



# Contents

Disk I



- 1 The Story of the Angel by the Altar—1
- 2 The Story of Jesus, the Babe of Bethlehem  
—12
- 3 The Story of the Star and the Wise Men—18
- 4 The Story of the Child in the Temple—27
- 5 The Story of the Water That Was Turned Into  
Wine—34
- 6 The Story of the Stranger at the Well—41
- 7 The Story of the Fishermen—50
- 8 The Story of the Sermon on the Mount—56

Disk 2



- 9 The Story of the Miracle Worker—66
- 10 The Good Shepherd and the Good Samaritan  
—78
- 11 The Story of the Palm Branches—86
- 12 The Story of the Betrayal—94
- 13 The Story of the Empty Tomb—105
- 14 The Story of the Man at the Beautiful Gate  
—117
- 15 The Story of Stephen, the First Martyr—126



# 1 *The Story of the Angel by the Altar*

Disk 1



At the time when the story of the New Testament begins, the land of Israel, called also the land of Judea, was ruled by a king named Herod. He was the first of several Herods, who at different times ruled either the whole of the land, or parts of it.

But Herod was not the highest ruler. Many years before this time, the Romans, who came from the city of Rome in Italy, had won all the lands around the Great Sea, the sea which we call the Mediterranean; and above king Herod of Judea was the great king of Rome, ruling over all the lands, and over the land of Judea among them. So Herod, though king of Judea, obeyed <sup>1</sup> his overlord <sup>2</sup>, the emperor <sup>3</sup> at Rome. At



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- 1 **obey** [əˈbeɪ] (v.) to do what you are told to
  - 2 **overlord** [ˈoʊvərloʊd] (n.) a person who is the lord of other lords
  - 3 **emperor** [ˈempərər] (n.) the head of an empire



the time when this story begins, the emperor at Rome was named Augustus Caesar.

At this time, the land where the Jews lived was full of people. Jerusalem was its largest city, and in Jerusalem was standing the Temple of the Lord, which king Herod had lately built **anew**<sup>4</sup>, taking the place of the old Temple built very many years before, which had long needed **repair**<sup>5</sup>.

Disk 1



There were also many other large cities besides Jerusalem. In the south was Hebron among the mountains; on the **shore**<sup>6</sup> of the Great Sea were Gaza, and Joppa, and Caesarea; in the middle of the land were Shechem and Samaria; and in the north were Nazareth, and Cana; down by the shore of the Sea of Galilee were Tiberias, and Capernaum, and Bethsaida. Far up in the north, at the foot of snowy



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- 4 **anew** [ə`nu:] (adv.) again, once more
- 5 **repair** [ri`per] (n.) the repairing of something damaged or broken
- 6 **shore** [ʃɔ:r] (n.) the land along the edge of the sea or of any large area of water

Mount Hermon, was another Caesarea; but so that it might not be **confused**<sup>7</sup> with Caesarea upon the **seacoast**<sup>8</sup>, this city was called Caesarea-Philippi, or “Philip’s Caesarea,” from the name of one of Herod’s sons.

One day, an old priest named Zacharias was **leading**<sup>9</sup> the **service**<sup>10</sup> of **worship**<sup>11</sup> in the Temple. He was standing in front of the golden altar of **incense**<sup>12</sup>, in the Holy Place, and was holding in his hand a **censer**<sup>13</sup>, or cup, full of burning coals and incense; while all the people were worshipping in the court of the Temple, outside the court of the Priests,



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- 7 **confused** [kən`fju:zd] (a.) puzzled
  - 8 **seacoast** [ˈsi:koust] (n.) land bordering the sea
  - 9 **lead** [li:d] (v.) to direct a performance or guide a behavior
  - 10 **service** [ˈsɜ:rvis] (n.) a religious ceremony
  - 11 **worship** [ˈwɜ:rʃɪp] (n.) an activity of worshipping
  - 12 **incense** [ˈɪnsɛns] (n.) a substance which is burned in religious service
  - 13 **censer** [ˈsɛnsər] (n.) a vessel for burning incense, especially during religious services



Disk I



where the great altar of burnt-offering<sup>14</sup> stood.

Suddenly, Zacharias saw an angel from the Lord, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. He felt a great fear when he saw this strange<sup>15</sup> being with shining face; but the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zacharias; for I have come from the Lord to bring good news. Your wife Elizabeth shall have a son, and you shall name him John. You shall be made glad, for your son John shall bring joy and gladness to many. He shall be great in the sight of the Lord; and he shall never taste wine nor strong drink as long as he lives; but he shall be filled with God’s Holy Spirit. He shall lead many of the people of Israel to the Lord, for he shall go before the Lord in the power of Elijah the prophet, as was promised by Malachi, the last of the old prophets. He shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and those who are disobeying the Lord to do his will.”



<sup>14</sup> **burnt-offering** a slaughtered animal or other offering burned on an altar as a religious service

<sup>15</sup> **strange** [streɪndʒ] (a.) not known or seen before





As Zacharias heard these words, he was filled with **wonder**<sup>16</sup>, and could **hardly**<sup>17</sup> believe them true. He was now an old man, and his wife Elizabeth was also old; so that they could not **expect**<sup>18</sup> to have a child. He said to the angel: “How shall I know that your words are true, for I am an old man, and my wife is old?”

“I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God,” said the angel. “And I was sent from the Lord to speak to you, and to bring you this good news. But because you did not believe my words, you shall become **dumb**<sup>19</sup>, and shall not be able to speak, until this which I have said comes to pass.”

All this time the people outside in the court were wondering why the priest stayed so long in the Temple. When at last he came out, they found that he

Disk I



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- 16 **wonder** [ˈwʌndər] (n.) surprise, amazement  
17 **hardly** [ˈhɑːrdli] (adv.) almost not  
18 **expect** [ɪkˈspekt] (v.) to think that something or someone is likely to happen or come  
19 **dumb** [dʌm] (a.) not able to speak



could not speak a word; but he made signs to them, to tell them that he had seen a **vision**<sup>20</sup> in the Temple.

After the days of his service were over, Zacharias went to his own home, which was near Hebron, a city of the priests, among the mountains in the south of Judea. When his wife Elizabeth found that God was soon to give her a child, she was very happy, and praised the Lord.

About six months after Zacharias saw the vision in the Temple, the same angel Gabriel was sent from the Lord to a city in the part of the land called Galilee, which was in the north. The city to which the angel was sent was Nazareth. There the angel found a young girl named Mary, who was a cousin to Elizabeth. Mary was soon to be married to a good man who had **sprung**<sup>21</sup> from the line of king David, though he was not himself a king, **nor**<sup>22</sup> a rich man. He was a carpenter, living in Nazareth, and his name was Joseph.



20 **vision** [ˈvɪʒn] (n.) a religious or mystical experience of a supernatural appearance

21 **spring** [sprɪŋ] (v.) to develop from

22 **nor** [nɔːr] (conj.) and not



The angel came into the room where Mary was, and said to her: “Hail, woman **avored**<sup>23</sup> by the Lord; the Lord is with you!”

Mary was surprised at the angel’s words, and wondered what they could mean. Then the angel spoke again, and said: “Do not be afraid, Mary. The Lord has given to you his favor, and has chosen you to be the mother of a son whose name shall be Jesus, which means ‘**salvation**<sup>24</sup>,’ because he shall save his people from their sins. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of God; and the Lord shall give to him the **throne**<sup>25</sup> of his father David. He shall be a king, and shall **reign**<sup>26</sup> over the people of God forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.”



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- 23 **favor** [ˈfeɪvər] (v.) to support or show preference for someone or something
- 24 **salvation** [sælˈveɪʃn] (n.) the freeing of a person from sin, or the saving of someone’s soul
- 25 **throne** [θroʊn] (n.) the office of a king or a queen
- 26 **reign** [reɪn] (v.) to rule as a king or a queen

But Mary could not see how all this was to come to pass. And the angel said to her: “The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Most High God shall be over you; and the child which you shall have shall be called holy<sup>27</sup>, the Son of God.”

Then the angel told Mary that her cousin Elizabeth was soon to have a child, through the power of the Lord. And when Mary heard all this, she said: “I am the servant of the Lord, to do his will. Let it be to me as you have said.”

Disk 1



When the angel had given his message and had gone away, Mary rose up in haste<sup>28</sup> and made a journey to the home of Zacharias and Elizabeth. When Elizabeth saw Mary, she was filled with the Spirit of the Lord, and said: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed among men shall be your son! And why is it that the mother of my Lord comes to visit me? Blessed is the woman who believed that the promise of the Lord to her shall be made true!”



27 **holy** [ˈhəʊli] (a.) belonging to or connected with God , sacred

28 **haste** [heɪst] (n.) hurry, speed



Then Mary was filled with the Spirit of the Lord, and broke out into a song of praise. She stayed with Elizabeth for nearly three months, and then went again to her own home at Nazareth.

As the angel had said, to the aged woman Elizabeth was given a son. They were going to name him Zacharias, after his father. But his mother said: “No, his name shall be John.”

“Why,” they said, “**none**<sup>29</sup> of your family have ever been named John!”

They asked his father Zacharias, by signs, what name he wished to be given to the child.

Disk 1



He asked for something to write upon; and when they brought it, he wrote, “His name is John.” Then all at once, the power to hear and to speak came back to Zacharias. He spoke, praising and blessing God; and he sang a song of thanks to God, in which he said: “You O child, shall be called a prophet of the Most High; to go before the Lord, and to make ready his ways.”

When John was growing up, they sent him out



<sup>29</sup> **none** [nʌn] (pron.) not one, not any

into the desert on the south of the land, and there he stayed until the time came for him to preach to the people; for this child became the great prophet John the Baptist<sup>30</sup>.



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30 Baptist [ˈbæptɪst] (n.) one that baptizes