

Introduction

1 Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled^a among us, ²just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye witnesses and servants of the word. ³With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

The birth of John the Baptist foretold

⁵In 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. ⁶Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

⁸Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

¹¹Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Eliz-

a 1 Or *been surely believed*

abeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵for 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. ¹⁶He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷And 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 the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.’

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

¹⁹The 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. ²⁰And 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.’

²¹Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²²When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realised he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

²³When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴After 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 favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.’

The birth of Jesus foretold

²⁶In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸The

angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'

²⁹Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. ³¹You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.'

³⁴'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'

³⁵The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called ^bthe Son of God. ³⁶Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷For no word from God will ever fail.'

³⁸'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.' Then the angel left her.

Mary visits Elizabeth

³⁹At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴²In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!'

b 35 Or *So the child to be born will be called holy,*

Mary's song

⁴⁶And Mary said:

*'My soul glorifies the Lord
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
⁴⁸ for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has
scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants for ever,
just as he promised our ancestors.'*

⁵⁶Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

The birth of John the Baptist

⁵⁷When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

⁵⁹On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰but his mother spoke up and said, 'No! He is to be called John.'

⁶¹They said to her, 'There is no one among your relatives who has that name.'

⁶²Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. ⁶³He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, 'His name is John.' ⁶⁴Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵All the neighbours were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, 'What then is this child going to be?' For the Lord's hand was with him.

Zechariah's song

⁶⁷His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

- ⁶⁸ *'Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.*
- ⁶⁹ *He has raised up a horn^c of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David*
- ⁷⁰ *(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),*
- ⁷¹ *salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us –*
- ⁷² *to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,*
- ⁷³ *the oath he swore to our father Abraham:*
- ⁷⁴ *to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear*
- ⁷⁵ *in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*
- ⁷⁶ *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,*
- ⁷⁷ *to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,*
- ⁷⁸ *because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven*

c 69 *Horn* here symbolises a strong king.

⁷⁹ *to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.'*

⁸⁰And the child grew and became strong in spirit^d; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

The birth of Jesus

2 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.² (This was the first census that took place while^a Quirinius was governor of Syria.)³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

⁴So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

⁸And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night.⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.¹⁰ But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.¹¹ Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.¹² This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'

¹³Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ *'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.'*

^d 80 Or in the Spirit

^a 2 Or This census took place before

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'

¹⁶So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

²¹On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

Jesus presented in the temple

²²When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord'^b), ²⁴and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: 'a pair of doves or two young pigeons'.^c

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

b ²³ Exodus 13:2,12

c ²⁴ Lev. 12:8