

The Gospel of Luke and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, are clearly concerned about the Jewish priesthood. Sometimes, Jewish priests are portrayed positively: Jesus told recently-healed persons to show themselves to the priest (Luke 5:14; 17:14); some priests converted to Christianity (Acts 6:7); and Paul refused to speak ill of the chief priest (23:5). Unfortunately, however, priests are more often portrayed negatively in Luke/Acts: A priest failed to render aid to a wounded traveler (Luke 10:31); a servant of the high priest tried to kill Peter (22:50); and Luke reports that the high priest was the primary force behind both Jesus' crucifixion (24:40; also 17:14; 19:47; 20:19; 22:2-4, 50-54; 23:10) and the persecution of early Christian leaders (Acts 5:24-27; 23:14; 24:1; 25:2, 15; 26:12).

Because the priests appear so prominently in Luke's gospel, it will be useful to understand the origin of Hebrew priesthood, the role of priests in the New Testament era, and the nature of priestly life in the first century.

Origin and History of the Old Testament Priesthood

The Old Testament established two priestly orders: the Levitical order (descending from Levi, one of Jacob's 12 sons) and the Aaronite order (descending from Aaron, the brother of Moses). Although both groups were ordained by divine decree, the status of each priestly class differed over time. Originally, the Levitical priestly order was distributed throughout the land occupied by the Israelites, while the Aaronite priests were concentrated around what eventually became the temple in Jerusalem. Levites focused on more pastoral duties; Aaronites were experts in ritual and administrative matters.

Although they were one of the 12 original tribes of Israel, the Levites did not inherit a distinct section of the promised land. Instead, they were given 48 cities to inhabit throughout the land (Josh. 21:1-42; 1 Chron.

6:54-81). The wide dispersal of these cities was probably intended to enable the Levites to minister to all the people and to fulfill the divine plan to establish a kingdom of priests and, thus, a holy people (Exod. 19:6; Lev. 11:44; Num. 15:40). Because these cities were located within areas inherited by the other Israelite tribes, the Levites were not allowed to plant crops (which symbolized complete land ownership). This prohibition against planting crops meant that Levites were excluded from the primary means of accumulating wealth in an agricultural society. Instead, the Levites were supposed to be sustained by receiving 10 percent of the people's produce and a substantial portion of the sacrifices and offerings rendered at the temple (Exod. 13:12-13; Lev. 2:3-10; 6:16;

7:8-34; 10:12-15; 24:5-9; Num. 18:12-28). Unfortunately, most of the revenue intended for the Levites first passed through the hands of the Aaronite priests in Jerusalem. Under this financial structure, many Levites were deprived of their livelihood and were forced to abandon their priestly vocation. Thus, the number of Levitical priests shrank over time.

The Jerusalem temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in the sixth century BC. When the temple was rebuilt under the Persians a century later, Ezra (2:36-42) tells us that there were 4,289 priests and priestly family members, but only 341 were Levites. During this period, the role of the high priest, an office dating back to Aaron (Exod. 28:1), grew in prestige, political authority, and economic power.



A depiction of the high priest's garment, based on Numbers 27:21. The breast-plate consists of 12 precious stones, one for each of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Priesthood in the New Testament

By New Testament times, many of the original ideals of the priesthood—Levitical cities, a broadly-dispersed priestly presence, the religious purity and sincerity of the high priest—were only faint memories. The secular role of the chief priest had grown steadily in the five centuries before Christ, especially under the Greeks and Romans (first and second centuries BC), when the chief priest was often chosen by pagan sovereigns. Many Jewish people—like the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls—detested the high priest and the elite priestly class in Jerusalem. In some cases, the high priesthood was sold to the highest bidder; in all cases, the high priesthood was granted to persons with powerful political connections. (By Jesus' time, the Sadducees consistently controlled the high priesthood through their willingness to cooperate with Roman rulers.)

In the New Testament era, the Jewish priesthood was composed of two distinct groups: (1) the politically-connected priests in Jerusalem who were aligned with the chief priest and the Roman political authorities and (2) the rural priests who lacked significant political and social connections to the high priesthood. The Jerusalem priests associated with the high priest were largely united in both their alliances with Rome and their opposition to Christianity. Even though there was technically only one chief priest at a time, the New Testament often speaks of the "chief priests" (Matt. 2:4; 26:47; Mark 8:31; 10:33; 14:53-55; Luke 20:1; 22:2; 23:10; John 7:32; 18:35; Acts 5:23;

23:14), because of the large population of priests who were functionaries of the high priest and his political will. The opposition of Jerusalem's elite priestly establishment to Christianity explains both why the New Testament is so negative toward the high priest and why no Christian minister in the New Testament is ever called a "priest."

The Lives of "Ordinary" Priests

Although religious authority, political power, and financial security was largely confined to the priests who were closely aligned with the chief priest in Jerusalem, other priests were still allowed to serve in the temple on occasion. And, many pious priests and Levites throughout ancient Israel did

struggle to maintain fidelity to the original priestly vision in the Old Testament. In theory, every man in the priestly lineage was allowed to work in the temple from age 25 to 50 (Num. 8:23-26; cf. 1 Chron. 23:24). In reality, however, there were far more qualified priests than there were positions within the temple. Therefore, "ordinary" priests were typically allowed to participate in temple rituals only a few weeks each year (one to three weeks every six months). This was Zechariah's position in Luke 1.

For priests outside of Jerusalem, life was difficult. These priests were still precluded from owning agricultural lands or engaging in farming. So, they had to seek employment that allowed them to be in Jerusalem for weeks at a time. In light of these restrictions,

most rural priests held jobs as menial laborers.

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Think about it . . .

- ✓ How did the priesthood change over the centuries? Why did the Levite priests have to become bi-vocational?
- ✓ Why does religious authority, like that of the chief priests, sometimes lead to corruption?
- ✓ Like the priests in New Testament times, today's pastors are often bi-vocational as well. What do you think is the best way to support ministers?

COMMENTARY Luke 1:5-25

The Gospel of Luke is unique among the New Testament gospels in that it alone provides an account of the births of both John the Baptist and Jesus. Through a series of scenes and songs, Luke narrates and intertwines the accounts of the two births. Only Luke describes John the Baptist and Jesus as relatives.

The Gospel of Matthew links the birth of Jesus to the Old Testament by beginning with a genealogy. The Gospel of Luke links John the Baptist and Jesus to the Old Testament by literary style. The literary structure and style of the scenes portrayed in Luke 1—2 are identical to the style and structure of the Old Testament historical narratives. It is almost as if Luke 1 is the next chapter of a book that began in Genesis telling the story of God's people.

Luke 1:5-25 provides an angelic announcement of the birth of John the Baptist. The section introduces the parents of John, makes clear the miraculous nature of the coming birth, gives a theological interpretation of the ministry of John, and describes the response of John's father.

1. The Setting for an Angelic Announcement (1:5-10)

- 5 *In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.*
- 6 *Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.*
- 7 *But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.*
- 8 *Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God,*
- 9 *he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.*
- 10 *And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.*

5. The opening words of verse 5 echo the beginning of many Old Testament narratives. This is especially clear in the Septuagint [sep-TOO-a-gint], the Greek translation of the Old Testament, with a phrase that was translated in the King James Version as "and it came to pass." The time of Herod king of Judea was between 37 and 4 BC, probably around 7 BC. Herod was well-known for his architectural ambitions, his violent cruelty, and his conniving political instincts. This verse also introduces

John's father, *Zechariah*, and mother, *Elizabeth*. Both came from priestly families and *Zechariah* is identified as belonging to the priestly division of *Abijah*. By New Testament times, there were far more priests than were needed at any one time. So the priests were divided into 24 groups, called orders or divisions, and they rotated their times of service.

6-7. Luke emphasizes the religious devotion of Zechariah and Elizabeth. *Both . . . were righteous in the sight of God* meant they lived in right relationship with God and the people they knew. This devotion led them to obey *all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly*. The one mark against them was that they were *childless*. The statement that their failure to have children was *because Elizabeth was not able to conceive* was a cultural assumption. No medical tests existed at that time to determine why they had no children. Further, *they were both very old*, indicating there was no longer any hope of a child.

8-9. When *Zechariah's division was on duty and . . . he was chosen by lot . . . to go into the sanctuary and to burn incense*. The burning of incense took place in the front room of the sanctuary (often called "the holy place") rather than the most sacred back room ("the holy of holies").

10. At the time of day when the incense offering took place, Zechariah was in the holy place. The temple courtyard (outside) was filled with the assembled worshipers praying. The scene is set for the announcement in an environment of devotion and worship.

2. An Angel Announces the Birth of John the Baptist (1:11-17)

- 11 *Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.*
- 12 *When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.*
- 13 *But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John."*
- 14 *He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,*
- 15 *for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.*
- 16 *He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.*
- 17 *And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to*



An anonymous 15th-century depiction of Zechariah holding a small shrine with a painting of Mary's visit with Elizabeth.

the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

11-12. The Greek text states that the *angel* was seen by Zechariah *standing at the right side of the altar of incense*. The basic meaning of *angel* (in both Hebrew and Greek) was "messenger." However, the idea of angels as spiritual, heavenly beings had developed extensively in the period between the Old and New Testaments. Understandably, *Zechariah* was confused and shaken. *Fear* was a common response to a sudden angelic appearance.

13. As was typical of angel appearance reports, the angel commanded *Zechariah* to *not be afraid*. His second statement was that Zechariah's *prayer* had *been heard*. Though the previous verse describing the piety of John's parents did not mention their prayers for a child, it is clear that they had prayed desperately about their failure to produce children. The angel's third declaration was the simple announcement that *Elizabeth will bear you a son*. Since verse 7 had

describe Elizabeth as unable to conceive, this announces a miraculous birth. Finally, the angel instructed Zechariah that he was to name the coming son *John*, which means, "The Lord is gracious."

14. The miraculous son *will be a joy and delight* for Zechariah because the lack of children brought shame and loss of status in that honor-shame culture. The coming son would also be expected to care for his parents when they were too old to care for themselves. Further, *many will rejoice because of his birth*. This suggests that John would bring some benefit, perhaps some act of salvation, to the whole community. Such a promise was common in ancient accounts of the birth of famous and influential people.

15. Beyond bringing joy, John would be *great in the sight of the Lord*. This is because John would be set apart for service to God. This is the meaning of the command that he was *never to take wine or other fermented drink*. This life of abstinence from alcohol does not positively identify John as a Nazirite (see Num. 6:1-21), but it indicates that he was set apart for priestly or prophetic service to God. He was equipped for such a task because *he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born*. In this Jewish context, being *filled with the Holy Spirit* would have indicated prophetic ministry.

16-17. The nature of the child's prophetic ministry was to *bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord*. The Greek word translated *bring back* in verse 16 appears again in verse 17, where it is translated *turn*. The word is often translated "repent" and appears frequently in Acts, where it means conversion to following Jesus. The fact that the child *will bring back many* indicates that not all *Israel* would respond, but a large number will.



Elizabeth by Guido Reni (1575—1642). Luke emphasizes the religious devotion of Zechariah and Elizabeth. "Both . . . were righteous in the sight of God" (1:6-7): They lived in right relationship with God and the people they knew. The one mark against them was that they were childless, a cause for shame in ancient societies.

This ministry would be *in the spirit and power of Elijah*. The connection continues in the words to *turn the hearts of the parents to their children*, which echo descriptions of Elijah in Malachi 4:6 and the intertestamental book of Sirach (48:10). Following the pattern of Hebrew poetic parallelism, the angel expanded the thought of turning *hearts of the parents to their children* to include turning *the hearts of the . . . disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous*. Authentic change will result from this prophetic ministry because repentance would be from *the hearts* and it would effect real change in actual direction in life. The goal of John's ministry was *a people prepared for the Lord*. Individual conversions are not enough; a renewed *Israel* was God's desire.

3. The Response to the Angelic Announcement (1:18-25)

18 *Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."*

19 *The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news."*

20 *And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."*

21 *Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple.*

22 *When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.*

23 *When his time of service was completed, he returned home.*

24 *After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.*

25 *"The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."*

18. The incredible announcement from the angel provoked Zechariah's question of how all that had been announced could ever happen given Elizabeth's and his advanced ages. Luke skillfully worded this verse to evoke memories of another miraculous birth. The question, *How can I be sure of this?* is an almost direct quote of Abraham's response to God's promise of a child in Genesis 15:8. The basis of the question, *I am an old man and my wife is well along in years*, parallels the narrator's comment in Genesis 18:11 after another angelic visitor had told Abraham and Sarah they would bear a son. Zechariah can be as sure of God's promise as he was of his own existence. Had God's promise to Abraham not come true in Isaac, Zechariah would have never been born!

19. Further confirmation of the promise comes when the angel identifies himself as *Gabriel*, one of three angels named in the Old Testament, where he brought Daniel insight into his visions (Dan. 8:16; 9:21-22). Gabriel's role of standing *in the presence of God* would have been well-known to Zechariah from several intertestamental books as well, including 1 Enoch. This description means that *Gabriel* had direct access to God and did not receive this message indirectly. In fact, he had *been sent to speak to Zechariah*. Such a commission is consistent with the picture of Gabriel in Daniel and 1 Enoch. Gabriel describes his message as *good news*. With this word, Luke connects the promise of the birth of John the Baptist with the Christian gospel.



Saint Luke the Evangelist by Valentin de Boulogne. On the writing desk beside him is a small painting of Mary and Jesus. Because the Gospel of Luke tells us a lot about Mary and her thoughts (see e.g., 2:19), it has long been believed that Luke spoke with her while he was compiling his gospel.

20. The consequence of Zechariah's question (v. 18) will be that he *will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens*. This is both punishment because Zechariah *did not believe* and a further sign of the certainty of the promise. That promise *will come true* (or be fulfilled, as the Greek text says) at the *appointed time*.

21-22. Luke tells us that the conversation between Gabriel and Zechariah took some time, so *the people* in the temple courtyard were *waiting for him and wondering* at the delay. Zechariah's responsibility that day would have included leading the priests in blessing the people. Verse 22 indicates that Gabriel's words had already been fulfilled because when Zechariah came out, *he could not speak*. *The people* concluded that *he had seen a vision in the temple*, though they could not have guessed the promise that had been given to him or why he was *unable to speak*.

23-25. Luke brings conclusion to the angelic announcement with two notes. First, Zechariah *returned home after his time of service was completed*. Second, Elizabeth *became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion*. This appears to have been to guard the secret until the pregnancy was obvious to the eye even in the typically loose-fitting robes that the women wore in that culture. Elizabeth concludes the paragraph with a threefold announcement. One, she affirms the miraculous nature of the event with the words, *The Lord has done this*. Two, she affirms that God has given direct and personal attention to her. The words *he has shown his favor* translate a single Greek word meaning to "look upon"¹ or to "show concern for."¹ Third, God had *taken away* her *disgrace*. In that culture, inability to conceive was regarded as a *disgrace*; it shamed both husband and wife, but especially the wife among the women of the village.

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