

The Contemplation Of Zacharias

**by Karl Kohlhase, 2007
www.k4communications.com**

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Who is this young girl who calls herself the Lord's handmaiden and whose presence has graced our home for these past three months?

For six months prior to her arrival, and continuing now to this ninth month, I have been silent, unable to speak since the day I dared question Gabriel's good word. Would that I had remembered Abraham and the deadness of Sarah's womb when the angel promised Elizabeth and me a son in our old age. Would that I had chained my careless tongue, of my own volition, before him who stands in the presence of God.

Alas, I could restrain neither my doubts nor my lips. I spoke. The angel rebuked. And I was left speechless.

Now I have come to understand both the severity and the kindness of the Lord. This silence has been for my chastening, yes, but also for my blessing. I was in need of silence. For the Lord's kind intention was to soon thereafter place before my dim and unworthy eyes sublime mysteries that could only be comprehended by the quiet and contemplative heart.

Now, in this ninth month, like a pregnancy that has come to full term, it seems that the fullness of my recollection is about to burst forth from my fettered tongue. But before I speak, let me call to mind one last time the marvelous events, and the meditations accompanying them, that have led me to this point of delivery.

I was filled with interior questions on that day. Why had the lot fallen to me, the least of all Levites, to enter the Holy Place this year? Why had the Lord shut my noble wife's womb when we had always tried so hard to please Him? Would all our prayers remain unanswered? Had He abandoned His people altogether, because of our infidelities? How long would it be before His Christ would come to restore the glory of Israel?

But the question that affixed itself most tenaciously to my mind as I stood there offering incense in the Holy Place, was this: "Where is the Ark of Your Covenant, Lord?"

Though I had never been in this Holy Place before, the Ark's absence was immediately apparent when I cautiously stepped inside. For the Scriptures indicated that the poles of the Ark extended past the curtain on both sides and were visible from where I now stood. I beheld the curtain, but no protruding poles of gold. Of course, this was no surprise to me, since no one had seen the glorious Ark since the days of our exile in Babylon more than five centuries ago. No one knew where it was.

But somehow my foreknowledge of the Ark's absence did not ease the deep sadness that it caused me to actually see, with my own eyes, the vacated Holy of Holies. There was no more overshadowing cloud as in the days of Moses. The pillar of fire, which had always led our fathers in the wilderness, had moved on, but this time no one knew where it had gone. So how could we follow?

My heart throbbed, “Yahweh, where are You?”

And when I had quieted my soul, I thought I heard the reply, “I am with My Ark.”

I closed my eyes and prayed again, “Oh, Lord, please, no more riddles. When shall we see the Ark of Your Glory again?”

A solitary word came into my mind: “Soon”.

Just then I opened my eyes, and, much to my astonishment, there stood an angel of the Lord in glorious raiment. His blazing image will be etched into my mind forever, but there are no words in my rudimentary vocabulary to describe his radiance. He stood to the right of the altar of incense, and I was gripped with fear.

He said to me, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the 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 he will drink no wine or liquor; and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother’s womb. And he will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

A child? At our age? Now I had a firsthand understanding of the laughter of old Abraham and Sarah. Had I not been so frightened, I would have snickered just like my forefather, but I wish that my sensible fear had restrained more than my laughter. I regretted the words before they even slipped out of my loose lips, when I said, “How shall I know this for certain? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”

The angel’s glare could have melted me. He raised his voice and thundered, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God; and I have been sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news. And behold, you shall be silent until the day when these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time.”

I couldn’t speak, not even to apologize to Gabriel. The angel disappeared, and I stood there alone, gazing at the curtain, lost in recollection. In my deep silence I could almost hear the curtain speaking to me. It spoke to me of my shame and the shame of my people, Israel. It spoke to me of the absent Ark. It echoed one final word: “Soon.”

I must have stood there meditating by that curtain a long time, for when I finally came out, the people rushed upon me with concern. They apparently thought I had died while attending my priestly duties. After all, I wouldn’t have been the first unworthy Levite to be struck down in the Holy of Holies. I tried to explain as best I could with signs and gestures. I don’t know why I didn’t think of asking for a tablet and pen. I suppose I just

wanted to get away from the crowd and go home where it was quiet, where I could think. For some reason I felt an inner assurance that I would find the answers to my questions there at home.

Soon after my homecoming, the answers did, indeed, begin to present themselves to my racing mind. First of all, my dear old Elizabeth became pregnant, just as Gabriel had promised. But with the begetting of this child there was also the begetting of more questions. If this child, whose name will be John, is to be the forerunner of the Lord our God, does that mean that the Lord is finally coming to save His people? When and where shall the Lord our God appear? Will the Ark of His Covenant, overshadowed by His radiant glory, also appear at this time? And how will little John be filled with the Spirit while yet in his mother's womb?

For five months my thoughts were frozen upon these questions, and in the sixth month the blazing noonday sun peaked its warming rays into the icy chambers of my heart when I heard a gentle voice greeting Elizabeth at our door.

Then my quiet reflection was interrupted by a shout: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!"

That was Elizabeth's voice, but to whom was she speaking? And why was she shouting? I looked out the window and saw that it was Mary, Elizabeth's young cousin, who had come from Nazareth to help around the house in our time of need. Had senility finally gripped my grey-haired wife? Mary was a consecrated virgin, and her belly showed no signs of being pregnant. What was this talk of the fruit of her womb?

Elizabeth continued, "And how is it that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leapt in my womb for joy." Those words brought me to my senses. I knew that Elizabeth had a sharper mind than I. These had to be words inspired by the Holy Spirit, which explains why little John leapt for joy in his mother's womb. I had learned my lesson, not to doubt the Lord's promise again. I understood that, just as Gabriel said to me by the altar of incense, the child had been filled with the Spirit while in his mother's womb, and Elizabeth herself had been filled with the prophetic Spirit at the greeting of Mary.

The final prophetic word that issued from my wife's inspired lips pierced like a lance through my doubting heart: "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord."

Who is this young woman who believes an impossible promise? Who is this young woman called "the mother of my Lord"? Who is this young woman, whose simple greeting imparts the same Spirit who rested upon Moses, Elijah, Elisha, and all the prophets of old? Who is this young woman, so favored by God that He blesses those who bless her? Who is this young woman who henceforth shall be called blessed by all generations?

And who is this “fruit of her womb”? I knew the answer to all my questions hinged upon this one. To understand the mystery of this woman I had to contemplate the mystery contained within her womb, for the two were inseparable.

And so I paid close attention to the conversations between Elizabeth and Mary, who had promised to stay with us for three months, before she was to be wed to her betrothed Joseph. Elizabeth asked her cousin countless times to patiently recount the story of her angelic encounter, so I had ample time to let it sink into my stubborn soul.

Elizabeth asked a host of questions, and I’m glad she did; for I would certainly have asked them myself if my tongue were able. First she inquired, “What was the angel’s name, and what did he look and sound like?” Mary responded that the angel didn’t tell her his name, but his voice resonated like a silver trumpet when he greeted, “Hail, full of grace”, and she was happy to describe his appearance as best she could.

When she began to tell of the angelic manifestation, it struck me that the messenger she described was a mirror image of the angel who appeared to me whose name was Gabriel. When I considered two appearances of the same angel, as if standing in a mirror, an interesting thought occurred to me: “That reminds me of the two identical cherubim, made of one piece of gold, who faced each other with their wings overshadowing the Ark of the....”

I couldn’t finish the thought. How could this young woman be compared to the Holy Ark of the Covenant? “That’s absurd!”, I thought. But, then again, was it really that absurd?

The Ark was made by the master craftsmen Bezalel (in whom was the Spirit of God), out of the best of Israel’s contributions—the finest acacia wood overladen with gold inside and out. Mary’s not a gilded box. Is she?

But, then again, Mary comes from the finest family in Israel and is full of grace, according to Gabriel’s word. She’s beautiful, inside and out. Three months of her tender smile and caring service have convinced me of that! She is golden in her faith, which puts my faith to shame and is even stronger than Abraham’s (and he was considered the father of all who believe). Mary’s virginal womb was more impossible than the old wombs of Elizabeth and Sarai combined, and yet she believed without hesitation. She is golden in her submission to God’s will and in her humility, saying “Behold, the handmaiden of the Lord; be it done unto me according to your word.” Her submission and humility even outshines that of Moses, the world’s most humble man who spoke face to face with God, who on one occasion angrily struck the rock after he was commanded to speak to it in order to bring forth water. She is inwardly a creature of wood, a fragile substance of the earth, but the wood of her creation is covered in gold, full of grace, preserving her from the deteriorating influences of this world’s corrosive air and water. She is extraordinarily golden in every way. In how many more ways will this be made known once her Child is born? In what ways will she accompany her holy Prodigy in his maturity?

The Ark, after it had been created by Bezalel and erected in the tabernacle by Moses, was overshadowed by the glory of the Lord. Mary doesn't have a pillar of cloud over her head. Does she?

But, then again, when Mary asked how she, a consecrated virgin, would bear a son (for noble Joseph intended to be the defender of her vow, not the spoiler of it), Gabriel explained, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you..." That explains why I find it difficult to stand in her presence without at least bowing my grey head a little. That explains why the doubts I had before the veil all vanish when Mary enters the room to announce that dinner is served. I know I am in the Divine Presence when she sits at table with us, for God is with her in a most extraordinary way. When I witness her unsurpassed love for Yahweh--when she excuses herself for evening prayer, for instance—she glows like a pillar of fire shining in the night. And when she happily washes our dishes or bakes our bread I can almost smell the sweet burning of incense ascending to the heavens like a pillar of cloud.

The Ark carried the Words of the Covenant, written by the finger of God Himself on tablets hewn out of the consecrated mountain. Mary isn't full of stone tablets. Is she?

But, then again, could it be that the fruit of Mary's womb is the very Word of God, not written on tables of stone, but actually become flesh and blood through her and in her? And as the tablets were taken from Sinai's rocky substance, made holy by the cloud of glory that overshadowed it, so this Child is formed out of Mary's created substance, she alone being found worthy by reason of the fullness of grace she had received and by the overshadowing of Yahweh's Holy Spirit. The Ark may have contained the Word made stone without the intervention of man, but Mary's virginal womb contains the Word made flesh without human father. The fruit that she bears is God incarnate, Immanuel, even the very Son of God who will save His people from their sins and sit on the throne of David forever.

The Ark went before Israel to lead us in victory over our enemies, for God was with the Ark. It was not Mary who led us into Jericho with the sound of trumpets and jubilant shouting. Was it?

But, then again, Gabriel did announce that the Lord is with Mary. And could not Gabriel's voice be compared to a trumpet (a non-human signal) when he said, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you."? And could not Elizabeth's loud, Spirit-led exclamation, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" be like the voice of those who shouted on the seventh day, when the walls of that great city fell? What victories, I wonder, will God accomplish through this woman and her seed?

What else did Elizabeth say on that day? Ah yes, I remember. She asked, "And how is it the Mother of my Lord should come to me?" That reminds me of when David attempted to bring the Ark back to his city after the Philistines had captured it, but Uzziah was struck down for carelessly reaching out his hand and touching the holy object. David said, "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?" And he was afraid to take it to his city

at that time, so it was sent to the house of Obed-edom, the Levite. There it remained for three months, and Obed-edom's entire household was blessed due to the presence of the Ark for those three months. Can it be a coincidence that Mary has come to my Levitical house for these three months, and my house has been abundantly blessed with an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon my wife and son, on account of Mary's presence and the presence of the One whom she bears within her womb?

The only thing this story is missing is that after David saw that Obed-edom's house was so blessed, he decided to have the Ark brought to his city, which is Bethlehem. That would be too much to ask for such a perfect parallel.

But what's this I hear? Mary is telling Elizabeth that she must leave soon. Why? She needs to get back to be wed to Joseph and to journey where? Joseph has been informed that a census is being taken, so they must travel to Bethlehem (since he is of the house and lineage of David), where the Child is to be born. No wonder little John leapt in his mother's womb, while Elizabeth shouted, just as David danced with all his might before the Lord with shouts of joy and trumpet blasts as the Ark entered that little town.

Being a student of the Law, I know, dear Mother, where you will take the Child thirty three days after his circumcision. With an offering of two turtledoves, the offering of the poor, you'll take Him up to Jerusalem and present Him, the first born of all first borns, to the service of His Father in Heaven. May God bless you, Holy Mother, with more sons and daughters, as He blessed Hannah for lending Him Samuel, the fruit of her barren womb. And may your children be as numerous as the stars of heaven, a crown upon your worthy head, just as God blessed Abraham for not withholding his one and only Isaac, who was the delight of his heart.

That's it! I have seen and heard enough.

I have beheld with my own eyes the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. I confess, and I am not lying, that the overshadowing cloud of glory was not in the worn out temple of Solomon. It has moved on, and it beckons all Israel to follow. Blow the silver trumpets! Sound the alarm! The Lord rallies his people. Pull up the tent stakes, for it is time to go out and meet the Lord in the wilderness again. He goes up, by way of the Jordan, to Nazareth, then to Bethlehem. Finally, He will draw us all to Himself when He is lifted up in Jerusalem. All you who seek the Lord and delight in the nearness of God, look to the Ark of the New Covenant; the Lord is with her.

Goodbye, Holy Mother. I wish I could speak to bid you a safe journey back to Nazareth. But do you have need of my humble prayers? The Lord our God is with you and in you. He overshadows you and takes up His residence within your womb. How blessed are you, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! I have need of your prayers. Pray that I, too, may be filled with the Spirit, and that my tongue may be loosed in order to make known the fruit of my nine-month contemplation.

Until we meet again in Bethlehem and on the hill of Jerusalem, goodbye.

Now, here I stand before Elizabeth who is holding our newborn son. She insists that his name will be John. Why are all these people making such a fuss about his name? They should listen to his mother; she knows what she is talking about. Give me a pen and paper, and I will spell it out for them: “His name is John.”

What’s this I feel welling up inside of me like a rushing river? It has reached the dam of my lips and is ready to break forth. I can hold it in no longer. I know the truth; therefore I must speak:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people. And has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David His servant—as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old—Salvation from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us; to show mercy toward our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant, the oath which He swore to Abraham our father, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways; to give His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God with which the Sunrise from on high shall visit us, to shine upon those who sit in the darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Now is the blessing of Obed-edom’s entire house complete. Now is the closing of the order of Levi and the dawn of the order of Melchizedek.