

CHAPTER III.
THE ANNUNCIATION OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST
(St. Luke i. 5-25.)

It was the time of the Morning Sacrifice. As the massive Temple gates slowly swung on their hinges, a three-fold blast from the silver trumpets of the Priests seemed to waken the City, as with the Voice of God, to the life of another day. As its echoes came in the still air across the cleft of the Tyropoeon, up the slopes of the Upper City, down the busy quarters below, or away to the new suburb beyond, they must, if but for a moment, have brought holier thoughts to all. For, did it not seem to link the present to the past and the future, as with the golden chain of promises that bound the Holy City to the Jerusalem that was above, which in type had already, and in reality would soon descend from heaven? Patriot, saint, or stranger, he could not have heard it unmoved, as thrice the summons from within the Temple-gates rose and fell.

It had not come too soon. The Levites on ministry, and those of the laity, whose 'course' it was to act as the representatives of Israel, whether in Palestine or far away, in a sacrifice provided by, and offered for, all Israel, hastened to their duties. For already the blush of dawn, for which the Priest on the highest pinnacle of the Temple had watched, to give the signal for beginning the services of the day, had shot its brightness far away to Hebron and beyond. Within the Courts below all had long been busy. At some time previously, unknown to those who waited for the morning - whether at cockcrowning, or a little earlier or later, the superintending Priest had summoned to their sacred functions those who had 'washed,' according to the ordinance. There must have been each day about fifty priests on duty. Such of them as were ready now divided into two parties, to make inspection of the Temple courts by torchlight. Presently they met, and trooped to the well-known Hall of Hewn Polished Stones, where formerly the Sanhedrin had been wont to sit. The ministry for the day was there apportioned. To prevent the disputes of carnal zeal, the 'lot' was to assign to each his function. Four times was it resorted to: twice before, and twice after the Temple-gates were opened. The first act of their ministry had to be done in the grey dawn, by the fitful red light that glowed on the altar of burnt offering, ere the priests had stirred it into fresh flame. It was scarcely daybreak, when a second time they met for the 'lot,' which designated those who were to take part in the sacrifice itself, and who were to trim the golden candlestick, and make ready the altar of incense within the Holy Place. And now morn had broken, and nothing remained before the admission of worshippers but to bring out the lamb, once again to make sure of its fitness for sacrifice, to water it from a golden bowl, and then to lay it in mystic fashion - as tradition described the binding of Isaac - on the north side of the altar, with its face to the west.

All, priests and laity, were present as the Priest, standing on the east side of the altar, from a golden bowl sprinkled with sacrificial blood two sides of the altar, below the red line which marked the difference between ordinary sacrifices and those that were to be wholly consumed. While the sacrifice was prepared for the altar, the priests, whose lot it was, had made ready all within the Holy Place, where the most solemn part of the day's service was to take place - that of offering the incense, which symbolised Israel's accepted prayers. Again was the lot (the third) cast to indicate him, who was to be honoured with this highest mediatorial act. Only once in a lifetime might any one enjoy that privilege. Henceforth he was called 'rich,' and must leave to his brethren the hope of the distinction which had been granted him. It was fitting that, as the custom was, such lot should be preceded by prayer and confession of their faith on the part of the assembled priests.

It was the first week in October 748 a.u.c., that is, in the sixth year before our present era, when 'the course of Abia' - the eighth in the original arrangement of the weekly service - was on duty in the Temple. True this, as indeed most of the twenty-four 'courses' into which the Priesthood had been arranged, could not claim identity, only continuity, with those whose names they bore. For only three, or at most four, of the ancient 'courses' had returned from Babylon. But the original arrangement had been preserved, the names of the missing courses being retained, and their number filled up by lot from among those who had come back to Palestine. In our ignorance of the number of 'houses of their father,' or 'families,' which constituted the 'course of Abia,' it is impossible to determine, how the services of that week had been apportioned among them. But this is of comparatively small importance, since there is no doubt about the central figure in the scene.

In the group ranged that autumn morning around the superintending Priest was one, on whom the snows of at least sixty winters had fallen. But never during these many years had he been honoured with the office of incensing - and it was perhaps well he should have learned, that this distinction came direct from God. Yet the venerable figure of Zacharias must have been well known in the Temple. For, each course was twice a year on ministry, and, unlike the Levites, the priests were not disqualified by age, but only by infirmity. In many respects he seemed different from those around. His home was not in either of the great priest-centres - the Ophel-quarter in Jerusalem, nor in Jericho - but in some small town in those uplands, south of Jerusalem: the historic 'hill-country of Judea.' And yet he might have claimed distinction. To be a priest, and married to the daughter of a priest, was supposed to convey twofold honour. That he was surrounded by relatives and friends, and that he was well known and respected throughout his district, appears incidentally from the narrative. It would, indeed, have been strange had it been otherwise. There was much in the popular habits of thought, as well as in the office and privileges of the Priesthood, if worthily represented, to invest it with a veneration which the aggressive claims of Rabbinism could not wholly monopolise. And in this instance Zacharias and Elisabeth, his wife, were truly 'righteous,' in the sense of walking, so far as man could judge, 'blamelessly,' alike in those commandments which were specially binding on Israel, and in those statutes that were of universal bearing on mankind. No doubt their piety assumed in some measure the form of the time, being, if we must use the expression, Pharisaic, though in the good, not the evil sense of it. There is much about those earlier Rabbis - Hillel, Gamaliel, and others - to attract us, and their spirit oftentimes sharply contrasts with the narrow bigotry, the self-glory, and the unspiritual externalism of their successors. We may not unreasonably infer, that the *Tsaddiq* in the quiet home of the hill-country was quite other than the self-asserting Rabbi, whose dress and gait, voice and manner, words and even prayers, were those of the religious *parvenu*, pushing his claims to distinction before angels and men. Such a household as that of Zacharias and Elisabeth would have all that was beautiful in the religion of the time: devotion towards God; a home of affection and purity; reverence towards all that was sacred in things Divine and human; ungrudging, self-denying, loving charity to the poor; the tenderest regard for the feelings of others, so as not to raise a blush, nor to wound their hearts; above all, intense faith and hope in the higher and better future of Israel. Of such, indeed, there must have been not a few in the land - the quiet, the prayerful, the pious, who, though certainly not Sadducees nor Essenes, but reckoned with the Pharisaic party, waited for the consolation of Israel, and received it with joy when manifested. Nor could aught more certainly have marked the difference between the one and the other section than on a matter, which must almost daily, and most painfully have forced itself on Zacharias and Elisabeth. There were among the Rabbis those who, remembering the words of the prophet, spoke in most pathetic language of the wrong of parting from the wife of youth, and there were those to whom the bare fact of childlessness rendered separation a religious duty. Elisabeth was childless. For many a year this must have been the burden of Zacharias' prayer; the burden also of reproach, which Elisabeth seemed always to carry with her. They had waited together these many years, till in the evening of life the flower of hope had closed its fragrant cup; and still the two sat together in the twilight, content to wait in loneliness, till night would close around them.

But on that bright autumn morning in the Temple no such thoughts would come to Zacharias. For the first, and for the last time in life the lot had marked him for incensing, and every thought must have centred on what was before him. Even outwardly, all attention would be requisite for the proper performance of his office. First, he had to choose two of his special friends or relatives, to assist in his sacred service. Their duties were comparatively simple. One reverently removed what had been left on the altar from the previous evening's service; then, worshipping, retired backwards. The second assistant now advanced, and, having spread to the utmost verge of the golden altar the live coals taken from that of burnt-offering, worshipped and retired. Meanwhile the sound of the 'organ' (the Magrephah), heard to the most distant parts of the Temple, and, according to tradition, far beyond its precincts, had summoned priests, Levites, and people to prepare for whatever service or duty was before them. For, this was the innermost part of the worship of the day. But the celebrant Priest, bearing the golden censer, stood alone within the Holy Place, lit by the sheen of the seven-branched candlestick. Before him - somewhat farther away, towards the heavy Veil that hung before the Holy of Holies, was the golden altar of incense, on which the red coals glowed. To his right (the left of the altar - that is,

on the north side) was the table of shewbread; to his left, on the right or south side of the altar, was the golden candlestick. And still he waited, as instructed to do, till a special signal indicated, that the moment had come to spread the incense on the altar, as near as possible to the Holy of Holies. Priests and people had reverently withdrawn from the neighbourhood of the altar, and were prostrate before the Lord, offering unspoken worship, in which record of past deliverance, longing for mercies promised in the future, and entreaty for present blessing and peace, seemed the ingredients of the incense, that rose in a fragrant cloud of praise and prayer. Deep silence had fallen on the worshippers, as if they watched to heaven the prayers of Israel, ascending in the cloud of 'odours' that rose from the golden altar in the Holy Place. Zacharias waited, until he saw the incense kindling. Then he also would have 'bowed down in worship,' and reverently withdrawn, had not a wondrous sight arrested his steps.

On the right (or south) side of the altar, between it and the golden candlestick, stood what he could not but recognise as an Angelic form. Never, indeed, had even tradition reported such a vision to an ordinary Priest in the act of incensing. The two super-natural apparitions recorded - one of an Angel each year of the Pontificate of Simon the Just; the other in that blasphemous account of the vision of the Almighty by Ishmael, the son of Elisha, and of the conversation which then ensued - had both been vouchsafed to High-Priests, and on the Day of Atonement. Still, there was always uneasiness among the people as any mortal approached the immediate Presence of God, and every delay in his return seemed ominous. No wonder, then, that Zacharias 'was troubled, and fear fell on him,' as of a sudden - probably just after he had spread the incense on the altar, and was about to offer his parting prayer - he beheld what afterwards he knew to be the Angel Gabriel ('the might of God'). Apart from higher considerations, there could perhaps be no better evidence of the truth of this narrative than its accord with psychological facts. An Apocryphal narrative would probably have painted the scene in agreement with what, in the view of such a writer, should have been the feelings of Zacharias, and the language of the Angel. The Angel would have commenced by referring to Zacharias' prayers for the coming of a Messiah, and Zacharias would have been represented in a highly enthusiastic state. Instead of the strangely prosaic objection which he offered to the Angelic announcement, there would have been a burst of spiritual sentiment, or what passed for such. But all this would have been psychologically untrue. There are moments of moral faintness, so to speak, when the vital powers of the spiritual heart are depressed, and, as in the case of the Disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration and in the Garden of Gethsemane, the physical part of our being and all that is weakest in us assert their power.

It was true to this state of semi-consciousness, that the Angel first awakened within Zacharias the remembrance of life-long prayers and hopes, which had now passed into the background of his being, and then suddenly startled him by the promise of their realisation. But that Child of so many prayers, who was to bear the significant name of John (Jehochanan, or Jochanan), 'the Lord is gracious,' was to be the source of joy and gladness to a far wider circle than that of the family. This might be called the first rung of the ladder by which the Angel would take the priest upwards. Nor was even this followed by an immediate disclosure of what, in such a place, and from such a messenger, must have carried to a believing heart the thrill of almost unspeakable emotion. Rather was Zacharias led upwards, step by step. The Child was to be great before the Lord; not only an ordinary, but a life-Nazarite, as Samson and Samuel of old had been. Like them, he was not to consecrate himself, but from the inception of life wholly to belong to God, for His work. And, greater than either of these representatives of the symbolical import of Nazarism, he would combine the twofold meaning of their mission - outward and inward might in God, only in a higher and more spiritual sense. For this life-work he would be filled with the Holy Ghost, from the moment life woke within him. Then, as another Samson, would he, in the strength of God, lift the axe to each tree to be felled, and, like another Samuel, turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. Nay, combining these two missions, as did Elijah on Mount Carmel, he should, in accordance with prophecy, precede the Messianic manifestation, and, not indeed in the person or form, but in the spirit and power of Elijah, accomplish the typical meaning of his mission, as on that day of decision it had risen as the burden of his prayer - that is, in the words of prophecy, 'turn the heart of the fathers to the children,' which, in view of the coming dispensation, would be 'the disobedient (*to walk*) in the wisdom of the just.' Thus would this new Elijah 'make ready for the Lord a people prepared.'

If the apparition of the Angel, in that place, and at that time, had overwhelmed the aged priest, the words which he heard must have filled him with such bewilderment, that for the moment he scarcely realised their meaning. One idea alone, which had struck its roots so long in his consciousness, stood out: A son - while, as it were in the dim distance beyond, stretched, as covered with a mist of glory, all those marvellous things that were to be connected with him. So, when age or strong feeling renders us almost insensible to the present, it is ever that which connects itself with the past, rather than with the present, which emerges first and strongest in our consciousness. And so it was the obvious doubt, that would suggest itself, which fell from his lips - almost unconscious of what he said. Yet there was in his words an element of faith also, or at least of hope, as he asked for some pledge or confirmation of what he had heard.

It is this demand of some visible sign, by which to 'know' all that the Angel had promised, which distinguishes the doubt of Zacharias from that of Abraham, or of Manoah and his wife, under somewhat similar circumstances - although, otherwise also, even a cursory reading must convey the impression of most marked differences. Nor ought we perhaps to forget, that we are on the threshold of a dispensation, to which faith is the only entrance. This door Zacharias was now to hold ajar, a dumb messenger. He that would not speak the praises of God, but asked a sign, received it. His dumbness was a sign - though the sign, as it were the dumb child of the prayer of unbelief, was its punishment also. And yet, when rightly applied, a sign in another sense also - a sign to the waiting multitude in the Temple; a sign to Elisabeth; to all who knew Zacharias in the hill-country; and to the priest himself, during those nine months of retirement and inward solitude; a sign also that would kindle into flame in the day when God would loosen his tongue.

A period of unusual length had passed, since the signal for incensing had been given. The prayers of the people had been offered, and their anxious gaze was directed towards the Holy Place. At last Zacharias emerged to take his stand on the top of the steps which led from the Porch to the Court of the Priests, waiting to lead in the priestly benediction, that preceded the daily meat-offering and the chant of the Psalms of praise, accompanied with joyous sound of music, as the drink-offering was poured out. But already the sign of Zacharias was to be a sign to all the people. The pieces of the sacrifices had been ranged in due order on the altar of burnt-offering; the priests stood on the steps to the porch, and the people were in waiting. Zacharias essayed to speak the words of benediction, unconscious that the stoke had fallen. But the people knew it by his silence, that he had seen a vision in the Temple. Yet as he stood helpless, trying by signs to indicate it to the awestruck assembly, he remained dumb.

Wondering, they had dispersed - people and priests. The day's service over, another family of ministrants took the place of those among whom Zacharias had been; and again, at the close of the week's service, another 'course' that of Abia. They returned to their homes - some to Ophel, some to Jericho, some to their quiet dwellings in the country. But God fulfilled the word which He had spoken by His Angel.

Before leaving this subject, it may be well to inquire into the relation between the events just described, and the customs and expectations of the time. The scene in the Temple, and all the surroundings, are in strictest accordance with what we know of the services of the Sanctuary. In a narrative that lays hold on some details of a very complex service, such entire accuracy conveys the impression of general truthfulness. Similarly, the sketch of Zacharias and Elisabeth is true to the history of the time - though Zacharias could not have been one of the 'learned,' nor to the Rabbinites, a model priest. They would have described him as an 'idiot,' or common, and as an *Amha-arets*, a 'rustic' priest, and treated him with benevolent contempt. The Angelic apparition, which he saw, was wholly unprecedented, and could therefore not have lain within range of common expectation; though the possibility, or rather the fear, of some contact with the Divine was always present to the popular mind. But it is difficult to conceive how, if not true, the invention of such a vision in such circumstances could have suggested itself. This difficulty is enhanced by the obvious difference between the Evangelic narrative, and the popular ideas of the time. Far too much importance has here been attached by a certain class of writers to a Rabbinic saying, that the names of the Angels were brought from Babylon. For, not only was this saying (of Ben Lakish) only a clever Scriptural deduction (as the context shows), and not even an actual tradition, but no competent critic would venture to lay down the principle, that isolated Rabbinic sayings in the Talmud are to be regarded as sufficient foundation for historical facts. On the other hand, Rabbinic

tradition does lay it down, that the names of the Angels were derived from their mission, and might be changed with it. Thus the reply of the Angel to the inquiry of Manoah is explained as implying, that he knew not what other name might be given him in the future. In the Book of Daniel, to which the son of Lakish refers, the only two Angelic names mentioned are Gabriel and Michael, while the appeal to the Book of Daniel, as evidence of the Babylonish origin of Jewish Angelology, comes with strange inconsistency from writers who date it in Maccabean times. But the question of Angelic nomenclature is quite secondary. The real point at issue is, whether or not the Angelology and Demonology of the New Testament was derived from contemporary Judaism. The opinion, that such was the case, has been so dogmatically asserted, as to have almost passed among a certain class as a settled fact. That nevertheless such was *not* the case, is capable of the most ample proof. Here also, with similarity of form, slighter than usually, there is absolutely contrast of substance.

Admitting that the names of Gabriel and Michael must have been familiar to the mind of Zacharias, some not unimportant differences must be kept in view. Thus, Gabriel was regarded in tradition as inferior to Michael; and, though both were connected with Israel, Gabriel was represented as chiefly the minister of justice, and Michael of mercy; while, thirdly, Gabriel was supposed to stand on the left, and not (as in the Evangelic narrative) on the right, side of the throne of glory. Small as these divergences may seem, they are all important, when derivation of one set of opinions from another is in question. Finally, as regarded the coming of Elijah as forerunner of the Messiah, it is to be observed that, according to Jewish notions, he was to appear *personally*, and not merely 'in spirit and power.' In fact, tradition represents his ministry and appearances as almost continuous - not only immediately before the coming of Messiah, but at all times. Rabbinic writings introduce him on the scene, not only frequently, but on the most incongruous occasions, and for the most diverse purposes. In this sense it is said of him, that he always liveth. Sometimes, indeed, he is blamed, as for the closing words in his prayer about the turning of the heart of the people, and even his sacrifice on Carmel was only excused on the ground of express command. But his great activity as precursor of the Messiah is to resolve doubts of all kinds; to reintroduce those who had been violently and improperly extruded from the congregation of Israel, and vice-versa; to make peace; while, finally, he was connected with the raising of the dead. But nowhere is he prominently designated as intended 'to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.'

Thus, from whatever source the narrative may be supposed to have been derived, its details certainly differ, in almost all particulars, from the theological notions current at the time. And the more Zacharias meditated on this in the long solitude of his enforced silence, the more fully must new spiritual thoughts have come to him. As for Elisabeth, those tender feelings of woman, which ever shrink from the disclosure of the dearest secret of motherhood, were intensely deepened and sanctified in the knowledge of all that had passed. Little as she might understand the full meaning of the future, it must have been to her, as if she also now stood in the Holy Place, gazing towards the Veil which concealed the innermost Presence. Meantime she was content with, nay, felt the need of, absolute retirement from other fellowship than that of God and her own heart. Like her husband, she too would be silent and alone - till another voice called her forth. Whatever the future might bring, sufficient for the present, that thus the Lord had done to her, in days in which He looked down to remove her reproach among men. The removal of that burden, its manner, its meaning, its end, were all from God, and with God; and it was fitting to be quite alone and silent, till God's voice would again wake the echoes within. And so five months passed in absolute retirement.