

# Luke Chapter 1

## Introduction

### A. Beginnings

Luke's elegant report in chapters 1 and 2 leads readers directly to Jesus of Nazareth. Luke's narrative draws an ever finer focus on events that surround Jesus' birth and youth, finally coming to rest squarely on him as he emerges from childhood into adulthood. These chapters also fitly frame a story about beginnings, first within families involving real people, culminating in the births of two special children, John and Jesus. Much later, the record introduces readers to the beginnings of the Christian movement as it grows from an obscure sect in a remote corner of ancient Palestine to a religion that penetrates the heart of the Roman empire, a growth chronicled by Luke's Gospel and his book of Acts.

### B. Sacred Space

Within the broad geographical setting that Luke's Gospel and book of Acts spread out before us, beginning in the eastern Mediterranean region and ending in Rome, the first indicator of place is "the temple" or, more accurately, the sanctuary (see the Note on 1:9). Thus, Luke opens his story at one of the most sacred spots on earth, thereby breathing into his story an air of holiness. Furthermore, he underlines the sanctity and centrality of this setting first by mentioning "the people . . . without" the sanctuary (1:10)—those inside the temple grounds but not inside God's house—and then by noting "the house of Zacharias" which lies at a distance from the temple and city (1:40). Clearly, these other spots—the temple courtyard and, more distantly, Zacharias's home—are removed from the holy center in

This theme of beginnings takes further shape in the dawning day of salvation (see 1:78; 2:30–31, 38) as well as in the births of lambs which, not surprisingly, may hint at the birth of the Lamb of God (see the Note on 2:8). With a twisting touch, Luke sets off birth by emphasizing Elisabeth's barrenness and subsequent pregnancy. In a different but related vein, the fearsome opposite of birth—death, including the deaths of sacrificial animals and the anticipated death of Simeon (see 2:24, 26, 29)—underscores the promising prospect of beginnings. But even here, death may point to Jesus' own, both as a sacrifice and as a joyful reversal of mortality.

a receding order of sanctity. By such a conception, Luke subtly yet consciously buttresses and expands the sacred beginning of his story (see the Analysis on 23:44–45). By the end of chapter 1, the home of Zacharias and Elisabeth has also become a place of spiritual power and illumination, complementing the temple's hallowed character.

In this light, it is worth noting that, within the sacred enclosure of God's house, Zacharias expresses a lack of faith as he speaks with God's messenger (see 1:18). Hence, within the most sacred room on earth known to Luke, a "blameless" official of God's priesthood expresses his doubt about God's power (1:6, 18–20). Does Zacharias thereby defile the sanctuary? Probably not. But he carries the mark of God's displeasure outside the holy place where others can see it.

What shall we make of all this? On one level, Luke's Gospel's story of redemption opens in Jerusalem at its most sacred spot yet ends not only with Jesus' predictions of the destruction of the same temple (see 21:6, 20, 24) but also with Jesus' death at nearby Calvary, an event that itself confers on Calvary a deep sacral character. In a related vein, the story begins with the arrival of an angel in the sanctuary, an event that shows God's respect for the Mosaic order, of which the temple is the apex, and ends with a decisive withdrawal of divine pleasure

### C. Contrasts

We also sense that Luke, who apparently writes in the 70s of the first century, seeks to answer questions about Christianity that have arisen in the larger Roman world, a world that his friend Theophilus represents (see 1:3; JST 3:19; Acts 1:1; and the Introduction V.A). After all, within recent memory Jews of Palestine and Roman legions have fought a bitter war that ends with the fall of Jerusalem and its temple, as well as the fortresses of Machaerus and Masada a little later. In the run-up to the war, Romans identify Christians simply as Jews. But Luke seeks to set the record straight by clarifying that Christians, and those who are involved in founding their movement, are very different from other Jews. For example, it is Jews who incite and lead the unruly crowds that oppose Paul and his companions in Asia Minor and elsewhere (see Acts 13:50; 14:2, 19; 17:5, 13; etc.). In contrast, those associated with the beginnings of the Christian movement, including the parents of John the Baptist and Joseph and Mary, are upright citizens who are circumspect observers of law and order, particularly visible in their respect for the Mosaic code (see 1:6; 2:4–5, 22, 24, 27, 39, 42, 51; the Note on 23:56; the Analysis on 2:21–24).<sup>2</sup> This respect extends even to the angel who approaches Zacharias within the temple not to announce a change in the law but to announce the birth of one who will, in time, begin that change (see D&C 84:28). Thus, an important contrast that exonerates lawless Jews and exonerates faithful Christians is woven into the fabric of Luke's records.

2. Evans, *Luke*, 342.

for the current Mosaic order as Jesus dies at the insistence of those who have custodianship for the sanctuary and the Mosaic law. What is more, fewer than twenty-five years later, the temple doors are shut against Jesus' followers, effectively sealing them from worshipping there and setting up the temple and its city for their destruction at Roman hands in AD 70 (see Acts 21:30).<sup>1</sup>

1. Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles*, 396.

Luke further frames his story through other contrasts, not only those that we see, say, between the responses of Zacharias and Mary to the angel's visits<sup>3</sup> but also those visible between Elisabeth and Mary, or between the newly born children and the aging Simeon and Anna—youth contrasted to old age. Some of the contrasts are almost hidden, such as those associated with Gabriel, who is Noah<sup>4</sup> and who announces life but has witnessed widespread death in his own day. Indeed, Gabriel announces the birth of the Savior who will offer life to those who have died in the flood (see Moses 7:38–39; 1 Pet. 3:18–21).<sup>5</sup>

On another level, the story begins with an expression of disbelief, a dimension that will characterize the reaction of most people to Jesus and his message. Thus, on a metaphorical level, Zacharias represents many whom Jesus will meet, particularly officials and especially those in the holy city—"blameless" but unbelieving (1:6). By contrast, God finds faith in a young woman far removed from the holy sanctuary and its city—Mary in Nazareth (see 1:38, 45).

In a further manifestation of contrasts, the theme of light also dances through the first two chapters in counterpoint to the lightless "power of darkness" that gathers in Jerusalem at Jesus' arrest (22:53). In the first instance, the infant Jesus is a bearer or

3. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1963), 80, 82.

4. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp. and ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938), 157 (hereafter cited as *TPJS*).

5. Draper, Brown, and Rhodes, *Pearl of Great Price*, 131–32. These observations about Gabriel come from an honors paper by Richard Gardner (September 1999).

bringer of light. For his coming draws down into the world angelic appearances and illuminating prophetic words. In his youth, we see him enlightening an audience of sages in the temple (see 2:46–47; JST 2:46–47). Among other instances of light in Luke 1–2, we notice the following:

1. In the sanctuary, both the candelabrum and the incense altar burn fuel and thus produce light, the lamps dispelling any darkness.

2. Enlightenment comes from angels who appear to Zacharias, Mary, and the shepherds.

3. Angels bring both the light of their countenances—they appear to the shepherds during the night (see 2:8)—and the light of their messages.

4. Enlightenment arises within words of prophecy from Elisabeth, Mary, Zacharias and Simeon.

5. Light is implicit in the accounts of searching and finding—the shepherds find the babe (see 2:16), Simeon and Anna come upon the family in the

temple (see 2:27, 38), and Jesus’ parents discover him there (see 2:46).

6. Light is also implicit in resolving the “troubled” feelings of Zacharias and Mary (see 1:12, 29).

7. The lambing season, hinted at in the adults’ actions with the sheep (see 2:8), points to the time of year when days are growing longer and nights are shortening.

8. There is an implicit dimming of light when Jesus departs from the temple in Jerusalem (see 2:39); the same can be said about other places—when Jesus leaves Bethlehem and Egypt (see Matt. 2:14, 21).

9. In this connection, particularly in the Joseph Smith Translation, we find the clear sense that the youthful Jesus is an illuminator of those who listen to him in the temple (see 2:46–47; JST 2:46–47).

## D. Humanity

In yet another pattern, we have to be impressed with the human links that Luke preserves in his account. He takes pains to note that both John and Jesus are born of women, thus connecting them to this world and not simply to a heavenly or ethereal realm. He also presents Jesus as a son of Adam, the first man, emphasizing Jesus’ humanity (see 3:38). Moreover, his record underscores Jesus’ descent from David and his inheritance of David’s earthly throne, besides his endless “kingdom” (1:32–33). Later, Luke’s version of the genealogy will stress this same human linkage, in addition to tying Jesus closely to God (see 3:31–32, 38).

In this connection, it is important to notice that Elisabeth and Mary stand at the center of chapters 1 and 2. What do they represent? What does their relationship mean for the story? In partial response, Elisabeth represents disappointment and unfulfilled dreams, having lived her life without a child. Even so, she is gracious and without jealousy toward the youthful Mary, standing as a perfect model for all (see 1:42–45). In another response, it is with Elisabeth that the Lord begins his miracles in a physical, palpable way: “Elisabeth conceived” (1:24).<sup>6</sup>

On a further level, although Elisabeth experiences most of her trials before her grand reward of a child, Mary’s troubles are just beginning because of the way that people will view her pregnancy. It is easier for a person to see the gracious blessings of God in the later life of Elisabeth than in Mary’s youth. Thus, only those with an eye of faith can see Mary’s situation for what it is and will become. Even Joseph does not possess such an eye at first, turning from her. He also represents others who do not believe her story about the angel (see Matt. 1:18–21). We can only imagine the difficulties that Mary faces when she returns to Nazareth from Elisabeth’s home. Although Luke does not write about Mary’s experiences immediately after her return (see 1:56), he leaves the door wide open for seeing that she meets severe challenges at home, now that she is about four months along and obviously pregnant (compare John 8:19, 41–42). Even so, we must never lose sight of the fact that God entrusts his secret of the ages to two women—namely, whom the mother of the Messiah is to be.

One of the important elements in chapter 1 touches on family and home—preparing a family to receive spiritual blessings. The appearance of the angel to Zacharias certainly brings this priest

6. Brown, *Mary and Elisabeth*, 22–23.

abruptly to understand God's imminent plans. And his months alone with his thoughts and with the memory of that visit while he cannot speak or hear plainly lift him to new spiritual heights. His transformation begins at the sanctuary but continues in his home. Elisabeth's pregnancy and her preparation to nurture her child will bring her to fresh spiritual awareness, all occurring within her home. And John, of course, carries the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb, pointing to her supernal spiritual preparation (see 1:15; D&C 84:27). As further evidence, we note the rush of celestial enlightenment onto Elisabeth at the arrival of Mary (see 1:41) and the descent of spiritual power onto Zacharias at the naming of their son, all within their family and home (see 1:64, 67).

We must also take account of threads that tie Mary back to the stories of Sarah, mother of Isaac, and Hannah, mother of Samuel. If we recognize Sarah

## E. Composition

Luke introduces us to the story of Jesus at about the moment in time that Matthew selects—notwithstanding Joseph Fitzmyer, who sees the original Luke beginning with chapter 3 (see the Introduction III.C).<sup>9</sup> The starting point is different for the Gospel writers Mark and John. Mark, who evidently writes the first of the Gospel accounts, begins his report with the ministry of John the Baptist. John the evangelist, on the other hand, opens his account with Jesus' premortal roles. Luke and Matthew select the time of Jesus' birth to begin their stories, emphasizing Jesus' incarnation, his birth into the flesh. It may be that, by emphasizing Jesus' connection to this world through his mother, Luke and Matthew are already answering those who deny such a tie, including those against whom John writes in his correspondence (see 2 John 1:7).

We must ask about Luke's sources for chapters 1 and 2. This segment of his record differs in important ways from the rest of his narrative. We observe clear indications of Hebrew or Aramaic features which do not otherwise characterize the writing of Luke, a person who writes and speaks Greek.<sup>10</sup> This circumstance leads some students of the New

as the mother of covenant Israel and Hannah as the mother of the ancient kingdom of Israel because she bears Samuel who anoints the first king,<sup>7</sup> then Elisabeth can perhaps be thought of as the mother of those who embrace the heavenly kingdom, and Mary the mother of the one who institutes the kingdom. The links to Sarah occur mainly in circumstances that surround Elisabeth: old, past childbearing years, without child, seemingly forsaken by God. The connections to Hannah stand forth chiefly in Mary's story: young, mother of a child of promise, singer of a song of praise to God (see 1 Sam. 2:1–10).<sup>8</sup>

7. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 35–38, notes God's control of the womb, even to controlling the destiny of "the nation Israel."

8. Brown, *Mary and Elisabeth*, 25–26, 67–68.

Testament to conclude that Luke draws on a finished source for his first two chapters. In this light, we notice that at the heart of these chapters stand the recollections of not only those who know about events surrounding John's birth (see 1:65–66) but even of occurrences that touch Mary herself (see 2:19, 51). We also suspect that these individuals—and Mary is to be reckoned among them—tell and retell their stories to friends and confidants (see the Introduction II.E). The patent connections to the temple that lie in the story of Zacharias and Elisabeth and undergird most of chapter 1 form a further factor. Although such links do not prove that this couple or their acquaintances are the source of this report, the temple ties in the account are most natural in the home and working environment of a priest. Additionally, in the aftermath of these events, God enrolls more witnesses among the acquaintances of John's parents, the shepherds, Simeon, and Anna, as well as those who hear their stories (see 1:65; 2:18, 25, 38).

9. Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1:488–89.

10. For example, *TDNT* 1:4; 5:270.

## F. Southerners in the North

The reasons that the families of Mary and Joseph, both from southern Bethlehem stock, find their way to Nazareth in the north remain unknown. But we can draw reasonable inferences from the historical situation. In 104 BC, the high priest-king Aristobulus, from the ruling Hasmonean family, sends forces to the north from Jerusalem and subdues Galilee's inhabitants. In order to ensure that government matters function properly, Aristobulus sends officials from the south to take up residence in Galilee and to manage Hasmonean political and economic interests.<sup>11</sup> It is likely that a substantial number of these officials sink roots into the soil of Galilee and raise their families there. In this light, one possible reason why the families of southerners, such as those of Mary and Joseph, are living in northern towns

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11. Josephus, *A.J.* 13.11.3 (§§318–19); Schürer, *History*, 1:141–42, 217–18; Aryeh Kasher, *Jews, Idumaeans, and Ancient Arabs* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1988), 80–83; Richard A. Horsley, *Archaeology, History, and Society in Galilee: The Social Context of Jesus and the Rabbis* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1996), 25–28; Andrea M. Berlin, “Jewish Life before the Revolt: The Archaeological Evidence,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 36, no. 4 (2005): 417–70; Morten Hørning Jensen, *Herod Antipas in Galilee: The Literary and Archaeological Sources on the Reign of Herod Antipas and Its Socio-economic Impact on Galilee* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 14–15.

## G. Names

What can we say about the meanings of the names Zacharias, Elisabeth, and John? Do they point to special dimensions of the story? In a very real sense, they do. Zacharias or Zechariah means “Yahweh/Jehovah remembers.”<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth or Elizabeth seems to be “[my] God is an oath” or “[my] God is good fortune.”<sup>14</sup> Possibly, one could see her name as “God will be or make an oath.” John or Yohanan means “Yahweh/Jehovah has been gracious.”<sup>15</sup> In light of events chronicled in chapter 1, where these three

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13. *TDOT*, 4:69–72; Theodor M. Mauch, “Zechariah,” in *IDB*, 4:941, 943; Brown, *Mary and Elisabeth*, 26.

14. Marshall, *Luke*, 52; Edward P. Blair, “Elizabeth,” in *IDB*, 2:93.

15. *TDOT*, 5:22–26, 30–35; Bruce T. Dahlberg, “Johanan,” in *IDB*, 2:929.

like Nazareth is that their forebears move northward either as government functionaries or as people who see an opportunity for a different kind of life after Galilee comes under Hasmonean control. After all, the artisan's skills that Joseph possesses will come from his father and grandfather, and those skills are in demand in expanding cities such as Sepphoris in the north; the renovation of the temple in Jerusalem, with its need for skilled workers, is still decades away. Another possible reason is that the forebears of Mary and Joseph, with ties to the royal family of David, see Galilee as a place to escape potential retribution by the Hasmoneans, who might view Davidic family members as competitors for the throne of the Judean kingdom.<sup>12</sup> Whatever the case, these families, with roots reaching back to Judea, evidently come into possession of properties in the north while still retaining connections to the south, including property. It is this sort of situation that we seem to meet in the story of the journey of Mary and Joseph to take care of tax matters in Bethlehem, where both of them, as we will suggest, are to register to pay taxes (see the Note on 2:5; the Analysis on 2:1–7).

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12. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 87, 89–90.

people are featured, each of these names enriches the significance of the report.<sup>16</sup>

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16. Brown, *Mary and Elisabeth*, 26.



## Prologue (1:1–4)

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### King James Translation

1 Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, 2 Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eye-witnesses, and ministers of the word; 3 It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, 4 That thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.

### BYU New Testament Rendition

1 Inasmuch as many have endeavored to set forth a narrative of the things which have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as those who were eyewitnesses and servants of the word from the beginning have handed these things down to us, 3 it seemed good to me as well, since I have investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it for you in orderly sequence, noble Theophilus, 4 so that you may understand for certain concerning those principles which you have been taught.

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## Translation Notes and Comments

**1:1 *Forasmuch as*:** The Joseph Smith Translation replaces this expression with a declaration about Luke’s authority for writing his Gospel: “As I am a messenger of Jesus Christ” (JST 1:1). Such a statement offers clarity because in the Greek version this verse, and in what follows, Luke discloses his knowledge of other written accounts and, though they exist, he seeks to justify his own record.

***many have . . . set forth . . . a declaration:*** Luke acknowledges (1) the existence of other accounts when he begins his Gospel and (2) his at least partial dependency on some of them. In addition, he signals that he will be giving his own shape to the materials that he inherits (see also 1:3).

***set forth in order a declaration:*** The meaning is that Luke intends to set out, in a fresh way, a narrative of events, as the Greek term *diēgēsis* (“narration”) illustrates,<sup>17</sup> following them through to the end.

***most surely believed among us:*** The basic sense of the passive form of the verb, when dealing with things, is “brought to fulfillment” or “achieved” (Greek *plērophoreō*). Further, the passive underlines

that it is God who does it.<sup>18</sup> Luke is treating matters that have occurred and are already known. By adding the phrase “among us,” Luke indicates that he is a witness, specifically to events that he narrates in the book of Acts.<sup>19</sup>

**1:2 *they delivered them unto us:*** The verb “delivered” is a common New Testament term which, among its meanings, carries the sense “to pass on” or “to transmit” the story or tradition about Jesus, frequently in an oral form (Greek *paradidōmi*; see 1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Pet. 2:21). The verb also has to do with the oral tradition among Pharisees (see Mark 7:13).<sup>20</sup> In this verse, Luke seems to be alluding to his own first encounter with the message about Jesus, the story that brings him to the Savior and comes from eyewitnesses. Whether that message first comes to him in oral or, perhaps, written form he does not say.

***they . . . were eyewitnesses, and ministers:*** Although the English word order in the KJV might lead us to believe that the expression “eyewitnesses, and ministers” agrees with the preceding pronoun “us,” thus making Luke an eyewitness of events that he records, it does not. In the Greek text, it is clearly “they” who are the “eyewitnesses” and Luke

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17. Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*, 427; Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 194 (hereafter cited as BAGD).

18. BAGD, 676; *TDNT*, 6:309–10; Blass and Debrunner, *Greek Grammar*, §§310(1).

19. Johnson, *Luke*, 3.

20. BAGD, 619–21; *TDNT*, 2:171.

therefore stands in the second or third generation of converts who receive “those things which are most surely believed” (1:1).

**from the beginning:** This expression, widely repeated in Greco-Roman literature, clearly points to eyewitnesses, the founding generation, both who know Jesus and whom Luke meets and interviews (see Introduction II.E).<sup>21</sup>

**eyewitnesses . . . of the word:** The legal dimension of the expression “eyewitnesses . . . of the word” becomes clear in Peter’s speech that follows Jesus’ death. In that speech, Peter sets out the qualifications of the person who will replace Judas Iscariot as a member of the Twelve: such a person shall “have accompanied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us” (Acts 1:21–22). In this light, an eyewitness “of the word” stands in an important place within the early Christian community because that person can bear witness of what he—legally, always a male—sees and hears from Jesus, from the beginning of his ministry to the end. Within the guidelines of law, such a person’s witness possesses legal force.

**the word:** The prominence of this expression is not to be missed. While it does not carry the same set of meanings that it bears in John’s Gospel (Greek *logos*), that is, pointing to Jesus, the term refers to the message that missionaries carry into the world, a message that Theophilus hears and, presumably, accepts.<sup>22</sup>

**1:3 having had perfect understanding:** Luke nods toward his extensive research efforts; though the exact meaning of the verb (Greek *parakoloutheō*)

is debated, the expression must mean “because I have examined everything carefully.”<sup>23</sup>

**in order:** The Greek term *kathexēs* denotes the accurate ordering of events, in a sequential row (see Acts 11:4), an objective that Luke seeks to govern his narrative.<sup>24</sup> As we shall see, at important junctures his ordering differs from that of others.

**most excellent:** Because of how this phraseology appears elsewhere in Luke’s work, it seems to be a proper way of addressing prominent Roman officials (see Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25). Hence, it is reasonable to believe that Theophilus is a Roman official.

**Theophilus:** The meaning of the name is “friend of God,” which leads some commentators to suppose that Theophilus is not a real person but merely a fictional device to address anyone who might be a friend of God. But Theophilus is certainly a real person who is probably the sponsor of Luke’s writing and publishing effort.<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that Luke mentions Theophilus twice, here and in Acts 1:1. Joseph Smith adds a third instance at JST 3:19 (see the Note on 3:13).

**1:4 those things:** The Greek term is *logoi*, “words,” meaning the details of the gospel.<sup>26</sup>

**instructed:** As with the term “delivered” in 1:2, this verb carries a likely reference to the first time that Theophilus hears the message about Christ, a message that brings him to inquire and possibly to believe (Greek *katēcheō*).<sup>27</sup> Whether on the basis of this verb we can conclude that Theophilus is already a believer remains problematic.<sup>28</sup>

23. BAGD, 624; *TDNT*, 1:215; Plummer, *Luke*, 4; Marshall, *Luke*, 42–43; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1:296–97; Johnson, *Luke*, 28.

24. BAGD, 389; Marshall, *Luke*, 43.

25. Morris, *Luke*, 74; Johnson, *Luke*, 1, 28–29.

26. Plummer, *Luke*, 5.

27. BAGD, 424–25.

28. *TDNT*, 3:638–40.

21. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 12–38, 114–54.

22. BAGD, 478–80; *TDNT*, 4:102–7.

## Analysis

Luke’s prologue presents the best example in the New Testament of meeting the early standards of Greek historical writing, especially those achieved by the historian Thucydides (c. 460–400 BC). These

first four verses of Luke’s account, hinting that he intends his work to rise to the high level of history reporting in his world, set out the objectives of

his story.<sup>29</sup> First, while standing in continuity with the “many” who have written before, his approach will be fresh, but with his own “understanding of all things” (1:1, 3). Second, his account will rest on his own research into matters as they have transpired “from the very first” (1:3). He plans to raise to view the events that stamp an initial, defining shape on what will follow in Jesus’ ministry. Third, his work will be thorough; it will be concerned with “all things,” as he is able to assemble them into a meaningful whole (1:3). Fourth, he proposes to write the story of Jesus accurately, “in order” (1:3). This is not to say that others have written inaccurately. Rather, Luke simply announces to his readers that he has consciously striven to achieve accuracy.<sup>30</sup>

29. *TDNT*, 3:395–96.

30. See a similar summary in Plummer, *Luke*, 4–5.

Luke’s choice of terms discloses much about the processes of missionary work in his day. He is, after all, one of its beneficiaries. He characterizes the missionary message as “a narrative” and as “the word” (see the Notes on 1:1, 2). He also talks about “the words” that have played a role in Theophilus’s conversion (see the Note on 1:4). Most of these terms point to the content of an oral presentation from a missionary to an investigator. Such content is “delivered” by “eyewitnesses, and ministers” so that a person is “instructed” in the truth about the Savior (1:2, 4). Implicit is the sense that people receive the basics, the fundamental message that Jesus is the Messiah. Also implicit in the expressions “the word” and “the words” rests a concept that the missionaries carry a fuller version of the story to the investigator, potentially bringing a deeper understanding that invites further exploration (1:2, 4).

## Zacharias and Elisabeth (1:5–25)

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### King James Translation

5 There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judæa, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. 6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. 7 And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years. 8 And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest’s office before God in the order of his course, 9 According to the custom of the priest’s office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense.

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### BYU New Testament Rendition

5 In the days that Herod was king of Judea, there was a certain priest named Zacharias from the priestly division of Abijah, and the name of his wife, who was of the daughters of Aaron, was Elizabeth. 6 Both were righteous in the sight of God, conducting themselves blamelessly in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord. 7 And they had no child, because Elizabeth was unable to have children, and they were both advanced in years. 8 And it came to pass while he was fulfilling his duties as a priest before God in the order of his division, 9 in accordance with the custom of the priest’s office, that he was chosen by lot to go into the Lord’s sanctuary and make the incense offering. 10 And all the assembly of the people were praying outside at the time of incense.



11 And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. 13 But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. 14 And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. 15 For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. 16 And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. 17 And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

18 And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years. 19 And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings. 20 And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.

21 And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple. 22 And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless.

23 And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house. 24 And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying, 25 Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.

11 And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. 12 And when he saw him, Zacharias was shaken and fear fell upon him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. 14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. 15 For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and he will not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Ghost while still in his mother's womb. 16 And he will turn many of the sons 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 understanding of the righteous, to prepare a people ready for the Lord."

18 And Zacharias said to the angel, "How will I know this? For I am old, and my wife is advanced in years." 19 And answering, the angel said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God. And I was sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 20 And behold, you will be silent and not be able to speak until the days when these things will happen, because you did not believe my words, which will indeed be fulfilled in their due time."

21 And the people were waiting for Zacharias and were amazed that he spent so much time in the temple. 22 And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. For his part, he kept nodding to them and remained mute.

23 And it came to pass that when the days of his service were completed, he went to his home. 24 After these days, his wife, Elizabeth, conceived and kept herself in confinement for five months, saying, 25 "This is how the Lord has treated me in the days when he looked on me to take away my disgrace among men."

## Translation Notes and Comments

**1:5 Herod, the king:** By introducing Herod, who ruled Palestine from 37 to 4 BC, Luke places events into a historical context which we can check. Herod

comes to power under a commission issued and celebrated by the Roman Senate in 40 BC. But

afterwards it takes him three years to consolidate his power against enemies and other pretenders.<sup>31</sup>

**the king of Judaea:** The formal title remains unknown, although Luke may be right. Other ancient sources do not specify Herod's title, simply calling him "king."<sup>32</sup>

**priest . . . daughters of Aaron:** This couple descends from Aaron, from either Eleazar or Ithamar (see 1 Chr. 24:1–6), which places the couple's oldest son John in the position to become the high priest, as Doctrine and Covenants 84:28 implies. (Aaron's older sons, Nadab and Abihu, die without children—see 1 Chr. 24:2.) During the prior 150 years, the office of high priest is first seized by the Hasmonean family (see 1 Maccabees 14:27–48) and then held as a political payment by King Herod for cooperating priests.<sup>33</sup> Even so, Josephus insists that during previous centuries his people exert the utmost care in seeing that the line of priests remains pure.<sup>34</sup> Such accords with the instructions in Leviticus 21:7, 13–15.

**the course of Abia:** According to Ezra 2:36–39, only four of the twenty-four divisions of temple priests return from the exile in Babylonia. But the four quickly reconstitute the twenty-four. Abia (or Abijah) is the eighth division of priests (see 1 Chr. 24:10; the Note on 1:8), which serves at the temple during the eighth and thirty-second weeks of the year.<sup>35</sup> Because of the large number of priests in his division, Zacharias actually serves no more than one day of his assigned week in temple functions.<sup>36</sup>

**his wife was of the daughters of Aaron:** By this note, it becomes clear that Elisabeth is of the preferred family descent to marry a priest, assuring the proper ancestry for any children, though the law

does not prevent a priest's son from marrying outside the tribe of Levi (see Lev. 21:7, 13–15).<sup>37</sup>

**1:6 both righteous before God, walking . . . blameless:** Luke strikes the chord that those associated with the earliest phases of the Christian movement respect law and hold standards of righteousness (see 2:4–5, 22, 24, 27, 39, 42, 51; 4:16; the Notes on 4:16; 16:16–17; 20:47; 23:56). Moreover, with an unexpected, generous tone, Luke's narrative will lift the curse of childlessness from Zacharias and Elisabeth. Beyond this, certain individuals carry the potent appellative "righteous" or "just" (Greek *dikaios*) at the beginning of his Gospel and near the end, forming a literary *inclusio* that ties the whole together (see 2:25; 23:47; the Note on 23:50).

**ordinances:** The noun here (Greek *dikaiōma*) means "statute" or "regulation" in the Old Testament sense of performing temple ordinances (see Heb. 9:1).<sup>38</sup>

**1:7 no child:** Of all the family tragedies that can occur in ancient Israel, as stories in the Old Testament attest, the lack of a child in a marriage is one of the worst. Not only does a childless person lack an heir but also is deemed cursed or unacceptable before God (see 1 Sam. 1:4–7; Isa. 54:1–7). But Luke does not intend to leave us with the impression that Elisabeth remains in this state. Instead, he will soon put Elisabeth in the select company of Sarah, Hannah, and other women in the Old Testament to whom God earlier grants special children.<sup>39</sup>

**Elisabeth was barren:** The common assumption is that the woman, Elisabeth in this case, is infertile. We do not know the medical reason for her barrenness, whether it is a physiological condition that afflicts Elisabeth or one that afflicts Zacharias.

**well stricken in years:** It is Zacharias who is the source for this notion in his objection to the angel's promise (see 1:18), evidently indicating that Elisabeth is past her child-bearing years.

**1:8 his order:** Twenty-four orders of priests have existed from early times, leaving each order with one week twice a year for service at the temple (see

31. Josephus, *A.J.* 14.14.5 (§§385–89); Schürer, *History*, 1:287–329.

32. Strabo, *Geography* 16.2.46; Appian, *Bell. civ.* 5.75; Tacitus, *History* 5.9.

33. Schürer, *History*, 1:193–94.

34. Josephus, *Ag. Apion* 1.7 (§30).

35. Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services As They Were at the Time of Jesus Christ* (rpt., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), 86–88; Morris, *Luke*, 75.

36. Schürer, *History*, 2:292.

37. Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 213–21; Ze'ev W. Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times*, 2d ed. (Provo, Utah: BYU Press; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 129–31.

38. BAGD, 197; *TDNT*, 2:219–23; *TLNT*, 1:343–44.

39. Marshall, *Luke*, 53; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1:323.