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April 27th: Numbers 23 & Luke 1:1-23

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Balaam's first two oracles. The annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist.

Some passages referenced:

Genesis 13:16 (the multiplication of Abraham's offspring); Genesis 12:1-3 (Abraham being made a blessing); Joshua 2:9-11 (the reputation of the Lord to the nations through Israel); Genesis 49:9 (blessing upon Judah).

Acts 11:4 (telling an ordered account); Genesis 16:11-12, 17:15-21, Judges 13:2-5 (Old Testament annunciations); Exodus 1—2, 1 Samuel 1—2 (stories of new birth); Exodus 6:23 (Elisheba); Daniel 8:16, 9:21 (Gabriel); Exodus 30:7-8 (the duty of incense); Psalm 141:2 (incense and prayer); Daniel 9:20-23 (evening sacrifice and prayer in Daniel); Nehemiah 12:22-23, 2 Kings 25:22-26, Jeremiah 42:1—43:7 (Johanans); Numbers 6:1-21 (law of the Nazirite); Judges 13:4-6, 1 Samuel 1:11 (Nazirites); Malachi 4:5-6 (Elijah to come); Genesis 17:17, 15:8 (Abraham's questions to the Lord).

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Numbers chapter 23 him, I have arranged the seven altars, and I have offered on each altar a bull and a ram.' And the Lord put a word in Balaam's mouth, and said, Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak. And he returned to him, and behold, he and all the princes of Moab were standing beside his burnt offering. And Balaam took up his discourse, and said, From Aram Balak has brought me, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains.

Come curse Jacob for me, and come denounce Israel. How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom God has not denounced? For from the top of the crags I see him, from the hills I behold him. Behold a people dwelling alone, and not counting itself among the nations.

Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his. And Balak said to Balaam, What have you done to me? I told you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have done nothing but bless them. And he answered and said, Must I not take care to speak what the Lord puts in my mouth? And Balak said to him, Please come with me to another place, from which you may see them.

You shall see only a fraction of them, and shall not see them all. Then curse them for me from there. And he took him to the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah, and built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each altar.

Balaam said to Balak, Stand here beside your burnt offering, while I meet the Lord over there. And the Lord met Balaam and put a word in his mouth and said, Return to Balak, and thus shall you speak. And he came to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering and the princes of Moab with him.

And Balak said to him, What has the Lord spoken? And Balaam took up his discourse and said, Rise, Balak, and hear. Give ear to me, O son of Zippor. God is not man that he should lie, or a son of man that he should change his mind.

Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it? Behold, I received a command to bless. He has blessed, and I cannot revoke it. He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob, nor has he seen trouble in Israel.

The Lord their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them. God brings them out of Egypt, and is for them like the horns of the wild ox. For there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel.

Now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, What has God wrought? Behold a people. As a lioness it rises up, and as a lion it lifts itself. It does not lie down until it has devoured the prey, and drunk the blood of the slain.

And Balak said to Balaam, Do not curse them at all, and do not bless them at all. But

Balaam answered Balak, Did I not tell you, all that the Lord says, that I must do? And Balak said to Balaam, Come now, I will take you to another place. Perhaps it will please God that you may curse them for me from there.

So Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor, which overlooks the desert. And Balaam said to Balaak, Build for me here seven altars, and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams. And Balaak did as Balaam had said, and offered a bull and a ram on each altar.

The story of Numbers 23 continues the farcical elements of the previous chapter, and can best be understood when closely related to them. Balaam's donkey resisted him on three occasions in the previous chapter, as the way was blocked by the angel of the Lord. Balaam wished that he had a sword in his hand to kill his donkey, even while the angel of the Lord stood with a drawn sword in his hand, ready to kill him.

Finally the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and she spoke to Balaam as Balaam struck her. The donkey pointed out that she was typically compliant, and asked why Balaam struck her three times. Now the humour and the irony of this story is intentional, and the strangeness of the narrative is not accidental.

Why do we see a donkey speaking? Because we are supposed to see that Balaam is the donkey in chapter 23. The Lord opened the mouth of the dumb donkey. A few verses later Balaam himself says to Balaak, Have I now any power of my own to speak anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I must speak.

Like the donkey is a dumb animal, the prophet is unable to speak unless his mouth is opened by the Lord. In chapter 23 Balaam the donkey has his mouth opened and he speaks. However as Balaam's donkey frustrated his master, so Balaam frustrates his master Balaak, who like Balaam is oblivious to the nature of the Lord's involvement in the situation.

The speaking of the donkey is exceedingly surprising. But the surprising speech of the donkey is connected to the speech of the unfaithful prophet which should be no less surprising. Many people read the story of Balaam's donkey and shrug and think maybe strange things just happened in Bible times.

But this is to misread badly what's going on. The speaking donkey is not just a weird thing, it's a sign. If the Lord can use a dumb unclean beast to speak, he can also use a mercenary prophet like Balaam.

Balaak drives Balaam, much as Balaam drove his donkey, until finally both were stopped by the angel of the Lord. Among other things going on in this chapter we are seeing a challenge to pagan ways of thinking about God. Balaak approaches God as a being that he can manipulate.

If Balaam just makes the right statement, accompanied by the right sacrifices from the

optimal vantage point, God will go along with his will. Like Balaam drove his donkey, oblivious to the angel of the Lord, so Balaak stubbornly drives Balaam against the will of the Lord that is stubbornly blocking his path, each time finding that Balaam goes astray from his purpose like an uncooperative beast. Balaam is trapped between a stubborn and a blind owner and the will of God, much as his donkey was in the previous chapter.

Balaak plays out the same plan three times with worsening results. Again this is similar to what we see with the donkey. The humour of the situation, as the same litany of events occurs three times over, drives the point home.

No one can successfully resist God's will. No one can successfully manipulate God's will for their personal ends. God is not man that he should lie, or a son of man that he should change his mind.

Balaam himself had approached the Lord in a similar manner in the preceding chapter, believing that if he went back to God enough times he might get an answer more to his liking, when God's will had already been made amply clear to him the first time. Within this chapter Balaak approaches sacrifice as if it were a work of divination. If he simply follows the ritual scrupulously enough he can get his way.

In such a theology sacrifice is a sort of technology for controlling God. Sacrifice and ritual are conceived of as a sort of magic, rather than as a sort of enacted prayer to a personal God. Balaam himself comes from such a culture of divination as we see at the beginning of chapter 24 where we're told that he generally looked for omens, a practice that's forbidden to Israel.

Balaam delivers the first two of his prophetic oracles in this chapter, both of which have an ancient poetic form. The poetry can be seen in parallelisms. So from Aram, Balaak has brought me.

The king of Moab from the eastern mountains. There's a parallelism there. You can see the king of Moab corresponds with Balaak, from Aram with from the eastern mountains.

And then again, come curse Jacob for me. And that parallels with come denounce Israel. Balaam makes clear, speaking by the spirit, that he cannot curse a people that God hasn't cursed.

There are times when it might seem that the prophet is a sort of magician, able to bless and curse at will, able to bring the magical power of his words to use those words to bring people low or lift them up. And this is precisely what Balaak wants from Balaam. He wants a person who can manipulate reality with his words.

However, true prophecy is the bearing of God's powerful word. The power is not the prophets, but the power of God's Holy Spirit within him. The false prophets were always telling people what they wanted to hear.

And this is what Balaak wants. He wants a prophet who will tell him what he wants to hear and use words to manipulate reality to his advantage. Balaam's prophecy is a remarkable one.

He speaks of the uniqueness of Israel. Israel is a people dwelling alone, not counting themselves among the nations. They've been set apart from the nations, the nations that were divided at Babel.

They are a people chosen by God and set apart, called out of the other nations to be a people special to the Lord. This, of course, reminds us of the calling of Abraham. And the uniqueness of Israel is important.

They are a specific set apart people. But they aren't simply one of the peoples. They are a people that dwells alone, a people that is other to all of the other nations.

They are a people, but they are not one of the peoples. They are a singular people, not a people that is simply one of many distinct individual peoples. The character of Israel's identity as a people that dwells alone is part of how they bear witness to a God who is unique, but not simply one of the gods, a God who dwells alone, high above all other rulers, powers or thrones.

They cannot be numbered for their multitude. Again, this is a fulfilment of the promises given to Abraham. Genesis chapter 13 verse 16, I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.

Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his. Balaam wants to be associated with the blessed nation of Israel, reminding us once again of Abraham's blessing in Genesis chapter 12 verses 1 to 3. Now the Lord said to Abraham, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Abraham will be made a blessing.

And Balaam's statement here is a sort of invocation of the blessing of the people of God upon himself. He wants their fate, he wants to be like them. After the utter failure of the first attempt to curse Israel, Balak tries again.

Perhaps they weren't standing at a good enough vantage point and the ritual didn't work for that reason, it just didn't take. All the rigmarole is repeated again, highlighting its comical nature. But again it fails.

The prophetic poem that follows again reiterates the Lord's blessing upon his people, but

underscores the theological point. God neither lies nor changes his mind. His purpose is sure and his intent is to bless Israel.

The Lord is the king in the midst of his people, dwelling in the tabernacle, in the centre of the camp. He has brought them out of Egypt and he fights for them against their enemies. Enchantments and divination, Balaam's typical stock and trade, can't work against the will of the Lord.

The Lord has bound himself to Israel by covenant and Balaam, the prophet for hire, the man of no loyalties, cannot go against this. The nations will marvel at what the Lord will achieve through Israel and this is something that we see coming to pass in Joshua chapter 2. Joshua chapter 2 verses 9 to 11, Rahab declares, For the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. Balaam concludes the oracle with a comparison of Israel to a lioness or lion, which recalls the blessing of Judah by Jacob in Genesis chapter 49 verse 9. Judah is a lion's cub, from the prey, my son, you have gone up.

He stooped down, he crouched as a lion and a lioness. Who dares rouse him? Balak at this point is annoyed with Balaam. Better to say nothing at all than to give such an extreme blessing.

He wanted a curse and instead he gets this extravagant blessing. Like Balaam, Balak cannot hear the word no from God. Balaam himself is a man whose no does not really mean no.

It's merely the start of a negotiation. Balak and Balaam presume that the Lord is like them, that if you come to God enough and negotiate with him enough and maybe offer him enough that he'll come round to your point of view. But God is not a man who lies, or like a man who would change his mind.

A question to consider. In what ways can you hear the blessings of Abraham in the second oracle of Balaam along with the first? Why might the reminder of the blessings of Abraham be important at this juncture in the story? Luke chapter 1 verses 1 to 23. Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah of the division of Abijah, and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.

Now while he was serving as priest before God, when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord, and he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. And Zechariah said to the angel, How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years. And the angel answered him, I am Gabriel, I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.

And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time. And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realised that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept making signs to them and remained mute.

And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. In the opening of Luke chapter 1, Luke introduces himself as the latest in a line of several who had written a narrative of the events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Luke was someone with access to eyewitnesses and apostolic heralds of the Gospel message.

He had been following everything closely for some time. He was in a great position to write a detailed and orderly account for someone like Theophilus. In order need not refer to strict chronological order.

There is chronological reordering of material in the Gospels for thematic and other purposes. This is something we find elsewhere throughout the Scriptures. But what we see here is a similar expression to something that we encounter also in Acts chapter 11 verse 4. When Peter relates the events of his bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles in chapter 10, his words are introduced as follows.

But Peter began and explained it to them in order. The point it seems to me is that there is a well-structured, persuasive narrative, achieving its purpose of informing and persuading people, most immediately Theophilus, in the truth of their faith. Luke begins

with parallel annunciations.

There's the first one to Zechariah concerning John the Baptist and the second to Mary concerning Jesus. The angel Gabriel appears to both of them. Both of them respond with fear.

Both of them are reassured by Gabriel, told not to be afraid, and are told that they will have a son. John will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. The Holy Spirit will come upon Mary.

The future missions of both John and Jesus are foretold. Both Zechariah and Mary respond with seemingly similar questions. How shall I know this? For I am an old man and my wife has advanced in years.

And how will this be, since I am a virgin? There are a number of similar accounts of annunciations in the Old Testament. Genesis chapter 16 verses 11 to 12, given to Hagar. And the angel of the Lord said to her, Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son.

You shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has listened to your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him. And he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.

Genesis chapter 17 verses 15 to 21. And God said to Abraham, As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sara shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her.

I will bless her, and she shall become nations, kings of peoples shall come from her. Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child? And Abraham said to God, O that Ishmael might live before you. God said, No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac.

I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly.

He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year. And then in Judges 13 verses 2 to 5. There was a certain man of Zorah of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah, and his wife was barren and had no children.

And the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, Behold, you are barren and have not born children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for behold you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a

Nazarite to guard from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.

The presence of two annunciations in direct succession indicates that the destinies of Jesus and John the Baptist are entwined in a single divine purpose. There are further parallels and connections between the two that emerge as we proceed through the narrative of Luke. The presence of these two annunciations at the very beginning of Luke's Gospel also foregrounds the theme of birth.

The prominence of the theme of birth can also be seen at the beginning of books such as Exodus and 1 Samuel. The story of the Exodus is the story of the deliverance from Egypt, the story of 1 Samuel the story of the establishment of the kingdom. A similar new work of God is to be anticipated here.

The theme of new birth is not just about an individual having a child, it's about something new happening in history, the birth of a new order. Like Exodus and 1 Samuel, the beginning of the story of Luke focuses upon believing and courageous women and birth. In Exodus it's the Hebrew midwives, Jochebed and Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter.

In 1 Samuel it's Hannah. And here it's Mary, Elizabeth and Anna. The focus upon women at the very beginning of a great new work of God in history is noteworthy.

It follows a consistent pattern in the Old Testament. The men that surround them are either wicked, Pharaoh and his men, Hophni and Phinehas in 1 Samuel, or lacking in spiritual perception, Eli and Zechariah. Eli later goes blind while Zechariah is struck dumb.

Or they stay largely in the background, Amram in Exodus, Elkanah in 1 Samuel and in Luke, Joseph. Many of the women are barren, widows or unmarried. The barren woman having her womb opened is a very important theme in scripture, particularly in the book of Genesis.

The story of Luke begins with believing women and a doubting man at news of birth. It ends with believing women and initially doubting men at news of resurrection. And this is one of the ways we can already start to see a symmetry developing between the birth of Christ at the beginning and his resurrection at the end, which is a new birth.

The focus upon women also goes together with a focus upon the gestation periods of God's salvation. God's salvation doesn't begin in the glare of public life, but in the quiet prayers of an aging couple and in the hiddenness of a young woman's womb. Thirty or more years will pass before this salvation comes to fruition.

But it has already begun. It's begun in the secret place, in these contexts where people don't necessarily know what's taking place. But something is going to occur and it will

have impact many years down the line.

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth are faithful people. They're both Levites and are described as being righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. Now such a statement makes many Protestants nervous, but it shouldn't.

The framework of perfect and spotless law obedience is one that we often impose upon the text, but we often do so quite inappropriately. Flawed and fallen human beings like Zechariah and Elizabeth certainly were, can be described in such a manner. The law always graciously provided ways for people to be in faithful and blameless relationship with God, even as sinful human beings.

Zechariah shares his name with Zechariah the prophet, whose ministry centred around the rebuilding of the temple. His connection with Zechariah might also make us think of the Old Testament story and where it left off. It also hints at a new temple building project after the defiling of an old temple and a period of exile.

The muteness of the priest Zechariah could be related to the general silence of God in the period between the two testaments. God reopens the mouth of the dumb prophet and a new era of his redemption will come about. He might be a picture of the nation as a whole as well.

Zechariah initially responds with doubt, but his mouth has later opened in praise. Many of these particular connections are weak and I wouldn't put that much strength upon them, but they're worth considering. Elizabeth was the wife of Aaron and the matriarch of the priestly line.

In Exodus 6, verse 22, Aaron Elizabeth, who shares her name, is a symbol of a priestly line in crisis, much as it was in the time of Eli, as Eli's two sons died on the same day and his priestly house was left in tatters. The later opening of the womb of Elizabeth promises the establishment of a new faithful priesthood from the ashes. Again, not a very strong connection, but worth considering perhaps.

We've already met the angel Gabriel on two previous occasions, both in the book of Daniel, in chapter 8, verse 16, and chapter 9, verse 21 of the book of Daniel, where he is involved in the affairs of nations and the destinies of empires. His presence here hints at something that is stirring that will have ramifications far beyond the borders of Israel. The setting of the scene here is important.

Zechariah is in the temple at the hour of incense. His service here would be related to the duties outlined in Exodus chapter 30, verses 7 to 8. And a connection between incense and prayer can be seen in places like Psalm 141, verse 2. Interestingly, we have already seen a prayer associated with evening sacrifice in Scripture. In Daniel chapter 9,

verses 20 to 23.

This is followed by the prophecy concerning the 70 weeks, in which the work of Christ is foretold. And so the coming of Gabriel again at the time of the evening sacrifice may not be an accident. It may be designed in part to draw our mind back to this event.

Zechariah was from the priestly division of Abijah. Each of the 24 subdivisions of the priests would serve on a rotating two-week basis. Zechariah would serve with the incense, and then he was supposed to come out and bless the praying people outside.

The setting in the temple recalls the story of 1 Samuel chapter 1, which also begins with a barren woman praying for a son in the temple, and another priest, Eli, who lacks perception. The temple is prominent at the beginning of Luke, also appearing in chapter 2 with the presentation of Jesus in the temple, where we also encounter a woman called Anna, reminding us of Hannah, who constantly prays there. The temple isn't just dismissed by Luke as something belonging to the old order and unimportant.

A lot of events in the book of Luke and in the book of Acts present the temple in a more positive light. It's a place where people go to interact with God, to pray. It's a place where faithful people are to be encountered.

And it's also a place, in this particular occasion, where God meets and reveals himself to his people. At the end of the Gospel, it also returns to the themes of its beginning, with the disciples constantly praying in the temple after Jesus has ascended to heaven. We could perhaps see this as mirroring the praying multitude at the beginning of the Gospel.

The theme of prayer is very prominent throughout the book of Luke, another thing to notice here. Jesus' action at the end, however, also recalls the beginning, as he blesses the disciples and then ascends to the heavenly temple. There is maybe a symmetry to be seen between the beginning and the end.

The book of Acts also follows the pattern of Luke in many ways. The temple, prayer and the Holy Spirit are also very prominent at its beginning, as is the failure to perceive. Here it's Zachariah's failure to perceive.

In the book of Acts, it's the people thinking that maybe they're drunk, which again reminds us of the story of Eli, who thinks that maybe Hannah is drunk when she's praying. The focus upon the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the Gospel is also noteworthy, and again is paralleled with the focus upon the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the book of Acts. At the beginning of the book of Luke, we see that association in the way that John the Baptist is to be filled with the Holy Spirit from his womb, then in the way that the Spirit comes upon Mary, then in the way that Elizabeth and Zachariah are filled with the Spirit, then in the way that Simeon is led in the Spirit into the temple, and then the way that Christ is filled with the Holy Spirit and then led in the Spirit into the wilderness.

The Spirit is very, very prominent at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, and then later on in the book of Acts, of course, with the events of Pentecost, it's no less prominent. God has heard the prayers of Zachariah and Elizabeth, but these prayers are not just prayers that relate to them as individuals and their desire for a son. As in 1 Samuel, the prayer of individuals for a child is the prayer for deliverance for the entire nation.

The significance of John's name is not so straightforward. Johanan was one of the high priests after the Restoration in Nehemiah 12, verses 22-23. Perhaps somewhat more interesting, Johanan was also a leader of the army who led a remnant of Judah out of the land to Egypt after the assassination of Gedoliah against the word of the prophet Jeremiah.

We see this in 2 Kings, chapter 25, verses 22-26, and Jeremiah chapter 42, verse 1 to 43, verse 7. How would this relate to John? First, the names of his parents suggest that John the Baptist is connected with the formation of a new priesthood, perhaps. Second, faithful John actually does something rather similar in character to the unfaithful Johanan. He leads a remnant out of an occupied land into the wilderness where he prepares the way for Jesus, Joshua, the new ruler who will lead them back in.

However, by far the more prominent meaning, I think, is the straightforward etymological one. God is gracious, that's the meaning of his name, and it's a theme in the story. God has shown his favour to Zachariah and Elizabeth.

He has shown mercy to them in giving them a son, and this is a sign of his grace towards his people more generally. So while those other associations may be there, I suspect they're very much in the background. If they are there at all.

John the Baptist is to be a Nazirite from birth. We have the law of the Nazirite in Numbers chapter 6, and this is similar to Samson in Judges chapter 13 and Samuel in 1 Samuel 1 verse 11. He comes in the spirit and the power of Elijah, and as we go through the Gospel he'll be described in ways that recall Elijah too.

His mission is associated with Elijah explicitly at other points. And the last verses of the prophet Malachi are alluded to here. Malachi chapter 4 verses 5 to 6. So what do we see here putting the pieces together? With a cluster of Old Testament allusions, John the Baptist is being characterised for us.

He's like Samuel, the one who's a Nazirite from birth, the one who's given in response to prayers and that's declared in the temple. He's someone who will prepare the way for and anoint the king, the Davidic king. He's like Elijah, a desert prophet who will herald the great day of the Lord, preparing the way for the Lord to come to his people.

He's a sign of the restoration of a faithful priesthood, born to Elishaba, a woman who shares the name of the Aaronic matriarch. He is picking up the threads that were left off

in the prophecies of Zachariah and Malachi. The silence of Zachariah until his birth might also make us think of the silence of the prophets in the intervening period between the Testaments.

John the Baptist is going to continue the ministry of the prophets and in preparing the way for Christ, he will bring that ministry to its climax. Zachariah's question in response to Gabriel is similar to that of Abraham. Genesis chapter 17 verse 17, Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child? And then in chapter 15 verse 8 of Genesis, But he said, O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it? Whereas in that case it doesn't seem to be a question of unbelief, in Zachariah's case it does seem to be one of unbelief.

His question is not, as Mary's will be, a question of how this thing will come to be, it's a question of will it come to be. It all seems a bit too incredible. And so Zachariah is struck dumb until he will be most prepared to bear the praise for what God has done.

A question to consider. The appearance to Zachariah isn't just an appearance to a private individual. It's rather an appearance to a priest in the course of the administration of his duties, while a crowd is waiting outside in prayer, waiting for him to come outside to bless them.

What significance might we see in the fact that God delivers this revelation, this annunciation, in such a context?