

# The Birth of John the Baptist

## Luke 1: 57-80

**DIG:** How did John's birth fulfill the words of the angel of ADONAI in Luke 1:13-17? How did the neighbors and relatives respond to these events? How does all this begin to promote the Gospel? Make a list of all the things that Zechariah praises ADONAI for. How does his song compare with Mary's in Luke 1:46-55? What, according to this song, is the purpose of salvation? How does Z'kharyah's song show God's unfolding plan from the days of the TaNaKk, to the coming of the Messiah?

**REFLECT:** What does it mean to you that the Lord's hand is with someone: Success? Courage? Wealth? Endurance? Holiness? How was His hand seen in the life of Yochanan? What does that mean for you? Of the promises listed in this song, which one means the most to you at this stage in your life? Why? How has God unfolded His plan of salvation in your life? Who helped prepare the way for you? What were some key events that led you to your commitment to Jesus?

**This begins the motif that what happens to the herald, happens to the King.**

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son (Luke 1:57). The circumstances of Elisheva's barrenness were widely known; so John's birth was recognized as supernatural. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy (Luke 1:58). Apparently Elizabeth remained in seclusion throughout her pregnancy. The imperfect tense here shows repeated action, they kept on rejoicing with her over and over.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. Circumcision on the eighth day of a boy's life is the sole condition for a Jew's being under the covenant God made with Abraham (see my commentary on **Genesis En - For Generations to Come Every Male Who is Eight Days Old Must be Circumcised**). Her neighbors and relatives were attempting to name him after his father - Zechariah Jr. . . if you will (Luke 1:59). When the final blessing had been spoken and the circumcision performed, and then came the final pronouncement of grace over the cup of wine, "Our God and the God of our fathers, raise up this child to his father and mother, and let his name be called Z'kharyah."<sup>79</sup> But his mother interrupted and spoke up saying: No! He is to be called John (Luke 1:60). Evidently Zechariah had already communicated his experience at the Temple with Elizabeth many times over and she was obedient to the command of the angel of the Lord.

However, that was contrary to Jewish tradition and practice and therefore raised a problem in the community gathered there. **They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name (Luke 1:61)."** According to the Jewish custom of that day, they would name the child after any relative, either living or dead. **The rabbis teach that this was because God changed the names of Abram and Sarai at the time God instituted circumcision.** In modern Jewish tradition this is still done to some degree. You name your children after a relative who has already passed away. But there was no one, in either **Zechariah** or **Elizabeth's** side of the family who was *ever* named **John**. So the other Jewish mother's at the circumcision ceremony didn't seem to like what **Elisheva** was doing and planned to go over **her** head to **her** husband.<sup>80</sup> **He** would surely set **her** straight!

**Then they made signs to his father Z'kharyah** who had been both deaf and mute for about nine months, **to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet.** He probably was handed a piece of wood that had been hollowed out and filled with wax. **And to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is Yochanan."** This act of obedience caused his judgment of both deafness and dumbness to be removed and he was able to speak. **Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free. God's chastening had the desired result and he began to speak, praising God (Luke 1:62-64).** His last words in the Temple had been words of doubt; his first words after the lesson of his being deaf and mute had been learned, were words of faith and praise.<sup>81</sup> All of us have shown a lack of faith at some point in our lives. But when **God** hears and answers our prayers, like **Z'kharyah**, we really get up and rejoice.

**Zechariah's prophecy filled the neighbors with awe, or a healthy fear of the Lord (Proverbs 9:10),** which was the proper response when they realized that the way was being prepared for the long awaited **Messiah.** **And throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things.** They, in effect, became evangelists who proclaimed throughout the countryside of **Judea** the truth of what **Z'kharyah** had told them. **Everyone who heard this wondered about it.** For this reason many questioned: **What then is this child going to be? For ADONAI's hand was with him (Luke 1:65-66).** The phrase **hand of the LORD** is a common expression of the TaNaKh for **God's** powerful presence.

**His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit.** Under the control of the **Ruach HaKodesh**, he prophesied a message with as much authority as any found in TaNaKh (**Luke 1:67**): He sang the second of four songs recorded in **Luke** by **Mary 1:46-66**, here by **Zechariah 1:68-79**, a choir of angels **2:14**, and **Simeon 2:29-32**.

**Zechariah's song is divided into two main segments. First, Z'kharyah praises the Meshiach who was to come (Luke 1:68-75).** The entire first segment consists of a single sentence in the Greek. He started his hymn by singing about the work of God that has already begun with the birth of John and the conception of the Messiah: **Praise be to the Lord, the God of Isra'el, because He has come to His people and redeemed them (Luke 1:68).** Again we find him relating the coming Messiah to the Jewish covenants. What ADONAI has begun to do is what He had promised through the mouth of His holy prophets of long ago (Luke 1:70).

**He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David (Luke 1:69).** The image of a horn symbolizes the strength of the animal. Since Yochanan himself is not linked to the house of David (Psalm 132:17), the horn of salvation cannot refer to Yochanan, but to the Meshiach he was announcing. The salvation mentioned here is not political, but personal. It speaks to an individual's relationship with Christ. It involves the person's life (Luke 9:24), and is for those who recognize that they are lost (Luke 19:10). It comes through faith (Luke 7:50, 17:19, 18:42), through the forgiveness of their sins (Luke 1:77). Saving faith results in salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us (Luke 1:71; Second Samuel 22:18; Psalm 18:17, 106:10). Luke understood salvation to mean salvation from sin, and this is how, according to Luke, John understood the salvation that Jesus would bring as witnessed in John's message (Luke 3:7-14).<sup>82</sup>

There is a play on words in verses 72 and 73. Z'kharyah name means to remember and Elisheva's name means the oath of God. So we can have confidence that ADONAI remembers His oath to fulfill the promises to the righteous of the TaNaKh. That He will show mercy to our ancestors and to remember His holy covenant (Luke 1:72). This should also be a comfort to us today because we can have confidence that God is a promise keeper. He will keep His promises to Isra'el and He will keep His promises to us.

**The oath He swore to our father Abraham (Genesis 17:4 and 22:16-17) to rescue us from the hand of our enemies.** Again Luke understood this rescue figuratively (see Psalm 97:10). This rescue involves the kind of salvation that was promised in Jeremiah 31:31-34, where ADONAI pledged that He would forgive Isra'el of their sins, cleanse them, give them a new heart and to enable them to serve Him without fear (Luke 1:73-74) in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days (Luke 1:75).<sup>83</sup> The phrase all our days is used as closing in Psalm 16:11 and 18:51. It expresses the eternal nature of God's salvation and the corresponding human response.

**Secondly, Zechariah praises his own son who will be the forerunner to King Messiah (Luke 1:76-79).** There is a change in tense at this point, from the past tense, which describes what the LORD has already begun to do, to the future tense, which speaks specifically of John's future ministry.<sup>84</sup> Here Zechariah, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, recalls Malachi's prophecy that Elijah precedes the Messiah: **And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him, Yochanan's task was to take on the office of a prophet and to prepare the way for the King. While John was a prophet of the Most High (Luke 1:76), Jesus is the Son of the Most High (Luke 1:32). John's birth to a barren woman was miraculous, but Yeshua's birth to a virgin is unique and unprecedented. Yochanan's role was to prepare the way for the Lord (Luke 1:17), but Jesus is that Lord - the Savior, who is the Meshiach, the Lord (2:11).**<sup>85</sup>

John was not the Savior and his message could not save. His ministry was to introduce the Savior who would provide salvation for God's people through the forgiveness of their sins (Luke 1:77). The redemption that the Messiah will give is not a political liberation, but rather a salvation that involves the forgiveness of their sins. As a result, the prophecy of Jeremiah would be fulfilled: **No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, "Know ADONAI," because they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more (Jeremiah 31:34).**

Salvation is possible only because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven (Luke 1:78). The rising sun means *the day star*, or *the morning star*, which announces the coming of the day in the sense that John is *the morning star* announcing the Son of righteousness (Malachi 4:2) who will come to us from heaven. As a result, Yochanan's ministry will be twofold, first to shine on those Gentiles living in darkness and in the shadow of death, and secondly to guide our feet, or the nation of Israel, into the path of peace (1:79). This picks up the image of the rising sun in the previous verse. Verses 68-79 are known in the west as *the Benedictus* (which is the section's first word in the Vulgate). As with *the Magnificat* (see An - [The Song of Mary](#)), the entire prophecy is couched in the language of the TaNaKh.<sup>86</sup>

**And the child grew and became strong (Luke 1:80a).** We find parallel accounts elsewhere in the Scriptures. The first seven words (six words in Greek) describing Messiah's growth are identical to Luke 2:40. But more importantly, **he became strong in the Spirit.** Earlier we learned that Yochanan would be filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:15), and here we see the fulfillment of that prophecy. Similar language is also found in Judges where

we learn that **Sampson grew and the Ruach HaKodesh came upon him (Judges 13:24-25 and 3:10)**. Thus, **John** grew up **strong** physically and spiritually.

This is a summary account. **He** continued to grow in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Isra'el (1:80b). That was not normal for a young person. Because of the special mission that **Yochanan** knew about from an early age, **he** followed the role of Elijah (**Luke 1:17**). **Luke** mentions **John's** name as a literary device, after **Z'kharyah's** lengthy song, to bring us back to the narrative. Sometime early in **his** life, we don't know when, **he** leaves the town in which **he** was born and goes out into the wilderness of Judea. **He** spends most of **his** life there. This separated **John** from the Judaism of **his** day. When **his** public message finally did come thirty years later, it was different from that of rabbinic Judaism.<sup>87</sup>