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A Levitical Priest (Zacharias) and Jesus' Birth

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THE PHYSICAL BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST

A LEVITICAL PRIEST (ZACHARIAS) AND JESUS' BIRTH

THE ZACHARIAS FILE

STATISTICS ON HIS LIFE

Spouse: Elisabeth

Son: John the Baptist

First mention: Luke 1:5

Final mention: Luke 3:2

Meaning of his name: "God remembers"

Frequency of his name: Referred to eight times

Biblical books mentioning him: One book (Luke)

Occupation: Priest

Important fact about his life: He was the father of John the Baptist

STORY OF HIS LIFE

- Two authors aptly introduce the opening event in his life:

On an October morning, Zecharias, a country priest on his half-yearly turn of duty in the Temple at Jerusalem, and the other priests on duty were gathered to await the casting of lots that would determine which of them would have the honor of offering the incense. This highly coveted privilege was never granted to a priest more than once in his lifetime. Zecharias, now an old man, must have long hoped that the privilege would fall to him. Probably fifty others waited with him, all moved with the same expectancy. That day the lot fell to Zecharias. (Donald Guthrie, *Jesus the Messiah*: Zondervan Publishing, p. 3)

Zacharias belonged to that of Abijah which was the eighth. Each course did duty for eight days, all joining in on the Sabbath. About fifty were engaged every day, the duty of each being determined by the white-stone "lot," that there might be no contention in the house of the Lord. The offering of incense was considered the highest duty and could be exercised only once in a lifetime. The lot had fallen at last on Zacharias for this high task.

It was the time of the morning sacrifice (9:00 a.m.). The ponderous Temple gates swing open and three blasts of the silver trumpets of the Priests summoned the people of the

city to a spirit of worship. The priests on the pinnacle of the Temple gave the signal for the beginning of the services of the day. One of the assistants of Zacharias reverently cleaned the altar and retired. A second as reverently placed the live coals taken from the burnt offering on the altar and, worshipping, retired. The organ sounded through the Temple. Zacharias entered the Holy Place, lit by the sheen of the seven-branched candlestick on the right, bearing in his hand the gold censer. On his left was the table of shewbread. In front of him beyond the altar was the thick curtain which separated the Holy of Holies. The people outside were prostrate in silent worship. Zacharias alone in the Holy Place awaited the kindling of the incense on the altar, when he too would bow in worship and then withdraw in reverence.

At that instant of intense expectation, the supreme hour of all his priestly life, as the cloud of incense symbol of accepted prayer began to rise, the angel Gabriel appeared, not where Jewish angelology would place him — on the left of the throne of glory — but on the right of the altar. Zacharias was agitated and terrified. By Jewish tradition one might not see God and live. (J. W. Shepard, *The Christ of the Gospels*: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 21)

- Actually there are thirty-two men with this name, more than any other name!
- Zacharias received the first spoken message from heaven in more than 400 years!
- The last person before Zacharias to receive a message given by angels had the same name — Zechariah (Hebrew and Greek spelling of the same name).
- Note: In the Old Testament, Zechariah the prophet was told *what* God desired:

Therefore say to them, "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Return to Me' says the LORD of hosts, 'and I will return to you,' says the LORD of hosts" (Zech. 1:3).

In the New Testament, Zacharias the priest was told just *how* this would occur:

"But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God'" (Lk. 1:13, 16).

- John's birth was the eighth of nine biblical births in which God Himself intervened. These are:
 - A. The birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 21:1)
 - B. The birth of Jacob and Esau to Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 25:21)
 - C. The birth of Reuben to Jacob and Leah (Gen. 29:31)
 - D. The birth of Issachar to Jacob and Leah (Gen. 30:17, 18)
 - E. The birth of Joseph to Jacob and Rachel (Gen. 30:22-24)
 - F. The birth of Samuel to Elkanah and Hannah (1 Sam. 1:19)
 - G. The birth of Samson to Manoah and his wife (Judg. 13:1, 2)

H. The birth of John to Zacharias and Elisabeth (Lk. 1:57)

I. The birth of Jesus to Mary (Lk. 2:7)

- The child was to be called John, which means, “the grace of Jehovah.” The name Zacharias means “God remembers,” and the name Elisabeth means “his oath.” Thus, at the birth of John the Baptist, God was remembering His covenant of grace made in Psalm 89:34-37 concerning David’s seed, Jesus, to which John would serve as forerunner.
- As both he and his wife were advanced in years, Zacharias had some difficulty believing all this (as once did Abraham and Sarah; see Genesis 17:17; 18:12).
- The waiting crowd soon realized that something very strange had happened to Zacharias and that he could not pronounce the expected blessing upon them. No doubt many in that waiting crowd were there to help Zacharias celebrate a very special event, the burning of incense upon the golden altar. A priest could do this only once in his entire life. Others in the multitude were expecting to hear him pronounce the great Levitical blessing. In Num. 6:22-27 we read: *“And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them, The LORD bless thee, and keep thee: The LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace. And they shall put my name upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them.”*
- But on that day there was no celebration or benediction. Something far more exciting and eternal was about to happen. Zacharias returned home and soon his old and barren wife conceived a child.
- Finally, note the initial two words spoken to Zacharias by the angel Gabriel: *“Fear not.”*
- Prior to this time a number of Old Testament individuals have heard this reassuring phrase:

A. Abraham

“After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward’” (Gen. 15:1).

B. Jacob

“So He said, ‘I am God, the God of your father; do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there’” (Gen. 46:3).

C. Joshua

“‘Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.’ And the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Do not fear them, for I have delivered them into your hand; not a man of them shall stand before you’” (Josh. 1:9; 10:8).

D. Gideon

“Then the LORD said to him, ‘Peace be with you; do not fear, you shall not die’” (Judg. 6:23).

E. Jehoshaphat

“You will not need to fight in this battle. Position yourselves, stand still and see the salvation of the LORD, who is with you, O Judah and Jerusalem! Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them, for the LORD is with you” (2 Chron. 20:17).

F. Isaiah

“Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand” (Isa. 41:10).

G. Israel

“Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your descendants from the east, and gather you from the west; I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’ And to the south, ‘Do not keep them back!’ Bring My sons from afar, and My daughters from the ends of the earth” (Isa. 43:5, 6).

H. All believers

“But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. ‘Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk. 12:7, 32).

I. Paul

“Saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you” (Acts 27:24).

J. John the Baptist

- Now we come to the New Testament where on four occasions these words appear, all connected to the incarnation:

A. Zacharias

“But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John” (Lk. 1:13).

B. Mary

“Then the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God” (Lk. 1:30).

C. Joseph

“But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 1:20).

D. The shepherds

“Then the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people” (Lk. 2:10).

- Surely if present today, these Old Testament and New Testament individuals could sing with the greatest passion the words found in stanza two of *How Firm a Foundation*:

*Fear not, I am with thee; O be not dismayed
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid;
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand!*

REFLECTIONS FROM HIS LIFE

He left us today—our Nazarite son—for the Judean desert. That lonely and desolate place is no doubt the ideal spot for him to begin spiritual preparation for his ministry. (Lk. 1:14, 15; 3:1, 2)

And what a ministry it will be. Think of it, serving as the Messiah's forerunner and ministering like a modern Elijah, bringing many people to the Lord. (Mt. 3:4-6; 11:14; Jn. 1:23)

To think that Elisabeth and I once despaired of ever having a child, never dreaming God would answer our prayer in such an incredible way. Gabriel's words in the Temple still ring in my ears: "*He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth.*" So he was, and so he shall be! (Lk. 1:7, 13, 15, 19, 80)