

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, ³³ and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" ³⁵ And the angel said to her in reply, "The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; ³⁷ for nothing will be impossible for God." ³⁸ Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Context

From the beginning of the Gospel according to Luke:

^{1:1} Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, ³ I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received.

The preface to the Gospel of Luke's begins with the Greek (*epidēper*) indicating a formal and important undertaking. And well Luke should write such as he intends to write of the things that God has fulfilled among the believers (*among us*). It establishes that the good news is already planted – not only in that others have already written their gospels – but that this is living tradition (*handed down*) among the community. These things have been fulfilled by God and part of his faithfulness to his promises.

Luke 1:5-2:52 forms the section referred to as the "Infancy Narratives." Luke's account of the conception, birth, and infancy of Jesus is one of his finest narratives. The Gospel of Mark, one of Luke's sources does not have an infancy narrative to guide him. The Gospel of Matthew has an infancy narrative, but there is every indication that Luke and Matthew had no knowledge of each other's work. Rather, they composed their accounts separately at a time when the church was reflecting back beyond Jesus' public ministry to his earthly beginnings.

The traditional preaching outline began with Jesus' baptism (as is evident in the sermons of Peter and Paul in Acts, and in the structure of Mark's Gospel). The infancy stories were added to the front of that outline to serve as a prologue to the main narrative. A prologue announces the themes to be pursued in the body of the work. Both Luke and Matthew proclaim the good news in advance in a kind of mini-gospel based on the birth and infancy of Jesus. If Luke's infancy narrative had been lost before his Gospel began to circulate, we wouldn't know it had existed, because there are no clear references back to these chapters in the later account of the public ministry. But the reverse is not true — there are many references forward to the later developments. What we know about the infant Jesus comes from the teaching of the adult Jesus and the early church's reflection on his life, death, and resurrection. Who is this child? He is Messiah and Lord (Acts 2:36). What does his coming mean? He will save his people from their sins (Luke 24:47). A reader's understanding of the prologue depends on his or her

understanding of the rest of the book. It means much more when read a second or third time after the entire book has been read. The infancy narrative grows in meaning the more the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus resound in the faith of the reader.

The immediate context of our passage is one of announcements:

- Luke 1:5-25: Announcement of John's birth
- Luke 1:26-38: The Annunciation of Jesus' birth

The next scene opens as though it will continue to tell of the birth of the child promised to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Instead, it tells of a greater miracle and the birth of one who would be even greater than John.

Commentary

Similar, yet... In many respects our gospel is similar to the annunciation of the birth of John. The angel Gabriel appears to announce the birth of the child, and the annunciation follows the pattern of birth annunciations in the OT: The angel says, "Do not be afraid," calls the recipient of the vision by name, assures him or her of God's favor, announces the birth of the child, discloses the name of the child to be born, and reveals the future role of the child in language drawn from the Scriptures. After their respective announcements, Zechariah and Mary each ask a question, a sign is given, and the scene closes with a departure. The similarity of structure and content between the two scenes invites the reader to consider the differences between them all the more closely. For example, the first announcement came as an answer to fervent prayer; the second was completely unanticipated. John would be born to parents past the age of child bearing, but the miracle of Jesus' birth would be even greater. Jesus would be born to a virgin. The announcement of Jesus' future role also shows that at every point Jesus would be even greater than his forerunner. Watch how these nuances are developed in the course of the details of this scene. Note this narrative comparison also punctuates the beginning of Mark's gospel which has no infancy narrative: John the Baptist is not the Christ, not Elijah, not the prophet to come, and not worthy to loosen the strap of the sandal of the one who is to come.

The Annunciation of Gabriel to Mary parallels the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist (1:25); in fact, they are so interwoven that we know before we are explicitly told in vv.39-45, 67-79 that these two mothers and their sons belong to one story. First, the opening reference to "the sixth month" (v.26; cf. vv.24, 36, 56) ties the report of Elizabeth's conception and response to this account. Second, the appearance of the angel recalls Zechariah's encounter in the temple (vv.11, 19, 26). We know from the prophet Daniel that Gabriel as an eschatological messenger; what will he say now? Gabriel comes to the virgin (vv.26-27), delivers his message and receives her response (vv.28-38a), then departs (v.38b). With Gabriel's departure, Mary will serve as the central figure joining together the various scenes of the birth narrative.

Parallels. The parallels also extend to language and form (vv.5-23 and vv.26-38). Joel Green [83] notes that the stories of John and Jesus share the following progression of elements: "(1) Introduction of Parents; (2) Specification of Obstacles to Childbearing; (3) Encounter with an Angel, Gabriel; (4) Response to the Angel; (5) "Do Not Be Afraid," with Address by Name; (6) Promise of a Son; (7) Objection; (8) Giving of a Sign; and (9) Departure of Gabriel."

Luke 1:11-20

"he was *troubled*" (v.12)

"the angel said to him" (v.13)

"Do not be afraid" (v.13)

Luke 1:28-38

"she was much *troubled*" (v.28)

"the angel said to her" (v.30)

"Do not be afraid" (v.30)

“will bear you a son” (v.13)	“you will ... bear a son” (v.31)
“and you will name him” (v.13)	“and you will name him” (v.31)
“he will be great” (v.15)	“he will be great” (v.32)
“said to the angel” (v.18)	“said to the angel” (v.34)
“ <i>and replying</i> , the angel <i>said to him</i> ” (v.19)	“ <i>and replying</i> , the angel said to her” (v.35)
“Gabriel ... God ... sent” (v.19)	“Gabriel ... sent ... God” (v.26)
“and now” (v.20)	“and now” (v.36)

The one account echoes and interprets the other, demonstrating that these scenes and especially these sons function together within the one purpose of God.

Contrasts. The points of contrast between these two scenes are equally telling. First, Elizabeth has a need—she is childless, disgraced; but Mary has no apparent need. Similarly, the redundancy in the explanation of Elizabeth’s childlessness (vv.7a, 7b, 18) signals how her *need* has led to the recognition of the *obstacle* that must be overcome prior to its *resolution*. But the triple assertion of Mary’s virginity (vv.27a, 27b, 34) is not presented as an obstacle to the resolution of any need on her part. Contrasts make explicit what was already implicit in the narrative—namely, the real needs here are not those of Mary or even of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Israel is estranged from God, under alien rule, oppressed. God’s covenant with his people has not been realized fully. Hence, God is intervening in human history to bring forth an everlasting kingdom. In doing so, he solicits and embraces the partnership of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Mary—themselves Israelites and representative in their own ways of the people of Israel.

While the descriptions of the two promised children share some common points, clearly Jesus is held up above John. Note that “*He [John] will be filled with the holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb,*” Jesus’ conception results from the activity of the Spirit (vv.15, 35). Both are important in the realization of God’s redemptive will, but Jesus is primary – rooted in the Spirit as part of his intrinsic being.

It is also worth noting that Zechariah’s encounter with Gabriel takes place at the center of Jewish life, the Temple, only a veiled doorway from the presence of God’s glory. But Gabriel travels to Mary, far away from the center of things in Jerusalem, to Nazareth in Galilee—inconsequential, shunned, unclean. Yet, the Temple priest Zechariah, the one who maintains cleanliness, responds to Gabriel’s words with hesitation rooted in unbelief. Mary, on the other hand, though she is only a young Galilean girl, embraces God’s plan, proclaiming herself as God’s servant. These points of contrast point to something profound about the focus of God’s redemptive initiative in Luke’s Gospel, and foreshadow the joy with which the people on the margins will receive divine favor.

Joseph, husband of Mary, gets scant attention in Luke, yet he is “introduced:” *of the house of David*. Most scholars hold that Luke’s primary interest is in establishing that royal connection. Jesus’ acclamation as Son of God (vv.32, 35) must be read at least against the backdrop of the use of this expression to designate the Davidic king in the OT. Even more obvious are the unmistakable reminiscences of the divine promise to David of an everlasting dynasty found in 2 Sam 7:11b-16 in vv.32b-33.

Confluence. Luke’s narrative style is on display as he deftly moves from the “annunciation” concerning John the Baptist to the one concerning the salvation of all humanity. There is a confluence of temporal and chronological markers, and the reappearance of Gabriel. The “sixth month” recalls

v.24, and seems to imply that Elizabeth has only now come out of seclusion. This prepares for the sharing of the news of her pregnancy in v.36 and her subsequent welcome of Mary (vv.39–45). Yet geographically and socio-religiously we move away from the center (Jerusalem and the Temple) to the margins of the nations (Nazareth in Galilee). Gabriel, God's messenger, is the connector, pointing to the God's Word active in the world.

The Favored and Troubled Virgin. *“Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you.”*²⁹ *But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be .”* Within a few short verses we learn that Mary is “favored” and “troubled.”

The words of greeting echo the distant words of Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel: *“Let your servant find favor in your sight”* (1 Sam 1:18 NRSV; a more literal rendering than our Catholic NAB translation). The words also parallel assurances of power and favor given to the judges of Israel: *“The LORD is with you”* (Judges 6:12 NAB). Matthew conveys the same assurance that the birth of Jesus meant the promise of God's redeeming love by means of the name Emmanuel, *“God is with us”* (Matt 1:23). Despite these words of hope and promise, Mary was greatly troubled.

Mary *“pondered what sort of greeting this might be,”* that is, knowing all greetings are a precursor to what follows, she wondered what was to follow. Recall that in the tradition of the Levites, angels showed up when a priest has made a corrupt offering in order to slay the offending priest. Imagine Zechariah's concern when Gabriel appears. Could Mary have been concerned about marriage related appearance of angels? While perhaps a bit of a stretch, you do not often get to reference the *Book of Tobit*. Tobit, a book accepted by Catholics only, tells of a jealous angel who appeared on a bride's wedding night each time she married and killed her bridegroom. Against the background of this popular story, the fear of a betrothed girl at the appearance of an angel is all the more understandable. Could it be that she thought an evil spirit was threatening to prevent her marriage?

Although Mary was not yet married, she was betrothed. According to ancient customs, the marriage would have been arranged by her father. She would live at home for a year after her betrothal. Then the groom would come to take her to his home, and the wedding celebration would last for an entire week. Legally, the marriage was sealed after the engagement. Thus, if Joseph had died before the wedding, Mary would have been considered a widow. [See the note on v.27 regarding *parthenos*, virgin].

Mother of the King of Kings

³⁰ *Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, ³³ and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”*

In four short verses, the whole of plan of salvation is outlined. God's promise to King David given through the prophet Nathan, spelled out in 2 Sam 7:11–16, is to come to fulfillment in the child that Mary will carry, give birth, and become mother. Yet, what one hears depends upon the presumptions with which one listens. It would have been difficult to hear vv.32–33 and not surmise the pending restoration of the Davidic monarchy. The logic of the angel's presentation is simple: Mary will conceive, bear, and name the child; God will give him the throne of David; as a consequence, the promised son (and his heirs?) will reign forever, etc. In other words, the partnership of human and divine previously lost through sin, will be restored.

Gabriel's announcement thus creates a complex of expectations related to Jesus' mission to *“rule over the house of Jacob forever.”* Luke's language contains nationalistic, socio-political reverberations. When this is matched with similar material in the birth narrative, it is difficult to imagine that the anticipated redemption will be anything but a nationalistic restoration of Israel. Other possibilities are

not yet excluded, however, and it behooves the reader to continue to listen to the narrative; how will Luke resolve the narrative needs introduced with these strong chords of eschatological anticipation?

According to the angel's words, Jesus will be "*Son of the Most High*," a designation synonymous with "*Son of God*" (see the parallel—vv.32, 35). What "Son of God" connotes in the context of this Lukan scene must be discussed in light of v 35. At this point, it is worth mentioning that Luke otherwise associates Jesus' kingship/messiahship and sonship (cf. 4:41; 22:29, 67–70; Acts 9:20–22).

How Can This Be? In response to this angelic announcement, Mary asks a question reminiscent of Zechariah's query, "How can this be?" She had not had sexual relations with a man. Ultimately, the purpose of Mary's question (v.34)—which leads to Gabriel's answer (v.35) and the giving of a sign (v.36) and word of reassurance (v.37)—is to emphasize that all of this is God's doing.

Gabriel's response emphasizes that the baby would be born by the power of God. Like the presence of God in the cloud at the transfiguration (9:34), the Holy Spirit would come upon her and overshadow her. The child, therefore, would be God's child, and he would be called the Son of God. As with all the annunciations in Scripture and in ancient biographical accounts, the purpose of the annunciation is to declare something vital about the identity of the child. The Lukan account repeatedly affirms that Mary's son would be called "Son of the Most High" (v. 32a), son of David (v. 32b), and finally the title by which he would be most widely recognized, "Son of God" (v. 35).

It is not immediately clear how the objections of Zechariah and Mary differ, even if it is certain that the angel can distinguish one from the other. In both cases we subsequently learn what motivated these questions—in Zechariah's case, unbelief (v.20); in Mary's case, belief (v.45). One can also distinguish between Zechariah's request for a sign ("*How shall I know this?*") and Mary's request for an explanation ("*How can this be..?*"). Zechariah asks for some sign to prove that this will be as announced and will come to pass. Mary simple questions, "How?" Her question simply states she is a virgin, and so "how" is a valid question.

But Mary receives a sign The implication of v. 36 is that Mary did not know that Elizabeth was carrying a child also. The earlier reference that Elizabeth remained in seclusion makes this lack of communication plausible. The announcement of Elizabeth's joy to Mary, therefore, serves as a sign to her. If Elizabeth, who had been called barren, could bear a child, then Mary could be sure that what had been told to her would come to pass also.

Revealed in a Reply. On the one hand, her question plays a vital theological role, for it accents the fact that she is still a virgin. The point of her question is rhetorical, inviting further information from the angel. The first two clauses of Gabriel's response parallel one another and prepare for the third:

The Holy Spirit	will come upon you, and
the power of the Most High	will overshadow you;
consequently, the child to be born will be called holy	the Son of God.

These parallel affirmations do not suggest sexual activity, but do indicate divine agency. The Holy Spirit is identified with God's power in a way that anticipates Acts 1:8. The verb "*to come upon*" also anticipates Acts 1:8, and, then, the Pentecost event. The text may call to mind Isa 32:15, which anticipates the Spirit's being poured out upon God's people as a mark of the age of peace. The second phrase has connections with the transfiguration scene in 9:34, and more broadly with scriptural accounts of manifestations of the glory of God (e.g., Exod 40:35; Num 9:18, 22).

The report of the consequence of this divine agency focuses on its christological repercussions. God's intervention will result in the special nature of the child. Here Gabriel's words recall his earlier announcement:

(v.32ab): He will be great, and
 will be called the Son of the Most High
 (v.35d): [He] will be called holy, the Son of God.

Mission Complete. Gabriel’s parting words ring with reassurance: “*Nothing will be impossible with God.*” They echo the wonder of Sarah: “*Is anything too marvelous for the LORD to do?*” (Gen 18:14) and Jesus’ later declaration, “*What is impossible for human beings is possible for God*” (18:27). A barren woman can bear a child. A virgin can conceive. The Lord can enter into human history as a child. From a tomb can come resurrection, and the Holy Spirit can empower the church for its worldwide mission. It is a promise in the future tense: With God nothing will be impossible. With faith in such power, Mary responds “*May it be done to me according to your word,*” (v.38) – a response that contrasts sharply with that of Zechariah, with the result that she, surprisingly in scenes of this type, has the last word. She unreservedly embraces the purpose of God, without regard to its cost to her personally. Her response is exemplary, demonstrating how all Israel ought to respond to God’s favor.

In describing herself as the Lord’s servant (cf. 1:48), she acknowledges her submission to God’s purpose, but also her role in assisting that purpose. Moreover, she claims a place in God’s household, so to speak; indeed, in this socio-historical context, her words relativize and actually place in jeopardy her status in Joseph’s household. For her, partnership in the purpose of God transcends the claims of family. In antiquity, the status of a slave was determined by the status of the householder. In his characterization of Mary as “slave of the Lord,” Luke has begun to undercut the competitive maneuvering for positions of status prevalent in the first-century Mediterranean world. Mary, who seemed to measure low in any ranking—age, family heritage, gender, and so on—turns out to be the one favored by God, the one who finds her status and identity in her obedience to God and participation in his salvific will.

Gabriel has completed his mission successfully. The annunciation would not have been complete without Mary’s trusting, obedient response. Mary had been chosen, “favored,” to have an important part in God’s plan to bring salvation to God’s people, but it is unthinkable that God would have forced Mary to have the child against her will. Mary is an important example, therefore, of one who is obedient to God even at great risk to self.

Notes

Luke 1:26 sixth month: using this phrase here and in v.36, Luke connects the two birth announcement scenes. **Gabriel:** “Gabriel” This Hebrew name means “God’s strong man,” “man of God,” or “God is my warrior.” This is God’s messenger angel (cf. 1:26; Dan. 8:16; 9:21). There are only two angels named in the Bible: (1) Gabriel, who is God’s messenger angel to Daniel, Zacharias, and Mary, and (2) Michael, who is the national archangel (cf. Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9; Rev. 12:7). **a city in Galilee called Nazareth** Galilee was known as a Gentile area although many Jews lived there (apparently a community from the royal tribe of Judah lived in Nazareth). The name Nazareth itself may be related to the Messianic title “Branch” (*nezer*, cf. Isa. 11:1; Matt. 2:23).

Luke 1:27 a virgin betrothed: Much as been made of the Isaiah *alma* – translated into Greek as *parthenos* – referring to any young unmarried women without reference to sexual experience. Little notice is given to the vigorous defense of the virginity from the beginning days of Christianity – pointing to a clear understanding of the identity of Jesus as “Son of God.” **Betrothed:** refers to a binding agreement recognized in Jewish tradition that describes the period before common living, but already affording the moniker “wife” to the woman.

Luke 1:28 *Hail! favored one:* There is no English translation that will capture the alliteration *chaire kecharitōmenē*. The word *chaire*, while literally meaning “rejoice, be glad” is part of a Greek greeting formula that was common in St. Luke’s time – and hence “welcome” [EDNT 3:451]. The word *kecharitōmenē* comes from the root *charitoō* which means to “bestow favor upon” or “bless.” [EDNT 3:461]. In our verse the verb is perfect (action already completed), passive (Mary was the recipient of the blessing), and nominative (describing Mary). It is the tradition of our “Hail Mary” that this is translated “full of grace.” That comes from the vulgate *gratia plena* – which is a marginal translation on both linguistics or contextual grounds.

Another view: Many translations read the initial word as a common greeting rather than as an invitation to rejoice. and this is possible. However, apart from the use of the word in openings to letters intended for Greek audiences in Acts 15:23; 23:26, Luke uses the Semitic term “peace” as a formula for greeting. This suggests that this greeting fills in further the picture of rejoicing that will pervade the Third Gospel (e.g., 1:14, 47, 58; 2:10). Moreover, his greeting is reminiscent of Zeph 3:14–15; Zech 9:9; Joel 2:21, where the formula is found: rejoice! + address + reference to the divine action or attitude to which joy is the proper response. “Favored one,” then, functions as a name for Mary, designating her as the object of divine benefaction. This reality is accented and clarified by its repetition in v 30, then celebrated (with rejoicing!—v 47) by Mary in v 48.

Luke 1:33 *house of Jacob:* This is a somewhat archaic designation for Israel (e.g. Gen 46:27, Exod 19:3, Isa 8:17) perhaps pointing to what was intended from the foundation of the world.

Luke 1:35 *Son of God:* Previously, “Son of God” was related directly to Jesus’ role as king, a usage well known in the Scriptures (v.32; cf. 2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7). In the first century milieu this pointed to a divine sonship, or at a minimum a very significant relationship with God. While much can be said, it should be noted that, for Luke, the relationship is keyed into the work of the Spirit. Jesus is “Son of God” not as a consequence of his assuming the throne of David (as in Ps 2:7), but as a result of his conception, itself the result of the miraculous work of the Spirit. As Jesus prepares for and commences his public ministry, the relation of the work of the Spirit and his identity as God’s Son will be further developed (3:21–22, 38; 4:1, 3, 9, 14, 18). Like John, Jesus is set apart (i.e., “holy”) from birth to special service in God’s redemptive purpose; unlike John—indeed, uniquely in salvation history—Jesus’ sonship extends backward to the prevenient work of God in his creation as a human being.

Luke 1:36 *your relative:* The description of Elizabeth as “your relative” serves three functions. Most obviously, it is one more way in which the stories of John and Jesus are interwoven. Second, it serves as a bridge back to the story of Elizabeth, preparing for the encounter between Elizabeth and Mary (vv.39–56) and John’s birth (v.57). Finally, it is a further indication of how carefully Luke has staged his characterization of Mary. Only at the end of this scene do we learn that she belongs to the family of Elizabeth and may thus share her ancestral heritage; the timing of this disclosure is significant, for the most memorable quality of Mary for Luke is her relation to God, a relationship God initiated.

Luke 1:38 *handmaid of the Lord:* In describing herself as the Lord’s servant, she acknowledges her submission to God’s purpose, but also her role in assisting that purpose. Moreover, she claims a place in God’s household, so to speak; indeed, in this socio-historical context, her words relativize and actually place in jeopardy her status in Joseph’s household. For her, partnership in the purpose of God transcends the claims of family. In antiquity, the status of a slave was determined by the status of the householder. In his characterization of Mary as “slave of the Lord,” Luke has begun to undercut the competitive maneuvering for positions of status prevalent in the first-century Mediterranean world. Mary, who seemed to measure low in any ranking—age, family heritage, gender, and so on—turns out to be the one favored by God, the one who finds her status and identity in her obedience to God and participation in his salvific will.

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