

Chapter 1: The Annunciation of John the Baptist

Luke 1:1–25

Christians believe that coming to a right understanding of the identity, nature, and mission of Jesus is the most important thing any person could do. What, then, should we make of Jesus? From one perspective, we are dealing with a man born in an insignificant town, to insignificant parents. This man's own people fiercely rejected him, and the Romans executed him on the cross in precisely the same manner that they executed thousands of other criminals, prisoners, and political enemies. Separated from this man by two thousand years, why should his life make any difference to the doubts, suffering, pain, and chaos of *our* lives? More than that, Jesus calls us to give up everything to follow him (e.g., Luke 9:23–26). If we take Jesus seriously, we have much to lose!

We know almost nothing about Theophilus, the man to whom Luke addresses his Gospel (Luke 1:3). Nevertheless, Theophilus clearly has some level of confusion, doubts, and concerns about Jesus—perhaps many of the same concerns that we share. To address these concerns, Luke writes an “orderly account” of the life of Jesus in order that Theophilus (and we) may gain “certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:3, 4). For all those who feel drawn emotionally and spiritually to Jesus, but who struggle to understand his significance intellectually, Luke writes to give much-needed clarity, assurance, and certainty about Jesus' importance. In Luke 1:1–25, Luke's first goal is to impress upon us that *because Jesus fulfills and exceeds the old covenant, we may believe in him with certainty*.

Luke's Purpose: To Give us Certainty about Jesus (Luke 1:1–4)

The scrolls that ancient people used for their books were not easy to browse in the way that modern books are. For this reason, ancient readers expected that the opening sentence of an ancient book would fulfill the roles that our books distribute among the book jacket summary, table of contents, and title page.¹ That is, ancient readers hoped to gain solid overview of the contents of the scroll from that first sentence. For this reason, three of the Gospel writers open their books with some significant statement about the identity of Jesus. Matthew immediately identifies Jesus as the royal Son of David (Matt. 1:1), Mark announces that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God (Mark 1:1), and John reveals that Jesus is the Word who was in the beginning with God and who *is* God (John 1:1). Each of these introductory sentences tells us something critical about the aims of the authors and the way they intend to curate the vast amount of source material they could have used (cf. John 20:30–31; 21:25) in order to give their unique specific vantage point on the nature, identity, life, and ministry of Jesus.

¹ Joel. B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 33.

Luke's Purpose for Writing

Luke alone, however, uses his opening sentence to tell us less about *who* Jesus is, and more about *why* Luke has chosen to write about him:²

[1] Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, [2] just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, [3] 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, [4] that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1–4)

Uniquely among the Gospels, Luke's preface is similar to what might accompany a more formal, literary document written by a secular writer, with sophisticated Greek, precise sentence structure, and an elevated style that contrasts sharply with the rest of the Gospel.³ In Greek, these four verses are a single sentence, with the first half balanced carefully against the second half:

many have undertaken (v. 1) – it seemed good to me also (v. 3)
to compile an [orderly] narrative (v. 1) – to write an orderly account (v. 3)
the things that have been accomplished among us (v. 1) – all things (v. 3)
from the beginning (v. 2) – for some time past (v. 3)
just as those...have delivered them to us (v. 2) – so that you may have certainty (v. 4)⁴

In this statement, Luke identifies three stages: (1) the events themselves: “the things that have been accomplished among us” (Luke 1:1); (2) the compilation of narratives (Luke 1:1) by the eyewitnesses of the events who then became ministers of the word (Luke 1:2); and (3) Luke's own writing of an orderly account after “having followed all things closely for some time past” (Luke 1:3).⁵ Luke's general point is clear: many have already written narratives of the life of Jesus, and Luke has studied them carefully; however, Luke believes that he can put these other narratives into an even more orderly account to give certainty to his reader(s).

History and Theology

² Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, The Anchor Yale Bible, vol. 28 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 290.

³ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 39–40.

⁴ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 36. My adjustments to conform Green's illustration to the ESV text.

⁵ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 290. Bock quibbles that this makes Luke a second-generation Christian, rather than a third-generation Christian, as Fitzmyer puts it (Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 1: 1:1–9:50 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 58.). So, the language of *stages* rather than *generations* brings out the helpful point Fitzmyer is making without suggesting any difference of identity between the “eyewitnesses” and the “ministers of the word” (Luke 1:2).

Luke's Gospel, then, is concerned primarily with relating historical events: "the things that have been accomplished among us" (Luke 1:1). Luke himself was not present to observe these events unfolding, but he has "followed all things closely for some time past" that those "who from the beginning were eyewitnesses" have "delivered" as "ministers of the word" (Luke 1:2-3). These eyewitnesses were Jesus' disciples who *saw* the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Afterwards, Jesus sent these same individuals as ministers of his word (apostles), charging them to declare everything they had seen and heard (cf. Acts 1:21-2; 4:19-20; 10:36-43).⁶ From the outset, Luke insists that his Gospel integrates and organizes these primary, eyewitness sources to give an accurate accounting of the actual events of history surrounding the life of Jesus.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to limit Luke's intentions down to a bare recording of the historical facts. Luke wants not only to tell us *what* has happened, but why it happened, and what significance these events carry. Indeed, these events are so important that Luke cannot capture their full significance in only one volume about the life of Jesus alone. In a second volume (the sequel that we call Acts), Luke will explain to Theophilus (Acts 1:1) how the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus leads directly into the rise of the Church under the reign of the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Lord Jesus Christ.⁷ Thus far, it has been the work of the "ministers of the word" to declare the gospel message on the basis of what they have seen. Now, Luke steps forward to arrange these accounts in an orderly fashion to put the preached message of the ministers of the word into writing.

Catechesis and Certainty

The significance of Luke's project is not restricted to the ivory towers of scholars and philosophers. On the contrary, Luke recognizes that the story of Jesus has the greatest possible significance for every person. Specifically, Luke writes to a man of whom we know very little beyond his name, Theophilus.⁸ Calling Theophilus "most excellent" does suggest a high degree of honor usually reserved for Roman political officials; however, even this bit of information does not shed much light on his identity.⁹ Still, dedicating this book to Theophilus does not mean that Luke intended his Gospel to reach Theophilus alone: "Other ancient writers dedicated their works to individuals, knowing full well that they were writing for a larger audience (Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.1 §§1-5)."¹⁰ Even today, virtually every modern book is dedicated to someone, and no one imagines that modern authors intend their books to circulate only to those people listed on the dedication page.

More importantly than the *identity* of Theophilus, then, are Luke's *goals* for Theophilus. Luke states that he is writing in order "that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been

⁶ Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 42.

⁷ Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1: 1:1-9:50, 64-57.

⁸ "Theophilus is a proper name commonly used from the third century B.C. on, found in both Greek papyri from Egypt and inscriptions....It was used by both Gentiles and Jews....The Theophilus mentioned here is met again in the introduction to the second volume (Acts 1:1); he is otherwise unknown." (Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 299.)

⁹ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 44.

¹⁰ Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1: 1:1-9:50, 64-64.

taught” (Luke 1:4). In the Greek word order, the phrase for “things you have been taught” comes earlier than the word for “certainty.” The word for “things you have been taught” is the word that we get our word *catechize* from, and it may mean either “to report, inform” or “to instruct” (cf. Acts 18:25; 21:21, 24; Rom. 2:18; 1 Cor. 14:19; Gal. 6:6).¹¹ Here, Luke explains his intention for his Gospel to reinforce the instruction that Theophilus has received regarding Christianity. What kind of reinforcement, then, does Theophilus need?

In light of the Gospel as a whole (along with the book of Acts), the reinforcement Luke gives to Theophilus is theological certainty: “Theophilus’s question would seem to be, ‘Is Christianity what I believed it to be, a religion sent from God?’ Perhaps such doubt resulted from the judgment the church suffered, especially as a result of including Gentiles.”¹² The story of Jesus is so unlike any other world religion that the intense persecution of the church does not undermine, but establishes, the claims of Jesus. How, then, can this be? How are believers to remain confident in Jesus despite their rejection by the world? In his Gospel, Luke intends to provide doubting believers with every assurance of why they should remain faithful, according to the eyewitness testimony of those who saw and heard Jesus directly.

Luke’s Proclamation: Jesus Fulfills and Exceeds the Old Covenant (Luke 1:5–17)

In order to give the Church certainty concerning what they have been taught, Luke grounds his orderly account in its historic context: during the days of Herod, king of Judea, and in the aged, barren couple Zechariah and Elizabeth:

[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. (Luke 1:5–7)

The days leading up to Herod’s kingship were sorrowful, since it had been four hundred years since God had communicated with his people.¹³ In fulfillment of the words of the prophet Amos, Israel endured during this time a “famine...of hearing the word of the LORD” (Amos 8:11). Furthermore, while God was silent, the nation of Israel experienced subjugation at the hands of several nations, including the oppression of the Roman Empire at the time of Herod’s reign. Herod himself was not the rightful Davidic king (cf. Gen. 49:10; 2 Sam. 7:16), but a usurper of David’s throne as God’s people awaited their long-promised Messiah.¹⁴ When we consider all the evidence of the New

¹¹ Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 43–44.

¹² Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1: 1:1–9:50, 65.

¹³ Frederick L. Godet, *Commentary on Luke (A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, 3rd ed., New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1887; Reprint: Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1981), 44.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 1, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 8–9. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.ix.ii.html>>

Testament, we can identify the date of these events as near to 4 B.C.¹⁵

From a human perspective, we might expect that the national, political struggles of Israel against the fraudulent reign of Herod and the conquering power of Rome would take center stage. Who doesn't like political intrigue and drama? Alternately, we might think that Luke would directly take up the ministry of Jesus Christ in the world. After all, isn't that the important part of the story? Instead, Luke begins the story of Jesus with the story of John the Baptist. As John Calvin memorably writes, "Luke very properly begins his Gospel with John the Baptist, just as a person who was going to speak about the daylight would commence with the dawn. For, like the dawn, he went before the Sun of Righteousness, which was shortly to arise."¹⁶ While all the Gospel writers tell us of the ministry of John the Baptist, Luke alone relates to us the account of John's conception and birth to Zechariah and Elizabeth.

A New Abraham and Sarah

Luke relates not only the general detail that Zechariah is a priest, but more specifically that he is a priest in the division of Abijah (cf. 1 Chron. 24:10).¹⁷ Of Elizabeth, we learn that she too is a daughter of a priest ("from the daughters of Aaron"; Luke 1:5). While God's law required priests only to marry virgins of Israelite birth (Lev. 21:7, 13–14), Zechariah's marriage to Elizabeth underscores that John comes from thoroughly "priestly stock."¹⁸ Even more importantly, we read that both Zechariah and Elizabeth are "righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord" (Luke 1:6). Luke presents this couple as ideal in every way except for one painful part of their lives: "But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years" (Luke 1:7).

The barrenness of Elizabeth echoes several stories of the Old Testament: Abraham's wife Sarah (Gen. 11:30), Isaac's wife Rebekah (Gen. 25:21), Jacob's wife Rachel (Gen. 29:31), Manoah's unnamed wife (Judg. 13:2), and Elkanah's wife Hannah (1 Sam. 1:2, 5) were all barren until the Lord opened their wombs. Elizabeth, however, is not only barren, but also "advanced in years" (Luke 1:7). Of all the stories of barrenness, only Abraham's wife Sarah is both barren and elderly when she conceives and gives birth to a child (Gen. 17:17; 18:12). By identifying Elizabeth with Sarah through these two details, Luke is telling us that God plans to give "an uncommon and remarkable demonstration of his favor" through Elizabeth.¹⁹ Indeed, aside from Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea, the most important miracle recorded in the Old Testament is when aged, barren Sarah bears a son for Abraham according to the promise of God. Both the Old and the New Testament holds up the faith of Abraham to believe God's promise to bring forth a child from barren, elderly Sarah as the model and archetype of justifying faith (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:13–25). Aged and barren Zechariah and Elizabeth also, then, symbolize and personify the faithful remnant of old covenant Israel as they

¹⁵ Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1: 1:1–9:50, 75.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 1, 7–8. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.ix.ii.html>>

¹⁷ Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1: 1:1–9:50, 76.

¹⁸ Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 52.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists*, vol. 1, 12. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.ix.ii.html>>

patiently await God's deliverance in spite of the insurmountable condition of Elizabeth's "seemingly barren and lifeless womb."²⁰

Certainly, it will be an extraordinary thing for Elizabeth to give birth to John the Baptist, as she eventually does (Luke 1:57). In this context, however, the extraordinariness of Elizabeth's birth to John—the same kind of impossible birth as when Sarah delivered Isaac—is overshadowed by the yet more extraordinary conception and birth of Jesus to the virgin Mary (Luke 1:34). Through this orchestration of events, God is holding up John as the last and greatest figure in redemptive history up to this point (cf. Luke 7:26–28). And yet, John's glory does not approach the glory of the ultimate figure of redemptive history who arrives immediately after John: God's only Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

A New Samuel

While Luke associates John's *parents* more with the story of Abraham and Sarah, Luke associates John *himself* more with Samuel, the son born to barren Hannah and Elkanah in 1 Samuel 1.²¹ So, the annunciation of John takes place to a priest in the temple (Luke 1:8–13), while Hannah prays for her son at a temple in the sight of a priest (1 Sam. 1:9). Furthermore, both sons are set apart from very early on for the service of the Lord. Hannah vows not to cut the hair of Samuel and "lends" her son to the Lord as soon as she weans him for the rest of his life (1 Sam. 1:11, 21–28). John, on the other hand, is filled with the Holy Spirit, even from the womb, and forbidden from drinking any wine or strong drink (Luke 1:15). The Hebrew text of 1 Samuel says nothing about Samuel's being forbidden from wine or strong drink, but the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) and a manuscript found in the caves of Qumran adds the line "he drinks no wine or intoxicating beverage" (1 Sam. 1:11).²² Finally, Mary patterns her song, *the Magnificat*, after Hannah's prayer after lending Samuel to the Lord (1 Sam. 2:1–10; Luke 1:46–55).

There is a powerful reason for all these similarities: both Samuel and John the Baptist prepare the way for God's anointed King to come into the world. In the first case, Samuel anointed David as king over Israel, at which time the Holy Spirit rushed upon David to equip him for his ministry (1 Sam. 16:13). In the second case, John the Baptist will baptize Jesus, at which time the Holy Spirit will descend upon Jesus to equip him for his ministry (Luke 3:21–22). John the Baptist comes not only in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17), but he will come as a greater Samuel to prepare the way for the coming Davidic king.

The Annunciation of John the Baptist

Before we get too far ahead of ourselves in the story, let's return to Zechariah, whom we find performing his priestly duties in God's temple:

[8] Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, [9]

²⁰ Thomas G. Weinandy, *Jesus Becoming Jesus: A Theological Interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 5, 7 (footnote).

²¹ I am grateful to Pastor Andrew Lightner for pointing out these connections to me.

²² Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 326. This may suggest that the line is original to the Hebrew, but lost before the copying of the Hebrew manuscripts that we have today.

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.” (Luke 1:8–17)

Because there were 18,000 priests in Israel at this time, each priest had to serve his duty twice per year, but no priest was permitted to be chosen by lot to burn incense in the holy place more than once in his lifetime—and some priests were never chosen for this privilege!²³ The Mosaic law required God's people to offer incense every morning and evening (Ex. 30:7, 8), and the “whole multitude of the people” gathered for prayer three times a day, during the morning, at noon, and in the afternoon (cf. Acts 2:15; 3:1; 10:9, 31).²⁴ In the morning and in the afternoon, then, the priest offered incense *while* the people prayed, since the burning of incense symbolizes the prayers of God's people (cf. Rev. 5:8).²⁵

On this particular day, another person attended the ceremonies: an angel of the Lord (Luke 1:11). There is perhaps a bit of irony in the fact that Zechariah does not become troubled and fearful until the angel appears (Luke 1:12), since to be in the holy place of the temple is to be in the dwelling place of God himself.²⁶ In response, the angel tells Zechariah not to be afraid, since Zechariah's “prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John” (Luke 1:13). In the case of both Rebekah and Hannah, God opened the wombs of barren women through prayer (Gen. 25:21; 1 Sam. 1:12–20). Here also, Zechariah has apparently been praying for a child, and the Lord has appointed this moment to answer Zechariah's prayers.

Once again, Luke makes the parallel between Sarah and Elizabeth explicit, since the phrase “your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John” echoes the promise that God made to Abraham: “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac” (Gen. 17:19).²⁷ Where the name *Isaac* referred to the laughter of both Abraham and Sarah regarding God's promises (Gen. 17:17; 18:12; 21:6; cf. Gen. 21:9; 26:8), the name *John* means “Yahweh has shown favor.”²⁸ The name *Isaac*, then, contained a hint of rebuke at Abraham and Sarah's laughter

²³ Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1: 1:1–9:50, 79.

²⁴ Godet, *Commentary on Luke*, 45.

²⁵ Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2006), 213.

²⁶ Weinandy, *Jesus Becoming Jesus*, 4.

²⁷ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 54.

²⁸ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, 325.

that only laughter turned to the laughter of joy, but the name *John* contains no such reproach. Instead, only the gracious, merciful favor of God toward his people is in view.

The Call of John the Baptist

This John will be “great before the Lord” (Luke 1:15). As mentioned earlier, John will demonstrate his entire devotion to the call of the Lord by refraining from drinking wine or strong drink his entire lifetime (Luke 1:15), a prohibition God also gives to priests on duty (Lev. 10:4) and for Nazirites who dedicate themselves as holy to the Lord (Num. 6:3).²⁹ Instead, John will be “filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb” (Luke 1:15). Intriguingly, Luke will not deal much in his Gospel with the Spirit’s filling role, but will take up the topic in the book of Acts from the day of Pentecost onward (Acts 2:4ff). That John is filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb demonstrates that he is, in fact, a transitional figure between the old covenant and the new covenant (cf. Luke 7:26–28).³⁰

Functionally, the Holy Spirit will empower John for the work of turning “many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God” (Luke 1:16).³¹ This “turning” entails repentance (cf. Deut. 30:2; Hos. 3:5; 7:10; Luke 24:47; Acts 9:35; 2 Cor. 3:16; 1 Pet. 2:25), and repentance from sin will be at the heart of John’s ministry (Luke 3:3).³² More than this, John will go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, like Elijah’s successor Elisha (cf. 2 Kgs. 2:9–16).³³ In doing so, he will prepare the way of the Lord in three ways: (1) by turning the hearts of the fathers to the children (cf. Mal. 4:5–6); (2) by turning the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; and (3) by making ready a prepared people for the coming of their Lord. This summary encapsulates the actual ministry we see John the Baptist performing in Luke 3:1–22. Notice also how everything John does is for the Lord: “John will turn Israel to its *Lord*. John will go before *him*—that is, *the Lord*. And so the people will be prepared for the advent of *the Lord*. This is a reminder that this is *God’s* story. At this juncture, the solution to the priestly couple’s childlessness has been caught up into the larger need of Israel for the reign of its God.”³⁴

An Old Temple and a New Temple

On its own, Gabriel’s annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist is extraordinary. Why,

²⁹ Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 57. Marshall points out, though, that John is not forbidden from cutting his hair, so that he is not a Nazirite, but simply an ascetic.

³⁰ “Reference to the Spirit’s filling is largely absent from Luke’s Gospel, but makes an appearance again in Acts. Such a contrast tends to indicate that John is a transitional figure, since he is regarded as part of the OT prophets (7:26–28). The Spirit’s provision for him in this period is unique. This intensification may explain why Jesus calls him ‘more than a prophet’ in 7:26. Luke’s presentation of John as a transitional figure tends to dilute the attempt to make clean breaks in the ‘periods’ of Luke’s portrayal of salvation history. John represents a bridge between promise and fulfillment.” (Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1: 1:1–9:50, 86.)

³¹ Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists*, vol. 1, 17–18 Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.ix.iii.html>>

³² Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1: 1:1–9:50, 87.

³³ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, 319.

³⁴ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 76.

though, must the angel make this annunciation in the holy place of the temple as Zechariah offers incense? In part, the angel announces John's coming birth in the temple because John's birth will prepare the way for Jesus Christ, "the fulfillment of all that the temple presently signified (God's ancient covenantal presence with his people) and anticipated (God's future new life-giving covenantal presence with his people), and thus the answer to all the prayers and sacrifices that were offered therein."³⁵ Indeed, the entire Bible narrates the story of how God makes his dwelling place with his people, from the garden of Eden, to the old covenant temple, to the New Jerusalem which has no need for a temple (Rev. 21:22).³⁶ More immediately, though, Gabriel's annunciation to Zechariah contrasts with Gabriel's upcoming annunciation to Mary about the birth of Jesus (Luke 1:26–39). To Zechariah, Gabriel announces the coming birth of John *in* the temple. Regarding the coming birth of Jesus, though, Gabriel announces to Mary that she will *be* the temple, since God will use her womb as his dwelling place on earth.³⁷ These two annunciations contrast the end of the old covenant temple against the beginning of the new covenant temple in the person of Jesus Christ.

Fulfilling and Exceeding the Old Covenant

Although John the Baptist is technically the subject of this section, he is not really the one that this passage draws our attention toward. John the Baptist represents the pinnacle of everything good from the old covenant: God's promise to Abraham and Sarah, God's temple, God's great prophet (Samuel) who prepares the way for God's great king (David), and God's angelic intervention on behalf of his people by messengers like Gabriel. While John encapsulates all of these elements in himself, he cannot move beyond them by himself. He stands as the glorious exclamation point at the end of God's glorious old covenant with his people. Even so, John cannot fulfill all the promises of God's old covenant, and neither can he usher in anything new and more glorious.

The reason that Luke begins by telling us about John the Baptist, then, is to contrast the pinnacle of the old covenant against the one to whom all the promises of the old covenant pointed: Jesus. Individually, all of the elements of the old covenant that John replicates in himself pointed forward to the coming of God's promised Messiah. Now that all the best elements the old covenant had to offer come together in one person, John is capable of pointing forward to the promised Messiah in a remarkable, new way. John will actually point the Messiah out of the crowd and personally baptize him to commission him for his ministry.

Still, it is Jesus, not John, who will fulfill the promises of the old covenant. John represents the old covenant, but only Jesus accomplishes what the old covenant announced. Furthermore, Jesus will not only bring these promises to fulfillment, but he will surpass what the old covenant held out by inaugurating a new covenant based on his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. This is Luke's first point as he seeks to give us certainty and confidence about Jesus: we can put all our hope in Jesus, for he fulfills and exceeds the old covenant!

Luke's Process: Relating How God Confirms His Word by Signs (Luke 1:18–25)

³⁵ Weinandy, *Jesus Becoming Jesus*, 6.

³⁶ See G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004).

³⁷ Weinandy, *Jesus Becoming Jesus*, 12.

Just as Abraham asked for confirmation of God's promises (Gen. 15:8), and even went so far as to laugh at the idea that his wife, Sarah, should bear him a son (Gen. 17:17), so Zechariah asks Gabriel for some sign to confirm this promise:³⁸

[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. (Luke 1:18–23)

Such a poor response to such a wonderful promise!

The Doubt of Zechariah

The text is not entirely clear about why Zechariah's comments draw such a rebuke from Gabriel, especially since they sound similar to Mary's unchallenged question: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34).³⁹ Most likely, however, it seems that Zechariah's question asks how he can *know* whether the promise was true, where Mary only asks *how* it might come to be, given her virginity. That is, Mary seems to presume that the promise is true, and only asks how such a wonderful promise could come to pass. Zechariah, by contrast, does not believe Gabriel's words (Luke 1:20). Even so, God himself often extended signs to confirm the faith of his people (Ex. 3:12; Is. 7:11), allowed his people to request signs without rebuke (Judg. 6:36ff.; cf. 13:8ff.; 1 Sam. 10:2; 2 Kgs. 20:8).⁴⁰ In fact, God even at one point rebukes a faithless king who refuses to ask for a sign to confirm God's prophecy (Isa. 7:12–13). In that situation, God insisted on providing a sign: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14).

In response to Zechariah's question, the angel finally reveals his own name: Gabriel (Luke 1:19). As a priest, Zechariah certainly would have recognized the name of the angel who appears twice in the book of Daniel (Dan. 8:16; 9:21). Indeed, when Gabriel last appeared to God's people, God sent him to explain his extraordinary plans for his people among the nations. Gabriel comes with the same kind of mission and message now, declaring, "I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news" (Luke 1:19).⁴¹ In other words, Zechariah has not

³⁸ Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 60.

³⁹ Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists*, vol. 1, 23–25. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.ix.iv.html>>

⁴⁰ Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 60.

⁴¹ Again, I am thankful to Andrew Lightner for pointing this idea out to me.

doubted the word of an angel, but the word of God that God sent the angel to bring.⁴² To confirm this message both to Zechariah and to the people waiting for an extended time in prayer outside the temple, Gabriel says that Zechariah must be mute until the day that Gabriel's words are fulfilled (Luke 1:20–22). Then, after finishing his time of service, Zechariah returns home (Luke 1:23).

Importantly, Zechariah is not only *mute* (unable to speak), but apparently also *deaf* (unable to hear). Gabriel first says, “And behold, you will be *silent* and unable to speak...” (Luke 1:21). Afterward, we read that John keeps making signs to the people while he remains “mute” (Luke 1:22). That word for *mute* is different from the earlier word for *silent*. The earlier word *silent* only refers to Zechariah's ability to speak; however, the second word *mute* can also mean *deaf*. Indeed, we later see the people making signs to Zechariah to ask him what he wants to name his new son (Luke 1:62), implying that deafness is as much a part of Zechariah's sign as his muteness.⁴³ Is it possible that by becoming mute and deaf, Zechariah is acting out the four hundred years of a famine of the word of the Lord (cf. Amos 8:11)?⁴⁴ Only after John the Baptist comes into the world is Zechariah filled with the Holy Spirit in order to *prophesy* (Luke 1:67) about God's work of salvation in the world. Here, on the brink of the entry of the Messiah, God ends the muteness of his silence in order that his people may hear the prophetic word just in time to recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

The Faith of Elizabeth

In the story of Abraham and Sarah, Sarah is the faithless one who is rebuked for laughing at God's promises, even though Abraham also laughed (Gen. 17:17; 18:12–15). Here, however, Elizabeth is the one with faith, in contrast to Zechariah's doubt:

[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.” (Luke 1:24–25)

The text does not specify exactly why Elizabeth keeps herself hidden, although the answer may have something to do with keeping herself away from the reproach of her people before she is fully pregnant after the fifth month of carrying her baby.⁴⁵ Furthermore, by hiding herself, she keeps the news of her pregnancy even from her own family, so that Gabriel announces to Mary that Elizabeth is six months with child as a sign to confirm the promises to Mary (Luke 1:36).⁴⁶ By declaring that even aged, barren Elizabeth has a baby, Gabriel proves God's ability to do something even greater by bringing about Mary's virginal conception. The emphasis of this text, however, is on the faith-filled response of Elizabeth. Rather than doubting what God is doing, Elizabeth rejoices that the Lord has looked upon her and taken away her reproach (Luke 1:25).

⁴² Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists*, vol. 1, 25. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.ix.iv.html>>

⁴³ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 328–29.

⁴⁴ Once again, I am grateful to Andrew Lightner for this suggestion.

⁴⁵ Godet, *Commentary on Luke*, 52–53.

⁴⁶ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 321.

Discussion Questions

- 1) How many elements does Luke identify to demonstrate the historical reliability of his Gospel? What would we lose if Christianity were not based on historical events? How does understanding that Luke seeks to give us “certainty” about what we have been “taught” shape our understanding of his Gospel (Luke 1:4)? Where do you most seek certainty in your faith?
- 2) How do the Old Testament stories of Abraham/Sarah, Hannah/Samuel, Gabriel, and the temple shape our reading of this passage? How does Luke contrast these old covenant elements against Jesus? Where does John the Baptist stand in relationship to the old covenant and the new covenant? How does Jesus’ greatness beyond the old covenant give our faith certainty?
- 3) Zechariah and Elizabeth are elderly and barren, but they faithfully pray for a son (Luke 1:13). More, God has been silent for 400 years, yet elderly Zechariah faithfully serves as a priest (Amos 8:11; Luke 1:8–9). What discouragements cause you to despair? What attractions distract you from Christ? How does the faith of Zechariah and Elizabeth give our faith certainty?
- 4) Why does God give signs to confirm his word, when his word should be enough (Luke 1:19–20)? How do Zechariah and Elizabeth become signs to Israel and to Mary? In what way does a sign confirm the truthfulness of God’s promises? What signs does God give us today? Can those signs alone convince skeptics? How, then, do signs give our faith certainty about Christ?