

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

John Kitto, D.D., F.S.A.

Twenty-Seventh Week -- Wednesday

ZACHARIAS' VISION

"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 you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also 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. He will also 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 a people prepared for the Lord." ' And Zacharias said to the angel, 'How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years.' " (Luke 1:13-16).

What had Zacharias seen in the temple? The muteness with which he was smitten did not necessarily preclude him from making known the particulars in writing, and the eagerness of both priests and people to learn what had taken place probably urged him to an early disclosure. Indeed, he must himself have felt it due to them to make known at the earliest moment the glorious tidings which had been entrusted to him, and the prediction involved might seem to be diminished of some of its evidencing power if not disclosed before the signs of fulfillment appeared. But still, what was it he had seen? It was an angel standing on the right side of the altar.

The altar of incense stood close by the veil that divided the holy place from the most holy place. On the north side stood the table of shew bread, on the south the golden candlestick; and as the priest entered with his face to the west, the angel must have stood to the north, or near the table of shew bread. Whether the angel was already visible when Zacharias came in or afterwards suddenly appeared has been questioned. It seems to us, however, likely that the angel did not appear until *after* the priest had performed his usual sacerdotal duties. For this there are two reasons: one, that the prior appearance of the angel would have discomposed the aged priest if not disabled him for the discharge of his duties; and the other, that the angel distinctly announced his appearance to be an answer to prayer, which declaration would have come with tenfold emphasis *after* the incense--embodying the prayers of the people--had been offered.

Zacharias was much terrified when he beheld the angel, anticipating from him much harm

rather than good. Besides, the idea of an angelic visitant, so familiar to this people in their early history, had from disuse become a strange matter to them. In the *presence* of angels they believed in the fullest extent, but of their *manifested* presence there had long ceased to be any authentic examples. The actual appearance of an angel was therefore a more signal and alarming event than it might have seemed in earlier times. The trouble of the good old priest was so manifest that the heavenly messenger hastened to relieve his fears. "Fear not, Zacharias, for thy prayer is heard!" What prayer?

From what follows--that his wife Elizabeth should bear a son, to be called John--it has been thought that it refers to the prayers which he was likely to have frequently offered, that he might not go down childless to the grave. But, on the other hand, the time and place of the angel's appearance being considered, it has appeared to many that the angel rather refers to the national prayer offered by him in his ministerial capacity for the appearance of the Messiah, for the angel goes on to explain that this son [to be born to Zacharias] was His appointed harbinger, thus laying the stress rather upon the fact of the Messiah's coming than of a son being born to Zecharias, a secondary consideration though a very important one to him. We incline to this view, as the sheer incredulity with which the old man received the announcement--as of a thing scarcely within the bounds of physical possibility--would suggest that he had ceased to hope or to pray for such a blessing.

The angel went on to tell him that this son, who like Samson was to be consecrated to God as a Nazarite from the womb, was appointed to raise the minds of the people to vital righteousness and thereby prepare the way for the One mightier than he, whom it was his vocation to announce. Further, to rebuke Zacharias for the incredulity he had ventured to express, as well as to be a sign to himself and others, he was to be afflicted with muteness till that of which he doubted was actually fulfilled.

At the end of the week Zacharias left Jerusalem and returned to his usual abode in the southern part ("the hill country") of Judea. This is generally thought to have been Hebron, which was originally a Levitical city. The priestly families did not indeed resume the exclusive occupation of the old sacerdotal cities after the return from the captivity, but the mere fact would naturally lead them to settle down by preference in those towns.

The promise made to Zacharias now began to be accomplished; and during the first five months of her pregnancy, his good old wife Elizabeth, instead of gadding about to call all her neighbors to rejoice with her over the prospects of maternity which opened to her, kept herself closely secluded--either to avoid the curious inquiries of her neighbors in these jealous and perilous times or because she deemed a devotional and thankful retirement best suited to her condition as the favored mother of a son so sacredly set apart for a holy life and for high and honored duties.