

# The Virgin And The Priest The Making Of The Messiah

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## 2 The Family of the New Abraham

Nobody knows exactly who the author of Luke's gospel was or where it was written, but historical research dates its composition to sometime during the last three decades of the first century C.E. Written in a sophisticated literary style of the Greek language, it emulated the style of language used in the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Pentateuch, which proves the author was highly educated. The Septuagint, regarded with awe during ancient times, was generally accepted as being divinely inspired.<sup>1</sup> So Luke used the same manner of expression to demonstrate that his account of Jesus' life reflected the same divine *modus operandi*.

A considerable amount of content was unique to Luke, and this material provided the spine of his gospel. Specifically, it was used in the infancy narratives of Jesus and John the Baptist to illuminate the 'truth' of Jesus' parentage.

In the formal preface to his gospel, and without impugning any other writers by name, Luke suggests that he is the most trustworthy chronicler of events.<sup>2</sup> It would be a serious mistake, however, to expect totally accurate history. Luke's sources, both for his gospel and the Book of Acts, would have been a combination of fact, speculation, proclamation, and fabrication, and the historicity of names and events were always of secondary importance to the schematization he applied to present his case. Not only that, Luke wrote in the time-honored way typical of religiously motivated texts -- so newcomers and lower ranks of the sect would not be offended by its content. He subscribed to the view that cold hard facts don't gain adherents to a cause as effectively as dramatic invention, so his manuscript was composed accordingly.

For example, Luke needed to show that Jesus' birthplace was Bethlehem, Judea, because of a prophecy in the Old Testament which early Christians interpreted as meaning that the Messiah would be born there.<sup>3</sup> The problem was that Jesus was well known for having been raised in Galilee. His solution was to create a storyline with impossible facts.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.  
Luke 2:1-5

Earlier in his gospel, Luke stated that Jesus was born "in the days of Herod, King of Judea. Herod died in 4 B.C.E. The supposed journey from Galilee to Bethlehem was in response to a census called by the Roman Emperor Augustus. This particular census, however, is known by historians to have occurred in 6-7 C.E., more than ten years after the death of Herod. And to compound matters further, it only applied to Judea, not Galilee. Stranger still is the claim that the Romans required people to travel to their ancestral villages to register for taxation purposes. There is no record of any such

requirement for any tax census in the history of the Roman Empire. Needless to say, Luke's intention was not so much to deceive the reader as it was to impress upon him that Jesus was the Messiah of prophecy.

Every religion had its mysteries and secrets, and Christianity was no different -- on the contrary, it had more secrets than most. This was highly sensitive material that could never be casually revealed lest it be misunderstood, or much worse, fall into the hands of the Church's enemies. Only after a novice had grown sufficiently in faith, and gained the trust of others, was he granted access to the group's closely guarded secrets. Usually, this was a slow and deliberate process because the higher ranks derived status, wealth, and respect from the lower orders by manipulating these hidden 'truths.' And the one thing that the early Church never wanted made public was the truth of Jesus' origins. Yet this information, which contained the power to undermine its credibility and challenge its authority, is precisely what Luke revealed.

## **THE NATIVITIES**

Luke's opening chapter was devoted entirely to a complex theological rationalization of Jesus' conception. And it was no coincidence that his account began with an identification of the parents of John the Baptist.

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

Luke 1:1-5

This was followed by two separate annunciations from the angel Gabriel to herald first the birth of John the Baptist and second Jesus. The details of the two nativities were intertwined and carefully constructed, but went much further than was necessary to simply inform the reader that John was the forerunner of Jesus.

Most Bible commentaries note that Luke's infancy narratives were patterned on birth legends of Jewish heroes of the past. And the introduction of John's parents was a clear pointer to that. Zacharias and Elisabeth represented the return of Abraham, the original Hebrew patriarch, and his wife Sarah. Key components in the story of Abraham's family, as recorded in Genesis, were copied by Luke and insinuated into the lives of Zacharias and Elisabeth. Both couples were elderly; Abraham and Zacharias "walk blameless;" as Sarah was "childless," so Elisabeth was "barren." God told Abraham that his wife will bear him a son and also named the child; the angel Gabriel gave the same message to Zacharias and also named his son. Both men responded with incredulity [Table 2].

Annunciations, 'old age,' and 'barren' motifs, also formed part of the birth accounts of Isaac, Samson, and Samuel. And the consensus view among scholars is that Luke lifted his characterizations and plotlines from the Hebrew Bible to show that God's providence had now passed from the old era of Israel to the new era of Jesus. Close analysis of the text, however, reveals that the birth annunciations and infancy narratives within Zacharias' family were integrated into a unity specifically designed to replicate the dynamics of Abraham's family. So rather than symbolizing a break with the past, the 'new era' represented a return to former times. Luke, as an ancient historian, believed that the direction of salvation history was cyclical and not linear.

The relevance of intricate family-based plot mechanics in the stories of Old Testament

legends has largely been neglected due to the predisposition of both clergymen and scholars to regard Jesus as a self-contained unit -- regardless of whether he is understood as the Son of God, a wandering holy man, a political revolutionary, an itinerant preacher, or a Mediterranean peasant. In Jewish tradition, each person was by definition part of a complex web of blood relationships from which they could not be separated -- father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister, and so on. No man was an island. Principal actors in the sacred texts thrived on human interaction. And the reason so many protagonists and dramas from the Bible have held the popular imagination for so long is that they resonate with ordinary people.

The scribes who wrote Genesis explained that it took three generations to establish the nation of Israel. In the Old Testament, therefore, the preferred divine self-appellation was not “God of Abraham” but “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” Likewise, the new Israel would be made by descendants of the new Abraham. Each member of Luke’s cast of characters -- Zacharias, Elisabeth, Mary, John the Baptist, and Jesus -- had its counterpart in Abraham’s family [Table 1]. The necessity of providential archetypes was the basic theological premise underlying Luke’s opening chapter.

**Table 1. FAMILIES OF FAITH**

Source	Father	Mother	Maid	First Son	Second Son
Genesis	Abraham	Sarah	Hagar	Ishmael	Isaac
Luke	Zacharias	Elisabeth	Mary	John	Jesus

**THE VISITATION**

Luke might not have been an historian in the modern sense of the word, but he knew how to structure his sources to fit a chronological plan that allowed him to chart a detailed scheduling of events. So in Luke-Acts, the time and place of incidents was never haphazard as it was in other gospel accounts. It is surprising, therefore, to notice that between the time of Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary and the birth of Jesus, an apparent contradiction exists between the storyline and the sequence of events that requires explanation. The timeline is as follows:

Gabriel announces to Zacharias that his elderly wife Elisabeth is to give birth to a son who shall be named John.  
Luke 1:13

Six months later, Gabriel announces to Mary that she will give birth to a son who shall be named Jesus.  
Luke 1:26

Mary goes “with haste” to the house of Zacharias.  
Luke 1:39

Three months later, Mary leaves the house of Zacharias.  
Luke 1:56

Elisabeth gives birth to John.  
Luke 1:57

Mary gives birth to Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem.

Luke 2:7

Elisabeth was already six months pregnant with John the Baptist when Gabriel told Mary to go to the house of Zacharias.

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus... And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible. "And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth.

Luke 1:31-40

The Greek phrase "*meta spoudes*," is normally translated as "with haste," but this does not suit the context here. Mary would hardly have rushed to congratulate Elisabeth on her pregnancy when six months had already elapsed. If they were "kinswomen" or sisters, then Mary would have already known, and her response to Gabriel did not suggest otherwise. Mary would be even less enthusiastic to give news that she had just conceived a child out of wedlock. But she only consented to her *future* pregnancy. Luke's use of future tenses ruled out the possibility that she conceived at the moment the angel spoke, and nothing in the narrative implies that it had already occurred.

Jane Schaberg explained that the phrase *meta spoudes* was an idiom used several times in Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible, used to denote anxiety and a disturbed psychological or spiritual condition.<sup>4</sup> Any movement implied was from a peaceful state of mind toward one of high stress. The only other occasion where *meta spoudes* was used in the New Testament is in Mark's famous banquet scene when Herod Antipas, bewitched by the dancing of Salome, daughter of his newly acquired wife Herodias, promised to give her whatever she wished. After consulting with her mother, Salome returned "with haste" and asked the king for the head of John the Baptist.

For when Herodias' daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will grant it." And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." And she went out, and said to her mother, "What shall I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the baptizer." And she came in immediately with haste to the king, and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

Mark 6:22-26

The translation of *meta spoudes* as "with haste" is particularly redundant here, because it is preceded by "came in immediately," which means exactly the same thing. In the context Mark used it, *meta spoudes* described Herodias' mental state, the result of her mother's extraordinary request.

A journey from Galilee, through the dangerous gauntlet of Samaria and into the hill

country of Judea, in a society where betrothed women did not normally go out in public, was not something that could be done without considerable logistical preparation. Luke's use of *meta spoudes* implied that Mary's trip was not sanctioned by Joseph's family. Her psychological condition was unlikely to have been one of unbridled joy, as church tradition would have us believe. Realistically, Mary was extremely apprehensive about visiting the house of Zacharias. Moreover, her cause for concern was connected to the angelic message she had received. Gabriel did not specify with whom Mary was to conceive a child, but his statement, "your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has *also* conceived a son," suggested it would be in the same way as John was conceived.

As soon as Mary entered the home, the fetal John the Baptist heard the sound of her voice, recognized her as the future mother of Jesus, and leapt for joy inside the womb. His mother Elisabeth exclaimed,

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?... Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.

Luke 1:42-45

At a stroke, Luke fixed the superiority of Jesus over John. Most New Testament scholars consider that Luke's repeated references to John the Baptist were intended to emphasize his inferiority to Jesus. But this notion misses the deeper implications Luke drew from the nature of their relationship.

Because Elisabeth was described as Mary's *sungenis*, variously translated as "kinswoman", "relative," or "sister," this has been taken as evidence that John the Baptist and Jesus were cousins. Skeptics cite Luke as the sole source to attest to this, and that its significance was far too great for other writers to disregard. In the end, this is moot because any familial connection between the two mothers-to-be was incidental to the reason for Mary's visit.

Mary's visit was not a Jewish family protocol. While in the betrothal period, a woman was expected to remain at the husband's home. By showing up at Zacharias' house, Mary showed Elisabeth that she had "believed" what she had been told. That "there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken" meant that Mary had agreed to complete her mission. This 'mission' required action and not simply lip service. Her deeds would result in her being the "mother of the Lord."

As the younger 'sister', the reader might assume that Mary had come to help with chores and take the burden off Elisabeth during the final months of her pregnancy. As the time of John's birth drew near, Mary's responsibilities would increase, and her assistance would be vital during labor and in the days immediately following childbirth, especially in view of the mother's supposed old age and that the newborn child purportedly had no elder siblings. All these things might normally be taken for granted.

Priestly families, however, usually kept slaves or servants who took care of menial tasks. But more importantly, Mary did not actually stay for the full term of Elisabeth's pregnancy. She left the house after about three months; before John was born, and did not return. Luke gave no reason for her abrupt departure:

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

the time came for Elizabeth to be delivered, and she gave birth to a son. And her neighbors and kinsfolk heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.  
Luke 1:56-58

If her visit was a providential necessity, why was Mary absent precisely at the time she was needed the most? It made no sense for her to leave before John's birth. Her next appearance in the narrative was to give birth to Jesus at Bethlehem six months later. Based on the timeline of events, as Mary was not yet pregnant at the time of the angelic announcement, conception must have occurred during her stay at the house of Zacharias.

## **THE FATHER OF MARY'S CHILD**

Luke's plot mechanics derived from the template of Abraham's family that he had adopted for Zacharias. Implicit in Mary's sudden and unexplained exit was a corresponding parallel with the banishment of Hagar from the house of Abraham. Hagar was Sarah's servant girl who became pregnant by Abraham. As Sarah was 'barren,' she was initially compliant with the idea of Hagar bearing her husband's child, but eventually she threw out both the maid and her son in a fit of jealous rage. Luke explained that Mary left the house of Zacharias after "about three months," which is when her pregnancy would have started to become noticeable. Elisabeth reacted in the same manner as Sarah. Mary was expelled.

In this strictly patriarchal society, wives had a religious duty to be obedient to their husbands. The wife's dependence on her husband was total. No matter what the circumstances, the right to divorce belonged to the husband alone. Polygamy was practiced at the time, and if a husband could afford a concubine, the wife had to tolerate it. If Elisabeth was no longer comfortable with Mary's presence, the most she could do was to force her to leave the house.

Gabriel's original message to Zacharias was to inform him that he would father a son by his wife, Elisabeth. Gabriel's second message was about Mary's child, but the father was not specified, "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." This famous phrase has been interpreted naively to mean that Luke described a spontaneous conception in Mary's womb by supernatural powers. Nothing, as they say, could be further from the truth.

To the ancients, an unseen force was present in all conceptions of human life. The concept of sex with the divine was a familiar one in the Mediterranean world, and lay behind the ritual practices of temple prostitution and *heiros gamos*, which still prevailed in some parts. The spirit of the god or goddess would enter the body of one or both participants during intercourse, and offspring from such unions would be considered holy. Although such practices were officially anathema in Second Temple Judaism, the process of sexual reproduction and birth was nevertheless closely linked to the divine will. Jews frequently invoked God's participation to increase fertility and particularly to produce male heirs.

The idioms "The Most High," "Son of God," and "Holy Spirit," were titles used by Jewish scribes (used regularly by the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the period shortly before Luke wrote), to signal a providential association between people and events. As a priest who "walks blameless in the Lord," Zacharias was recognized as God's representative in the conception of his children. From the instant Mary's impending

pregnancy was announced, to the moment it was acknowledged, the only man mentioned by name in the narrative was Zacharias. On the evidence of Luke's gospel, Zacharias is the sole candidate to be the father of Jesus.

## MARY, HANNAH, AND RUTH

To show a precedent for the conception of a holy child from an illicit sexual relationship between a priest and a younger woman, Luke exploited the story of Hannah and Eli from the First Book of Samuel [see Table 3]. Hannah went to the temple to pray for a son:

O Lord of Hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thy maidservant, and remember me, and not forget thy maidservant, but wilt give to thy maidservant a son.

1 Sam 1:11

The Greek word *doule*, used to describe Hannah, is usually translated as “maidservant,” “handmaid,” or “bondswoman,” but technically the closest meaning is “slave girl.” Mary was also described as a *doule* in Luke 1:38, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word,” to link her with Hannah.

Eli, the priest on duty while Hannah prayed, noticed her quietness, and initially believed she had been drinking. She denied it, and implored Eli, “not to regard your maidservant as a base woman.” Accepting what she told him, Eli granted her prayer request. This curious exchange ended with Hannah saying, “Let your maidservant find favor in your eyes.” She became pregnant and gave birth to a son, Samuel, whose destiny was to be one of Israel's greatest prophets. Samuel anointed Saul as the first ever King of Israel, and later anointed David as Saul's replacement.

The relationship between Hannah and Eli was well out of the ordinary. As a “slave girl,” her desire for a son was facilitated by her ‘master.’ But in this instance, her master was clearly not her husband, Elkanah. Who then, was her master? Hannah identified herself as the *doule* of both God and Eli. The expression, “Let your maidservant find favor in your eyes,” suggests that she hoped Eli would find her physically attractive.

After Samuel was born, Hannah returned to Eli and handed him over to be brought up ‘in the service of the Lord.’ Elkanah could only have agreed with this plan if Samuel were not his own son. Apart from the reality that precious sons would never have been given away, the Law of Moses stated that first-born sons were to be given to the priesthood and purchased back for a ransom payment.<sup>5</sup> Priests could not adopt male heirs. Membership of the priesthood was inherited through direct blood descent, and by no other means. Even prophets were not permitted to carry out priestly duties.

Eli already had two sons, Hophni and Phineas. But an angel told Eli that although the Lord had promised that his “house and the house of your father should go in and out before me forever,” his sons had shown themselves unworthy. Accordingly, they were killed in battle as punishment for their sins. The angel added that “the man of you whom I shall not cut off from my altar shall be spared....And I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and in my mind.”<sup>6</sup> As Samuel carried out priestly ritual duties, which are plainly described in the biblical text,<sup>7</sup> the “faithful priest” could only be a reference to Samuel, son of Eli and Hannah.

Here then, was a nativity story of one of Judaism's most important figures -- and he was

the illegitimate son of a priest and a *doule*. This explains why scribes in the time of Jesus differed with priests on the question of allowing illegitimate sons into the priesthood. Obviously, they understood that Samuel was a priest.

Although the meaning behind the story of Hannah and Eli is transparent enough, orthodox Jews in the Second Temple period tried to cloud the issue of Samuel's parentage to conform to their own religious sensibilities. Samuel was regarded so highly in Pharisaic tradition that he could not possibly have been of impure blood. Fundamentalist Pharisees would have drawn considerable discomfort from the idea that he was a priest. Samuel was illegitimate if Eli, and not Elkanah, was his biological father. And according to the stipulations of Ezra 2:61-63 and Nehemiah 7:63-65, illegitimate sons of priests could not hold priestly office. For this reason, Samuel was identified as a Levite in I Chronicles. Modern textual scholars, however, agree that Chronicles was written as a later attempt to redact embarrassments from the Book of Samuel.

Cynics, who regard this entire episode as an invention with no historical value whatsoever, still need to provide a convincing explanation as to why scribes chose to describe Samuel's conception in this way. The most logical reason to disclose his illegitimacy was to bear witness to a deep-seated principle that transcended the Law of Moses to consecrate his birth. And by using the model of Samuel's conception by Hannah and Eli to throw light on Jesus' conception by Mary and Zacharias, Luke testified to the same principle.

A sexual relationship between a *doule* and her master was also recounted in the Old Testament story of Ruth and Boaz, great grandparents of King David. As described in the Book of Ruth, Ruth's husband died leaving her childless, so her mother-in-law Naomi decided to fix her up with Boaz, a wealthy family relative. One night, Naomi instructed Ruth to wait until Boaz had finished dining and to "observe the place where he lies; go and uncover his feet and lie down." In ancient Hebrew, 'feet' was often used as a euphemism for genitals.<sup>8</sup> Ruth "came stealthily and uncovered his feet, and lay down," Boaz awoke startled and asked who she was. Her response was, "I am Ruth; spread your wings over your maidservant, for you are my redeemer." Eventually they married and produced a son, Obed, who became the grandfather of David.

The stories of Hannah and Mary followed the pattern established by Ruth. In each account, none of the women were described as victims of predatory male overlords. Each woman sacrificed herself willingly, risking her life and reputation, to give birth to a child of providential significance.

## CANTICLES OF PRAISE

Mary's song of praise, known as the *Magnificat*, is generally acknowledged to have been based on Hannah's own celebratory hymn from 1 Sam 2:1-10. There is some scholarly argument whether or not Mary's verses were originally recited by Elisabeth, in honor of John the Baptist, but that is tangential. Luke associated Hannah with Mary to highlight the parallel nature of their pregnancies. In the opening verse of the *Magnificat*, Mary repeated Hannah's recognition of herself as God's slave girl. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden." Luke 1:47-48

Despite the illegitimacy of their children and the negative societal consequences it could hold for mother and child, each woman expressed delight in their reward from heaven.



They thanked God profusely, and heralded their children in terms of messianic prophecy [Table 3].

Luke also attributed a song of thanksgiving to Zacharias. Known traditionally as the *Benedictus*, it began with a proclamation on the unborn Jesus:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.

Luke 1:69

The odd phrase ‘horn of salvation’ further cemented Zacharias’ relationship with Mary/Hannah. This expression was drawn from Hannah’s song at the birth of Samuel:

And Hannah prayed, and said; my heart rejoiceth in the Lord, mine horn is exalted in the Lord: my mouth is enlarged over mine enemies; because I rejoice in thy salvation.

I Sam 2:1

“Horn” was a symbol used regularly in many ancient cultures to denote abundance or fertility, but more often than not to represent lineage. “Mine horn is exalted” referred to Hannah’s bloodline, to which God had granted a special honor. The “horn of salvation” mentioned by Zacharias signified the messianic lineage. But although he was referring to the unborn Jesus, this accolade was curiously given at the occasion of John’s birth.

Did Zacharias know about the miraculous conception of Jesus? Does this explain how he understood Jesus’ superior status to John? No. If Zacharias had believed that Mary was carrying the Son of God in her womb, he would never have allowed her to leave his house. Zacharias’ special interest came from his role in Jesus’ conception, and this is why he gave thanks. The “horn of salvation” was the messianic bloodline of Zacharias and the Davidic Mary.

In the *Magnificat*, Mary referred to her pregnancy as the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, “he has helped his servant Israel... as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity forever.” Likewise, Zacharias praises God for remembering, “the oath which he swore to our father Abraham.” The union of Mary and Zacharias completed the original covenant made with Abraham. Thus Luke closed his opening chapter by sealing the association with which he began it.

## **FAMILY OF THE NEW ABRAHAM**

In the Abraham-Zacharias parallel, each was the father of two sons of dispensational relevance. One son by his wife, and the other by his wife’s maid, or *doule*. Isaac was the son of Abraham and Sarah, Ishmael the son of Abraham and Hagar. Similarly, John the Baptist was the son of Zacharias and Elisabeth, and Jesus was the son of Zacharias and Mary.

Despite Abraham’s pleading, God favored Isaac over Ishmael the first born, who was later banished into the wilderness. In the family of the new Abraham, God favored Jesus, “and the child grew strong, filled with wisdom and the favor of God was upon him,” over John the Baptist, the first born, who was “in the wilderness” until his public ministry began [Table 2]. The sons of Abraham prefigured the sons of Zacharias.

According to Genesis, Isaac also had two sons, Esau and Jacob, who were twins. Once again, the second born was preferred by God. While Isaac’s wife Rebecca was pregnant, the unborn twins jostled for position inside her womb. God’s message to her at that time was, “the one shall be stronger than the other; the elder shall serve the younger”. Though Esau was the first born, Jacob was the founder of the nation of Israel. Luke described the unborn John the Baptist leaping in the womb of Elisabeth to make the association with Esau and Jacob. Therefore, John the elder brother should serve Jesus the younger. Both instances represented a reversal of Jewish tradition, whereby the firstborn son was paramount, but Luke merely used a formula that was already well known in Jewish Christian circles.

**Table 2. THE SONS OF ABRAHAM AND ZACHARIAS**

FIRST-BORN SONS

**Ishmael**

God was with the boy, and he grew up; and he lived in the wilderness.  
Gen 21:20

**John the Baptist**

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness.  
Luke 1:80

SECOND-BORN SONS

**Isaac**

“O, that Ishmael might live in Thy sight.” No...I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.  
Gen 17:18-21

**Jesus**

Blessed be the Lord God...he has raised for us a horn of salvation...to remember the holy covenant, the oath which he swore to our father Abraham.  
Luke 1: 69-73

The Clementine literature is a collection of ancient writings originating from a Jewish-Christian sect, which purported to be a transcript of a series of discourses given by the apostle Peter. Most scholars date its composition somewhere between the second and third centuries, but the original source material was likely to be much earlier. The curious scene between Peter and Simon Magus described in the Book of Acts<sup>9</sup> betrayed a distinct familiarity on Luke’s part with the Clementine writings, large sections of which consisted of a debate between the two men. One of Peter’s main arguments was that history progressed according to a divine plan, which entailed specific pairs with providential significance.

For, as I was beginning to say, God has appointed for this world certain pairs; and he who comes first of the pairs is evil, he who comes second, of good.<sup>10</sup>

This theory was further elaborated as a paradigm of sibling rivalry, the first born son intrinsically inferior to the second born. Ishmael and Isaac are cited as examples along with Esau and Jacob.

As in the beginning God, who is one, like a right hand a left, made the heavens first and then the earth, so also He constituted all the combinations in order; but upon men He no more does this, but varies all the combinations. For whereas from Him the greater things come first, and the inferior second, we find the opposite in men -- the first worse, and the second superior.

Therefore from Adam, who was made after the image of God, there sprang first the unrighteous Cain, and then the righteous Abel...From Abraham also, the patriarchs of our nation, two sprang -- Ishmael first, then Isaac, who was blessed of God. And from Isaac himself, in like manner, there were again two -- Esau the profane, and Jacob the pious. So, first in birth, as the first born in the world, was the high priest Aaron, then the lawgiver Moses.<sup>11</sup>

Peter described John as “a day-Baptist, who was also, according to the method of combination, the forerunner of our Lord Jesus.” As the first-born son, John the Baptist not only ranked lower than Jesus, he was Jesus’ natural enemy. When Luke’s gospel was written, it was not understood outside Christian circles that John was inferior to Jesus. John was the far more popular figure, and his elevated status, as articulated by Josephus, was not earned through any association with Jesus. So Luke trod carefully. Everything was implicit.

As he drew from scriptural tradition to explain the relationship between Jesus and John, Luke described John’s birth as the fulfillment of a famous prophecy from the Book of Malachi that predicted the prophet Elijah would return in the days before the Lord’s coming:

And he will turn many of the sons 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."

Luke 1:16-17

Malachi had prefaced his prediction with a reminder to remember “my servant Moses”.<sup>12</sup> This is key to Lucan theology, because a tradition existed that the Messiah and the returning Elijah would together repeat the fraternal cooperation between Aaron and Moses.<sup>13</sup> The greatest Jewish hero of all time, the younger Moses was the undisputed leader of the two brothers. Cognizant that John the Baptist, ‘in the spirit and power of Elijah,’ was a priestly descendant of Aaron, the older brother, Luke sought a way to link Jesus with Moses. He made the connection in Jesus’ genealogy, while delineating his descent from King David.

When David was king of Israel [tenth century B.C.E.], belief developed that his ancestral house would reign forever, not only over Israel but over all nations. And popular opinion demanded that the Messiah be descended from the Davidic family line. Zacharias,

however, was from the Aaronic line, so if Jesus was to be a Davidic Messiah, then it must have been through Mary's family. This is exactly what Luke sets out to prove in Jesus' ancestry.

Forty-three generations are listed from David to Jesus. The significance of this number comes from the Jewish exile in Egypt, which lasted exactly four hundred and thirty years, "at the end of four hundred and thirty years, on that very day, all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt."<sup>14</sup> In ancient numerology, the number ten signified one complete cycle, so four hundred and thirty years represented forty-three cycles or generations. The duration of the exile in Egypt symbolized the time period between David and the coming of the Messiah. Thus the liberation brought by Moses foreshadowed the salvation brought by Jesus.

Consequently, the missions of Moses and Elijah were to be consummated by Jesus and John the Baptist. So it is not surprising that Luke described the appearance of Moses and Elijah together at the Mount of Transfiguration, where they allegedly communicated with Jesus about his course of action. Clearly, this was an event loaded with theological import.<sup>15</sup>

## HOLY BIRTHS

Suggestion of a sexual relationship between Hannah and Eli may have been hard for Second Temple Jews to accept, but it pales in comparison to the difficulty of Christians to acknowledge the same thing of Mary and Zacharias. But no way could Luke have predicted the enormous theological impact made by the naïve interpretation of his opening chapter. For Luke, the harsh facts of Jesus' conception were not so much grounds for awe and wonder, they were reasons to appreciate the core principles that operated in salvation history.

Ancient Jewish scribes were not too embarrassed or ashamed to describe illicit sex triangles in Genesis and other books. Yet for Judeo-Christians, these tales are often the cause of puzzlement or righteous indignation. They are not read in synagogues, are rarely heard from church pulpits, and are never taught in Sunday school.

Some have tried to make sense of these stories as examples of God's inclusiveness. Redemption is possible for all sinners, no matter how murky their past. This view, however, disregards the school of Judaism to which the scribes who wrote these questionable narratives belonged. Everything was composed to be in harmony with rudimentary laws. Not to be confused with the Mosaic Law, these basic principles were the mechanics through which God interacted behind the scenes in human affairs.

These underlying laws were developed in the medieval Kabbalistic literature, in particular by Nahmanides (1194 -- 1270), who composed the famous *Letter on Holiness*. Nahmanides explained that the circumstances of conception determined the quality of the child, not the pedigree of the parents. The "holiness" of a child depends not on legalistic rules defining kinship, inheritance, and social order, but on the attitude of the parents during the sexual act. Purity comes from the intention and motivation behind conception, not from the technicalities of the Torah. "When the sexual relationship points to the Name, there is nothing more righteous and more holy than it." When this is understood, one "will then grasp a great secret regarding the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob." Therefore, the key to understanding the messianic lineage is found in the conception of "holy" children, not in the legal identification of their birth status.



Lorenzo and Jacopo Salimbeni, *Mary and Elisabeth meet Zacharias*, 1415, Oratorio di San Giovanni Battista

This artist(s) depicted Mary’s “Visitation” to send a specific message. Though forbidden for Jews to touch women in public, Mary holds hands with Zacharias, as Elisabeth “introduces” her to him. A pregnant woman behind Mary makes a hand sign suggestive of the female sexual part. The man above Zacharias folds his hands in an “X,” a traditional esoteric symbol for the union of masculine and feminine.

One can be certain that most Second Temple Jews living in the time of Jesus, like their modern Judeo-Christian successors, would not approve of sexual trysts outside the accepted norms of civil society and beyond the limits of the Law. But from where did Luke get his information? Was it invented simply to fit his theological concepts? And if he used a pre-existent tradition of Jesus’ parentage, how come nobody else knew it? Evidence exists that others did know it. In fact, rumors of the relationship between Mary and Zacharias reached the early Church fathers. It was an oral tradition that was kept alive in the Middle East for over a thousand years. Eventually it spread to Western Europe, where it formed the basis of an underground heretical movement centered not on Jesus, but on John the Baptist.

**Table 3. Parallels between Luke and 1 Samuel**

<b>1 Samuel</b>	<b>Luke</b>
<b>Woman visits Priest “<i>Doule</i>” conceives</b>	
After they had eaten in Shiloh, <b>Hannah</b> rose. Now <b>Eli</b> the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. 1 Sam 1:9	In those days <b>Mary</b> rose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of <b>Zacharias</b> . Luke 1:40-41
<b>Proclamation</b>	
“O Lord of hosts...look on thy <b>maidservant</b> , and remember me, and not forget thy maidservant., but wilt give to thy maidservant a son” 1 Sam 1:11	“Behold, I am the <b>handmaid</b> of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” Luke 1:38
<b>Returns to husband</b>	
Then the woman went her way and ate, and her countenance was no longer sad.” 1 Sam 1:18	And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her home. Luke 1:56
<b>Prophecy</b>	
“My horn is exalted in the Lord; My mouth derides my enemies because I rejoice in thy salvation” 1 Sam 2:1	“He...has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.” Luke 1.70
“The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger.” 1 Sam 2:4-5	“He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.” Luke 1:52-53
<b>Formative Years</b>	
His mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year, when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. 1 Sam 2:18-19	Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover. Luke 2:41
<b>Piety</b>	
Now the boy <b>Samuel</b> continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men. 1 Sam 2:2	And <b>Jesus</b> increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man. Luke 2:52

**Table 4. Parallels between the Families of Abraham and Zacharias**

<b>Genesis</b>	<b>Luke</b>
<b>Righteous Man</b>	
The Lord appeared to <b>Abram</b> and said....”walk before me and be blameless.” Gen 17:1	There was a priest named <b>Zacharias</b> ...walking in all the commandments of the Lord...blameless. Luke 1:5-6
<b>Childless Wife</b>	
Now <b>Sarai</b> was barren, she had no child.	They had no child because <b>Elisabeth</b> was

Gen 11:30	barren. Luke 1:7
<b>Annunciation</b>	
I will bless her and...I will give you a son by her. Gen 17:16	Your wife Elisabeth will bear you a son. Luke 1:13
<b>Disbelief</b>	
Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah who is ninety bear child? Gen 17:17	How shall I know this? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years. Luke 1:18
<b>Maid conceives</b>	
Sarah, Abram's wife took <b>Hagar</b> ...her <b>maid</b> and gave her to Abram her husband, as a wife. Gen 16:3	"You will conceive in your womb and bear a son,"... <b>Mary</b> said, "I am the <b>handmaiden</b> of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word." Luke 1:31-38
<b>Second child preferred</b>	
O that Ishmael might live in thy sight! God said, No....I will establish my covenant with Isaac. Gen 17:18-19	When Elisabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb....she cried "Blessed is the fruit of your womb" Luke 1:41-42
<b>Maid leaves</b>	
Then Sarah dealt harshly with her and she (Hagar) fled from her. Gen: 16:6	Mary remained with her for about three months and returned to her home. Luke 1:56
<b>Prophecy</b>	
Your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. Gen 17:5-7	Zacharias...prophesied... "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people ...to remember his holy covenant, the oath which he swore to our father Abraham." Luke 1:73-75