The *Golden Legend* or *Lives Of The Saints*
Compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, Archbishop of Genoa, 1275
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86// HERE FOLLOWETH THE NATIVITY OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST

The nativity of St. John Baptist was ancient, and showed by the Archangel Gabriel in this manner. It is said in the *History Scholastic* that David the king, willing to increase and make more the service of God, instituted twenty-four bishops or high priests, of whom one was overest and greatest, and was named prince of the priests, and he ordained that each priest should serve a week. Abias was one, and had the eighth week, of whose kindred Zacharias was descended, father of St. John Baptist. This Zacharias had to wife one of the daughters of the kindred of Aaron, whose name was Elizabeth, daughter of Esmeria, which was sister of St. Anne, mother of our Lady. Then this Elizabeth and our Lady were cousins-german, daughters of two sisters.

THE ANNUNCIATION TO ZACHARIAS

These two, Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth, were just tofore our Lord, living in all the justifications, and holding all the commandments of the law without murmur ne complaint, praising and thanking our Lord God.They had no children, for the holy woman was barren. They had great desire to have a son that might be bishop of the law by succession of lineage after Zacharias, and hereof had they in their youth prayed much to our Lord, but when it pleased not unto our Lord, they took it a worth and thanked God of all. They served the more devoutly our Lord God, for they had no charge but only to serve and entend unto him. Many there be that withdraw them from the service and love of our Lord for the love of their children. They were both old, he and his wife Elizabeth.

St. John Baptist is named in many manners. He was named a prophet; friend of the spouse; lanterne; an angel voice; Elias; baptist of the Saviour; messenger of the judge; and foregoer of the King. By prophet is signified prerogative of knowledge; in the friend of the spouse, noblesse of love; in the lantern burning, noblesse of holiness; in an angel, prerogative of virginity; in voice, nobleness of meekness; in Elias, noblesse of burning love; in baptist, prerogative of marvellous honour; in messenger, prerogative of preaching; and in foregoing, prerogative of preparation or making ready. All these virtuous things were in him.

It happed, at a solemnity that the Jews had after August, that the bishop did holy sacrifice in doing the office that appertained to him and to his week; he went for to incense, and entered into the temple, and the people abode without, making their prayers and awaiting the coming again to them of the holy bishop. Thus, as he was alone, and incensed the altar, the angel Gabriel appeared to him standing on the right side of the altar, and when the holy bishop saw him he was abashed [astonished] and had great dread.

The angel said to him: Be nothing afeard, Zacharias, thy prayers be heard and thou hast found grace tofore of whom our Lord. Elizabeth thy wife shall conceive and bear a son, whom thou shalt call John, of whom thou shalt have great gladness, and much people shall make great feast and joy of his nativity, for he shall be great, and of great merit tofore our Lord. He shall not drink wine ne cider, ne thing whereof he might be drunken, and in his mother's womb he shall be

sanctified and fulfilled with the Holy Ghost. He shall convert many of the sons of Israel, that is to say, of the Jews, to our Lord, and shall go tofore him in the spirit and virtue of Elias the prophet for to convert father and sons, old and miscreants, to the sense of righteousness and to the service of God.

When the angel had thus said to Zacharias, he answered: How may I believe and know that this is truth that thou sayest? I am now all old and ancient, and my wife old and barren.

The angel answered and said: I am Gabriel, the angel and servant tofore God, which in his name am sent to speak to thee and to show to thee these things aforesaid, and because thou hast not believed me thou shalt lose thy speech, and shalt not speak till the day that this which I have said shall be accomplished, each thing in his time.

The people were abiding and awaiting when Zacharias the bishop should come out, and marvelled where he tarried so long. He came out of the temple, but he might not speak, but the holy man made to them signs by which they thought well that he had seen some vision of our Lord, but more knew they not. He abode in the temple all that week, and after, went home to his house. His wife conceived and waxed great, and when she perceived it she was shamefaced and kept her in her house well five months.

THE ANNUNCIATION TO MARY

In the sixth month the same angel Gabriel was sent from our Lord unto the blessed Virgin Mary, newly espoused to Joseph, which shewed the conception of Jesu Christ, son of God our Lord, and the angel told to her that she should conceive of the Holy Ghost without knowledge of man. “For our Lord may do all that it pleaseth him, like as it appeareth,” said he, “of Elizabeth thy cousin, the which, she being old of age, and barren by nature of her body, hath conceived by the pleasure of our Lord, and hath now borne about six months.”

MARY VISITS ELIZABETH

When our Lady heard that St. Elizabeth her cousin was great, she went to visit and accompany her in the mountains where she dwelt, right far, hard, and evil way. When she came thither she saluted her much courteously. Our Lady was then great with the blessed Son of God, our Lord Jesu Christ, whom she had conceived when she said to the angel: *Ecce ancilla domini;* and then she was replenished [filled] with the deity and humanity of our Lord Jesu Christ. Then, when the salutation issued out of the body of our Lady, the greeting entered into the ears of the body of St. Elizabeth, and into her child that she had within her, which child was anoint of the blessed Holy Ghost, and, by the presence of our Lord, sanctified in the womb of his mother and replenished with grace, whereof he removed him [jumped] for joy in his mother's womb, in making to our Lord reverence such as he might make not of himself, but by the grace that he had received of the Holy Ghost.

Of which by the merits and grace done to the blessed child, St. Elizabeth was replenished, and anon prophesied in saying and crying with a high voice: Thou art blessed among and above all women, and blessed be the fruit of thy womb. From whence cometh to me such grace, so

great that the mother of my Lord cometh to visit me? I know well that thou hast conceived the Son of God, for as soon as thy salutation entered into mine ears, the child that is in my belly made joy and feast, and removed. Thou art well blessed and happy that thou hast given faith and believed the words of the angel which he said to thee, for all things shall be performed that he hath said to thee.

Of all these things St. Elizabeth knew nothing when our Lady came, ne yet our Lady had nothing said to her, but the Holy Ghost, by the merits of her holy child that she bare, replenished her and made her to prophesy. Then answered our Lady and made the holy psalm saying: *Magnificat anima mea dominum* ["My soul doth magnify the Lord"], and all the remnant. Our Lady abode with St. Elizabeth three months or thereabouts till she was delivered and laid abed, and it is said that she did the office and service to receive St. John Baptist when he was born.

THE BIRTH OF JOHN

When then he was born, and the neighbours and cousins and friends knew the grace that our Lord had done to these holy folk, noble of lineage, rich of goods and of great dignity, to whom in the end of their age he had given an heir male against double or treble nature, they made great joy and feast with them. When the eighth day came, and the child should be circumcised, they called him after his father's name, Zacharias. The mother said that he should named John. and not Zacharias. And they went unto the father and said that there was none in that kindred that so was called. And then the father demanded pen and ink, and wrote: Johannes est nomen ejus, "John is his name," and all they marvelled. Anon after, by the merit of St. John, his father's mouth was opened, and had again his speech, and spake, glorifying our Lord God.

And these tidings of this holy child thus born, were anon spread all about the country, and each man said in his heart, and without forth one to another: What suppose ye shall be of this child? He shall be great and a man of our Lord, for he is already now with him, and the hand, the work, and the virtue of our Lord is with him.

The father, holy Zacharias, replenished with the Holy Ghost, said and prophesied, and made then the holy psalm: *Benedictus Dominus Deus Israel*, which psalm is always sung in the end of matins.

JOHN GOES TO THE DESERT

It is said that holy Zacharias dwelled upon the mountains two miles nigh to Jerusalem, and there St. John Baptist was born, and after that St. John was circumcised, he was nourished as a child of a noble and rich man and son of great dignity, but when he had understanding and strength of body, God our Lord and the heart performed the work. He issued out of his father's house, and left riches, honours, dignities, noblesse, and all the world, and went into desert on flom Jordan [on the River Jordan]. Some say he went in the age of fifteen years accomplished, and others say he departed at twelve years of age for to serve our Lord without empeshment [hindrance], by which he kept silence, and bydwonge his life and his soul from idle words.

This holy St. John, dwelling in desert, ware an hair made of the hair of camels. Some say that he ware the skin of a camel, in which he had made an hole to put his head in and girded it with a girdle of wool, or of leather, cut out of an hide or a beast's skin. He ate locusts, not such as we have here that we call honeysuckles; some say that it is flesh [meat] of some beasts that abound in the desert of Judea where he baptized; with wild honey he ate it. That it was flesh, the legend of St. Austin doth us to understand, which saith that St. Austin ate flesh by the example of Elias the prophet, which ate the flesh that a crow brought to him, and so St. John ate locusts, some say that there be roots so called. There served he our Lord solitarily upon the flom Jordan till that he was about twenty-nine years old. The angel of our Lord came to him and said that he should show the coming of our Lord and preach penance, for to purge them that were baptized, in accustoming the baptism of our Lord Jesu Christ. This angel said to St. John Baptist that, Jesu Christ, Saviour of the world, should come to him for to be baptized, and it should be he on whom the Holy Ghost should descend in semblance of a dove.

HIS PREACHING

St. John drew him towards Bethany, upon the river or desert, not far from Jerusalem; there preached he, and taught and baptized them that would amend their life, and said to them that the Saviour and health of the world was nigh. Then came to him many, and he said to some religious men of evil life: Ye children of serpents, who hath given to you counsel to eschew the ire of our Lord? If ye will be baptized in sign of penance, do ye the works of penitence. Leave the evil, humble you, do the work of mercy. Ween ye [Do you expect that], because ye be circumcised and be the children of Abraham, that ye shall be saved? Our Lord shall make of these stones if it please him the child of Abraham which with Abraham shall be saved.

St. John preached about a year tofore that our Lord came to him for to be baptized. When the Pharisees heard say that he baptized, they sent to know what he was, and they demanded [asked] if he were Christ the great prophet that was promised in their law, and he said: Nay.

They demanded him if he were Elias, and come from Paradise terrestrial, he said: Nay.

They demanded him if he was a prophet, he said: Nay.

They demanded him whereof he meddled then to baptize, since he was neither Christ, ne Elias, ne prophet. Say to us, said they, who that thou art, that we may answer to them that have sent us hither. He answered: I am he of whom Isaiah prophesied: I am the voice of the crier in desert: Address ye and make ready the ways to God, and make ye right the paths of our Lord. They said to him: Wherefore baptizest thou then? I baptize and wash the body with water in sign of penance, but among you is he that ye know not, which was tofore me, and came after me, of whom I am not worthy to loose the latchet of his shoe. He shall give you baptism in the virtue of the Holy Ghost, in water and fire of penance.

JOHN BAPTIZES JESUS

When St. John along the flom Jordan had preached and baptized about a year, our Lord came unto him and would be baptized of him. St. John, enlumined of [inspired by]the Holy

Ghost, knew him, and did to him reverence as to his God, his Maker, and Lord. He was so espired that human nature which was pure in him might not sustain so great knowledge, and he said right humbly: Sir, thou comest to me, which art pure and clean, to be baptized and washed of me that am foul and wasted, which ought to be baptized of thee and washed, how dare I lay on thee my hands?

Our Lord said to him: Do this that I say now, for thus behoveth it to fulfil all justice and to humble and give ensample of baptism to all people. And then in humility and patience he baptized our Lord, and washed him where he had never filth, and all by holy mystery; on whom the Holy Ghost descended visibly in likeness of a dove, and the voice of the Father was heard saying: Here is my well-beloved son in whom I am well pleased.

Then our Lord was thirty years old from his nativity and thirteen days beginning of the thirtyfirst year. On that same day our Lord changed water into wine in Cana of Galilee. And this sufficeth for the nativity of St. John Baptist, and the residue of his life and of his death shall be said at the feast of his decollation, by the grace of God, who bringeth us to his bliss. Amen.

The iconography of St. John the Baptist is available at the Christian iconography website.

For other saints, see the index to this Golden Legend website.

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