

Luke 1:26-38

What we have here is a classic “birth announcement.” It was a common literacy device in ancient biographies of famous people (e.g., Suetonius, “Augustus,” 94, in *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*). It was designed to answer this important question: “How do we explain such an extraordinary life?” Talbert says, “All of the canonical Gospels wrestle with the same issue. Mark explains Jesus’ unique life as due to his being the bearer of the Spirit...at his baptism (Mk 1:9-11). John’s explanation is that the preexistent Word became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14).” Both Matthew and Luke explain Jesus’ uniqueness through the virgin birth.

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent Gabriel on another mission. This time to Nazareth, not Jerusalem. This time to a young girl not an old man. Both messages were similar: You’re going to have a baby. Both times Gabriel had to allay their fear through God’s promise. And while both Mary and Zechariah wonder about the possibility of this announcement, Mary has complete faith and commitment to the angelic message.

Shortly after a girl hit her teens, she would be betrothed, that is engaged. The parents of the prospective couple would make the arrangements and, in fact, choose the partner. Although this does not meet our cultural mores, it remains, to this day, an effective means of marriage. Once a young man saved enough money, he would choose a mediator. The mediator would go, with the young man’s parents, to the house of the prospective bride. Her parents would meet them and offer a drink. The party would refuse the drink until the price of the dowry had been set and consent of the bride given. Her parents would then choose a mediator for their side, and the negotiations would begin. When the matter was settled, refreshments were brought out and everyone celebrated the agreement. Betrothal would probably last no longer than a year before the wedding. This contract was legally binding and could only be broken by death or divorce. In case of the former, the woman was considered a widow. Yet sexual relations were not permitted until after the wedding ceremony. According to Jewish custom Mary was probably about fifteen years old.

This must be a wonderful time in Mary’s life. She is young, she is a virgin, she is engaged. All is normal, all is well. Gabriel enters the scene with this remarkable greeting; “Greetings, you who are highly favored.” From this passage comes the famed “Ave Maria.” Although these words frightened her, they got her attention and set a positive tone for the message to come.

Zechariah was afraid at the sight of Gabriel. Mary is troubled by his message. Fear is the normal reaction to an angelic visitation. In addition, the angels usually say, “Don’t be afraid,” (cf. Genesis 15:1;26:24; Dan 10:19; Mt 28:5; Lk 1:13,30; 2:10; Acts 18:; Rev 1:17). Angels are often harbingers of judgement and/or agents of destructions, but not at this time. Mary shouldn’t fear but rejoice. She will have a son and she is to name him Jesus.

“Jesus” comes from the Hebrew name “Joshua” meaning “Jehovah saves.” Joshua was a type of Christ, in that he led God’s people into the promise land, conquering their enemies. It should also be noted that “Christ” is not Jesus’ last name but His official title. “Christ” is the Greek word equivalent to the Hebrew “Messiah.” They both mean, “The anointed one.” Other names and titles for Jesus are; Son of Man, Son of God, Son of David, God, Lord, Word, Servant, Savior, Lamb of God, High Priest, Mediator, Last Adam, Prophet, Priest, King.

Gabriel’s description of Jesus is astounding in light of the OT prophecy. “The Most High” is an exalted title for God. Thus, Jesus is called the Son of the Very God. Interestingly, Jesus is only called “Son of the Most High” by the Gerasene Demoniac (Mk 5:7; Lk 8:28). Even more startling is the fact that Jesus said that we too could become sons of the Most High (Lk 6:35). We are adopted through the blood of Jesus (Jn 1:12; Rom 8:14-17; 1 Jn 3:1-2).

“Throne of David” designates the royal lineage of the kingdom of the Jews. David became the archetype of the king of God’s people. Second Samuel 7:16 (cf. 1 Chron 17:11-15) made this promise: “your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.” However, the bottom fell out of that kingdom in the days of Jehoiachin, of whom God said, He will have no one to sit on the throne of

David.” As was discussed before in relation to Jesus’ genealogy, both promises were fulfilled when Jesus, who was not of Jehoiachin’s line, but was of David’s line, became the king of the Jews.

Mary was familiar with the Scriptures. In her “Magnificat” she used at least thirty words or phrases from the OT. This talk about David’s throne would likely have brought Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6-7 to her mind—a child born of a virgin who would sit forever on David’s throne. These messianic prophecies would have added to her knowledge of her son’s identity.

“House of Jacob” symbolized all of Israel, since Jacob, the father of the twelve patriarchs, was seen as the father of the entire Jewish nation. It is often used this way in prophetic literature (Isa 2:5-6; 8:17; 10:20; 14:1; 29:22; 46:3; 48:1; 58:1; Jer 2:4; 5:20; Ezek 20:5; Amos: 3:13; 9:8; Obad 1:17-18; Micah 2:7; 3:9).

Many have struggled with the miracle of a virgin birth. Indeed, both the Greek word *parthneios* and the Hebrew word *alma* can be translated “young woman.” However in this context, it must mean “virgin” since Mary claims to have “never known a man.” The bottom line is: Do we choose to believe what Luke and Matthew claim? Or to put it another way: Is God able to perform a creative miracle such as this? It will do no good to say that Matthew and Luke’s audiences were pre-scientific hence they could believe such stories. You don’t need to be a “modern” to understand where babies come from. And Luke as a physician, would not have accepted this lightly. Nor should we suggest Matthew and Luke are merely imitating pagan mythology, for there are no true parallels to virginal conception in these myths. Besides, there is no Jewish precedent for a virgin-born Messiah, and Luke would have known this ran the risk of turning Jesus into a pagan demigod. Furthermore, the tradition-history would have to run as follows: (1) Graduate Jesus from a human to a divine figure within Judaism. (2) Transform him from a Hebrew figure into a demigod. (3) Matthew and Luke independently mistake this metaphor for history this all takes place within fifty years. This theory asks us to believe the story of the virgin birth arose *ex nihilo*. The bottom line is that if God was able to create life in Eden, He can create life in the womb.

One may have an irreverent and sensual curiosity about the mechanics of Mary’s conception. The fact is, we just do not know how it happened. Verse 35 says that the Holy Spirit “came upon” Mary. In the OT that phrase indicated Holy Spirit empowerment, not physical contact. Although pagan mythology speaks of cohabitation between the gods and humans, there is no grammatical, contextual or theological basis for reading into this passage any kind of a sexual encounter between Mary and the Holy Spirit.

All this would be difficult and frightening for Mary to believe. It would be difficult, because she knew she was a virgin. Hence, Gabriel gives her a sign. Her aged and barren relative Elizabeth was pregnant. If God can do for Elizabeth what he promised, then he will be faithful to Mary as well. Although we don’t know just how Mary and Elizabeth were related, we do know that Elizabeth was old enough to be Mary’s grandmother.

Not only was this difficult to believe: It was also frightening. First, an adulteress was to be stoned (Lev 20:10). Even if she was not killed, she would almost certainly lose the man she loved (and, in fact, would have had Gabriel not intervened). Furthermore, who wants to marry a “used” woman. In addition, single women in that culture didn’t have a lot of job opportunities. And, of course, living in a small community, everyone would know what was going on. It would not take the grapevine long to label Mary with a scarlet letter. This precious and pure young thing would shock everyone with her “impropriety.”

Even understanding the consequences, Mary’s faith in God drove her to say, “May it be to me as you have said.” The Greek text uses an optative, an unusual verb form which expresses a wish or a desire. There are two extremes to be avoided here. One is the worship of Mary (i.e. Mariolatry, often observed in Catholicism). She is great but she is not God(ess) or the “Queen of Heaven.” The other side of this same dingy coin is the Protestant neglect the faith of this incredible young woman. Compared to Abraham, Sarah, and Zechariah, Mary’s faith shines above them all. She had more to lose. Yet, without wavering, she invites the will of God to prevail in her life.