zechariah was modelled on the prophecies.

The Greek aorist *epeskepsato* translated "visited" is from the verb *episkeptomai* and is the word from which we get the English, *episcopacy*, which means literally, "over-sight, government, rule." The same Greek word, *episkopos*, (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; I Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:7; I Pet. 2:25) is translated "overseer, bishop, elder." The word is used by Zechariah again in 1:78 and might be literally translated, ". . . by the passionate mercies of our God, there will visit (*episkepsetai*) us a Dayspring (or Branch) from the height . . ." The Greek word *anatole* means literally, "a rising up of the sun or stars" or "east" (Mt. 2:1). The Greek *anatole* word is used in the Septuagint for the Hebrew word *Tzemach* and is translated *Branch* or *Shoot* (see Jer. 23:5; Zech. 3:8; 6:12). Zechariah is definitely predicting that his son, John, is to be the prophet and way-preparer for The Branch (the Messiah) who is coming to deliver His people from their enemy, set up His kingdom, fulfill Jehovah's covenant, and rule. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit speaking through this aged Hebrew priest, predicts that the dawning of this messianic age will bring "light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" which is undoubtedly a paraphrased quotation of Isaiah 9:1-7 (cf. Mt. 4:12-15). Zechariah's prophecy goes beyond the provincial confines of the Jewish people and includes the Gentiles. All men who are prisoners of the enemy (Satan) and who walk in darkness are going to be given a Ruler (Micah 5:2) who will deliver them and guide them into the way of peace. Isaiah said this Ruler was to be the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6). Isaiah also said people of his day did not know the way of peace (Isa. 59:8; see comments, *Isaiah, Vol. 3*, Butler, College Press). Peace in the Hebrew language (*shalom*) means *wholeness, prosperity, usefulness, soundness, harmony*. It probably has the same meaning in Greek (*eirene*) (see the connection between *eirene* and *wholeness* in I Thess. 5:23). In the Septuagint *shalom* is often translated *soteria* (*salvation*) (Gen. 26:31; 41:16, etc.). The "peace-offering" of the Old Testament is often called the "salvation-offering." So the son of Zechariah, John the Baptizer, was born to be the prophet and way-preparer to the Visitor from Heaven, the Ruler-Prince of Peace. No wonder Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist," (Mt. 11:11).

John the Baptist lived in the "wilderness" until the day of his "manifestation" to Israel. He began his ministry about 26 A.D. in the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar (cf. Lk. 3:1-3). The Greek word *eremois* ("deserts") is like the Hebrew word *midhbar* which means "a place for the driving

of cattle." The wilderness of Judea is not totally arid. The area in John's day was simply uncultivated and mostly uninhabited, yet suitable for pasturage. John's parents probably died when he was a youngster and from then on he lived a very solitary life. Evidently he had little contact with other people until he was over 30 years of age. He lived an austere and ascetic life, eating locusts and wild honey, drinking no wine or strong drink, and wearing a garment of camel's hair with a leather girdle (Lk. 1:14-17; Mt. 3:1-6). He was descended from Aaron, but there is no evidence that he ever practiced priestly duties. Some think he belonged to the sect of the Essenes, an ascetic, communal group of Jews who lived in the Qumran community just west of the Dead Sea. There is no evidence for that whatsoever. As Hobbs says, "Other than his ascetic life and his opposition to the *status quo* of Judaism there is no resemblance between them. Indeed, in many ways they were quite the opposite of one another. Plummer notes two vital differences: John preached the kingdom of God; the Essenes preached isolation. The Essenes abandoned society; John the Baptist sought to reform it." Luke infers that John lived and roamed through these uninhabited hills from "childhood" and there he kept on growing stronger and stronger in both physique and spirit. It is *not* said of John, like Jesus, that he grew in favor with man! John did have "disciples," however the picture we get of John (Mt. 3:1-6; Lk. 3:1-3; Mk. 1:1-8; Jn. 1:6-8; 1:19-36; 3:22-26; Mt. 11:2-19; Lk. 7:18-35; Mt. 14:1-12; Mk. 6:14-20; Lk. 9:7-9) is of a tough, austere, hermit-like, fiery-tempermented, booming-voiced, righteously-indignant preacher, with no close friends. People were awed by his demeanor and swayed by his preaching. Many followed him trying to learn (disciples) all they could from him. His light burned brightly and penetratingly, but only for a moment. It quickly faded in favor of the Sun of Righteousness (Mal. 4:1-6) and was then extinguished by the wicked Herodias. This child born to Zechariah and Elizabeth was a true child of destiny!

STUDY STIMULATORS:

1. Why were Elizabeth and Zechariah so insistent that their child should be named "John"? What difference would it have made if they had called him "Zechariah"?
2. Does God really intend that men follow His directions minutely when He specifies details?
3. Would the miracles surrounding John's birth be of benefit to anyone other than his aged parents?

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4. Does the figurative language of Zechariah's Benedictus help you understand the way Old Testament prophets used figurative language? It should!
5. How do you know that the "visit" of the Lord to man is more than a social thing?
6. Do "clothes make the man"? Would John the Baptist be turned down by most modern pulpit committees because he tended to be a "loner" and had no out-going personality? Is his behavior and personality really the pattern for preachers? (See Mt. 11:16-19.)