

# Luke 1:1-23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Luke chapter 1 verses 1 to 23 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

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.

And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

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 Lord and burn incense.

And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.

[ 1 : 1 8 ] 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.

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

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

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

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

[ 2 : 3 3 ] And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realised that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute. And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

In the opening of Luke chapter 1, Luke introduces himself as the latest in a line of several who had written a narrative of the events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Luke was someone with access to eyewitnesses and apostolic heralds of the gospel message. He had been following everything closely for some time. He was in a great position to write a detailed and orderly account for someone like Theophilus.

In order need not refer to strict chronological order. There is chronological reordering of material in the gospels for thematic and other purposes. This is something we find elsewhere throughout the scriptures.

But what we see here is a similar expression to something that we encounter also in Acts chapter 11 verse 4. When Peter relates the events of his bringing the gospel to the Gentiles in chapter 10, his words are introduced as follows.

[ 3 : 40 ] But Peter began and explained it to them in order. The point, it seems to me, is that there is a well-structured, persuasive narrative, achieving its purpose of informing and persuading people, most immediately Theophilus, in the truth of their faith.

Luke begins with parallel annunciations. There's the first one to Zechariah concerning John the Baptist, and the second to Mary concerning Jesus. The angel Gabriel appears to both of them.

Both of them respond with fear. Both of them are reassured by Gabriel, told not to be afraid, and are told that they will have a son. John will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb.

The Holy Spirit will come upon Mary. The future missions of both John and Jesus are foretold. Both Zechariah and Mary respond with seemingly similar questions.

How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife has advanced in years. And how will this be? Since I am a virgin. There are a number of similar accounts of annunciations in the Old Testament.

[ 4 : 43 ] Genesis chapter 16 verses 11 to 12, given to Hagar. And the angel of the Lord said to her, Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has listened to your affliction.

He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him. And he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen. Genesis chapter 17 verses 15 to 21, And God said to Abraham, As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.

I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations. Kings of peoples shall come from her. Then Abraham fell on his face, and laughed, and said to himself, Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?

Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child? And Abraham said to God, O that Ishmael might live before you. God said, No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac.

I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly.

[ 5 : 55 ] He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year. And then in Judges 13, verses two to five, there was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah, and his wife was barren and had no children.

And the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman, and said to her, Behold, you are barren, and have not born children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. Therefore be careful, and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean.

For behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.

The presence of two annunciations in direct succession indicates that the destinies of Jesus and John the Baptist are entwined in a single divine purpose. There are further parallels and connections between the two that emerge as we proceed through the narrative of Luke.

The presence of these two annunciations at the very beginning of Luke's gospel also foregrounds the theme of birth. The prominence of the theme of birth can also be seen at the beginning of books such as Exodus and 1 Samuel.

[ 7 : 08 ] The story of the Exodus is the story of the deliverance from Egypt, the story of 1 Samuel, the story of the establishment of the kingdom. A similar new work of God is to be anticipated here.

The theme of new birth is not just about an individual having a child, it's about something new happening in history, the birth of a new order. Like Exodus and 1 Samuel, the beginning of the story of Luke focuses upon believing and courageous women and birth.

In Exodus it's the Hebrew midwives, Jochebed and Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter. In 1 Samuel it's Hannah. And here it's Mary, Elizabeth and Anna. The focus upon women at the very beginning of a great new work of God in history is noteworthy.

It follows a consistent pattern in the Old Testament. The men that surround them are either wicked, Pharaoh and his men, Hophni and Phinehas in 1 Samuel, or lacking in spiritual perception, Eli and Zechariah.

Eli later goes blind while Zechariah is struck dumb. Or they stay largely in the background, Amram in Exodus, Alcana in 1 Samuel, and in Luke, Joseph.

[ 8 : 17 ] Many of the women are barren, widows or unmarried. The barren woman having her womb opened is a very important theme in scripture, particularly in the book of Genesis. The story of Luke begins with believing women and a doubting man at news of birth.

It ends with believing women and initially doubting men at news of resurrection. And this is one of the ways we can already start to see a symmetry developing between the birth of Christ at the beginning and his resurrection at the end, which is a new birth.

The focus upon women also goes together with a focus upon the gestation periods of God's salvation. God's salvation doesn't begin in the glare of public life, but in the quiet prayers of an aging couple and in the hiddenness of a young woman's womb.

Thirty or more years will pass before this salvation comes to fruition. But it has already begun. It's begun in the secret place, in these contexts where people don't necessarily know what's taking place, but something is going to occur and it will have impact many years down the line.

Zachariah and his wife Elizabeth are faithful people. They're both Levites and are described as being righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. Now such a statement makes many Protestants nervous, but it shouldn't.

[ 9 : 35 ] The framework of perfect and spotless law obedience is one that we often impose upon the text, but we often do so quite inappropriately. Flawed and fallen human beings, like Zachariah and Elizabeth certainly were, can be described in such a manner.

The law always graciously provided ways for people to be in faithful and blameless relationship with God, even as sinful human beings. Zachariah shares his name with Zachariah the prophet, whose ministry centered around the rebuilding of the temple.

His connection with Zachariah might also make us think of the Old Testament story and where it left off. It also hints at a new temple building project after the defiling of an old temple and a period of exile.

The muteness of the priest Zachariah could be related to the general silence of God in the period between the two testaments. God reopens the mouth of the dumb prophet, and a new era of his redemption will come about.

He might be a picture of the nation as a whole as well. Zachariah initially responds with doubt, but his mouth has later opened in praise. Many of these particular connections are weak, and I wouldn't put that much strength upon them, but they're worth considering.

[ 10 : 46 ] Elishabah was the wife of Aaron and the matriarch of the priestly line. In Exodus chapter 6 verse 22, Baron Elizabeth, who shares her name, is a symbol of a priestly line in crisis, much as it was in the time of Eli, as Eli's two sons died on the same day and his priestly house was left in tatters.

The later opening of the womb of Elishabah, Elizabeth, promises the establishment of a new faithful priesthood from the ashes. Again, not a very strong connection, but worth considering perhaps.

We've already met the angel Gabriel on two previous occasions, both in the book of Daniel, in chapter 8 verse 16 and chapter 9 verse 21 of the book of Daniel, where he is involved in the affairs of nations and the destinies of empires.

His presence here hints at something that is stirring that will have ramifications far beyond the borders of Israel. The setting of the scene here is important. Zechariah is in the temple at the hour of incense.

Now his service here would be related to the duties outlined in Exodus chapter 30 verses 7 to 8. And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it. Every morning when he dresses the lamps, he shall burn it.

[ 11 : 56 ] And when Aaron sets up the lamps at twilight, he shall burn it. A regular incense offering before the Lord throughout your generations. And a connection between incense and prayer can be seen in places like Psalm 141 verse 2.

Let my prayer be counted as incense before you and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice. Interestingly, we have already seen a prayer associated with evening sacrifice in scripture.

In Daniel chapter 9 verses 20 to 23. While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel and presenting my plea before the Lord my God for the holy hill of my God, while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the first, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice.

He made me understand, speaking with me and saying, O Daniel, I have now come out to give you insight and understanding. At the beginning of your pleas for mercy, a word went out, and I have come to tell it to you, for you are greatly loved.

Therefore consider the word and understand the vision. This is followed by the prophecy concerning the 70 weeks, in which the work of Christ is foretold.

[ 13 : 11 ] And so the coming of Gabriel again at the time of the evening sacrifice may not be an accident. It may be designed in part to draw our mind back to this event.

Zachariah was from the priestly division of Abijah. Each of the 24 subdivisions of the priests would serve on a rotating two-week basis. Zachariah would serve with the incense, and then he was supposed to come out and bless the praying people outside.

The setting in the temple recalls the story of 1 Samuel chapter 1. Which also begins with a barren woman praying for a son in the temple, and another priest, Eli, who lacks perception.

The temple is prominent at the beginning of Luke, also appearing in chapter 2 with the presentation of Jesus in the temple, where we also encounter a woman called Anna, reminding us of Hannah, who constantly prays there.

The temple isn't just dismissed by Luke as something belonging to the old order and unimportant. A lot of events in the book of Luke and in the book of Acts present the temple in a more positive light.

- [ 14 : 14 ] It's a place where people go to interact with God, to pray. It's a place where faithful people are to be encountered. And it's also a place, in this particular occasion, where God meets and reveals himself to his people.

At the end of the gospel, it also returns to the themes of its beginning, with the disciples constantly praying in the temple after Jesus has ascended to heaven. We could perhaps see this as mirroring the praying multitude at the beginning of the gospel.

The theme of prayer is very prominent throughout the book of Luke. Another thing to notice here. Jesus' action at the end, however, also recalls the beginning, as he blesses the disciples and then ascends to the heavenly temple.

There is maybe a symmetry to be seen between the beginning and the end. The book of Acts also follows the pattern of Luke in many ways. The temple, prayer and the Holy Spirit are also very prominent at its beginning, as is the failure to perceive.

Here it's Zechariah's failure to perceive. In the book of Acts, it's the people thinking that maybe they're drunk, which again reminds us of the story of Eli, who thinks that maybe Hannah is drunk when she's praying.

- [ 15 : 24 ] The focus upon the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the gospel is also noteworthy. And again, it's paralleled with the focus upon the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the book of Acts. At the beginning of the book of Luke, we see that association in the way that John the Baptist is to be filled with the Holy Spirit from his womb.

Then, in the way that the Spirit comes upon Mary. Then, in the way that Elizabeth and Zechariah are filled with the Spirit. Then, in the way that Simeon is led in the Spirit into the temple.

And then, the way that Christ is filled with the Holy Spirit and then led in the Spirit into the wilderness. The Spirit is very, very prominent at the beginning of Luke's gospel. And then later on, in the book of Acts, of course, with the events of Pentecost, it's no less prominent.

God has heard the prayers of Zechariah and Elizabeth. But these prayers are not just prayers that relate to them as individuals and their desire for a son. As in 1 Samuel, the prayer of individuals for a child is the prayer for deliverance for the entire nation.

The significance of John's name is not so straightforward. Johanan was one of the high priests after the restoration in Nehemiah chapter 12 verses 22 to 23. Perhaps somewhat more interesting, Johanan was also a leader of the army who led a remnant of Judah out of the land to Egypt after the assassination of Gedaliah against the word of the prophet Jeremiah.

- [ 16 : 46 ] We see this in 2 Kings chapter 25 verses 22 to 26 and Jeremiah chapter 42 verse 1 to 43 verse 7. How would this relate to John?

First, the names of his parents suggest that John the Baptist is connected with the formation of a new priesthood, perhaps. Second, faithful John actually does something rather similar in character to the unfaithful Johanan.

He leads a remnant out of an occupied land into the wilderness where he prepares the way for Jesus, Joshua, the new ruler who will lead them back in. However, by far the more prominent meaning, I think, is the straightforward etymological one.

God is gracious. That's the meaning of his name. And it's a theme in the story. God has shown his favour to Zechariah and Elizabeth. He has shown mercy to them in giving them a son.

[17:50] We have the law of the Nazarite in Numbers chapter 6. And this is similar to Samson in Judges chapter 13 and Samuel in 1 Samuel 1 verse 11. He comes in the spirit and the power of Elijah.

Malachi chapter 4 verses 5 to 6. So what do we see here, putting the pieces together?

He's someone who will prepare the way for and anoint the king, the Davidic king. He's like Elijah, a desert prophet who will herald the great day of the Lord, preparing the way for the Lord to come to his people.

John the Baptist is going to continue the ministry of the prophets and in preparing the way for Christ, he will bring that ministry to its climax. Zechariah's question in response to Gabriel is similar to that of Abraham.

And then in chapter 15 verse 8 of Genesis. But he said, O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it? Whereas in that case, it doesn't seem to be a question of unbelief.

[ 20 : 22 ] And so Zechariah is struck dumb until he will be most prepared to bear the praise for what God has done. A question to consider. The appearance to Zechariah isn't just an appearance to a private individual.

What significance might we see in the fact that God delivers this revelation, this annunciation, in such a context?

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