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The Birth of John the Baptist

Luke 1: 57-80

The birth of John the Baptist 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 TaNaKh, 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, to see link click [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**.⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰ **He** would surely set **her** straight!

Then they made signs to his father Z'kharyah who had been 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 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 mute had been learned, were words of faith and praise.⁸¹ 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 Spirit. Under the control of **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh**, he prophesied a message **with** as much authority as any found in TaNaKh (Lk 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 had 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 (Lk 1:68).** Again we find **him** relating **the** coming **Messiah** to the Jewish covenants. What **God** had begun to do is what **He** had promised **through** the mouth of **His holy prophets of long ago (Lk 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**).⁸²

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).**⁸³ 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.⁸⁴ 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 (Lk 1:17)**, but **Jesus** is that **Lord - the Savior**, who is **the Messiah (2:11).**⁸⁵

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.⁸⁶

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 Ha'Kodesh 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.⁸⁷