



Luke's introduction to his gospel

luke 1.⁵-2.⁵²

part 1

the annunciation concerning john the baptist

luke 1.⁵⁻²⁵

Introduction

After a four-verse preface to his work, Luke launches into the story he has to tell. Luke 1.⁵-2.⁵² can be read as a sort of introduction. Luke does in this introduction what most authors do in an introduction. He summarizes his work, his message, and what he hopes the reader will learn.

Luke's introduction comes in the form of eight narratives, each accompanied by an "oracle." By oracle, I mean "a divine announcement." The first seven oracles come from the mouth of angels, men, and women—all inspired by the Holy Spirit of God. The eighth and final oracle—interestingly and tellingly, the simplest of the eight—comes from the very mouth of God Himself.

In this series of homilies, we will look at each introductory narrative with its accompanying oracle. We begin with the first, the annunciation concerning John the Baptist that is found in Luke 1.⁵⁻²⁵.

Luke introduces two people, husband and wife, Zacharias and Elisabeth. Their names have meaning. These meanings will play an important role, not only in Luke's introduction, but throughout his work. Zacharias' name means "Yahweh remembers," "Yahweh calls to mind," "Yahweh acknowledges," something like that. We will soon observe how Yahweh remembers the man and his wife as he calls to mind, gives heed to, and responds to their prayers and their most ardent desires. But, as we shall see, His interest and care for this couple is also typological. In the course of Luke's book, God's interest and care will be in evidence over and over again in the life of individual after individual. This divine interest and care, we come to realize, is applicable to every reader.

Elisabeth's name means "God swears," "God covenants," "God promises." Again, this name will signify desires, promises, and acts of God that are broader than those involving the married couple. Luke has a story to tell about desires, promises, and acts of God that impact *all* mankind.

These names, we will see, are repeated and played with throughout the introductory narratives. These names, along with their meanings, remind us that Luke's story is, first and foremost, about God. People will come and go; people will be impacted by the amazing events that unfold; but this is not a story about people. It is God's story. Luke's narrative is more than history, however sacred it may be. It is "theology"—a study of God.

They had no child

Luke tells us a number of things about our married couple. They are both descended from Aaron, brother of the great Moses, and the first to hold the Aaronic priesthood. They are strict observers of the Law. They are elderly. And, finally, they are childless.

It is this last fact—the fact of their barrenness—that seems most important. It is this element that propels the story forward. The observant Bible reader will remember that we have encountered barren couples before. In fact, the Bible has introduced several such couples.

Every time we have been introduced to a barren couple, something wonderful has immediately happened. In each case, the barren couple has eventually born an important child—a child promised and of divine promise. Let’s take a moment to call them to mind.

Abraham and Sarai—barren during their younger, more fertile years—bear Isaac, as promised, in their later years. He it is who will carry on the covenant promises made to Abraham. Jacob and Rachel—barren as a couple—bear Joseph, who will be God’s agent in preserving Israel, and thus the promises God has made to the family. Manoah and his unnamed and barren wife bear a son, Samson, through whom God promises to deliver Israel from their Philistine enemies and overlords. Elkanah and his wife, Hannah, barren, bear Samuel, a son promised by a prophet of God. He will minister to and direct Israel in some of its most critical moments and decisions.

Luke, then, through this couple and their experiences, is sending a signal to the conscientious Bible reader. “Something wonderful is about to happen!” “A child is on the horizon.” We will, of course, meet the couple’s son, impressive in himself. But there is a second child, “preferred” before the first, though coming after him. It is He who is the true miracle, the child of greatest promise, the child who holds within his person a divine promise unparalleled in human history.

Luke has clearly given some thought to his message and how to deliver it. With his use of this couple and the fact of their barrenness, the reader is put on notice. Luke is more than a story teller. He is more than a historian or chronicler. He is a poet. He is creative and imaginative in his presentation. We will want to read him carefully, with our own equal share of creativity and imagination.

the 1st oracle

Having been signaled that we are to be on the lookout for something amazing, for a promised and promising child, we read on, on the edge of our seat. We read with a sense of excitement and anticipation. Will the couple indeed bear a son? Who will he be? What will he do? What is the nature of the promise that we will find in the child?

The answer to such questions begins to come as we enter the temple. It comes as a man does a very “customary” thing. He performs a ritual that has been performed day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, century after century, millennia after millennia. It has, at times, become rather ho hum. But it is not ho hum to Zacharias. He will only stand in this holy place and do this holy thing once in his lifetime. As he burns incense upon the altar—its rising smoke a symbol of Israel’s prayers¹—he offers a prayer for himself, for his wife, and for the nation he faithfully serves. On this occasion, Zacharias’ prayer is heard. The response is extraordinary: “There appeared unto him an angel of the Lord.” This angel, herald of a divine message, utters the first of our eight oracles.

“Fear not, Zacharias:
for thy prayer is heard;
and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son,
and thou shalt call his name John.
And thou shalt have joy and gladness;
and many shall rejoice at his birth.

We pause here to express our own wonder and joy in a potentiality so soon realized. Luke’s hinted suggestion that we might expect this couple to bear a child is confirmed. A son is on the way. His name is to be John, or Yoḥannan. Just as his parents’ symbolic names tell us something about Luke’s greater message and teach something about the character of God (he is a promise maker and a promise keeper), so too does the son’s name. Yoḥannan means “Yahweh is gracious,” “Yahweh his merciful,” or “Yahweh is accepting.”² Though the mother and father’s names bear a powerful testimony of their own, it is the son’s name, “God is merciful,” that gives potential and meaning, not only to the introductory narrative before us, but to Luke’s entire tale. It is out of mercy that God acts as a promise maker and a

¹ See Psalm 141.² and Revelation 8.³⁻⁴

² I have noted elsewhere that these two words, ‘grace,’ and ‘mercy,’ are related to the Spanish ‘gracioso,’ and the French ‘merci,’ respectively. “Thank you,” they mean. But what, exactly, do we mean when we say “thank you”? These words, certainly express gratitude and appreciation. But they also suggest “acceptance.” “I accept your kind words.” “I accept your gift.” “It pleases me.” We would do well to see God’s “grace,” or “mercy” as a reflection of his accepting nature. He is a being who finds pleasure—often even in places where we might not expect him to find pleasure. His capacity to feel pleasure is more about what is in Him than what is outside Him.

promise keeper. It is because God is merciful, that He answers the unfortunate couple's prayers. While this happy announcement of a child will, naturally enough, bring great joy and gladness to the blessed couple, their joy only scratches the surface of God's intentions, and the joy that He is pleased to bestow, not only upon this one man and this one woman, but upon untold billions. Because God is merciful, He has heard and will hear the longing prayer of billions. Because the Almighty is a merciful Being, He has prepared a blessing for billions of barren souls.

The blessings that follow immediately upon the naming of the child also have their origin, potentialities, and realizations in the truth found in the boy's name: "God is merciful."

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.
And many of the children of Israel
shall he turn to the Lord their God.
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."³

God's mercy-based promises are a veritable avalanche of goodness and blessing. Let's just take a moment to briefly look at these promised blessings.

First, we learn that the son will hold a special and favored place before God. He will possess the Holy Spirit in unparalleled ways. Most often in the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit is portrayed as coming upon an individual for a specific and limited purpose. With the completion of the task, there is often, almost, a kind of retirement. Not so, in the case of John. The Holy Spirit will be a constant influence; a continual source of insight and joy—a joy far superior to and more lasting than that found in wine.

³ Luke 1. ¹³⁻¹⁶

Now, it is true that the Old Testament often criticizes the overuse of wine.⁴ Drunkenness is an error to be assiduously avoided. However, there is another Old Testament stratum that celebrates wine as a sign of blessedness and a source of joy and thanksgiving.⁵ This promised son will have no need of such earthly intoxications as wine affords, for he will be intoxicated and made happy through the ministrations of the Holy Spirit. He will, like Old Testament Nazarites, be so thoroughly dedicated to and joyful in the service of his God, and so full of mission and purpose that, again, earthly and mundane enjoyments will pale in comparison.

However, this New Testament Nazarite will be something more than an oath-keeping Nazarite. He will be a prophet on parallel with one of the very greatest of Hebrew prophets: Elijah. This, we learn, from the angel's reference to Malachi 4.⁶ Elijah and John have much in common. Now, much could be said on their similarities and the significance of Malachi 4.⁶ in their ministries. We will touch on just a few points.

Both men serve in a period of extreme hypocrisy and apostasy. Both confront the apostasy courageously and without compromise. Both find their lives in constant peril at the hands of unappreciative government rulers. Nevertheless, both diligently labor to fulfill their missions and to positively influence others. Their principle influence is to “turn” “many of the children of Israel...to the Lord their God.” They seek to “turn... the disobedient to the wisdom of the just;” that is to say, encourage repentance and a change of life from disobedience to righteousness.⁶

An LDS reader is strongly drawn to the idea that John, duplicating the work of Elijah, turns “the hearts of the fathers to the children.” This is, of course, packed with meaning. But, to take it at its most simple, I appreciate the Jewish Publication Society's translation of Malachi 4.⁶ The first line reads, “He shall reconcile parents with children.” It then renders the second line, “and [reconciles] children with their parents...” This, it seems to me, gets to the heart of

⁴ See Isaiah 5.¹¹⁻¹² or Isaiah 28.⁷ for just two of many examples

⁵ See Psalm 104.¹⁵; Isaiah 25.⁶; Joel 2.⁹; Amos 9.¹³; Zachariah 9.¹⁷ and 10.⁷ for a few examples.

⁶ This is a variant reading from our normal “and the heart of the children to their fathers.” This passage is quoted in each of our LDS standard works (It may be the only passage found in every standard work). But this passage is subject to alternative readings.

the real work of John, Elijah and, ultimately of the temple. In fact, it gets to the real meaning of Atonement, or at-one-ment: reconciliation, connectedness, unity.

We can now put together three principle data points of Luke's message: "the world is full of barrenness," "God is merciful," and "the Spirit of Elijah is resurgent." Luke is pointing our minds to an imminent and new dispensation of mercy. Put differently, he hopes to introduce his readers to a new revelation of God—to an accepting Being, who is pleased with us beyond our former imagination. Only when mankind comes to know and experience God as accepting, will they learn to accept each other. Only then will they be reconciled. Only then will they turn their hearts toward each other.

Put in more temple-like language, people must come to understand their connectedness; that they are bound or welded together; that they are linked, like it or not, for good or for ill. This revelation comes first to the family, but is not to be restricted in its power to such a narrow circle. We are all family. We are all connected—connected to an accepting God, and through Him to each other. We must be at-one. That is the lesson Elijah, John, and the temple have to teach us. It is at the heart of Luke's larger message. We either learn this lesson, thus "preparing for the Lord," the most connected of all Beings, or we ignore the lesson and face extinction. This had been the last word of the Old Testament: "be connected, form attachments, form community or become extinct."

Well, all of these promises and more can be found in the boy's name and the angel's announcement. God has answered prayers, promised a child, bestowed the Holy Spirit, brought joy and gladness to others, and invited others into intimate communion and relationship with Him because He is gracious: because He is an accepting Being, who happily receives others to Himself. This son is privileged to bear the message of God's imminent arrival, which ushers in an age of unimagined grace, acceptance, and connectedness.

The great Book of Mormon missionary, Ammon, once expressed his wonder at God's goodness, grace, mercy, and acceptance. In doing so, he taught us that it was far beyond human prediction or estimation.

“Who could have supposed that our God would have been so merciful...?”⁷

Perhaps we can hear in Zacharias' doubtful reply this same tendency to underestimate the willingness and capacity of God to act in barren lives. Perhaps we hear our same tendency to doubt what He is capable of doing with us, incapable and barren as we know ourselves to be. It is all just too wondrous!

“Whereby shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.”⁸

We think—as Luke intends, I suspect—of Abraham, of his similarly skeptical reply to an incomprehensible promise, and of the eventual fulfillment of the promise. Genesis informs us, and Paul reminds us, that Sarai was in menopause and Abraham was impotent.⁹ This couple was not going to be having any babies. The promise was outside their natural capacity to fulfil.

But we know that they, like Zacharias and Elisabeth, did have a baby. And we know that they had the baby through the power of God, not of man. Paul states:

“And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara's womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform.”¹⁰

⁷ Alma 26.¹⁷

⁸ Luke 1.¹⁸

⁹ See Genesis 18.¹¹; Romans 4.¹⁹

¹⁰ Romans 4.¹⁹⁻²¹

Paul, like Luke, goes beyond the history and uses the story of Abraham and Sarai as a metaphor. God has promised certain potentialities for each us. In Paul's metaphor, the potentiality is our justification, our forgiveness, our acceptance by God. But we are incapable of achieving this right standing with God through our own efforts, our own abilities, our own performance, or our own imaginings. It comes only through the power of God. It comes only through the grace of God.¹¹

Little wonder that Zacharias pauses, hesitates, and wonders at the promise of a child.

Gabriel

At this point, we have met all the principles in this particular narrative: Zacharias, Elisabeth, the angel, and Yoḥannan. But now, as if this message of God's power, even in the face of our powerlessness, is to be reinforced, the angel reveals his name: Gabriel—"God is powerful," "God is mighty." The angel's name is a reminder of the angelic response to Sarai's skepticism. "Is anything too hard for the Lord."¹²

No!

To further reinforce the certainty of the message, Gabriel informs Zacharias that he has stood in the presence of God. Therefore, Gabriel is privy to God's intentions. He has listened to God speak. He has heard God utter the promise. There *will* be a son.

Dumb and not able to speak

"Because thou believest not my words," declares the angel, "thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak." Now, certainly, this announcement could reasonably be read as a statement of displeasure, even reprisal. We'll not deny this likely reading: "disbelieve God's word and you'll find yourself slapped around."

¹¹ See Romans 4.²²⁻²⁵

¹² Genesis 18.¹⁴

Yet, in relating the angel's words, we might be excused for putting the stress on a different syllable, as it were. Are we not all "dumb" in the face of such Divine purpose and capability? Are we not all unable "to speak" when it comes to understanding, quantifying, and describing God's willingness and ability to act in our lives? Again, we think of Ammon's humble confession.

"Behold, who can glory too much in the Lord? Yea, who can say too much of his great power, and of his mercy, and of his long-suffering towards the children of men? Behold, I say unto you, *I cannot say the smallest part which I feel.*"¹³

Perhaps Luke's principle intent in recording the angel's declaration is to affirm just such confessions.

"Thou hast beset me behind and before,
and laid thine hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is high, I cannot attain unto it."¹⁴

The marvel of it all

"The people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple." This is Luke's first statement of a theme that he will repeat over and over again. It is one of his principle messages. Something new is afoot. A new day has arrived. Everyone senses it. All marvel at it. All marvel at God's extravagance in the lives of vulnerable mortals.

"And they *marvelled* all," we are informed of those present for John's circumcision, when Zacharias named the child Johānann.¹⁵ When shepherds, faithful to their angelic charge, testified of the things that they had learned about the newly born Savior, "all they that

¹³ Alma 26.¹⁶

¹⁴ Psalm 139.⁵⁻⁶

¹⁵ Luke 1.⁶³

heard it *wondered* at those things.”¹⁶ Upon hearing Simeon witness of their son, “Joseph and his mother *marvelled* at those things which were spoken of him.”¹⁷ Seasoned priests who met with the twelve year old Jesus in the temple “were *astonished* at his understanding and answers.”¹⁸ Those attending synagogue and hearing Jesus read, teach, and explain a passage from Isaiah, “*wondered* at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth.”¹⁹ When, after a long and worrying search, Jesus’ parents find their twelve year old son in the temple, “they were *amazed*.” Those who heard Jesus teach “were *astonished* at his doctrine: for his word was with power.”²⁰ Witnessing Jesus’ miraculous act of casting out an unclean spirit, those present “were all *amazed*, and spake among themselves, saying, ‘What a word is this!’”²¹ Peter, along with other early disciples were “*astonished*” at the large catch of fish for which Jesus was responsible.²² Those who witnessed Jesus heal a man with palsy “were all *amazed*, and they glorified God, and were filled with fear, saying, ‘We have seen strange things to day.’”²³ Apostles, delivered from a watery grave below the boisterous waves of Galilee, “*wondered*, saying one to another, ‘What manner of man is this! For he commandeth even the winds and water, and they obey him.’”²⁴ Grateful parents were “*astonished*” as they watched Jesus raise their beloved daughter from the dead.²⁵ Upon seeing Jesus heal the lunatic son, the multitude was “all *amazed* at the mighty power of God,” and “*wondered* every one at all things which Jesus did.”²⁶

Such repetition, clearly intentional, is meaningful... and moving, indeed. Luke, surely, wants us to know of the wondrous Being who walked among us so long ago. But, again, the writer is more than historian and chronicler. He is a pastor. Through this repetition, Luke, I believe, also invites his readers to enter into this same wonder, amazement, and

¹⁶ Luke 2.¹⁸

¹⁷ Luke 2.³³

¹⁸ Luke 2.⁴⁷

¹⁹ Luke 4.²²

²⁰ Luke 4.³²

²¹ Luke 4.³⁶

²² Luke 5.⁹

²³ Luke 5.²⁶

²⁴ Luke 8.²⁵

²⁵ Luke 8.⁵⁶

²⁶ Luke 9.⁴³

marvel as they invite that Being into their lives to experience the wonder of his personal ministry.

“Therefore, let us glory, yea, we will glory in the Lord; yea, we will rejoice, for our joy is full; yea, we will praise our God forever. Behold, who can glory too much in the Lord? Yea, who can say too much of his great power, and of his mercy, and of his long-suffering towards the children of men? Behold, I say unto you, I cannot say the smallest part which I feel.”²⁷

to take away reproach

Elisabeth, as we have learned, is “well stricken with years.” After all these years, she continues to feel the sting and carry the burden of her barrenness. When she walks among her neighbors, she feels “reproach.” The Greek word, *oneidos*, means “shame,” or “disgrace.” It often involves “scandal.” Her barrenness makes others uncomfortable. Some deem her “unworthy” in some way. Others, even if they like her, are often unsure what to say to her. Others’ discomfort with her impacts her. She too is uncomfortable. Is there something wrong with her? Is she fully female? Fully human? And even if she can be more self-assured, still there is a little chasm between herself and others. Her connection with others is strained. She cannot have the relationship with others that she might, if she only had children.

Elsewhere, we get a sense of the shame and reproach and scandal that accompany barrenness. Rachel, second wife of Jacob, watches her older sister, first wife of Jacob, conceive four sons with their shared husband, while she remains childless. That’s, what, six, seven, eight years into the marriage? One might think that she would “get over it” over such a lengthy time. But, no, the sting is new every day. “Give me children,” she demands/complains to her husband many years into the marriage, “or else I die.”²⁸ We are told that “Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel.” Her demand/complaint feels more like an accusation. We see, here, the strain that barrenness brings into this husband/wife relationship. Upon having a second

²⁷ Alma 26.¹⁶

²⁸ Genesis 30.¹

son through her handmaiden, Rachel names the boy Naphtali because, as she says, “with great wrestlings have I wrestled with my sister, and I have prevailed.”²⁹ Her barrenness has caused tension and stress between herself and her sister.

Elisabeth, like Rachel earlier, simply cannot feel acceptance, approval, validation. But God removes her feelings of being reproached.

Luke knows that Elisabeth is not alone. Many feel the reproach of their weaknesses and barrenness. God intends to remove such feelings of hurt. He will, most importantly, remove the reproach that so many feel exists between themselves and their God.³⁰

“He maketh the barren woman to keep house,
and to be a joyful mother of children.
Praise ye the LORD.”³¹

Conclusion

With the first of his eight introductory narratives, Luke is off to a running start. We have learned a thing or two about his work and what he hopes we will learn from it.

Trough the individuals we have met, Luke reminds us that God had previously made promises (Elisabeth), which he was, in those days calling to mind and fulfilling (Zacharias). He does so because he is merciful (Johannan), and in order to open a new and unparalleled dispensation of mercy or acceptance (Johannan). He will, in this new dispensation, exercise power (Gabriel) in the barren lives of those who turn to him. The world is filled with humans who are barren in a million ways. Their barrenness causes them troubling and frequent sadness and uncertainty that can, at times, be debilitating. They bear a sense of reproach. But

²⁹ Genesis 30.⁸

³⁰ As I write this, I almost write, “between themselves and their god,” for the exacting, hard-to-please, reproachful, and upbraiding God is a creation of man. It is a false creation that flows from the imaginings of his own heart, and is made after his own image. It is, therefore, the substance of an idol. It does not deserve the honor of the capitol ‘G.’

³¹ Psalms 113.⁹

those who call out to God for understanding and help will find a gracious and accepting God, who makes them fruitful as to the things of righteousness and godliness. They will discover a God who responds to their needs in ways that go far beyond their expectations, far beyond their capacity to quantify or understand. With these discoveries, they will, themselves, discover new and empowering grace and acceptance toward others. They will be able to connect and unite with others, to feel at-one with others in ways that will produce eternal survival and eternal blessedness.

We end this homily with a Pauline benediction so appropriate to Luke's first narrative. May we each experience and share his inspired declaration.

“Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.”³²

³² Ephesians 3.²⁰⁻²¹