

## Luke: 1:1–25

### From Catena Aurea:

Ver. 1. Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us,

2. Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word:

3. It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus,

4. That thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.

AMBROSE. (Expos. Ev. Luc. l. i. c. i.) For as many among the Jewish people prophesied by inspiration of the Spirit of God, but others were false prophets rather than prophets, so now also have many attempted to write Gospels which the good moneychanger refuses to pass. One gospel is mentioned which the twelve Apostles are said to have written; another Basilides presumed to write; and another is said to have been by Matthias.

AMBROSE. Now they who have attempted to set forth these things in order have laboured by themselves, and have not succeeded in what they attempted. For without the assistance of man come the gifts and the grace of God, which, when it is infused, is wont so to flow, that the genius of the writer is not exhausted, but ever abounding. He well says therefore, Of things which have been fully accomplished among us, or which abound among us. For that which abounds is lacking to none, and no one doubts about that which is fulfilled, since the accomplishment builds up our faith, and the end manifests it.

TITUS BOSTRENSIS. (in proœm. Lucæ.) He says, of things, because not by shadows, as the heretics say, did Jesus accomplish His advent in the flesh, but being as He was the Truth, so in very truth He performed His work.

ORIGEN. (Hom. i. in Luc.) The effect upon his own mind, St. Luke explains by the expression, of the things which have been fully accomplished among us, i. e. have had their full manifestation among us, (as the

Greek word *πεπληροφορημένων* signifies, which the Latin cannot express in one word,) for he had been convinced of them by sure faith and reason, and wavered not in any thing.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Comm. in Act. Apost. Hom. i.) The Evangelist was so far from being content with his single testimony, that he refers the whole to the Apostles, seeking from them a confirmation of his words; and therefore he adds, as they handed them down to us, who were themselves from the beginning eyewitnesses.

CHRYSOSTOM. (sup.) He says, were eyewitnesses, because this is our chief ground for believing in a thing, that we derive it from those who were actually eyewitnesses.

ORIGEN. It is plain that of one kind of knowledge, the end is in the knowledge itself, as in geometry; but of another kind, the end is counted to be in the work, as in medicine; and so it is in the word of God, and therefore having signified the knowledge by the words were themselves eyewitnesses, he points out the work by what follows, and were ministers of the word.

AMBROSE. This expression is used, not that we should suppose the ministry of the word to consist rather in seeing than hearing, but that, because by the word was meant not a word that can be spoken by the mouth, but one of real existence, we may understand that to have been not a common, but a Heavenly Word, to which the Apostles ministered.

CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA. (non occ.) In what he says of the Apostles having been eyewitnesses of the word, he agrees with John, who says, The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory. For the Word by means of the flesh was made visible.

AMBROSE. Now not only did they see the Lord in the body, but also in the Word. For they saw the Word, who with Moses and Elias saw the glory of the Word. Others did not see it, who could only see the body.

ORIGEN. It is written in Exodus, The people saw the voice of the Lord. (Exod. 20:18.) Now a voice is rather heard than seen. But it was so written, to shew us that men see the voice of the Lord with other eyes, which they only have who are worthy of them. Again in the Gospel, it is not the voice that is perceived, but the Word, which is more excellent than the voice.

THEOPHYLACT. (Præf. in Luc.) By these words it is plainly implied, that Luke was not a disciple from the beginning, but became one in course of time; others were disciples from the beginning, as Peter, and the sons of Zebedee.

ORIGEN. St. Luke hereby explains to us the source of his writing; seeing that what things he wrote, he gained not from report, but had himself traced them up from the beginning. Hence it follows, It seemed good to me also, having carefully investigated every thing from the very first, to write to thee in order, most excellent Theophilus.

AMBROSE. When he says, It seemed good to me, he does not deny that it seemed good to God: for it is God who predisposes the wills of men. Now no one has doubted that this book of the Gospel is more full of details than the others; by these words then he claims to himself, not any thing that is false, but the truth; and therefore he says, "It seemed good to me, having investigated every thing, to write." Not to write every thing, but from a review of every thing; "for if all the things which Jesus did were written, I do not think the world itself could contain them." (John 21:25.) But purposely has Luke passed by things that were written by others, in order that each book of the Gospel might be distinguished by certain mysteries and miracles peculiar to itself.

THEOPHYLACT. (in loc.) He writes to Theophilus, a man probably of some distinction, and a governor; for the form, Most excellent, was not used except to rulers and governors. As for example, Paul says to Festus, Most excellent Festus. (Acts 26:25.)

CHRYSOSTOM. (sup.) Or it may be, "That thou mightest feel certain and satisfied as to the truth of those things which thou hast heard, now that thou beholdest the same in writing."

THEOPHYLACT. For frequently, when a thing is asserted by any one, and not expressed in writing, we suspect it of falsehood; but when a man has written what he asserts, we are the more inclined to believe it, as if, unless he thought it to be true, he would not commit it to writing.

GREEK EXPOSITOR. (Photius, comment. in Luc.) The whole Preface of this Evangelist contains two things; first, the condition of those who wrote Gospels before him, (Matthew and Mark for example;) secondly, the reason why he also himself proposed to write one.

Having said, "attempted," a word which may be applied both to those who presumptuously engage upon a subject, and those who reverently handle it, he determines the doubtful expression by two additions; first, by the words, Of things which have been fully accomplished among us; and secondly, As they handed them down to us, who were eyewitnesses from the beginning. The word handed down seems to shew, that the eye-witnesses themselves had a commission to transmit the truth. For as they handed it down, so it became others also receiving it in due order, in their turn to publish it. But from the not depositing

in writing what had been delivered, several difficulties through lapse of time sprang up. Rightly then did those who had received the tradition from the first eye-witnesses of the Word, establish it in writing for the whole world; thereby repelling falsehood, destroying forgetfulness, and making up from tradition itself a perfect whole.

1:5–7

5. There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judæa, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth.

6. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

7. And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years.

CHRYSOSTOM. (noc occ.) St. Luke commences the history of his Gospel with Zacharias and the birth of John; relating one marvellous event before another, the less before the greater. For since a virgin was about to become a mother, it had been fore-ordained by grace that the old should previously conceive. He fixes the time, when he says, In the days of Herod, and in the following words adds his rank, king of Judæa. (in Matt. cap. 2.). There was another Herod, who killed John; he was tetrarch, whereas this one was king.

AMBROSE. Divine Scripture teaches us with respect to those whom we commemorate, that not only the characters of the men themselves, but of their parents also, ought to be praised, that they might be distinguished by an inheritance, as it were, handed down to them of unspotted purity. Now not only from his parents, but also from his ancestors, St. John derives his illustrious descent, a descent not exalted by secular power, but venerable from its sanctity. Complete then is that praise which comprehends birth, character, office, actions, and judgments.

The office was that of the Priesthood, as it is said, A certain Priest of the name of Zacharias.

AMBROSE. His birth is implied in the mention made of his ancestors. Of the course of Abia, i. e. of high rank among the noblest families.

THEOPHYLACT. Wishing to shew also that John was legally of Priestly descent, Luke adds, And his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth, for it was not permitted to the Jews to take a wife

from any other tribe but their own. Elisabeth by interpretation signifies “rest,” Zacharias “the remembrance of the land.”

AMBROSE. Here their whole character is comprehended in their justice, but it is well said before God, for a man by affecting a popular good-will might seem just to me, but not be just before God, if that justice instead of springing from simpleness of heart, was a mere pretence carried on by flattery. Perfect then is the praise, “that a man is just before God;” for he only is perfect who is approved by Him who cannot be deceived. St. Luke comprehends the action in the commandment, the doing justice in the justification. Hence it follows, walking in all the commandments and justifications of the Lord. For when we obey the command of heaven we walk in the commandments of the Lord, when we observe justice we seem to possess the justification of the Lord. But to be “blameless” we must “provide things honest, not only before God, but also before men”; (Prov. 3:4.) there is no blame when both motive and action are alike good, but a too austere righteousness often provokes censure. A righteous act may also be done unrighteously, as when a man out of ostentation gives largely to the poor, which is not without just cause of blame. It follows, And they had no son, because Elisabeth was barren.

CHRYSOSTOM. (ex Hom. in Gen. 49.) Not only Elisabeth, but the wives of the Patriarchs also, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, were barren, which was counted a disgrace among the ancients. Not that their barrenness was the effect of sin, since all were just and virtuous, but ordained rather for your benefit, that when you saw a virgin giving birth to the Lord, you might not be faithless, or perplexing your mind with respect to the womb of the barren.

THEOPHYLACT. And that you might learn that the law of God seeketh not a bodily increase of sons but a spiritual, both were far advanced, not only in the body but in the Spirit, “making ascents in their heartb,” having their life as the day not as the night, and walking honestly as in the day. (Ps. 84:6, 1 Thess. 5:5.)

1:8–10

8. And it came to pass, that while he executed the Priest’s office before God in the order of his course,

9. According to the custom of the Priest’s office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

10. And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense.

AMBROSE. Zacharias seems here to be designated High Priest, because into the second tabernacle went the High Priest alone once every year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and the sins of the people. (Heb. 9:7.)

AMBROSE. This then is that High Priest who is still sought by lot, for as yet the true High Priest is unknown; for he who is chosen by lot is not obtained by man's judgment. That High Priest therefore was sought for, and another typified, the true High Priest for ever, who not by the blood of victims, but by His own blood, was to reconcile God the Father to mankind. Then indeed there were changes in the Priesthood, now it is unchangeable.

1:11–14

11. And there appeared unto him an angel of the the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

12. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.

13. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.

14. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Hom. 2. de Inc. Dei Nat.) When Zacharias entered into the temple to offer up prayers to God for all men, interceding between God and man, he saw an angel standing within, as it is said, And there appeared unto him an angel.

AMBROSE. It is well said that there appeared an angel to Zacharias, who suddenly beheld him; and this is the expression especially used by Divine Scripture with respect to angels or God, that what cannot be seen beforehand may be said to appear. For things which are the objects of our senses are not seen as He is seen, Who is seen only as He will, and Whose nature is not to be seen.

ORIGEN. And we speak thus not only of the present time, but also of the future. When we shall have passed from the world, God will not appear unto all men, nor will the angels, but unto him only who has a clean heart. The place will neither hinder nor serve any one.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Hom. li. in Matt.) But the angel evidently came not in a dream, because the tidings he brought were too hard to be understood, and needed therefore a more visible and marvellous manifestation.

DAMASCENE. (de fide Orthodox. ii. 3.) Angels, however, are revealed not as they really are, but transformed (as men are able to behold them) into whatever the Lord commands.

THEOPHYLACT. It is said the altar of incense, because the other altar was set apart for burnt offerings.

AMBROSE. It was not without good reason that the angel appeared in the temple, for the coming of the true High Priest was now announced, and the Heavenly Sacrifice was preparing at which angels were to minister. For one cannot doubt that an angel stands by where Christ is sacrificed. But he appeared at the right hand of the altar of incense, because he brought down the token of Divine mercy. For the Lord is on my right hand, so that I should not be moved. (Ps. 16:8.)

CHRYSOSTOM. (de Inc. Dei Nat.) The justest of men can not without fear behold an angel; Zacharias therefore, not sustaining the sight of the angel's presence, nor able to withstand his brightness, is troubled, as it is added, Zacharias was troubled. But as it happens, when a charioteer is frightened, and has let loose his reins, the horses run headlong, and the chariot is overturned; so is it with the soul, when it is taken by any surprise or alarm; as it is here added, and fear fell upon him.

ORIGEN. A new face suddenly presenting itself to the human eye, troubles and startles the mind. The angel knowing this to be the nature of man, first dispels the alarm, as it follows, But the angel said unto him, Fear not.

ATHANASIUS. (in vita Anton.) Whereby it is not difficult to discern between good and bad spirits, for if joy has succeeded to fear, we may know that relief has come from God, because the peace of the soul is a sign of the Divine Presence; but if the fear remains unshaken, it is an enemy who is seen.

ORIGEN. The angel not only soothes his fears, but gladdens him with good tidings, adding, For thy prayer is heard, and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear a son.

AUGUSTINE. (de Quæst. Evan. l. i. q. l.) Now here we must first consider that it is not likely that Zacharias, when offering sacrifice for the sins or for the salvation or redemption of the people, would neglect the public petitions, to pray (though himself an old man, and his wife also old) that he might receive children; and, next, above all that no one prays for what he despairs of ever obtaining. And even up to this time, so much had he despaired of ever having children, that he would not believe, even when an angel promised it to him. The words, Thy prayer is heard, must be understood therefore to refer to the people; and as salvation, redemption, and the putting away of the sins of the people was to be through Christ, it is told Zacharias that a son shall be born to him, because that son was ordained to be the forerunner of Christ.

CHRYSOSTOM. (sup.) Or it means, that this was to be the proof of his prayer having been heard, namely, that a son should be born to him, crying, Behold the Lamb of God!

THEOPHYLACT. As if when Zacharias asks, How shall I know this? the angel answers, Because Elisabeth shall bring forth a son, thou shalt believe that the sins of thy people are forgiven.

AMBROSE. Or, as follows; Divine mercy is ever full and overflowing, not narrowed to a single gift, but pouring in an abundant store of blessings; as in this case, where first the fruit of his prayer is promised; and next, that his barren wife shall bear a child, whose name is announced as follows; And thou shalt call his name John.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Joann. Hom. xviii.) Which must be the meaning here, for those who from their earliest years were destined to shine forth in virtue, received their names at the very first from a divine source; while those who were to rise up in later years, had a name given them afterwards.

ORIGEN. For when a just man is born into the world, the authors of his birth rejoice; but when one is born who is to be as it were an exile to labour and punishment, they are struck with terror and dismay.

AMBROSE. But a saint is not only the blessing of his parents, but also the salvation of many; as it follows, And many shall rejoice at his birth. Parents are reminded here to rejoice at the birth of saints, and to give thanks. For it is no slight gift of God to vouchsafe unto us children, to be the transmitters of our race, to be the heirs of succession.

1:15–17

15. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb.

16. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God.

17. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, 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.

AMBROSE. Next to his becoming the rejoicing of many, the greatness of his virtue is prophesied; as it is said, For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord. The greatness signified is not of the body, but of the soul. Greatness in the sight of the Lord is greatness of soul, greatness of virtue.



THEOPHYLACT. For many are called great before men, but not before God, as the hypocrites. And so in like manner was John called great, as the parents of John were called just, before the Lord.

AMBROSE. He extended not the boundaries of an empire, nor brought back in triumph the spoils of war, (but, what is far greater,) preaching in the desert he overcame by his great virtue the delights of the world, and the lusts of the flesh. Hence it follows; And he shall drink no wine nor strong drink.

AMBROSE. On whomsoever the Holy Spirit is poured, in him there is fulness of great virtue; as in St. John, who before he was born, when yet in his mother's womb, bore witness to the grace of the Spirit which he had received, when leaping in the womb of his parent he hailed the glad tidings of the coming of the Lord. There is one spirit of this life, another of grace. The former has its beginning at birth, its end at death; the latter is not tied down to times and seasons, is not quenched by death, is not shut out of the womb.

GREEK EXPOSITOR. (Metaphrastes sup.) But what John's work is to be, and what he will do through the Holy Spirit, is shewn as follows; And many of the children of Israel shall he turn, &c.

ORIGEN. John indeed turned many, but it is the Lord's work to turn all to God their Father.

AMBROSE. But we need no testimony that St. John turned the hearts of many, for to this point we have the express witness of both prophetic and and evangelical Scriptures. For the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, and make His paths straight; and his baptisms thronged by the people, declare the rapid progress of conversion. For the forerunner of Christ preached, not himself, but the Lord; and therefore it follows, And he shall go before Him. It was well said, that he shall go before Him, who both in birth and in death was His forerunner.

ORIGEN. In the spirit and power of Elijah.—He says not, in the mind of Elijah, but in the spirit and power. For the spirit which was in Elijah came upon John, and in like manner his power.

AMBROSE. For never is the spirit without power, nor power without the spirit. And therefore it is said, in the spirit and power; because holy Elijah had great power and grace. Power, so that he turned back the false hearts of the people to faith; power of abstinence, and patience, and the spirit of prophecy. Elijah was in the wilderness, in the wilderness also was John. The one sought not the favour of king Ahab; the other despised that of Herod. The one divided Jordan; the other brought men to the Saving waters; John, the forerunner of our Lord's first coming; Elijah of His latter.

GREEK EXPOSITOR. Or else; The Jews were the parents of John and the Apostles; but, nevertheless, from pride and infidelity raged violently against the Gospel. Therefore, like dutiful children, John first, and the Apostles after him, declared to them the truth, winning them over to their own righteousness and wisdom. So also will Elias convert the remnant of Hebrews to the truth of the Apostles.

THEOPHYLACT. Or, John made ready a people not disbelieving but prepared, that is, previously fitted to receive Christ.

ORIGEN. This sacrament 2 of preparation is even now fulfilled in the world, for even now the spirit and power of John must come upon the soul, before it believes in Jesus Christ.

1:18–22

18. And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.

19. And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings.

20. And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.

21. And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple.

22. And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them and remained speechless.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Hom. ii. De Inc. Nat. Dei sup.) Considering his own age, and moreover the barrenness of his wife, Zacharias doubted; as it is said, And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? as if he said, “How shall this be?” And he adds the reason of his doubting; For I am an old man. An unseasonable time of life, an ill-suited nature; the planter infirm, the soil barren. But it is thought by some a thing unpardonable. in the priest, that he raises a course of objections; for whenever God declares any thing, it becomes us to receive it in faith, and moreover, disputes of this kind are the mark of a rebellious spirit. Hence it follows; And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, who stand before God.

CHRYSOSTOM. (sup.) That when you hear that I am sent from God, you should deem none of the things which are said unto thee to be of man, for I speak not of myself, but declare the message of Him who sends me. And this is the merit and excellence of a messenger to relate nothing of his own.

CHRYSOSTOM. (sup.) That the bonds might be transferred from the powers of generation to the vocal organs. From no regard to the priesthood was he spared, but for this reason was the more smitten, because in a matter of faith he ought to have set an example to others.

THEOPHYLACT. (cap. i.) Because the word in the Greek (κωφός) may also signify deaf, he well says, Because thou believest not, thou shalt be deaf, and shalt not be able to speak. For most reasonably he suffered these two things; as disobedient, he incurs the penalty of deafness; as an objector, of silence.

CHRYSOSTOM. (sup.) But the Angel says, And, behold; in other words, "At this instant." But mark the mercy of God in what follows: Until the day in which these things shall be performed. As if he said, "When by the issues of events I shall have proved my words, and thou shalt perceive that thou art rightly punished, I will remove the punishment from thee." And he points out the cause of the punishment, adding, Because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season; not considering His power Who sent me, and before Whom I stand. But if he who was incredulous about a mortal birth is punished, how shall he escape vengeance, who speaks falsely of the heavenly and unspeakable birth?

GREEK EXPOSITOR. (Antipater Bostrensis.) Now while these things were going on within, the delay excited surprise among the multitudes who were waiting without, as it follows: And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried. And while various suspicions were going about, each man repeating them as it pleased him, Zacharias coming forth told by his silence what he secretly endured. Hence it follows, And when he came out, he could not speak.

THEOPHYLACT. But Zacharias beckoned to the people, who perhaps enquired the cause of his silence, which, as he was not able to speak, he signified to them by nodding. Hence it follows, And he beckoned to them, and remained speechless.

AMBROSE. But a nod is a certain action of the body, without speech endeavouring to declare the will, yet not expressing it.

23. And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house.

24. And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying,

25. Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.

AMBROSE. What reason then for concealment, except shame? For there are certain allowed times in wedlock, when it is becoming to attend to the begetting of children; while the years thrive, while there is hope of child-bearing. But when in good time old age has come on, and the period of life is more fitted for governing children, than begetting them, it is a shame to bear about the signs of pregnancy, however lawful. It is a shame to be laden with the burden of another age, and for the womb to swell with the fruit of not one's own time of life. It was a shame then to her on account of her age; and hence we may understand the reason why they did not at this time come together, for surely she who blushed not at their coming together in their old age, would not blush at her child-bearing; and yet she blushes at the parental burden, while she yet is unconscious of the religious mystery. But she who hid herself because she had conceived a son, began to glory that she carried in her womb a prophet.

ORIGEN. And therefore he says, Five months, that is, until Mary should conceive, and her babe leaping with joy should prophesy.

AMBROSE. And though she might blush at the time of her child-bearing, on the other hand she rejoiced that she was free from reproach, saying, Thus hath the Lord dealt with me.

CHRYSOSTOM. Truly He has loosed her barrenness, a supernatural gift He has bestowed upon her, and the unfruitful rock has produced the green blade. He has taken away her disgrace, in that He has made her to bring forth. Hence it follows: In the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.

AMBROSE. For it is a shame among women not to receive that reward of marriage, which is the only cause of their being married.

CHRYSOSTOM. (Homil. de Anna.) Her joy therefore is twofold. The Lord has taken away from her the mark of barrenness, and also given her an illustrious offspring. In the case of other births, the coming together of the parents only occurs; this birth was the effect of heavenly grace.

AMBROSE. But in one man the voice of the people was put to silence, because in one man the whole people was addressing God. For the word of God has come over to us, and in us is not silent. He is dumb who understands not the Law; for why should you think the man who knows not a sound, to be more dumb than him who knows not a mystery. The Jewish people are like to one beckoning, who cannot make his actions intelligible.

### **From Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture:**

#### **1:1 A Kerygmatic Narrative**

#### **Only Four Canonical Gospels.**

Origen: With respect to the New Testament also “many have tried” to write Gospels, but not all found acceptance. You should know that not just four Gospels, but very many, were composed. The Gospels we have were chosen from among these Gospels and passed on to the churches. We know this from Luke’s own prologue, which begins this way: “Because many have tried to compose an account.” The words “have tried” imply an accusation against those who rushed into writing gospels without the grace of the Holy Spirit. Matthew, Mark, John and Luke did not “try” to write. They wrote their Gospels when they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Hence, “many have tried to compose an account of the events that are clearly known among us.” ...

Our doctrines about the person of our Lord and Savior should be drawn from these approved Gospels. I know one gospel called “According to Thomas,” and another “According to Matthias.” We have read many others, too, so that we do not appear to be ignorant of anything, because of those people who think they know something if they have examined these gospels. But in all of these questions we approve of nothing but that which the church approves, namely, only four canonical Gospels....

Luke makes his intention known by the word he uses; that is, “that have been clearly shown to us,” a concept that the Latin language cannot express in one word. It means that Luke knew by firm faith and by careful consideration and did not waver on any point, wondering whether it should be this way or that. Homilies on the Gospel of Luke 1.1–3.

## **1:2 Eyewitnesses and Ministers**

### **Eyewitnesses and Ministers of the Incarnate Word.**

Ambrose: The ministry of the word is greater than the hearing of it. Not the spoken word but the essential Word is meant—that which was made flesh and dwelt among us—so do not understand it as the common word but as that celestial Word to whom the apostles ministered. For one reads in Exodus that the people saw the voice of the Lord, yet truly a voice is not seen but heard. For what is a voice but a sound, which is not discerned with the eyes but perceived with the ear? Truly, with the highest genius, Moses wished to proclaim that the voice of God is seen, for it is seen with the sight of the inner mind. In the Gospel, not a voice but the Word, which is more excellent than a voice, is seen.

You see, therefore, that the Word of God was seen and heard by the apostles. They saw the Lord, not only according to the body but also according to the Word. For they with Moses and Elijah saw the glory of the Word. They who saw him in his glory saw Jesus. Others who could see only the body did not see him. Jesus is seen not with the eyes of the body but with the eyes of the spirit. Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 1.5.

### **Handing Down the Traditions.**

Athanasius: What the apostles received, they passed on without change, so that the doctrine of the mysteries (the sacraments) and Christ would remain correct. The divine Word—the Son of God—wants us to be their disciples. It is appropriate for them to be our teachers, and it is necessary for us to submit to their teaching alone. Only from them and from those who have faithfully taught their doctrine do we get, as Paul writes, “faithful words, worthy of complete acceptance.” With them we are back to ground level, because they did not become disciples as a result of what they heard from others. Rather, they were eyewitnesses and servants of God the Word, and they handed down what they heard directly from him. Festal Letter 2.7.

### **Traditions of Incarnation and Atonement.**

Cyril of Alexandria: They “who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word” did not hand on to us that he was one Son and another, as I said, but one and the same, God and man at the same time, the only-begotten and the firstborn. This came about in order that he might have the first title as God and the second as man, when he “was born among many brothers,” having assumed our likeness.

[He had not] joined another man to himself—as it seemed good to some persons to think—but [he] really and truly [became] man and [did] not relinquish being what he was, being God by nature and impassible. For this reason he voluntarily suffered in his own flesh. He has not given the body of someone else for us. Rather, the only-begotten Word of God himself offered himself, after he became man, as an immaculate victim to God the Father. Letter 67.4.

### **1:3–4 The Purpose of Luke’s Gospel**

#### **Luke Written for All Who Love God.**

Ambrose: So the Gospel was written to Theophilus, that is, to him whom God loves. If you love God, it was written to you. If it was written to you, discharge the duty of an evangelist. Diligently preserve the pledge of a friend in the secrets of the Spirit. Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 1.12.

#### **The Truth of Luke’s Instruction.**

Origen: “It seemed right for me, too, following the same course from the beginning.” He makes his point and repeats it. He did not learn from rumors what he is going to write. He himself has grasped it from the beginning. Hence, the apostle Paul praises him deservedly when he says, “He is praised for his Gospel throughout all the churches.” Scripture says this about no one else. It uses the expression only for Luke. “It seemed right for me, too, following the same course from the beginning, carefully to write down all those events for you in order, most excellent Theophilus.” Someone might think that Luke addressed the Gospel to a specific man named Theophilus. But, if you are the sort of people God can love, then all of you who hear us speaking are Theophiluses, and the Gospel is addressed to you. Anyone who is a Theophilus is both “excellent” and “very strong.” This is what the Greek word θεοφιλος [Theophilos] actually means. No Theophilus is weak. Scripture says of the people of Israel, when they were going out from Egypt, “There was no weakling in their tribes.” I could say boldly that everyone who is a Theophilus is robust. He has vigor and strength from both God and his Word. He can recognize the “truth” of those “words, by which he has been instructed” and understand the Word of the gospel in Christ—to whom is glory and power for ages of ages. Amen. Homilies on the Gospel of Luke 1.6.

## **1:5–2:52 PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON THE INFANCY NARRATIVE**

### **The Pure and Undeiled Birth of Jesus.**

Cyril of Jerusalem: Let us remember these things, brothers, and use them as weapons of defense. Let us not endure the heretics who teach that Christ's coming was in appearance only. Let us shun as well those who say that the birth of the Savior was from a man and a woman, daring to assert that he was begotten of Joseph and Mary, because it is written, "He took his wife." Let us recall Jacob, who, before he received Rachel, said to Laban, "Give me my wife." Just as Rachel was called the wife of Jacob before marriage, as a result of her betrothal Mary also was called the wife of Joseph. Note the exactness of the Gospel when it says, "Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee, called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph," and what follows. Again, when the enrolling took place and Joseph went up to be enrolled, what does the Scripture say? "And Joseph also went up from Galilee ... to register together with Mary his espoused wife, who was with child." Though she was with child, it does not say "with his wife" but "with his espoused wife." "God sent his Son," Paul says, not born of a man and a woman but "born of a woman" only; that is, born of a virgin. We have already shown that a virgin is also called a woman. For he who makes virgin souls was born of a virgin. Catechetical Lectures 12.31.

### **1:5–7 Time, Persons and Place**

#### **John's Priestly Background.**

Ambrose: Holy Scripture tells us that not only the character of those who are praiseworthy but also their parents must be praised, so that the transmitted inheritance of immaculate purity, as it were, in those whom we wish to praise, may be exalted. What other intention is there in this passage of the holy Evangelist, except that St. John the Baptist be renowned for his parents, his wonders, his duty and his passion? Thus Hannah, the mother of St. Samuel, is praised. Thus Isaac received from his parents nobility of piety, which he handed down to his descendants. Therefore the priest Zechariah is not only a priest but also of the course of Abijah, that is, a noble among his wife's ancestors. "And his wife," it says, "was of the daughters of Aaron." So St. John's nobility was handed down not only from his parents but also from his ancestors—not exalted through worldly power but venerable through the religious succession. For the forerunner of Christ ought to have such ancestors, that he be seen to preach a faith in his Lord's advent



that is not suddenly conceived but received from his ancestors and imparted by the very law of nature. Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 1.15–16.

### **Elizabeth's Barrenness.**

Origen: Consider why many holy women in the Scriptures are said to have been barren, as Sarah herself, and now Rebecca. Also Rachel, Israel's beloved, was barren. Hannah also, the mother of Samuel, is recorded to have been barren. Also in the Gospels, Elizabeth is said to have been barren. In all these instances this term is used, for after sterility they all gave birth to a holy person. Homilies on Genesis 12.1.

### **John Heralds the End of Old Testament Worship.**

Ephrem the Syrian: John, herald of the Lord of the right, was announced from the right of the altar. It was at the time of worship that he was announced to show he was the end of the former worship. It was in the middle of the sanctuary that Zechariah became dumb, to show that the mysteries of the sanctuary had become silent, for he who was to fulfill these mysteries had come. Because Zechariah did not believe that his wife's barrenness had been healed, he was bound in his speech. Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron 1.10.

### **1:8–17 Gabriel Appears to Zechariah in the Temple**

#### **Gabriel Dispels Fear.**

Athanasius: Whenever the soul continues to be fearful, it is the enemy who is present. The evil spirits do not dispel the fear of their presence, as the great archangel Gabriel did for Mary and Zechariah. Life of St. Anthony 37.

#### **The Angel Comes to Zechariah.**

Augustine: The angel Gabriel came to Zechariah, not to Elizabeth. Why? Because it was through Zechariah that John was going to be in Elizabeth. The angel, in announcing that John was going to come by being born, went not to the receptacle of the womb but to the source of the seed. He announced they would both have a son, but he made the announcement to the father. John, after all, was going to come from the marriage of male and female. And once more the same Gabriel came to Mary—not to Joseph. The

angel came to the one from whom that flesh was to begin, from whom it was to take its starting point. Sermon 291.3.

### **Zechariah Prays for a Messiah.**

Augustine: The priest was offering sacrifice on behalf of the people. The people were expecting the Christ. John was the one who would announce the Christ. Sermon 291.3.

### **Zechariah's Priestly Prayer.**

Chrysostom: This man Zechariah came into the Holy of Holies, to the innermost sanctuary, upon which he alone of all men had the right to look. Consider how he was equal in importance to all the people. When he offered prayers for the whole people, when he was making the Master propitious to his servants, he was serving as a mediator between God and men. On the Incomprehensible Nature of God 2.9–10.

### **John's Greatness is in Spirit.**

Ambrose: He here announced greatness, not of body but of soul. Greatness of soul before the Lord is greatness of virtue, and smallness of soul is childhood of virtue.... Thus John would be great—not through bodily virtue but through magnanimity. He did not enlarge the boundaries of an empire. He did not prefer triumphs of military contest to honors. Rather, what is more, he disparaged human pleasures and lewdness of body, preaching in the desert with great virtue of spirit. He was a child in worldliness, but great in spirit. He was not captivated by the allurements of life, nor did he change his steadfastness of purpose through a desire to live....

There is no doubt that this promise of the angel came true. Before he was born—still in his mother's womb—St. John depicted the grace of the receipt of the Spirit. Although neither his father nor his mother had performed any miracles previously, he, leaping in his mother's womb, proclaimed the coming of the Lord. When the mother of the Lord came to Elizabeth, the latter said, "For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy." She did not yet have the spirit of life, but the Spirit of grace. We find in another place that the grace of sanctification precedes that of the substance of living, where the Lord says, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations." For the spirit of this life is one, and the Spirit of grace is another. Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 1.31–33.

### **Those Baptized by John.**

Cyprian: John did not merely announce the Lord in words before his coming but pointed him out for people to see. John baptized the Christ himself through whom all others are baptized. The Baptismal Controversy 73.25.

### **In the Spirit and Power of Elijah.**

Ambrose: These words are well added because the spirit is never without power, nor power without the spirit. "In the spirit and power of Elijah," it says, perhaps because holy Elijah had great power and grace. Power so that he turned the spirits of the people back from unbelief to faith, the power of abstinence and patience, and the Spirit of prophecy.... Elijah divided the Jordan, John made it the font of salvation. John walks with the Lord on earth, Elijah appears with the Lord in glory. Elijah is a herald of the first coming of the Lord, and John of the second. Elijah after three years watered the earth with rain, John after three years sprinkled the arid soil of our body with the stream of faith. Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 1.36.

### **1:18–20 Zechariah's Response and the Angel's Proclamation**

#### **Barrenness and Virginity.**

Augustine: The church observes the birth of John as in some way sacred.... When we celebrate John's, we also celebrate Christ's....

John is born of an old woman who is barren. Christ is born of a young woman who is a virgin. Barrenness gives birth to John, virginity to Christ. The normal and proper age of parents was lacking with the birth of John. No marital embrace occurred for the birth of Christ. The former is announced in the declaration of the angel. With the angel's annunciation the latter is conceived. That John will be born is not believed, and his father is silenced. That Christ will be born is believed, and he is conceived by faith. First of all faith makes its entry into the heart of the virgin, and there follows fruitfulness in the mother's womb.

And yet, Zechariah used nearly the same words, when the angel announced John: "By what shall I know this? For I myself am an old man, and my wife is already advanced in her days," and by holy Mary when the angel announced that she was going to give birth: "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" These are practically the same words....

Finally, John is born when the daylight begins to diminish and the night begins to grow longer. Christ is born when the night begins to be curtailed and the day begins to increase. Sermon 293.

### **1:21–23 The People Realize Zechariah Has Seen a Vision**

#### **Zechariah's Silence a Sign.**

Origen: When the priest Zechariah offers incense in the temple, he is condemned to silence and cannot speak. Or better, he speaks only with gestures. He remains unable to speak until the birth of his son, John. What does this mean? Zechariah's silence is the silence of prophets in the people of Israel. God no longer speaks to them. His "Word, which was with the Father from the beginning, and was God," has passed over to us. For us Christ is not silent....

Christ ceased to be in them. The Word deserted them. What Isaiah wrote was fulfilled: "The daughter of Zion will be deserted like a tent in the vineyard or like a hut in the cucumber patch. She is as desolate as a plundered city." The Jews were left behind, and salvation passed to the Gentiles. Homily on the Gospel of Luke 5.1, 4.

#### **Zechariah Doubts.**

Chrysostom: Zechariah looked at his age, his gray hair, his body that had lost its strength. He looked at his wife's sterility, and he refused to accept on faith what the angel revealed would come to pass. On the Incomprehensible Nature of God 2.11.

### **1:24–25 Elizabeth Rejoices in Her New Status**

#### **Why Elizabeth Hid Herself.**

Ephrem the Syrian: Elizabeth hid herself because of Zechariah's grief. Or alternatively, she hid herself because she was ashamed on account of the fact that she had resumed intercourse. So it was because of her old age that Elizabeth hid herself. But see, Moses did not write in relation to Sarah that she hid herself, when at the age of ninety she carried Isaac, nor with regard to Rebecca, who was pregnant with twins. Elizabeth hid herself for five months, until her infant would be sufficiently formed in his members to exult before his Lord, and because Mary was about to receive the annunciation. Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron 1.24.

### **Elizabeth's Modesty.**

Ambrose: Elizabeth, who undoubtedly desired sons, hid herself for five months. What was the reason for this concealment if not modesty? For there is a prescribed age for each duty, and what is fitting at one time is unseemly at another, and a change of age often changes the nature of every act.... She, who once hid because she had conceived a son, began to carry herself with confidence because she bore a prophet— she who blushed before was blessed, she who doubted before was strengthened. “For, behold,” she said, “as soon as the voice of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy.” Therefore she cried out with a loud voice when she perceived the coming of the Lord, because she believed in the divine birth. There was no cause for shame when she accepted the birth of the prophet as a given, not a desired, generation. Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 1.43, 46.