

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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

Twenty-Seventh Week -- Tuesday

ZACHARIAS

"There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years. So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense" (Luke 1:5-10).

The circumstances which preceded and attended the appearance of John the Baptist are more extraordinary and wonderful than had ever accompanied the birth of any person who had hitherto appeared in the world; and this may well suggest the reflection that seeing how solemnly the appointed harbinger is brought into the world, how great was He of whose appearance this man was but the herald! We judge of the greatness of a king by the rank and magnificence of his ambassador, and it ought to assist us to some adequate conception of our Lord's essential greatness to note that among men there has not been born a greater than the man who heralded his [Christ's] approach (although it be true that the least in the kingdom of heaven was greater than he [John]).

The father of John was an aged priest "of the course of Abia," which is the same as the Abijah of the Old Testament. This may need some explanation. When the priests had become numerous, David divided the whole body into twenty-four classes or "courses," which were appointed to do service in weekly rotation, so that each of the courses had to attend at the temple twice in the year for a week each time. Of the twenty-four courses, that of Abijah was the eighth. Of the number that went into captivity, only four of the courses returned, and that of Abijah was not one of them. But these four were divided into twenty-four in order to reproduce the former distribution and to render the analogy more complete. These courses received the same names as the original courses, and hence it is that we find the course of Abia named in the new Testament.

Even this division, however, proved eventually insufficient for the designed object of keeping the number of priests in actual official duty within some bounds. Josephus affirms that there

were as many as 4000 in some of the courses, thus being too numerous for duty. Hence, when the course came upon its turn it was subdivided into seven families, each of which took a day's duty in order that everyone might take part in the duties of his office. This practically reduced the time of actual service for each priest to one day during the week of the course and to two days in the year. Each of these courses had a chief or president, who are called in Ezra the "princes" or "chiefs of the priests" and who are probably the same as the "chief priests" so often mentioned in the New Testament.

When a "course" came up to relieve the one that had served the preceding week, the particular services of the priests were determined by lot. Certain services were accounted more honorable than the others, and in this way all contention respecting them was avoided. The most honorable of all was that of going into the holy place to offer incense upon the golden altar. And on the occasion before us, this distinguished office devolved upon the aged Zacharias.

The service was performed twice every day, just before the morning and evening sacrifice (that is, at nine in the morning and three in the afternoon); and the time of offering the incense was also the time of prayer, sweet fumes of the ascending incense being indeed representative of the prayers of the people ascending to God. So when the priest entered the holy place to offer the incense, the sound of a small bell notified the assembled people that the time of prayer was come. When this was heard, the priests and Levites, who had not taken their stations, hastened to do so. Also, the space in the court between the great altar of burnt-offerings and the porch of the Lord's house was cleared, and the people, in the different courts of the temple, "stood and prayed." The prayers were perfectly silent, and this silence lasted so long as the priest remained within the temple. But the instant he reappeared, the sacrifice was laid upon the altar and the Levites commenced their psalmody and the sounding of their trumpets.

This reappearance of the priest was always awaited with much interest, and the least delay beyond the time usually occupied occasioned anxiety and alarm. Indeed, the priest always endeavored to make his stay as short as became the seemly discharge of this solemn function, for he knew that if his stay were protracted, the worshipers without would be in fear lest some judgment from the Lord, on their account or on his own, had befallen him there. This would have been regarded as a national calamity, seeing that he stood for the time as the representative of the people.

Such anxiety and alarm they at this time experienced, for the stay of Zacharias within the temple was unusually protracted--not long in reality, but long to those who stood without anxiously counting every moment. At length he appeared, and his strange and excited aspect showed that something had indeed happened to him in the sacred place. But when questioned concerning it, they could obtain no answer for Zacharias was mute. However, he was not deaf, and from the signs with which he met their questions, it was found that he had seen a vision in the temple.

That it had been *there* must have given the event unspeakable and mysterious importance in the

eyes of the people, for it will be remembered that the interior of the temple was never visited or even seen by them. The mere idea of the interior was an awe and a mystery to them. The priests only might enter, and they only a few at a time, for the discharge of certain duties concerning the lamps and the shew bread, and one only at the time of offering incense. Besides this were the deeper mysteries of the inner sanctuary, inaccessible even to the priests, and which the high-priest alone might enter but once in the year. All this could not but create the impression that the vision which had produced effects so signal upon the aged priest could hardly be one of private interpretation but must involve some matters of deep public concern, strengthening the desire to learn more than Zacharias could not disclose and fixing the minds of the people with strong interest in the result.

It is observable that on this day there was "a multitude without at the time of offering incense," which has suggested the probability that it was the Sabbath-day, as it is known that on this day only did a multitude of people attend the temple services. A few devout people were present on other days, but besides them the congregation was then composed of the priests, the Levites, and a number of persons called "stationary men," who were considered to represent the people.