

02. Luke's Prologue : The promise Luke 1:5-56



I. Announcing the coming of the Baptist : Luke 1:5-25

Luke 1:5-6



The Lord has
remembered

My God is
everything to me

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named **Zechariah**, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was **Elizabeth**. Both of them were **righteous** before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.

Luke 1:7

They had no children, because Elizabeth was barren,
and both were getting on in years.



The aim of the Prologue (Chapters 1-2) is to offer the reader 'an interpretive commentary. 'What **Jesus began to do and teach**' (Acts 1:1) begins in Chapter 3 with the Baptism in the Jordan.

Luke is preparing the stage. He wants his readers to know that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, so his first scene is in the Temple.

In portraying Zechariah and Elizabeth as unable to conceive, Luke wants to remind us of the stories of the Hebrew Bible that portray significant figures of the tradition that recount 'miraculous' conceptions, thus indicating that it is God's will that we are witnessing.

Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 21)

Jacob and Rachel (Genesis 30; 35)

Birth of Samson (Judges 13)

Birth of Samuel (1 Samuel 1)

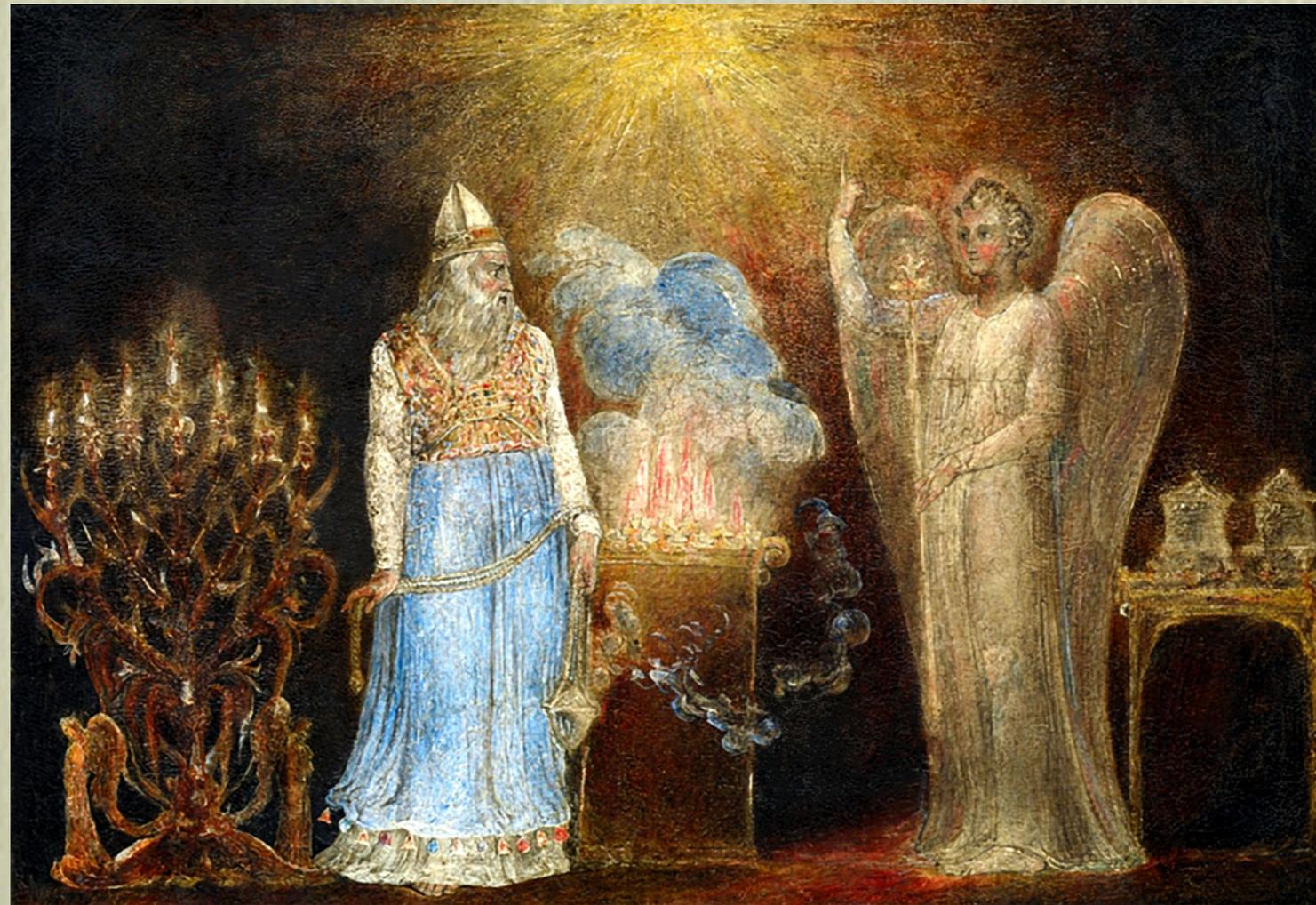
Luke 1:8-10

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside.



Luke 1:11

Then there appeared to him an **Angel of the Lord**, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.



Luke 1:12-16

When Zechariah saw the angel, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him **John**. You will have **joy** and gladness, and many will **rejoice** at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.

↓
YHWH is gracious

He must never drink wine or strong drink [Nazarite; Numbers 6:1-21]; even before his birth he will be filled with the **Holy Spirit**.

Luke 1:17

He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of **Elijah** he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to **make ready a people prepared for the Lord.**”

Malachi – the last of the prophets!

(Middle 5th century BC)

‘Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse’ (4:5-6)

Luke 1:18-19

Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.”

[My God is powerful]

The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.

‘While I was speaking in prayer, Gabriel came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice. He came and said to me, “Daniel, I have now come out to give you wisdom and understanding. At the beginning of your supplications a word went out, and I have come to declare it, for you are greatly beloved. So consider the word and understand the vision: Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city: to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place’ (Daniel 9:21-25).

Luke 1:20-23

But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realised that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

The blessing Zechariah could not proclaim

‘May the Lord bless you and keep you

May the Lord make his face to shine upon you
and be gracious to you.

May the Lord lift up his countenance to you
and give you peace’ (Numbers 6:24-26)

Luke 24:50

‘Jesus led the eleven and their companions out as far as Bethany,
and, lifting up his hands, **he blessed them.**’

Luke 1:24-25

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived,
and for five months she remained in seclusion.

She said, “This is what the Lord has done for me
when he looked favourably on me
and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

Luke is preparing us to encounter Jesus, and introducing us to the prophet who would point out Jesus as the promised Messiah?

He does this by opening the Prologue in the temple with the people in prayer – longing for the promised Messiah, and the priest offering their prayer with incense. He does this by the presence of Gabriel and the reference to Elijah.

Luke presents Jesus as the Messiah (the 'Christ').

'The Angel of the Lord said to the shepherds: 'To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the **Messiah**' (Luke 2:10-11).

'It had been revealed to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's **Messiah**' (Luke 2:26).

'Jesus asked his disciples: Who do you say I am? Peter answered: The **Messiah** of God' (Luke 9:20).

'The assembly accused Jesus before Pilate of claiming to be the **Messiah**' (Luke 23:2).

(see also Luke 3:15; 4:41; 20:41; 22:67; 23:35; 23:39; 24:26; 24:46)

'It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called "**Christians.**"
(Acts 11:26).

(see also Acts 2:38; 3:6; 4:10; 8:12; 9:34; 10:36; 10:48; 11:17; 15:26; 16:18; 24:24; 28:31)

II. Announcing the coming of the Messiah : Luke 1:26-33

Luke 1:26-27

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

Let him increase

Beloved



Movement from temple in Jerusalem to a home in Nazareth

Luke 1:28-33

And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favoured one!
The Lord is with you.” [Hail, full of grace]

But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.

And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him **Jesus**. (The Lord is salvation)

He 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 ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

The promised anointed king. The Messiah (‘Christ’)

He will be called the Son of the Most High

‘When your days are fulfilled, I will raise up your offspring after you. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me’ (2 Samuel 7:12-14).

‘I will tell of the decree of the Lord:

He said to me, “You are my son;
today I have begotten you’ (Psalm 2:7).

The Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.
He will reign over the house of Jacob forever,
and of his kingdom there will be no end.

‘I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth’ (Psalm 89:27).

Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a **virgin?**”

The angel said to her, “The **Holy Spirit** will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called **Son of God**.”

The Apostles’ Creed (Rome: Third Century AD?)

‘I believe in Jesus, God’s only Son, who was **conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.**’

Christian faith rests on what Luke is stating here. Let us examine what it is that Luke is affirming.

1. The first point to make is that Luke is affirming that Jesus is the ‘**Son of God**’ - a teaching that recurs in Luke’s Gospel and Acts.

Jesus' baptism experience: 'A voice came from heaven: You are my **Son**, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' (Luke 3:22).

The three disciples' Prayer experience on Mount Tabor:

'This my **Son**, the Chosen; listen to him' (Luke 9:35)

'**All things have been handed over to me by my Father**; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Luke 10:22).

The owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my **beloved son**; surely they will respect him.' (Luke 20:13).

After describing Paul's enlightenment, Luke states 'immediately Saul began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the **Son of God**."' (Acts 9:20).

see also Luke 4:3; 4:9; 4:41; 8:28; 22:70; Acts 20:18)

We find the same teaching in Luke's teacher, Paul

'God revealed **God's Son** to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles' (Galatians 1:16).

'I live by the faith of the **Son of God**, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

'When the fullness of time had come, **God sent his Son**, born of a woman' (Galatians 4:4).

'God is faithful; by him you were called into the communion of **God's Son**, Jesus the Messiah, our Lord' (1 Corinthians 1:9).

'God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of **his beloved Son**' (Colossians 1:13).

'The **Son of God**, Jesus the Messiah, whom we proclaimed among you, was not "Yes and No"; in him it is always "Yes." (2 Corinthians 1:19).

Paul's opening words in his Letter to the churches in Rome: 'Paul, a servant of Jesus the Messiah, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning **God's Son**, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be **Son of God** with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus the Messiah, our Lord' (Romans 1:1-4).

'I serve God with my spirit by announcing the gospel of **God's Son**' (Romans 1:9).

'We were reconciled to God through the death of **God's Son**' (Romans 5:10).

1. The first point to make is that Luke is affirming that Jesus is the ‘**Son of God**’ - a teaching that recurs in Luke’s Gospel and Acts.

2. Luke’s second Point is that Jesus was **conceived by the Holy Spirit**. This is also at the heart of Christian faith. It is reiterated throughout the New Testament. From his conception Jesus is open to the intimate communion that God is offering him. As already stated, this communion is offered to us all. Unlike us, Jesus never said No to it.

3. Thirdly, Luke's account has something to say about Jesus' mother. She is a virgin. Does this mean that God miraculously intervened, by-passing Joseph, and enabling Mary to conceive Jesus while remaining a virgin? This is how Christians have traditionally understood it. Is that what Luke is asserting?

It is important that faith seeks understanding. This must be a humble seeking for we are dealing with matters that remain mysterious, not because they are inherently dark. Rather there is too much light for our limited minds to comprehend.

1. We must be clear about the fact that our faith that Jesus is God's Son is not dependent on Mary being a virgin. When we speak of God as Jesus' 'Father', we are asserting that everything that Jesus is, and everything he says and does comes from God. We are not speaking of biological paternity.

2. In the rest of the Prologue and throughout his Gospel and Acts, Luke does not refer to Mary as a virgin. It is only here in this passage.

Later in his Prologue, we are told that ‘**the child’s father and mother were amazed**’ at what Simeon was saying about the child Jesus (Luke 2:13).

We are told that ‘**every year Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover**’ (Luke 2:41).

Jesus went with them, but went missing. Luke writes that when ‘**his parents found him, his mother said to him: “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look your father and I have been searching for you with great anxiety”**’ (Luke 2:48).

Again and again the New Testament speaks of Jesus as ‘the Son of God’, but Mary’s virginity is never mentioned by Mark or John, nor by Paul in any of his letters. We find no mention of it in any of the other Letters in the New Testament, or in the Apocalypse. They are certainly not making an explicit link between Jesus sonship and the virginity of his mother.

There is one other place where Mary is portrayed as a virgin. It is in the Gospel of Matthew, but, once again, it is only in the Prologue, not in the body of his Gospel.

3. Luke's Prologue may contain facts about Jesus' life before he entered his public ministry after his baptism experience. However, its focus is not on biography, but on creating powerful stories to prepare the reader for Luke's interpretive commentary. The Prologue introduces the reader to key theological assertions of the Gospel.

4. To understand Luke's purpose in presenting Mary as a virgin we need to examine the thinking of those for whom he is writing. Luke's readers were familiar with legends that stated that the founders of the great cities of the Greco-Roman world had a god for their father and a virgin for their mother. Romulus and Remus are celebrated as twin brothers, the sons of a vestal virgin named Rhea Silvia and the god Mars. Asclepius was the son of Apollo. His mother was Coronis. Helen was the daughter of Zeus and Leda was her mother. Alexander, the Ptolemies, and the Caesars were said to have been "virgin-born". Luke mentions Augustus (Luke 2:1) to tell his readers to look to Jesus, not Augustus, as their 'saviour' and 'peacemaker'.

Is he also speaking of Mary as a virgin to state, using language that his readers would understand, that it is Jesus who is divine (the Son of God), not the heroes of their myths, or their emperors?

Virgil (70-19BC) writes that shepherds heralded Augustus's birth. His birth was called 'good news' ('evangelion'). Augustus the new born child is proclaimed saviour (soter) and described as lord (kyrios). He is seen as the bringer of a new age of peace. He is called the son of God. He shows exceptional qualities at the age of twelve, etc.

In his *Lives of the Caesars* Suetonius (69-122AD) says that there were prophecies, portents and prefigurements before the birth of Augustus.

His was a miraculous conception.

It took place in the context of worship at a temple.

Upon his birth, Augustus was declared to be a King and a Ruler.

(François Bovon Commentary on Luke in Hermeneia Series 2002, I.45).

4. 'Biblical marriages are sometimes spiritualised in the Hellenistic Judaism of Egypt, and the sexual vocabulary applied to the mystical union with God. In Philo it becomes clear that births like that of Isaac were regarded as virgin births; for Philo himself these are only an allegory of the ecstatic union of the soul with God.'

Commenting on Matthew's prologue, Luz writes: 'We do not need to assume that this story, which strongly follows traditional schemas, contains information from the circle of Jesus' family. Nor are the signs favourable for the historicity of the virgin birth [better, 'virginal conception'], which in the NT is transmitted only by Matthew and Luke ... It is probably part of the attempt of Jewish Christian communities to bear witness to the Jesus who was appointed by God as Son according to the Spirit (Romans 1:4) in a way that was analogous to other ancient stories in the form of an infancy narrative. The virgin birth [conception] then is a means of confessing faith and has no historical background.'

(Ulrich Luz Commentary on Matthew, Fortress Press 2007 I.93)

5. 'Jesus had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect' (Hebrews 2:17).

'We have a high priest who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin' (Hebrews 4:15).

Since 'the Son of God worked with human hands, thought with a human mind, acted with a human will, and loved with a human heart. He has truly been made one of us, like to us in all things except sin' (Vatican II GS. 22 par 2).

Being 'like us in all things except sin', we would expect his conception to be like ours. In portraying Mary as a virgin, Luke dramatically, and in a way familiar to his audience, reinforces his focus on God as Jesus' 'Father', and on the Jesus' intimacy (the Spirit) with the one he called 'Abba'.

6. Luke's scene of the virginal conception is also a beautiful way of portraying the special relationship between Mary and God. A virgin is a person who gives his or her first love to another. Mary's first love was for God, and the conception of Jesus was a fruit of that special love. Would that every conception came from such a communion. As Jesus will say: **'Strive for God's kingdom, and these things [all we need for life] will be given to you as well'** (Luke 12:31).

In repeating Luke's description of Mary as a Virgin, the Christian community (however, it has imagined this over the centuries) has kept before us the above truths.



Luke's intention in the Prologue is to open the eyes of our mind and heart to see what the Spirit of God is doing in Jesus, beginning with Jesus' experience in the Jordan at his baptism and culminating in his dying and rising.

The whole of our evolving universe is a word of God who is revealing in increasingly wonderful ways who God is.

'In his Gospel John tells us that this self-revelation, this word of God reached its perfect human expression in Jesus of Nazareth, in whom 'the Word was made flesh' (John 1). In John's final portrait we see Thomas overwhelmed by the Presence of God in Jesus as he exclaims: 'My Lord and my God' (John 20).

John has the Jewish leaders falsely accusing Jesus as claiming to be equal to God (John 5 and 10). Jesus' disciples reject that claim. They came to see Jesus as God's obedient Son. Everything Jesus is, everything he says and does flows from his intimate communion with God, an intimacy that is expressed in his calling God 'Abba! It is this intimate communion that we speak of as Jesus' divine nature, a divinity that we are called and graced to share. At the Offertory at Mass we pray: 'May we share in the divinity of him who shares our humanity.'

The whole of Luke's Gospel makes the same claim, a claim first expressed here in the Prologue when God's Spirit finds perfect human expression in the conceiving of Jesus.

Paul sums up this truth when he states: 'God was in Jesus, his Messiah, reconciling the world to God' (2 Corinthians 5:19), initiating what Paul dares to call 'a new creation', a new sinless way of expressing the yearning of creation for communion with God (Romans 8:19).

Annunciation

Marie Howe

Even if I don't see it again – nor ever feel it
I know it is – and that if once it hailed me
it ever does –

And so it is myself I want to turn in that direction,
Not as toward a place, but it was a tilting
within myself

As one turns a mirror to flash the light to where
it isn't – I was blinded like that – and swam
in what shone at me

Only able to endure it by being no one
and so specifically myself I thought I'd die
from being loved like that.



Luke 1:36-38

And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.

For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

