

BIRTH NARRATIVES

THE ANNUNCIATIONS

The birth and infancy of Jesus of Nazareth is described in two of the four gospels, Matthew and Luke. Following is the probable order of events.

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| 1. The annunciation regarding John (Lk. 1:5-25) | 6. The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem (Lk. 2:1-7) |
| 2. The annunciation regarding Jesus (Lk. 1:26-38) | 7. The visit of the shepherds (Lk. 2:8-20) |
| 3. Mary's visit to Elizabeth (Lk. 1:39-56) | 8. The temple ritual (Lk. 2:21-40) |
| 4. Joseph discovers Mary's pregnancy (Mt. 1:18-25) | 9. The visit of the magi (Mt. 2:1-12) |
| 5. The birth of John (Lk. 1:57-80) | 10. The flight to Egypt (Mt. 2:13-18) |
| | 11. The return to Nazareth (Mt. 2:19-23) |
| | 12. Jesus visits the temple at age 12 (Lk. 2:41-52) |

THE ANNUNCIATION TO ZECHARIAH (Lk. 1:5-25)

Annunciations were important in the historical faith of Israel. There had been annunciations for the births of Ishmael (Ge. 16:7-12), Isaac (Ge. 17:1-3, 15-21; 18:1-2, 9-15) and Samson (Jg. 13:2-21), and they follow a standard pattern. Luke's two annunciations follow the same pattern. Together, the annunciation stories regarding John and Jesus form a matching pair, which are at the same time similar yet contrasting.¹ The birth of John is placed over against the birth of Jesus to demonstrate the divine origin of both individuals and yet the infinite superiority of Jesus over John.

THE COURSE OF ABIJAH

There were so many priests, even in each of the 24 orders, that the duties for each morning and evening sacrifice were assigned by lot. The thrill of awaiting a turn to serve in the temple must have been intense, and the most coveted part of the ritual was the burning of the incense, a symbol of the congregation's prayers rising to God, just as the smoke arose toward the ceiling. No priest was allowed to perform this function more than once, and some priests had never done it. Thus, when Zechariah faced the altar of incense in front of the inner curtain which screened from view the Most Holy Place, he was participating in the single most important event of his religious career. Outside in the courtyard, the congregation remained waiting and praying until his return to pronounce God's blessing upon them, taken from the ancient benediction delivered to Aaron (Nu. 6:22-26).

In agreement with Matthew (Mt. 2:1), Luke places the time of the annunciations in the reign of Herod the Great (40-4 BC). Similar to the sterility of Sarah (Ge. 16:1) and Hannah (1 Sa. 1:2, 6-8), Elizabeth and Zechariah were also childless. Both were devout Levites, Zechariah serving in the 8th of the 24 orders of priestly rotations designated to serve at the temple twice a year for a week at a time (Lk. 1:8-10; cf. 1 Chr. 24:1-19).

While performing his service, an angel appeared to Zechariah between the altar of incense and the menorah.² Zechariah was told that his prayer had been heard, though the exact content of his prayer is unknown (1:11-17). Perhaps it was a personal request, or perhaps it was a customary prayer for the salvation of Israel associated with the offering of the evening sacrifice. The angel explained that the couple would

¹ As a literary device, such a pair of matching stories is called a diptych.

² This assumes that the phrase "right side" is given facing the east as are most directions having to do with the temple.

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have a son, and they were to name him John or Johanan (a common Jewish name meaning “the Lord has been gracious”). The birth would be a cause of joy to both parents as well as others. John seems to have been reared as a Nazarite (cf. Nu. 6:1-8); he was required to abstain from wine or any alcoholic beverage. Most important, he would be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth.

Luke here introduces one of the most important and recurring expressions in his writings, the description of being “filled with the Spirit.” The same expression or parallels to it appear in the Third Gospel in connection with Elizabeth (1:41), Zechariah (1:67), Mary (1:35), Simeon (2:26-27), and Jesus (4:1, 18). Later in the Book of Acts, Luke applies the same language to the disciples at Pentecost (2:4), Peter (4:8), the Jerusalem church (4:31), deacons (6:3, 5), Stephen (7:55), Saul/Paul (9:17; 13:9), Barnabas (11:24), and the church at Pisidian Antioch (13:52). The expression refers to the empowerment of the Spirit to speak or act as God’s spokesperson. John would be just such a person, because he would be Spirit-filled from birth.

John’s mission, like that of Elijah, would be to turn Israel back to God and to prepare it for God’s visitation. John would minister “in the spirit and power of Elijah.” The connection with Elijah is especially significant against the background of Jewish expectation that this ancient prophet, who did not die but was mysteriously transported to heaven (2 Kg. 2:1-12), would return as the herald for Yahweh at the end of the age (Mal. 3:1; 4:5; Sirach 48:4, 10). This notion was kept alive in rabbinic literature. Later, representatives from the Jews would ask John directly if he was Elijah, to which he responded negatively (Jn. 1:21). Nevertheless, the connection between John and Elijah was more than incidental. John, like Elijah, wore the garb of Elijah (cf. Mk. 1:6; 2 Kg. 1:8), and Jesus identified John as the fulfillment of the Elijah prophecy of Malachi (Mk. 9:11-13; Mt. 11:13-14). Given Elijah’s reckless boldness in confronting Ahab (1 Kg. 17:1), it is not surprising that after Herod had John executed for a similar denunciation (Mk. 6:17-29), some speculated that Jesus was John resurrected or else Elijah-redivivus (Mk. 6:14-15).

RETURN OF THE QUENCHED SPIRIT

Luke’s language concerning the activity of the Spirit must be understood alongside the conclusion of the rabbis that the prophetic sequence of inspired speech had broken off with Malachi, the last of the writing prophets. However, it was widely believed that in the days of the Messiah, the Spirit of Yahweh would again become active, and the quenched Spirit would return. By stressing the activity of the Spirit, Luke calls attention to the fact that the dawn of the time of the messianic had come.

ANGELS

The OT word and NT word for “angel” means “messenger.” Only two are named in the Old Testament, Michael and Gabriel, though other names arise in Jewish literature. They are described as “winds” and “flames of fire” (Ps. 104:4//He. 1:7).

Zechariah asked for a sign of authentication, and Gabriel promised that Zechariah would be struck mute until the birth occurred. The people waiting outside would have been anxious at the priest’s delay, for normally the priest was only in the temple a short time. According to the *Mishnah*, “He did not prolong his prayer lest he put Israel in terror.”³ When Zechariah finally was able to leave the sanctuary and confront the people outside, he was no doubt embarrassed, while the congregation was surprised and baffled, that he could not pronounce the customary benediction (cf. Sirach 50:19-23). His frantic gestures

³ Yoma 5:1.

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indicated to them that something extraordinary had happened in the sanctuary, and they concluded that he must have seen a vision.

When his week of service ended, Zechariah returned home. Soon Elizabeth became pregnant, though for the first five months she remained secluded. The seclusion was likely a way of avoiding any discussion of the pregnancy with neighbors, who probably would not have believed it anyway, given Elizabeth's age, at least until it could not possibly be denied. In any case, Elizabeth's seclusion made it possible for the pregnancy to become a sign to Mary some six months later (Lk. 1:26, 36).

THE ANNUNCIATION TO MARY (Lk. 1:26-38)

The annunciation to Mary follows the typical pattern of previous annunciations. In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Gabriel once again appeared, this time to Mary in a northern, rural Jewish community of Galilee (1:26-27). Mary had been pledged to be married to a man named Joseph.

The angel's first word to Mary was "hail" or "greeting" from which the Latin salutation *Ave Maria* derives.⁴ Mary was greatly disturbed, as might be expected. After calming her fears, Gabriel announced the coming birth, named the child, and predicted his kingly role. Each of these elements in the annunciation are theologically significant.

The name Jesus (the equivalent of the OT name Joshua) means "Yahweh is salvation" or "Yahweh is savior." The title "Son of the Most High" and its accompanying phrases point toward Jesus as the Davidic messiah. Note the deliberate verbal parallels of this annunciation with the ancient promises about David:

<u>Promises About David</u>	<u>Promises About Jesus</u>
(2 Sa. 7:9, 13, 14, 16)	(Lk. 1:32-33)

ANCIENT JEWISH MARRIAGE CUSTOMS

Jewish marriage at this time consisted of two distinct parts, the betrothal and the home-taking (Dt. 20:7). Betrothal was usually sealed for the girl at an early age with the paying of the bride price (mohar) to the father in the presence of witnesses. Until a girl was 12 ½, her father could arrange for her to marry whomever he wished, and she could not refuse. When she had come of age (12 ½ or older), she could not be betrothed against her will, and thus, the usual age of betrothal was between 12 and 12 ½.

Once the betrothal was valid, the betrothed woman was the "wife" of the man, and while they were not yet living together conjugally, she could be widowed, divorced, or even executed for adultery. Betrothal could be broken only by divorce.

The second stage, the home-taking, was the marriage proper, in which the girl would be transferred from the home of her parents to the home of her husband, who would then assume her full support. This usually occurred about a year after the betrothal, and it was celebrated with a processional to the husband's home followed by a wedding feast.

Given these customs, Mary may have been quite young at the time of the annunciation, which took place between her betrothal and her home-taking.

⁴ For Roman Catholic Christians, the greeting *Ave Maria* is combined with a prayer to Mary as the mother of God. In Roman Catholic theology, the Greek wording *chaire kecharitomene* (= greetings, you who are favored) has been translated, "Hail, Mary, full of grace," and consequently taken to mean that Mary herself is a source of grace. This understanding, however, depends more on the Latin Vulgate than the Greek text. In the Greek text, Mary is almost certainly the object of grace, not the source of grace.

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<i>a great name</i>	<i>he will be great</i>
<i>the throne of his kingdom</i>	<i>the throne of his father David</i>
<i>he will be my son</i>	<i>he will be called the Son of the Most High</i>
<i>your house and kingdom will endure forever</i>	<i>he will reign over the house of Jacob forever</i>
<i>your throne will be established forever</i>	<i>his kingdom will never end</i>

Prior to the exile, the citizens of Judah believed that the promises of an unending kingship under David's sons would be fulfilled in the politics of the ancient world. However, the prophets predicted otherwise (Ho. 3:4-5; Je. 22:24-30; 36:30-31; 37:6-10, 17). Thus, it remained for the promises to be fulfilled in a later time, and this, also, the prophets had predicted (Am. 9:11; Is. 11:1-2; 55:3; Je. 33:14-26; Eze. 34:22-24; 37:24-25). According to Luke, the promises not only would be fulfilled in another time, but in another way than was popularly conceived. The kingdom of God was not to be the kingdom of Israel, even if a political Israel could be revived (Lk. 4:42-43; 6:20; 8:1; 9:1-2; 10:9, 11; 11:2, 14-22; 12:32; 16:16; 17:20; 18:16-17). Mary, of course, could not have known all of this at the annunciation. She only knew that the time of fulfillment was at hand.

Mary's dilemma was related to her own life situation. How could she possibly become pregnant, since she was between the betrothal and the home-taking? Gabriel explained that the pregnancy would result from the power of the Holy Spirit. Luke employs two verbs here, *eperchomai* (= to come upon) and *episkiazo* (= to overshadow). The first is a word often used to describe unpleasant occurrences, even hostile events. The second is a word that quite literally meant to cast a shadow, though metaphorically, as used here, it comes to mean protection, especially divine protection. The combination of these two verbs sets up a dynamic tension. The "coming upon" of the Spirit points to the mystery and stigma of Mary's pregnancy. The "overshadowing" of the Spirit points to God's presence and protection. Further, Gabriel guaranteed that the child would be holy, the Son of God. While "Son of God" is a title for the Davidic king in the Old Testament, the use of the title in the annunciation moves beyond the Davidic connotation. Jesus would be called the Son of God, not only because he was descended from David, but also because he was conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit. He would be the Son of God in a unique sense. Mary herself may not have fully understood the implications of the saying at this time, but she would remember it, and Luke, in retrospect of the life of Jesus, understood that the saying implied divinity.

It may only be added that the Christian confession of the virgin birth has been held from the beginning of Christianity as a way of asserting the truth of the incarnation and the paradox of Jesus' humanity and divinity. Mary was given a sign that the words of Gabriel were true. Gabriel explained to her the unusual pregnancy of Elizabeth, Mary's relative.⁵ This other pregnancy would function as an assurance to Mary that nothing God had spoken was impossible. Mary's response was one of humility, faith, and obedience, all in the face of almost certain public disgrace.

⁵ The Greek term *syngenis* (= relative) is translated as "cousin" in the KJV, but the term is more general than such a translation might suggest. If Luke had meant cousin specifically, he would have been more likely to have employed the Greek term *anepsios*, as is also used in Col. 4:10. While Jesus and John are related, it is too rigid to demand that they are second cousins, even though this might have been the case.