

Annunciations of John and Jesus

Luke 1:5 In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

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

⁷ But 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,

⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.

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

¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.

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

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

¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God,

¹⁷ and 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."

¹⁸ And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."

¹⁹ And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.

²⁰ And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."

²¹ And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple.

²² And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute.

²³ And 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 kept herself hidden, saying,

²⁵ "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth,

²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary.

²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"

²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

³⁰ And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

³² 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 father David,

³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ And the angel answered 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 called holy-- the Son of God.

³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren.

³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God."

³⁸ And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

³⁹ In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah,

⁴⁰ and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

⁴¹ And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit,

⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!

⁴³ And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

⁴⁴ For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

(Luke 1:5-45)

Theophilus: Beloved of God

Herod: Heroic

Gabriel: Man of God; Man of Strength

Zechariah: The LORD Remembers

Elizabeth: God of the Oath

John: The LORD has been Gracious

Joseph: May God Add.

Mary: Bitterness, Rebellious (Root: trouble; sorrow)

Jesus: The LORD Saves

Galilee: Circuit;

Nazareth: Branch. Preservation.

The Good and Certain News

The Gospel is an **announcement**, an announcement of good news. In fact, the word *euaggelion* (see **Mark 1:1**) means “**good news**.” It isn’t bad news. It isn’t sad news. It isn’t given to terrify you or make you bitter or rebellious. It is happy and hopeful news given to calm and comfort, soothe and save.

Like news that you hear on the television, radio, or internet, it is something that **you do not know naturally**. It is something **you must be told** (**Rom 10:14-15**). It comes from outside of you, by others who have heard and seen for themselves.

Unlike a lot of news you hear out there, the Gospel is **true and trustworthy**, for its source comes from the Good God who created you and all things. He is the unchanging God of truth and love who in his infinite wisdom and majesty swore an oath before the ages began to bring an heroic gift of the grace through the person and work of his only unique Son, the man of God, Jesus Christ.

As Luke opens his Gospel, he tells his friend **Theophilus**—*Beloved of God*, that he is setting out to **compile a narrative** of the things that have been accomplished among us

(**Luke 1:1**). He got his information from eyewitnesses to the events themselves (2), men and women he knew personally through his companionship and travels with the Apostle Paul. These people were servants of the Word himself. But because by his day many other books were already circulating about Jesus, books that could not be trusted and which were throwing people into confusion, he set out to write **an orderly account** (3) to add others to the kingdom, to bring to those Beloved of God so that they might **have certainty** concerning the things that pertain to the Gospel of Jesus Christ (4).

Now, **if Theophilus had been taught these things** already, but was still in need of certainty, even though he had clearly been taught about the Gospel from people very close to the original words, **how much more** might we, 2,000 years removed from the events, be in need of the same confident conviction that the Lord has remembered his oath and brought salvation? This is a question that I send out to all who hear these words. Young and old. Believers and non-believers. The well-off and the less-fortunate. Those who have confessed Christ and those who have not. All are in need of such certainty that Luke set out to bring to you. You who have not confessed Christ as Lord have excuses that you

have made in your head for not trusting in Christ. You need certainty. You who have continue to sin and your sin sometimes causes you to doubt the good news, that it could really be true for you—a sinner. You need certainty from outside yourselves. And this is the point of Luke’s Gospel.

But I might as a question. **What about those** who did not merely hear about this news from those who were eyewitnesses or friends of eyewitnesses, but **who were themselves the preordained people** that God had chosen to experience the events personally? Do you think them more holy or somehow less human, less in need of certainty, less incredulous and prone to doubt when God decided to make them real living actors in the greatest story ever told?

You see, when Luke sets out to tell the Gospel the way that he did, he did not create superheroes that belong to the realm of fiction, people you might want to emulate but could never really be like. Rather, he shows that the **very first people** that **were in need of such certainty** were those who were themselves the eyewitnesses of the events. The certainty comes to them not through law and demanding legalistic obedience to a taskmaster deity, but through announcements that were so unbelievably happy yet impossi-

ble that the only way they could be true is if the only loving, omnipotent God himself was behind them. And that is how he opens his Gospel as he begins to tell the story of Jesus to Theophilus, Beloved of God.

Luke 1:5-45: Literary Structure

We saw in the introduction that by itself, Luke's Gospel is a rather straightforward chronology of Jesus' life. As such, its structure may be outlined in the traditional manner found in most commentaries and good Study Bibles. The beginning of his Gospel is a very lengthy introduction of two chapters consisting of 132 verses. This introduction takes us from the birth of Jesus through his twelfth year of life.

However, unlike the other three Gospels, **Luke does not begin with Jesus**. Instead, he decided to open with Jesus' relatives through his mother Mary. He does this as a calculated and deliberate way of introducing Jesus and his family to us through the use **literary parallelism** that is at the same time harmonious and ingenious. It's like the literary equivalent of listening to a Beethoven Symphony in several Movements, as the symphony both parallels and yet moves beyond what came before it to a climactic crescendo, begging you to consider the whole piece together.

Fig. 1.

Two Parallel Constructions in Four Parallel Structures¹

Luke 1:11-25 <i>The Annunciation and Conception of John the Baptist</i>	Luke 1:26-45 <i>The Annunciation and Conception of Jesus the Messiah</i>
1.1. An angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah at the right side of the altar of incense. (11)	2.1. The angel Gabriel is sent to Mary, a virgin of the house of David saying, “Rejoice.” (26-28)
1.2. When Zechariah sees him, fear falls upon him and he is troubled . (12)	2.2. When Mary sees him, she is troubled , and tried to discern what sort of greeting this was. (29)
1.3. The angel announces the good news of John’s birth . (13-17)	2.3. The angel announces the good news of Jesus’ birth . (30-33)
1.4. Zechariah asks, “ How shall I know this? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years.” (18)	2.4. Mary asks, “ How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (34)
1.5. Gabriel : I was sent to you. You will be mute until the fulfillment because you did not believe. (19-22)	2.5. Gabriel : The Holy Spirit will come upon you. With God nothing is impossible. (35-38)
1.6. When his service was complete, Zechariah departed to his own house (23).	2.6. Mary departed and went to Zechariah’s house . (39-40)
1.7. His wife Elizabeth conceived saying , “Thus the Lord has done for me” (24-25)	2.7. His wife Elizabeth perceived the Messiah saying , “Blessed is she who believed.” (41-45)

¹ From **Christine Smith**, “Luke 1,” *A Little Perspective* (Mar 2, 2016), https://www.alittleperspective.com/luke-1-2016/?doing_wp_cron=1669648100.8108279705047607421875.

Luke 1:5-45 tells two similar conception stories that are purposefully woven with seven strands² that mirror one another (see Fig. 1). The first is the conception of John the Baptist to his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth. The second is the conception of Jesus to his mother Mary.

What's more, not only do the story lines follow one another in a sequential order, each is arranged chiastically with a similar center. The first has Zechariah questioning the angel's message, while the second has Mary questioning the angel's message. "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years" (18). "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (34).

- A. Elizabeth is barren (1:5-7)
- B. People wait (1:8-10)
- C. Words of an angel (1:11-17)
- D. Words of Zechariah (1:18)**
- C'. Words of an angel (1:19-20)
- B'. People wait (1:21-23)
- A'. Elizabeth conceived (1:24-25)

- A. The angel Gabriel is sent (1:26)
- B. Mary greatly troubled at words (1:29)
- C. Words of the angel (1:30-33)
- D. Words of Mary (1:34)**
- C'. Words of the angel (1:35-37)
- B'. Mary's faith (1:38)
- A'. Gabriel departs (1:38)³

² This is slightly subjective. You can find people who see more than seven.

³ These two chiasms and the two structures that follow are from "Literary Structure (chiasm, chiasmus) of Gospel of Luke," *Literary Structures of the Bible*, http://www.bible.literarystructure.info/bible/42_Luke_pericope_e.html#1. I should also point out that another chiasm can be discerned from 1:1-1:20. It begins with Luke's assurance that the Good News will be accurately transmitted and ends with the assurance that the Good News is true. It centers upon Zechariah being troubled (vs. 12). This reinforces our point about certainty being needed even further. See Tony Robinson, "Luke 1:1-20," *Biblical Chiasm Exchange* (Sept 13, 2019), <https://www.chiasmusexchange.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Luke-1v1-20.pdf>.

Remarkably, what we will discover is that **Zechariah will be given a sign** in the form of himself becoming mute for nine months because he did not believe (*pisteuō*) the angel's message. He did not have faith. But **Mary will believe** the angel's message, even though the prediction for her is even more impossible. Yet, she will believe precisely **because she heard that** her old relative Elizabeth conceived before her, something which itself was impossible. Except with God, all things are possible. This right here is our first hint that even those original eyewitnesses to the events themselves were in need of solid confirmation about the astounding things that were taking place before their eyes. They needed signs and God condescended to give them.

This will be solidified at the end of our passage by **the final section** which seems to **deliberately mirror** the **opening four verses** of the book. Their structure is the same (ABA'B') and their content very much seems to be related.

- | | |
|---|---|
| A. To compile a narrative (1:1) | A. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb (1:41) |
| B. Ministers of the word (1:2) | B. Most blessed are you [Mary] among women. Astonishment. (1:42-43) |
| A'. To write it down (1:3) | A'. The sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant leaped for joy (1:44) |
| B'. Then teachings you have received (1:4) | B'. Blessed are you [Mary] who believed (1:45) |

At the beginning, Luke tells us all about how he is writing this account so that **those loved of God might have certainty**. Each of those four verses are paralleled in the way Elizabeth and her baby respond to Mary's visit. Essentially, Mary shows up to her house, John leaps in the womb because he senses the conception that has occurred, and Elizabeth gives two different words to Mary of how blessed she is by God for this miracle. They become certain of what is happening, and **what a joyful beginning** to the Gospel this is.

Luke 1:5-25: The Annunciation of John the Baptist

Luke's story commences in the days of Herod, king of Judea (**Luke 1:5**). **Herod means "Heroic,"** but that understanding can only be called ironic in this book. This is **Herod the Great, a most ruthless and cruel king,** who died probably in 4 BC around seventy years of age after nearly 35 years of tyranny. A contemporary of Pompey, Julius Caesar, and Mark Antony, Herod's most notorious early crime was probably the murder 45 members of the Sanhedrin council for daring to question his putting a gang of rebels to death without a trial.

Judea is a Greek/Roman adaptation of the name “Judah,” and the territory was essentially that of Judah or the Southern Kingdom after the division which occurred when Solomon died. For a thousand years, since King David, Judea had been ruled or governed by someone from the tribe of Judah. This changed with Herod, who was not Jewish. His mother was Arabian, and his father was an Edomite—descended from the line of Esau. To get the throne, Herod murdered Antigonus, high priest and last Judean ruler, in 37 BC.

This is important, as Calvin shows, because this is precisely what was prophesied by Jacob at his death-bed to his son Judah. “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, *until* tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples” (Gen 49:10). This prophecy about the coming Messiah says that he would be born when the ruler’s staff was finally taken away. Thus, Calvin writes, “It had several times happened that the Jews had been without kings; but they had never been seen, as they then were, without Counsellors, Governors, or Magistrates.”⁴ “The advent of the Messiah is promised [after] ... the royal authority ... had been removed

⁴ John Calvin, *Christ the End of the Law: Being the Preface to the Geneva Bible of 1550* (London: William Tegg, & Co., 1850), 11.

from the tribe of Judah... Herod broke *the sceptre of the tribe of Judah* (**Gen 49:10**) ... because whatever relics of superior rank still lingered in that tribe were entirely carried off by his robbery.”⁵ Yet, because God had sworn an oath that **the throne of David would be eternal** (**Ps 89:29**) and that **he would raise up its ruins** (**Amos 9:11**), the birth of the King of kings would take place at this appointed time. Exactly as God had planned.

Next, Luke narrows his focus down to one special family. In Judea, “there was a priest named Zechariah, of the vision of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth” (5). Zechariah means “The LORD Remembers” while Elizabeth means “God of the Oath.” These names can be a great way to add context to what Luke is doing, for in them, the LORD is about to remember the oath that he swore long ago, many times, to David, to Abraham, even all the way back to Eve. This is about covenant and promise keeping. After 400 years of so called “silence”⁶ since the last prophet (Malachi) wrote, God

⁵ John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 8–9.

⁶ This label of “400 silent years” is very much a **misnomer**. It is true that God had not sent a prophet for that long, so in this sense, it kind of works. But these 400 years were anything but “silent.” This is the period when Second Temple Literature exploded, including a great deal of speculation about who Messiah would be and when he would come. I highly recommend getting ahold of the Jewish Pseudepigraph and reading the dozens and dozens of books that we have

has not forgotten his word. The birth of Messiah was now imminent.

The most important fact we learn about this family is that **both sides are Levites**. Yet, they are more than the Levites (which included anyone born from the tribe of Levi). They are **both descended from the priesthood**—“*a double blessing*”!⁷ Elizabeth comes from **Aaron**, while Zechariah (also from Aaron) is pointed out as being from the newer **line of Abijah**, who served as priest during the days of king David. In this way, from the very beginning, Luke’s Gospel is **focused on the priesthood** and the sacrificial activities surrounding it, which is why the Father’s assigned the bull-ox as the symbol for this Gospel.

Like we should hope to expect, we learn about how **devout** they are. “**And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statues of the Lord**” (6). Yes, God still had faithful servants and priests even in those politically and spiritually corrupt days. There are a couple of important points to see here.

from this time period. They provide much more context to Luke’s Gospel than I could ever hope to give.

⁷ **Philip Graham Ryken**, *Luke*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 1, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 17.

First, Luke is **not saying that the couple are without sin**. The Apostle, quoting the Psalmist, says, “**There is no one righteous, no not one**” (**Rom 3:10**). “**All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**” (**3:23**). In the Scripture, one can be simultaneously righteous and not righteous, and this is because faith works itself out later not in perfectionism, but in **virtue**. **Ryken** says, “**Both were active in ministry. We might think of them as an old country pastor and his wife, nearing the age of retirement. And both of them were distinguished by their godliness. Not that they were sinless, of course, but they had a right relationship with God. They lived in outward conformity with the law, and God regarded them as righteous.**”⁸ Zwingli put it this way. “The prophet [Luke] commends John’s parents for their holiness and righteousness, not for riches, power, or that sort of thing ... [these] follow people after death and make them famous and worthy of praise. It is silly to commend a person on account of his works ... but virtue in itself is truly commendable to the human soul, and the human mind will be led to desire it eagerly [when it is praised], just as people are inflamed with desire for earthly pleasures after they hear about them.” (**Huldrych Zwingli, Gospel of Luke 1**).⁹

⁸ **Ryken**, *ibid.*

⁹ Cited in **Beth Kreitzer** et al., eds., *Luke: New Testament*, vol. III, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 7.

Next, we learn that Elizabeth was barren and that both were advanced in years (Luke 1:7). Along with the previous verse with its language of “commandments and statutes” which harken back to Abraham (Gen 26:5),¹⁰ our minds go immediately to he and Sarah, and the oath God had sworn to him to make him the father of many nations. And yet, they were without children into their old age, and Sarah herself was long past the age of childbearing. Her womb was dead (Rom 4:19). At least three allusions already to Genesis and Luke is setting us up for seeing just how amazing the birth of Messiah is truly going to be.

So how old were they? We can't be sure about Elizabeth, but my guess is that Zechariah was right at the age of 50, since that was the maximum age a priest could serve (Num 4:47),¹¹ and yet he was still serving in the temple. So we read, “Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the

¹⁰ A helpful resource with this and the many OT references to come is David W. Pao and Eckhard J. Schnabel, “Luke,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), 259.

¹¹ This also fits the age that Hippocrates and Philo both said constitutes someone who is a *presbutés* (Luke’s “old man” in Luke 1:18. This was 49-56 years old). See Peter Kirby, “Taking Irenaeus Seriously,” *Peter Kirby* (Nov 4, 2013), <https://peterkirby.com/taking-irenaeus-seriously.html>.

Lord and burn incense” (8-9). To be chosen like this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience (Mishnah, *Tamid* 5:2).¹²

When it came time for his priestly division to serve in the temple, Zechariah came from his home somewhere outside of Jerusalem. Each day, the priests would cast lots for one man who would be specially privileged to go into the Holy Place to light the incense. This would take place twice a day, at daybreak and twilight. The afternoon time is the most likely, as the people who had come to offer sacrifices would wait for this event in the courtyard, singing psalms with the priests, and offering up prayers which are the spiritual counterpart of the incense. Thus it says, “And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense” (10).

As this was twilight, it was what Stephen Lawhead calls in his Celtic novels a “time-between-times,” neither day nor night, a time “when the door between the worlds would stand open for a moment at that holy place.”¹³ I find this time curious because of what happens next. “And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side

¹² In Shmuel Safrai, “Zechariah’s Prestigious Task,” *Jerusalem Perspective* (Mar 1, 1989), <https://www.jerusalemerspective.com/2326/>. See also “Blessed is he who chose Aaron and his sons to stand to serve before the Lord in the house of the Holy of Holies” (Mishnah: *Middot*, 5:4K).

¹³ Stephen Lawhead, *The Silver Hand: Book Two in the Song of Albion Trilogy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010).

of the altar of incense” (11). Surely, the veil was thin as the angel chose this very moment to make himself known to Zechariah. In fact, it was not unknown for a priest to see a vision or hear a heavenly voice in the sanctuary at this time of the incense offering. Josephus tells us about the high priest John Hyrcanus who around 134 BC was offering incense at this time when he heard a voice tell him that his sons had just defeated the Syrian king Antiochus (*Antiq.* 13.282). In 41 AD, a voice announced the murder of Emperor Caligula (*Tosefta Sotah* 13:6). In 200 BC, Shim'on the Righteous said that he saw a man in white enter the Most Holy Place with him each year, and that because he did not leave the last time he saw him, he knew he was going to die that same year, which he did (*JTal, Yoma* 42^c).

Who was this angel? Given that just beyond the veil was the Most Holy Place and the mercy seat which was the throne of the Angel of the LORD, it is tempting to think it is the True God himself. But it is not necessarily so. Zechariah is on the other side of the veil, and the angel appears to him “on the right side,” the side of power and honor, but not in the Most Holy Place.

Zechariah's response is important. He “was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him” (12). This is a common reaction throughout Scripture when a heavenly

being appears to a man. These creatures are so “other” that the mere sight of them brings a kind of terror and dread.

At that moment, “The angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John’” (13). Obviously, he too was praying at the hour of incense. This announcement is what we call **the annunciation of John the Baptist**. An annunciation is a declaration or proclamation. It was a message delivered by an angel—a messenger.

John means “The LORD has been Gracious.” In this case, it is **prophetic**. He is *going* to be gracious. Thus, the angel continues. “And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth” (14). So far, this scene reminds us of the Angel of the LORD telling both Abraham and then Sarah that they would have a son in their old age. It especially reminds me of **how both** laughed at the news (**Gen 17:17; 18:12**), either out of incredulity or joy (or both). Sarah was far too old to have children. Could this really be? In this way, we are meant to think of **Isaac**, and not only him, but also **Samuel** who was born the same way to **Hannah**.

The prophecy tells just a bit more about **what kind of man John would be**. “For he will be great before the Lord.

And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (15). This verse reminds us of a **third angelically announced birth**. That of **Samson** (Jdg 13:3), also born to a barren mother. Samson would be very similar to John as a **Nazarite** (5); this is a person who would take a vow and never be able to drink wine until that vow was ended (Num 6:3-5).¹⁴ It also highlights that John would be a **priest**, for this is the very same language given to Aaron who must not enter the temple with wine or strong drink (Lev 10:9).

In his ministry, John would be **great before the Lord**. Jesus will later tell us that **no man born of woman is greater than John** (Luke 7:28). Part of this surely has to do with **his role** to “**turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God**” (1:16) and “**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**” (17). Both of these verses take us to **Malachi** and the prophecies of a coming “messenger” (Heb: *malak*, Gk: *aggelos*; Mal 3:1; cf. Isa 40:3) who would **come like Elijah** to prepare the way for the Lord by turning many hearts back to God just before the great and awesome

¹⁴ Samuel is also a Nazarite in the Dead Sea Scrolls of 1Sam 1:22.

day of the LORD comes (cf. **Mal 4:5-6**). Israel was in a terrible spiritual state in those days, and many had fallen away from belief in their God. Part of John's ministry would be to bring them to repentance. This in turn would prepare them for one even greater than John.

At this moment, we come to **the center of the first chiasm**. It is Zechariah's response to the angel. "And Zechariah said to the angel, 'How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years'" (**Luke 1:18**). Is this a good response? A bad response? One of faith? One of disbelief? We do know that it is almost **identical to Abrams'**, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" (**Gen 15:8**).

Vs. 19 begins to answer. It finally shows us, first, **who this angel is**. "And the angel answered him, 'I am Gabriel'" (**19a**). Clearly, he is not the Angel of the LORD. **Gabriel** appears in one book in the OT: Daniel, in two (perhaps three) consecutive chapters (**8** and **9** [**& 10?**]). In scenes where it seems pretty obvious that **the Angel of the LORD** is also present, a voice from heaven commands Gabriel, whose name means "**Man of God**" or "**Man of Strength**," to make Daniel understand his visions (**Dan 8:16**). This is his main job (even in the Pseudepigrapha). Curiously, he also came to Daniel at the time of

“evening sacrifice” (9:21).¹⁵ Also, the fact that Gabriel is giving Daniel “end times” visions is a strong hint that those end times are about to be fulfilled.¹⁶

Gabriel tells Zechariah that “I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news” (19b). As in heaven, so on earth. Gabriel stands in the presence of God in heaven, ministering before the throne, so now he comes to the Holy Place to minister to God’s chosen priest who is lighting the incense and offering up prayers about a child.

Gabriel calls his message “good news.” This is the word *euaggelizō*, from which we get *evangel*, Evangelicalism, and gospel. Gospel is good news, an announcement, delivered through a message.

¹⁵ There are only two angels mentioned by name in the Scripture, Michael being the other. (Raphael is also mentioned in the Book of Tobit). Both Michael and Gabriel appear in the oldest extant list of four →archangels in *1 Enoch* 9:1 with Sariel and Raphael. While the composition of this list often varies in post-biblical Jewish writings, Michael, Gabriel and Raphael are constant members (1QM 9:14–16; *1 Enoch* 40:9; 54:6; 71:8; *Life of Adam and Eve* 41:1; *Num. Rabbah* 2:10; *Pesiqta Rabbati* 46; *Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer* 4; →Uriel and Phanuel often appear as the fourth archangel). Gabriel also appears in the list of seven archangels in *1 Enoch* 20, with Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Sariel and Remiel. He is one of ‘the glorious ones of the Lord’ in *2 Enoch* 21:3.” J. J. Collins, “Gabriel,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999), 338–339.

¹⁶ See my sermons “Daniel 8. A Vision by the River: Daniel 8 and Antiochus Epiphanes,” rbnc.com (10-25-2020; 11-8-2020) and “Daniel 9:24-27. Antichrist or Jesus Christ?” at <https://www.rbnc.com/daniel>. This thought came from John Nolland, *Luke 1:1–9:20*, vol. 35A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1989), 35.

But Zechariah does not “know” (*ginōskō*; vs. 18) how this can be. So Gabriel answers his question. “And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place...” (20a). This appears to be a sign intended for Zechariah. However, it was given to him *because of his unbelief*. “... because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time” (20b). Now we can see that his response to the Angel was *not a matter of faith, but a lack of it*. Yet, consider the mercy and kindness of God who would not only perform this miracle for a man who didn’t believe him, but give him a sign so that he might do so! This gets at the very reason Luke wrote the book for Theophilus and for us, that we might be certain of the things that happened in those days.

But it was *not merely a sign for him*. Luke continues working us out of the chiasm by returning to the people. “And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple” (21). Clearly, it doesn’t take that long to light the incense! Was he loitering? Getting one last look of a place he would never get to enter again?

The answer comes in the next verse. “And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that

he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute” (22). You can see in this verse that the Jews understood that from time to time the priest would see a vision while serving in the temple. The fact that he could not speak, and more, that he insistently kept making signs to them was proof to them all that he had seen a powerful one. Thus, his muteness was not merely for himself, but for everyone so that when the baby would come, they might believe the whole message.

The scene now shifts away from the temple. First, it says, “when his time of service was ended, he went to his home” (23). Zechariah goes back to normal life. However, “After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived” (24a). This is a truly wonderful verse, and it is wrapped up in their names: Zechariah—*The LORD Remembers* and Elizabeth—*God of the Oath*. God has come through on his promise. The angel was telling the truth. Elizabeth is now pregnant.

The final section of this structure ends, “... and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, ‘Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people’” (24b-25). What are we to make of this? Is she embarrassed? Is that why she is hiding?

This takes us back to **Hannah**, the mother of Samuel, who was also born of a similar promise that came at Shiloh while she was praying before God at “the temple” (some structure prior to Solomon’s temple). After Hannah had received her message, we read that she and her husband “**rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her**” (**1Sa 1:19**). Then, **like Rachel**, she expresses her wonderment at God’s mercy in finally giving her a child, “**God has taken away my reproach**” (**Gen 30:23**), even as he did for Jacob’s grandmother Sarah when “**The LORD visited [her] as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised**” (**Gen 21:1**).

All that is left to think about in this part of the story is **Elizabeth’s hiding**. What is going on here? From a **literary point of view**, this continues **the silence that began when Zechariah** went mute. No one can see that she is pregnant. It also **prepares the way** for the coming of **Mary** to her home. This in turn will allow Luke to set up Mary’s story as a parallel to Elizabeth’s.

Before moving on to that story, I just want to point out **how saturated Luke is with the OT** as he has told this story. There is no Great Divorce in the NT from the OT. This

Gospel is not bringing a different religion from the OT, much less a different God. Rather, the NT from beginning to end goes to great pains to prove to you that it is but the fulfillment of all the long-awaited expectations and prophecies that had been **given from Eve to Esther, from Moses to Malachi**. And in knowing this, you may be certain that what happened in those days was exactly what God had said would happen.

Luke 1:26-38: The Annunciation of Jesus

Vs. 26 marks a **fundamental shift** in the story. It comes through a **transitory figure**: the angel **Gabriel**. “**In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth.**” The sixth month refers to the sixth month from Elizabeth’s conception. Remember, she has been in hiding for five months. It is at this moment that Gabriel is sent north, to Galilee, and a city named Nazareth.

Galilee is the region by the stunning Sea of the same name. For most people today, it is a lovely vacation spot. Like Luke’s storytelling, the word means “**circuit.**” **Nazareth** is about 15 miles from the Sea to its southwest and about 60 miles north of Jerusalem in the rolling hill country of Issachar. Curiously, the word means “**Branch**” or



“Preservation.” In fact, Matthew may be thinking of this very thing when he says that Jesus went and lived in a town called Nazareth to fulfilled what was said through the prophets that he would be called a Nazarene (**Matt 2:23**). There is no verse that says this, however, thinking

of prophecies like **Isaiah 11:1** that a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse and from his roots a Branch will bear fruit may very well be a play on the word Nazareth (with *netser*, meaning “branch”). But that takes us ahead of ourselves.

Why was Gabriel dispatched to Nazareth? Because “a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David” (**Luke 1:27**) was there. Joseph means “**May God Add.**” A prophetic name if ever there was one given

this story. “And the virgin’s name” of course “was Mary.” Mary has perhaps the most interesting name in the chapter, as it means **Bitterness** or **Rebellious** (from the root: trouble; sorrow). But this name is like Herod, ironic given what we will see from Mary.

The fact that she is a **virgin** is a nod to **Isaiah 7:14** LXX and the prophecy that the Lord will give you a sign. “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” At this point, we begin to really see parallels with the Zechariah story come into view. Gabriel begins to talk to Mary. “And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!’” (**Luke 1:28**).

Like Zechariah, **Mary’s response** is now captured. “But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be” (29). The word “troubled” is used of both individuals. Thus, we are meant to ponder the similarity. But there are slight **differences**. Zechariah was said to be in fear. But Mary is said to be more bewildered. “**What is going on here?**” she is thinking to herself.

Gabriel intervenes to calm her, as he did for Zechariah. “And the angel said to her, ‘Go not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God’” (30). Favor is the word *charis*, and it means **grace** (see also vs. 28). This is vital, for Mary

did not earn God's favor. Rather, God gave it freely of his own grace.¹⁷ And because this was a coming in grace, **she was not to be afraid.**

But what kind of grace would God display? “**And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus**” (31). This verse shows us a **direct parallel to that of Zechariah.** Both will have children. But there is a glaring difference, of course. Zechariah is a man. **Mary is a woman.** Of course, God came as the Angel to Sarah and Hagar and Manoah's wife, and promised children to each of them. So this is nothing that out of the ordinary for God. Yet, it is the beginning of something we will see throughout Luke's Gospel. This Gospel cares more than others to highlight that the good news is for **those in society who are lesser,** not greater. Women, outcasts, lepers, tax-

¹⁷ Zwingli said, “We learn from this that the phrase “full of grace” should not be understood in the sense that she was full of grace from herself but that all the grace with which she was richly filled came from God. For to be “full of grace” means nothing else than to be the most beloved of God, to be made worthy and to be chosen from among all other women. For grace is the good will of God alone.” (Huldrych Zwingli, *Sermon on Mary, the Pure Mother of God*. Cited in Kreitzer, 15-16). Calvin said, “The word *Blessed* does not, in my opinion, mean, Worthy of praise; but rather means, Happy. Thus, Paul often supplicates for believers, first “grace” and then “peace,” (Rom. 1:7; Eph. 1:2,) that is, every kind of blessings; implying that we shall then be truly happy and rich, when we are beloved by God, from whom all blessings proceed. But if Mary's happiness, righteousness, and life, flow from the undeserved love of God, if her virtues and all her excellence are nothing more than the Divine kindness, it is the height of absurdity to tell us that we should seek from her what she derives from another quarter in the same manner as ourselves.” John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 33.

collectors, unclean, and so on.¹⁸ The angels did not come to Joseph, but to Mary.

But it is what Gabriel says next that must have truly been difficult for Mary to fathom. “He will be great” echoes that of John, “He will be great before the Lord” (15). But John’s greatness—even the greatest of men born of women—cannot compare with this baby. “... and he will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (32-33).

¹⁸ Consider the meditation of [Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg](#) (1633-94), Austrian poet and one of the most significant German-language writers of the early modern era (Wiki bio). “The highest God above all the heavens sent an ambassador, one of the most glorious angels, down to earth, to Galilee, a poor, obscure spot on the way to Nazareth, an unimportant little hamlet, to a virgin who was the most insignificant and lowliest of maidens, the betrothed of a simple, common carpenter. In this simplicity, however, the divine Trinity showed its greatest wisdom in that it knew both how to find in the greatest lowliness capacity for virtue and how to impart the capacity for divine things to the most wretched incapacity. It shows its omnipotence in its ability to exalt a little speck of earth to heavenly spectacles and splendid miracles. It displays its goodness by electing the most miserable things for the purpose of its elevation, and it displays its freedom by turning with its grace there where, at the beginning, one—and all the rest of the world—would not have expected it.

Who would believe that the King of kings, the Lord of all the potentates, would dispatch an angel as an ambassador to a poor maiden or the wife of an artisan? What is more absurd before the world and yet better disposed for the dispensation of heaven? Poverty and lowliness are no hindrance to divine calling: as little as they could take from her the right of inheritance of her royal birth from the house of David and still less the gracious election by God, whose piercing eyes see through all the mountains of misery the small flash of the metal of virtue that his hand has placed within them. He selected her from the very beginning of eternity for this high honor and from that same beginning made her fit for it. And so he therefore suffered her to be called to it too. For all divine calling has its roots and foundation in eternal Providence.” ([Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg](#), *Meditations on the Incarnation of Christ*.) Cited in [Beth Kreitzer](#) et al., eds., *Luke: New Testament*, vol. III, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 15. Unless a full bibliography is given, all Reformation quotations will come from this source.

It is difficult to even begin to appreciate these words. And how awful (as in full of awe) they would have been. **At first glance**, it appears that he will be **merely** a king. I say “merely” tongue-in-cheek because there is no such thing as a mere king. But given what else is said, how else can I put it? Let’s go from the lesser to the greater.

First, clearly this is **a reference to the promise of a son to David**. “I will raise up your seed after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish *the throne of his kingdom forever*. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me *a son*” (2Sa 7:12-14). The thing about this passage is that the next part says, “**When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men.**” Therefore, someone like Solomon would clearly be in view. The fact that the throne of David did not depart for generations also lends itself to the establishing a throne forever.

And yet, at some point, the kings of David **came to an end**. In fact, the entire tribe of Judah ceased to have any authority under Herod for the first time. Yet, somehow, **this child** of Mary’s would continue the line? Now, we know that there is more going on here. And Mary came to understand it too. And when Luke wrote this he also knew more.

Truly, what is being promised here by the angel is that this boy would have a kingdom that really would never end. It would be *eternal*. And this is because his sonship is an *eternal* sonship. For he is the only begotten Son of God (Ps 2:7, 12; 110:3 LXX). No one else is ever said to be “Son of the Most High” like this, and it is a nod to Daniel 7, which appears just one chapter before Gabriel comes on the scene. But this is what is said of the boy who must be named “Jesus,” which means, “Yahweh Saves,” the equivalent of Joshua, which is fitting. Matthew’s parallel tells you that he will save his people *from their sins*, while the Isaiah parallel tells you that this is the name *Immanuel*—God With Us. Truly, there is much to take in here.

Of course, Mary’s natural question is obvious. “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:35). This is the center of the second chiasm, and deliberately parallel’s Zechariah’s center, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years?” (18). But in the similarity, you are meant to see the stunning difference. Yes, Elizabeth and Zechariah were too old, and yes, their baby would be a miracle. But they would come together in sexual union. Mary, on the other hand, would remain a virgin and yet conceive? As tremendously amazing and miraculous as

John's conception was, this conception would make it look stunningly ordinary.

As with Zechariah, Gabriel now answers Mary. “And the angel answered 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 called holy-- the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God’” (35-37). It is primarily from Luke and Matthew that we have the precious doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. This is a doctrine deeply embedded in the creeds. It has been viciously attacked for centuries, I believe, because without it, you have a perfectly normal child, even if the birth, like John's was a miracle or God opening the womb. But the virgin birth of Jesus Christ means that in a way unlike any other man, God truly is Jesus' Father.

Curiously, God here is the Holy Spirit—the Breath, who “overshadows” Mary. There are a couple of OT ideas that go into this that can help us. First, we have the very end of Exodus in the LXX. “And Moses was not able to enter into the tabernacle of testimony, because the cloud *overshadowed* it, and the tabernacle was filled with the glory of the

Lord” (Ex 40:35 LXX). The image of the Spirit here is that of a cloud filling or engulfing the temple. Second, we probably have a passage like Isa 32:15 LXX in the background. “The Spirit shall come upon you from on high, and Chermel shall be desert, and Chermel shall be counted for a forest” (Isa 32:15 LXX; Heb: “The wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest”). There is no sexual activity going on in these OT allusions. Rather, it is the Holy Spirit who is giving life where there was none because he is God. Pay careful attention to the Spirit in Luke, because when we come to Acts, it will serve as an important interpretive guide to the many often bewildering things the Spirit is said to do.

This all shows that God can do anything, and in saying “nothing will be impossible with God,” Luke is alluding to Moses and the Prophets before him. “Shall anything be impossible with the Lord?” (Gen 18:14 LXX). “Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you” (Jer 32:17).

In these last words from Jeremiah, we are led on to consider Mary’s response to these things. Recall that Zechariah did not believe and so he was given a sign. Now, that sign is

actually being given to Mary, who as of yet did not even know that Elizabeth was pregnant! Elizabeth has conceived a son in her old age and she is six months on. Thus, we get Mary's response, which is in direct **antithetical parallel** to Zechariah's, "**Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word**" (38a). I can't help but think of Sarah who laughed and Elizabeth who hid. But not Mary. Mary was given the word and shown the proof; and **she believed God** and it was credited to her as righteousness. Thus, "**the angel departed from her**" (38b).

Vs. 39 gives us a last parallel for this, even as it provides a transition to our final section, which will in turn return us to Luke's introduction. As Zechariah **departed and went home** (23), so now the angel departs, and Mary goes to Zechariah's home! "**In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth**" (39-40).

Luke 1:39-45: The Sure and Certain Word of God

At this singular moment, **the two stories come together**, like two parallel paths that suddenly converge at an intersection. You and I have been noticing the parallels in the story,

but it is only just recently that we know why Luke is doing this. Mary and Elizabeth are “relatives” (36). The word occurs nowhere else, and it conveys nothing more specific than a kinswoman. Perhaps Elizabeth was a cousin once or twice removed or an aunt.¹⁹ Whatever the case, they obviously knew each other, and Mary is so astonished at the words of the angel, that she goes at once to visit her.

It is at the moment of greeting that one of the great short segments of story in the Bible occurs. “And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb” (41). This is such an important event that Luke says it twice. “For

¹⁹ **Going Deeper:** The Venerable Bede (672-735) makes an interesting observation here. “Now when the mediator between God and human beings appeared in the world, it was fitting that he had his physical origin from both tribes because, in the humanity which he assumed, he would possess the roles of both priest and king” (Bede, *Homily on the Gospels* 1.3). At the very most, we only have one genealogy of Mary given in the Gospels (possibly but not probably Luke 3), and so there is either speculation and/or tradition that is going into this. But we do know that some of these traditions have her descending from Judah on her father’s side, and Levi from her mother. Her ancestors are said to be Zadoq or Joachim and Dina or Hanna/Anna. See Sebastian Brock, “The Genealogy of the Virgin Mary in Sinai Syr. 16,” *Scrinium II* (2006): 58-71.

Into this, we might ask the question as to whether or not Jesus would have been considered a priest because of this lineage on his mother’s side. We do know that long ago (whether in NT times I’m not certain), Jewishness was counted through the mother’s side and this continues to this day with Orthodox Jews. For example, Ambrosiaster (4th cent) and Nicolaus of Lyra (13th cent) argued that Timothy was a Jew because of his mother’s Jewishness. See Matthew Thiessen, *Genealogy, Circumcision and Conversion in Early Judaism and Christianity*, Dissertation to Duke University (2010), 5.2.4 (251-54), https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10161/2465/D_Thiessen_Matthew_a_201005.pdf. Also, Chaye J. D. Cohen, “The Origins of the Matrilineal Principle in Rabbinic Law,” *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 10/1 (Spring 1985): 19-53.

However, it appears that priestly lineage is only counted through the father. And this could be one reason why Hebrews does not try to trace Jesus’ lineage via human descent, as it does the kingly reign of Judah. Instead, it opts for Melchizedekian lineage (I believe, because Melchizedek is himself the Angel of the LORD).

behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, *the baby in my womb leaped for joy*” (44). Of course, we have learned that by now, when Luke repeats something, it is probably for literary and theological purposes. It is not just mere emphasis.

And yet, it surely is an **emphasis!** Think about what is being said. A sixth month old **fetus**, still in the womb of its mother, simply hears the sound of Mary’s voice. Mary is someone he’s obviously never met or heard. And yet, he is still in the womb, so has he heard anyone? Of course he has! That creature inside its mother is **no blob of cells**, no “**part of the woman’s body.**” It is a separate, distinct, living, human being made in the image of God. It has its own nature, its own senses (including ears), and its own will. And somehow, he sensed what when the newly pregnant Mary came to the house, he was in the presence of something astonishing. This is something that even Elizabeth did not yet understand, for she did not leap. Perhaps Mary herself did not even know it, for she had only barely just conceived. John did.

This is because **John has been filled with the Holy Spirit**, even in his mother’s womb (15). Is that a verse proving that John was **saved in the womb**? Possibly, although it needs to be said that often the work of the Spirit in Luke’s writings is

something other than salvation. I have no problem is John was saved by the Spirit in the womb, for he clearly hears and can understand even at this tender age in this particular place of watery dark residence. Surely, **the gospel could come to an infant**, and since faith and regeneration are God's work, not man's, God would bring that infant to faith whenever he wanted to.²⁰ Augustine's words are worth hearing,

We see instances of leaping not only in children but even in animals, although certainly not for any faith or religion or rational recognition of someone coming. But this case stands out as utterly uncommon and new, because it took place in a womb, and at the coming of her who was to bring forth the Savior of humankind. Therefore this leaping, this greeting, so to speak, offered to the mother of the Lord is miraculous. It is to **be reckoned among the great signs**. It was not effected by human means by the infant, but by divine means in the infant, as miracles are usually wrought.

(**Augustine**, *Letter 187.23*).²¹

²⁰ Though unrelated, the topic of **baptism** could come up here. Baptists do not *not* baptize infants because we think God can't save them in the womb. Rather, we do not baptize infants because even if they are, they cannot profess faith in Christ. We believe baptism is based on confession of faith, hence, *credobaptists*. So the issue of whether John was saved in the womb should have nothing to do with baptism from our perspective.

²¹ Cited in **Arthur A. Just**, *Luke*, vol. 3, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT 3. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 21.

Nothing is impossible with God.

Soon thereafter, the Holy Spirit enters the picture for a third time in our story. This time he fills Elizabeth. “And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!’” (42). This is a phrase that many today know because of the Hail Mary (*Ave Maria* in Latin).²²

The Hail Mary has origins that date back only to the Great Schism in the eleventh century. It was not known in the early church, though, of course, many Fathers did comment on Luke 1 and so say similar words. The Hail Mary is actually a combination of Luke 1:28, 42, and words approved at the Council of Trent (though the third line, “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen” predates Trent).

Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.	Hail, <i>thou that art</i> highly favoured, the Lord <i>is</i> with thee: (Lk. 1:28 KJV)
Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.	Blessed <i>art</i> thou among women, and blessed <i>is</i> the fruit of thy womb. (Lk. 1:42 KJV)

²² For somewhat of a history on the Hail Mary (the paper goes beyond it) see Diarmaid MacCulloch, “Mary and Sixteenth-Century Protestants,” in *The church in Sickness and in Health*, Studies in Church History Vol. 58 (2004): 191-217. For Luther see Martin Luther, “The Hail Mary,” in *Luther’s Works, Vol. 43: Devotional Writings II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 43 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 39-41. For Calvin see *Harmony*, 33.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.
Amen.

“To this sort of prayer belongs the first part of the Angelic Salutation, when used by us as a prayer: Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women. For in these words we render to God the highest praise and return Him most gracious thanks, because He has bestowed all His heavenly gifts on the most holy Virgin; and at the same time we congratulate the Virgin herself on her singular privileges.

To this form of thanksgiving the Church of God has wisely added prayers and an invocation addressed to the most *holy Mother of God*, by which we piously and humbly fly to her patronage, in order that, by her intercession, she may reconcile God to us sinners and may obtain for us those blessings which we stand in need of in this life and in the life to come. We, therefore, exiled children of Eve, who dwell in this vale of tears, should constantly beseech the Mother of mercy, the advocate of the faithful, *to pray for us sinners*. In this prayer we should earnestly implore her help and assistance; for that she possesses exalted merits with God, and that she is most desirous to assist us by her prayers, no one can doubt without impiety and wickedness.” *Catechism of the Council of Trent, Part IV: The Lord’s Prayer—For the Blessed Virgin Mary.*

The Reformers knew the Hail Mary well, and were either very cautious in how they taught on it (Luther) or down-right opposed to it (Calvin). Part of this was due to the rapidly growing cult of Mary which, for instance, by the synod of Paris in 1210 required all professing believers to pray it.²³ Part of it was because of the intercession of Mary required by the prayer, when the only intercessor between God and man is Jesus (1Tim 2:5) and the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:26).

²³ See Michael A. G. Haykin, “Remember the Reformation!” *Haddington House Journal* (2017), 9-10, https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/haddington-house-journal/19_005.pdf.

Whatever the case, there is no question but that part of this prayer comes from the Angel Gabriel and another part from Elizabeth. Curiously, **neither of those instances is in fact a prayer at all**. Rather, **both are greetings!** As Calvin said of the Hail Mary for Rome, **“Their silly ambition leads them into a second blunder, for they salute a person who is absent.”**

Elizabeth’s greeting (notice, filled with the Holy Spirit but not in some strange tongue), comes to Mary **in the form of a blessing**: **“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!”** It is not wrong, much less a sin to **give praise to God**, as Elizabeth does here, for what the Lord did for Mary. I think Luther is probably right when he says, *so long as it is not a prayer or an invocation to Mary*, that one could **“use the Hail Mary as a meditation in which we recite what grace God has given her. Second, we should add a wish that everyone may know and respect her [as one blessed by God].”** (Luther goes on immediately to talk about her sinlessness, and on this he is certainly wrong, and that might give us pause on what he says here.) This may add a bit of balance for people who are sometimes so angry at what Rome has done that they don’t even want to think about

Mary at all. Rome hardly made up giving praise to God for what he did for Mary.

Elizabeth blessed God, even as she herself was still pregnant with a miracle-child, because what God had done for her kinswoman was even more extraordinary. She continues, “And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Luke 1:43). But how did she know what she knew? Luther has a lengthy comment on this that is worth considering, even if you do not agree fully,

When Mary lets her voice be heard and speaks with Elizabeth, [John] feels it within the womb and is made aware by the Spirit even before his mother, Elizabeth. Then his mother thinks, *what does this mean, that the child who is so newly living within me stirs?* And through this the Holy Spirit enlightens the matron Elizabeth so that she begins to speak, full of joy and the Spirit. And what does she say? Listen how she receives her guest! She doesn't thank her and say, “*You are most welcome, my dear Mary*”—as one is wont to say quite cheerfully. Out of an even greater joy she forgets the normal greeting and does not even recognize Mary as herself but rather as the blessed mother. And this even though Christ had only been conceived hardly four days before! But even if it had been half or even a whole month, how is it possible that

Elizabeth could have felt it, how could she have guessed? Mary was still young, and no one could see from her figure that she was pregnant. It is the highest recognition that she praises Mary as a mother and as one who carries the child who is above all others. And she places her above all women for eternity. For, she says, you carry a son who is a Lord of us all. “*And how does it happen to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?*” That is the first sermon on earth, that Mary is the mother of the Lord, and it comes from the aged, honorable matron. Jesus is hardly a month in the womb, and even so Elizabeth calls her “Mother” and “Mother of the Lord.” “Lord” the name of the true God. It is an exalted word ... Elizabeth did not hear it from anyone but rather spoke it through the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

(Martin Luther, *Sermon on the Visitation* [1535])

Just like the leaping in the womb, Luke repeats this in a second slightly different way in the last verse of our passage. “*And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord*” (45). Twice, she blessed Mary. For what an extraordinary gift God gave to this “*virgin who was the most insignificant and lowliest of maidens, the betrothed of a simple, common carpenter*” from “*a poor, obscure spot on the way to Nazareth,*

an unimportant little hamlet” (see n. 18)! To be the mother of God in human flesh? Can it really be?

Certainty for Them; Certainty for You

In ending this section the way that Luke does, repeating two different ideas every other line, he is returning to the pattern he set up in the first four verses. In fact, he is also returning to the same theme: certainty. Zechariah did not believe the angel’s news, so he was given a sign. Mary did not understand the news, but took the sign given to Zechariah and Elizabeth by faith. She went to their house and in an incredible series of events, a fetus in the womb and an old woman both by the Holy Spirit confirmed the news. News that perhaps Mary herself did not yet know. So Mary’s belief was certain. She would bear the Son of God. The Word was made sure to them all.

It is my opinion that Luke either had very early sources that he trusted which had already written down this information, or, more likely, he knew Mary personally, and she told him this most precious and even secret information, perhaps while they were in Ephesus together. He told you this information so that you might be certain of these events.

He told you this information *this way*, so that you might be struck by the power of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit whom he has sent into this world to convict the world of sin and to save it from slavery and damnation.

Hear, O beloved of God, the good news first given in those days. God has done *Heroic* things in these days of old. *The LORD Remembers* his promises, for he is the *God of the Oath*. *A Man of Strength* has told you that *LORD has been Gracious*. *May God Add* to your faith and grace, even as he overcame the *Bitterness* and *Rebellion* of his people who were lost in those days by giving them a messenger who would bring them back the Lord through a *God-man who Saves* his people from their sins.

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